Medallion minted by Sepphoris celebrating friendship with the emperor Caracalla (211-217 CE)

**Denomination:** Medallion

**Date:** 211 CE to 217 CE

**Material:** Bronze

**Mint:** Sepphoris

**Actual Location (Collection/Museum):**
Israel Museum, Jerusalem

**Name of Ruler:** Caracalla

**Obverse (Image and Inscription):**
Image: Laureate and cuirassed bust of Caracalla looking right

Inscription: ??????? ????? ????????? (imperator Augustus Antoninus)

**Reverse (Image and Inscription):**
Image: Legend in five lines within wreath

Inscription: ?????/?????/?????/?????/???

**Commentary:**
This medallion, minted at Sepphoris (one of the main cities of Galilee) between 211 and 217 CE, under the reign of Caracalla, depicts on the obverse the head of the emperor, and on the reverse a long puzzling inscription in five lines, set inside a wreath. The inscription in Greek on the obverse refers to Caracalla as imperator and Augustus, while the inscription on the reverse mentions a treaty of friendship between Diocaesarea (another name for Sepphoris), which had a mainly Jewish population, and Rome. A medallion was a symbolic keepsake, distributed by the emperor or by the local authorities, which had no monetary value. The object was distributed to celebrate an important event, in this case the friendship between the city and the emperor Caracalla. The inscription (difficult to make out) reads “Diocaesarea the Holy, city of asylum, autonomous, loyal, [a treaty of] friendship and alliance between the holy council [of the city] and the Senate and the Roman people” (Meshorer, City-Coins of Eretz-Israel and the Decapolis, p. 113, no. 95). The pagan character of the city is emphasized in the inscription by the title bestowed to the city, “autonomous city of asylum.” The title had been bestowed by Hadrian or Antoninus Pius. Thus, the inscription does not just refer to the internal autonomy of the city, and the power to enact internal laws, but also to the right of asylum, or refuge, granted to its temples. However, the grant of autonomy evidenced by this medallion hints at the fact that the municipal council of Sepphoris was to be reverted back to Jewish control, albeit this time more open to external influences (see Meyers and Chancey, Alexander to Constantine, p. 277). According
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to Ya'akov Meshorer, this medallion was minted to emphasize the friendship between the Jewish Patriarch Judah the Prince, the most eminent of Sepphoris’s citizens, and the Roman emperor. Meshorer bases this assumption on the fact that Talmudic sources mention the friendship between Judah the Patriarch and a Roman emperor known by the name of Antoninus (“Sepphoris and Rome”; see also Meyers and Chancey, Alexander to Constantine, p. 277). Various scholars have tried to identify him with different Roman governors, such as Avidius Cassius, or with a succession of emperors, from Antoninus Pius to Marcus Aurelius, and to Caracalla. Indeed, all these three emperors bore the name Antoninus. The full name of Caracalla as emperor was Marcus Aurelius Severus Antoninus Augustus. Both a dedicatory inscription from a synagogue in Katzion (Qazion), now lost, and the presentation of the emperor Caracallain the Historia Augusta can be taken as possible evidence that he had a positive attitude towards the Jews (see also A Jewish Vow for the Salvation of the Severans from Qazion [2]). The inscription from Katzion mentions Caracalla together with other members of the imperial family, such as his father, the emperor Septimius Severus, and his mother, the empress Julia Domna. The Historia Augusta refers to the positive and friendly attitude of the future emperor, still heir to the throne, towards a playmate, who was a proselyte to Judaism (SHA, Life of Caracalla 1.6). Moreover, it is indeed during the third century that the Jewish Patriarch, known in this period as the ethnarch (Origen, Letter to Africanus 14), rose to pre-eminence. Sepphoris ceased minting coins during the rule of Elagabalus. This city-coin reflects the wish of the aristocracy which ruled the Eastern cities of the Roman empire to establish a close personal relationship between the leading members of the city council, of whom the Jewish Patriarch was the most important, and the emperor. However, the fact that the right of asylum in pagan temples is referred to in this medallion’s inscription still highlights the pagan identity of the city, meaning that the Jewish dimension of the city is not the only thing emphasised.

Keywords in the original language:

- ???????? [3]
- ???????????? [4]
- ??????? [5]
- ????? [6]
- ??????????? [7]
- ?????? [8]
- ????????? [9]
- ?????? [10]

Thematic keywords:

- Sepphoris [11]
- Caracalla [12]
- Syria-Palestina [13]
- Roman hegemony [14]
- city [15]
- city council [16]
- Patriarch [17]
- friendship [18]
- alliance [19]
- wreath [20]
- asylum [21]
- temple [22]

Bibliographical references:  Meshorer, Ya’akov, City-Coins of Eretz-Israel and the Decapolis in the Roman Period [23] (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1985)
Meshorer, Ya’akov, “Sepphoris and Rome” [27], in Greek Numismatics and Archaeology: Essays in Honor of Margaret Thompson (ed. Otto Mørkholm, Nancy M. Waggoner; Wetteren: Editions NR, 1979), 159-171

Other sources connected with this document: Inscription

A Jewish Vow for the Salvation of the Severans from Qazion [29]

A group of Jews dedicates a vow to the salvation of Septimius Severus, Caracalla, Geta and Iulia Domna. It belongs to a building project of controversial nature.

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