

Fake ‘Medium Bronze’ Coins of the Bar Kosiba War, A.D. 132-135

By

Marvin Tameanko

Everyone is familiar with the expression - “A little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing”, but in numismatics, sometimes even a lot of knowledge can be hazardous. At one time or another many collectors have been seduced by their own wisdom into buying a dubious or false coin. It is nothing to be ashamed of; even highly experienced dealers and collectors have made this mistake and, to compensate for their embarrassment, they laugh it off and put the spurious coin into their ‘Black Museums’ of counterfeits. After more than 30 years of collecting, I now have 11 such coins in my own box of mistakes.

Unfortunately, when purchasing ancient coins, even a reasonable amount of knowledge can lead to unpleasant and disappointing acquisitions. I recently reduced my coin collection and consigned several duplicates to be sold by a dealer. He returned one coin, a so-called ‘medium bronze’ of the Second Jewish Revolt, A.D. 132-135, struck by Simon Bar Kosiba (Bar Kokhba), stating that it was a fake. To avoid the usual confusion, it is important to explain that the correct spelling and meaning of the name of this great Judaeen hero is often misinterpreted. Only his first name, Shimeon, (Simon in Hebrew) appears on the coins. His surname is recorded in the major coin reference books as Bar Kokhba (Mildenberg), Barcochba (Hill in the BMC) and Bar Cochba (Meshorer and Sear). Actually, the controversy was resolved years ago when ancient signed letters with his real name, *Shimeon bar Kosiba*,—meaning “Simon, son of Kosiba”—were discovered in 1951 in a cave located near the Dead Sea. In ancient literature, Bar Kosiba’s supporters and followers poetically distorted his surname by changing the *SI* to a *Kh* so that it became Bar Kokhba and meant ‘son of a star’, that is the Messiah. His enemies and detractors changed the *S* to a *Z* so that the name became Bar Koziba, ‘son of a lie’, meaning the deceiver. To be historically accurate in this report the authentic name, Bar Kosiba, is used. To compound the confusion surrounding these coins, the second major insurrection of the Jews against the Romans in A.D. 132-135 is called the Bar Kochba War, the Second Jewish War, or the Second Revolt against Rome. To be consistent with the latest historical information the title, the Bar Kosiba War, is used throughout this article.

Recovering from the shock of owning a fake coin, I checked the definitive reference book on these coins, *The Coinage of the Bar Kokhba War* by Dr. Leo Mildenberg, and sure enough, there was my coin illustrated in the plates of counterfeit coins. Unfortunately, I had purchased this coin in 1972, twelve years before this reference book was published. However, in those days I had some experience in collecting Jewish coins and could not be considered an amateur, yet I purchased a fake. When I had first examined the coin, my knowledge data-bank ‘kicked in’ to reminded me that these coins were usually barbaric in appearance because they were produced under war-time

conditions. Therefore, they were sometimes crude, poorly engraved, overstruck on Roman provincial coins which varied greatly in weight, were often filed down to remove excess metal, had inconsistent die axes, and were harshly cleaned of dirt with wire brushes. Also, the inscriptions were engraved using the ancient paleo-Hebrew alphabet which was not used by the people of Judaea at that time. I remembered that the legends were frequently blundered, incomplete, or garbled and that the obverse and reverse dies could be hybrids or mismatched, and the coins varied greatly in workmanship. This made them difficult to identify as genuine ancient coins. The coin I looked at had a beautiful obverse with the vine leaf finely engraved and with tiny letters in the legend. The reverse of a palm tree was less well done but typical of the series and the inscription was correct. Finally, I felt secure and confident in my purchase because I was obeying the basic, common sense instruction given to all collectors, “buy only from a reputable dealer and then you can return a problem coin for a full refund”. So I handed over my money and took the coin home. Today, 26 years after the purchase, I cannot return the coin to the dealer because he died years ago and it is not worth pursuing the matter with his estate.

The coin is actually a classic of the counterfeiting art. It was probably made somewhere in the Middle-East as a numismatic fake to be sold to collectors and not as a crude copy to be fobbed off on gullible travellers. Many of these tourist-trap reproductions are common in the Middle-East but are easily recognized by their shiny metal, perfectly round flans, low weight, inferior manufacture and strange, whimsical designs. Dr. Leo Miltenberg described my numismatic counterfeit, no. F10 in his book, as a close copy of the authentic coin cataloged in his work as no. 121.¹ In his notes for my fake coin, he said that it was struck from modern dies, artificially patinated, and that it was purchased on the Swiss coin market in 1971. Dr. Miltenberg also said that he had seen these counterfeits on the market and in several auction catalogs in 1980-1984. Presumably, many exist and they may be held in private collections as authentic coins.

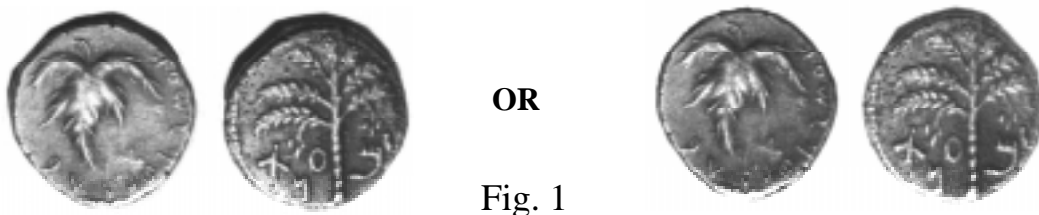


Fig. 1

The false medium bronze coin of the Bar Kosiba War purchased in 1972, Miltenberg, no. F10. This is a close copy of the genuine coin cataloged as Miltenberg, no. 121. The obverse shows a vine leaf and tendril. The reverse depicts the date palm tree, symbol of Judaea.

My fake coin differs slightly from the coin illustrated in Miltenberg’s book in that the obverse inscription is made up of smaller letters, some of which are garbled. However, the reverse design of my coin is identical to the fake coin illustrated in the book. This may indicate that the counterfeiter later improved on the obverse design or struck it so many times that he had to make another die with smaller letters. The design of the genuine coin, Miltenberg’s no. 121, is remarkable considering that it was made under wartime conditions, in a travelling mint and by artists who may have lacked experience in die engraving. The symbols and inscriptions on the coin are historically significant. The obverse features a grape vine leaf representing the agricultural

resources of Judaea.² The inscription on these coins is ‘Year One Of The Redemption Of Israel’ or ‘Year Two Of The Freedom Of Israel’. Ironically, this message of hope was issued while the Jews were still involved in fierce battles against the Romans. The reverse design consists of a seven branch palm tree with two clusters of dates. This may refer to the famous dates grown in Judaea but also, the palm tree traditionally symbolized the nation of Israel. The reverse inscription under the palm branches is an abbreviation of the name Shimeon, for the Hebrew first name of Simon Bar Kosiba.

The Bar Kosiba War was the last heroic attempt by the Jews to regain the political and religious freedom denied them by the Romans. The emperor Hadrian had founded a new colony, called Aelia Capitolina, on the ruins of Jerusalem and built a temple to Jupiter on the holy site.³ The Romans also forbid the Jews to live in the city of Jerusalem and this dashed their hopes of reviving their national and religious autonomy. Then, the Roman administrators instituted an insensitive and stupid policy of religious persecution. Laws were enacted that restricted Jewish customs, prayer and rituals, and forbid the circumcision of children, a basic, age-old tenet in the religion. This was an unbearable burden and, under the leadership of the rebel Bar Kosiba, the desperate Judaeans revolted against Roman rule.

During this insurrection, the government of Bar Kosiba issued the finest and most beautiful series of Judaeans coins ever made. It consisted of silver tetradrachms (shekels), didrachms, and drachms, all overstruck on Syrian provincial or Roman coins. The bronze coins were made as large coins, 33 millimetres in diameter, medium coins, 24 millimetres, and small modules, 18 millimetres in size. These were overstruck on the provincial city coinage of Antioch, Gaza, Ashkelon, Caesarea and Alexandria. Often the original undertypes of these coins show through the overstruck designs. The symbols and legends used on the Jewish coins were nationalistic and messianic, referring to a restoration of Israel, the destroyed Temple of Jerusalem, and the implements used in the forbidden religious rituals. On the coinage, Bar Kosiba titles himself as *Nasi* in Hebrew, meaning the *president* or *prince*, over Israel.

Hostilities with Rome began in A.D. 132 and after some surprising military successes against the local garrisons, Bar Kosiba and his decimated forces were surrounded by Roman legions and destroyed in 135 at Bethar, a hill-top fortress near Jerusalem. Except for the coinage, only a small amount of historical documentation about Bar Kosiba and his great deeds survived, and he passed into legend. He was rediscovered and returned to history in 1951 when some of his signed letters to local army commanders were found by Bedouin nomads in a cave near the Dead Sea.⁴



Fig. 2

A genuine medium bronze of the Bar Kosiba War struck in year two of the war. It shows the vine leaf and tendril on the obverse and the palm tree on the reverse. Similar to Mildenberg, 121.

From Dr. Mildenberg's brief report on the fake medium bronze coin, F10, and from other reports on dubious coins in this series, one would believe that this counterfeit was an unusual incident. But after hunting around at a local coin show in 1996, I purchased another similar counterfeit medium bronze of Bar Kosiba from a dealer's tray of damaged, junk and false coins. This second coin is a close copy of the coin Dr. Mildenberg catalogs as no. 140. These coins are undated but are considered by authorities to have been struck in the third or final year of the war. The designs are the same as the coins struck in the second year but the obverse inscription reads 'For The Freedom Of Jerusalem'. This morale-raising legend may have been the battle cry of the Judaeen soldiers in that final year of the war but they were never able to capture Jerusalem. The reverse consists of the usual seven branch palm tree and the abbreviated inscription, Shimon. From the existence of this second type of fake, it could be concluded that more false Bar Kosiba medium bronzes are circulating in the market place.

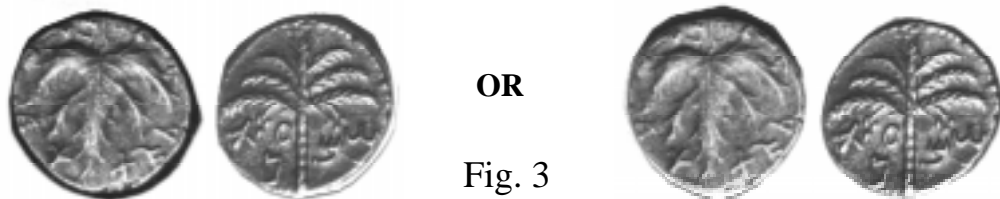


Fig. 3

The second, fake medium bronze coin of the Bar Kosiba War, purchased in 1996, a close copy of Mildenberg, no. 140.

The two counterfeit bronzes in my possession weigh exactly 9.12 grams, well within the normal but very wide range of acceptable weights (from 8.2 to 9.8 grams) for this series of coins.⁵ The average weight for genuine specimens is given in the references as 9 grams. Using the specific gravity test, the density of the metal of the fake coins was determined to be 8.8. This indicates that the alloy of bronze used to make the blanks was 95% copper, 4% tin and 1% zinc, almost the same as the genuine coins but including a little more zinc which was used to make the metal more malleable. The dies used to strike the first fake coin were probably made with modern machinery from photographs of the authentic coin. This could account for the corrupted letters in the inscriptions. The artwork on these coins can be classified as excellent for reproductions and good enough to fool most collectors. Comparing the second fake coin with a genuine medium bronze coin of the third year shows that the design was also finely copied to create a numismatic counterfeit and not to make a reproduction used in jewellery or for a souvenir in the tourist trade.



Fig. 4

A genuine medium bronze of the Bar Kosiba War, undated but presumed to have been struck in the 3rd year, A.D. 135. Similar to Mildenberg, no. 140.

The first fake coin, of year two of the revolt, was probably struck with a small press, on blanks that had been cast in molds. The edge of this false coin has exactly the same characteristics as a genuine coin. However, the second fake coin of the third year was cast directly in a mold using the latest type of centrifugal or pressure casting equipment employed in the dental and jewellery trades. This type of casting can be identified by the finely pitted surface of the coin when viewed under 10 X magnification. Pressure casting machines use a 'lost wax' process in which a wax model of the entire coin is placed in a plaster mold. The wax is then melted out and replaced with metal. This process produces an edge on the coin without the tell-tale ridge that occurs when a two part, conventional mold is used. For some reason, the perfect edge of this false coin was lightly filed, probably to improve its roundness.

Both of my fake coins were artificially patinated with an acid-based solution. Under a 30 power microscope, the rainbow, fluorescent color residue that results from such chemical treatment can be seen inside and around the letters. Overall, both coins look genuine and were obviously made to defraud ancient coin collectors. Only the pitted surface and the filed edge of the coin of the third year exposes it as a counterfeit. The first fake coin, of year two, is without flaws except for the tiny letters on the obverse. Being a knowledgeable collector taken in by the fake coin, F10, I can only console myself with the fact that I now own an excellent, modern counterfeit of a beautiful, famous, historical ancient coin that is recorded and illustrated in the major reference book on this series.

Notes and Bibliography.

¹. *Typos VI. The Coinage of the Bar Kokhba War* by Leo Mildenberg, Verlag Sauerlander, Germany, 1984, page 345.

². I prefer to use Dr. Mildenberg's choice of the vine leaf side as the obverse of these coins. Meshorer and Hendin, in their catalogs, designate the palm tree side of the coin as the obverse.

³. *Bar-Kokhba, the Rediscovery of the Legendary Hero of the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome* by Yigael Yadin Random House, New York, 1971, page 19.

⁴. *Bar-Kokhba*, as above page 28.

⁵. Weights for this series of coins are given in *Ancient Jewish Coinage Vol. II* by Ya'akov Meshorer, Amphora Books, New York, 1982, page 156.

