

Visual Storytelling: Iconography and Manipulation of History on the Scaurus-Aretas Coins

In 58 BCE, aedile Marcus Aemilius Scaurus minted a coin which named “Rex Aretas” and depicted him in a submissive posture. The intent of this iconography was to illustrate the victory of Pompey and Scaurus over the Nabataean King, Aretas III, during their campaigns in the Near East in the late 60s BCE. The image was completed with a camel standing in the background, confirming the foreign and exotic nature of King Aretas and his Nabataean Arabs (Figure 1).

However, this posture of submission seems to be nothing more than creative storytelling. The historical record of Pompey and Scaurus’ victories over Nabataea is not clear and arguments can convincingly be made that Nabataea was never defeated by the Romans up to this point (Schmid 2009). While Pompey return to Rome to celebrate his third triumph, his general, Scaurus, was left behind with two legions as the governor of Syria and intended to ensure peace in the region after Pompey’s reorganization. In same year (62 BCE), Scaurus led his forces into Nabataean territory and attempted to seize the capital of Petra. He was largely unsuccessful, failing entirely to take the famous red-rock city. Aretas III was persuaded by Hyrcanus of Judea to pay Scaurus to withdraw – agreeing to give the Roman 300 talents of silver to leave the land unmolested further. Scaurus accepted the payment (or bribe) and withdrew. No evidence of any official surrender or subjugation exists. Scaurus went on to move up the *cursus honorum* and became *aedile* (58 BCE), *praetor* (56 BCE), and eventually *propraetor* (55 BCE). In this presentation, I will argue that Scaurus employed this iconography to bolster his own political aspirations and support Pompey’s declaration of triumph over all the Near Eastern kingdoms and territories.

Coins were an effective source of Roman propaganda and were utilized on many occasions to creatively re-fashion historical events to improve popular perceptions of Roman actions. This was especially true when military “victories” were not actually clear victories at all. A later comparative example was Augustus’ minting of coins to celebrate the return of the battle standards from the Parthians. Originally a decisive military defeat for Rome, Augustus did not win back the standards in battle, but rather negotiated for them diplomatically. The reverse of these coins, however, show a Parthian in a submissive kneeling position, indicating military defeat (Figure 2). While theories about the efficacy of coin iconography as a means of propaganda remains under debate, their role in depicting key scenes in Roman storytelling highlights how Roman leaders were able to manipulate historical events for public consumption.

Figure 1: Reverse of Scaurus’ Rex Aretas Coin – American Numismatic Society 1944.100.2590



Figure 2: Reverse of Augustus' Parthian Coin – British Museum 1920,1102.1



Bibliography

Schmid, Stephan G. "Nabataean Royal Propaganda: A Response to Herod and Augustus?" *Herod and Augustus: Papers Presented at the IJS Conference, 21st-23rd June 2005*. Edited by David M. Jacobsen and Nikos Kokkinos, 325-60 (Leiden: Brill, 2009).