In this last chapter we will see whether parts of the seriation proposed in chapter 11 can be fixed with chronological pegs. Some observations have already been made in the previous chapter in that regard. Perforce, what follows is more speculative. It is not very difficult to assign dates to the striking of specific coin-types, but it is a much thornier task to gauge the reliability of those dates. Historical endeavor is more accustomed to drawing conclusions from literary sources than from the field of archaeology—and from its stepsister, numismatics. The connection between a particular symbol on a coin and a historical event might seem tenuous when compared to the connection established by a written text. Thanks to the literary record, however, enough is known about Herod’s reign to weigh the association of a coin-type with one historical event over another. Moreover, such activities already pervade scholarly literature (section 11.1 above). Therefore, it is logical, and even desirable, to see if the new tools and understandings appearing in the previous chapters can produce a cogent, if still tentative, absolute chronology of Herod’s coins.

The discussion below, based upon the relative chronology tabulated at the end of the previous chapter, follows its order.

12.1. Coins (Types 1–4)

The ratio of the number of dies to the number of coins of Type 1 is anomalous. The number of reverse dies of that type is greater than any other classified type (of course the unclassified Type 15, constituting an estimated 70% of the coins of Herod, would have been struck with more dies). One possible reason for the great number of reverse dies of Type 1 may be that—because of the lack of experience in Herod’s new mint—the dies were made of poorer quality materials. In section 4.1, we took Faucher and Shahin’s rough factor of one obverse die per week for bronze coins and concluded that the great number of reverse dies could easily have been used within the few months of Herod’s third regnal year which remained after the king conquered Jerusalem, especially since Type 1 was struck at two and sometimes three workstations.

12.2. Diadem/Table Types (Type 5 and Types 6–9)

In the relative chronology, the large size diadem/table types were placed at the beginning of the minting order of the undated coins. A claim for the absolute dating of Type 5 between the beginning of the summer of 30 BCE through to late 30 or 29 BCE will be made here.

Type 5 (with Types 6–9) is the only group of Herod’s types that have not previously been related to specific events by other scholars (Table 20). Those scholars nevertheless recognized in the type(s) the first undated issue(s). This may be because the diadem, as a symbol of kingship, was symbolic of Herod’s claim to legitimacy—a claim that would have been made very early on in his reign.

The diadem may, in fact, have a historical association. The event to which we refer is Herod’s visit to Octavian on the island of Rhodes in the spring of 30 BCE (after the latter’s victory in the Battle of Actium). There is no doubt that the visit was critical for Herod’s future. In historical hindsight Octavian’s decision to reconfirm Herod appears self-evident (Cary and Scullard 1975:339). Nevertheless, it was not a foregone conclusion in Herod’s eyes. Nor was this outcome inevitable from Antony’s perspective. After Actium, the latter sent Alexis of Laodicea to Herod to convince him not to go over to Octavian (Plutarch Antony, lxii; Roller 1998:21). Herod had been subordinate to Antony and, to our knowledge, had little interaction with Antony’s rival Octavian since feasting with him on the evening of his coronation. Herod, knowing the Roman policy of preferring native dynasties to commoners such as himself (Cary and Scullard 1975:339), prepared for his meeting with Octavian in Rhodes by executing
Hyrkanus II (Ant. xv.173), and thereby removing his potential replacement, the last of the old guard in the Hasmonean dynasty. Herod also arranged places of refuge for his family, in the event that the visit had a deleterious outcome.

After a dangerous winter voyage (Richardson 1996:171) Herod arrived in Rhodes (probably in March according to Roller 1998:30–31). There he “presented himself before [Octavian] without a diadem, a commoner in dress and demeanor, but with the proud spirit of a king . . .” (BJ i.390). Herod removed his diadem as a sign of obeisance before the new victor to whom he was transferring allegiance (BJ i.387; Ant. xv.187). After some speech-making “he (Octavian) placed the diadem on his (Herod’s) head . . .” (BJ i.393).

The importance of the act of wearing a diadem is obvious. In the Josephan context and elsewhere, ‘assuming the diadem’ was synonymous with claiming kingship or behaving like a king. Wearing a diadem appears four times in Josephus’ works; these references all occur relatively soon after Herod’s death has been recounted. Although Herod had appointed Archelaus as his successor, Archelaus refused to put a diadem on his head (if we are to believe BJ ii.3), even though upon Herod’s death, the army at Jericho had wished to confer it upon him. This is because Herod had made his son’s coronation dependent upon Augustus’ approval. Alternatively, Archelaus did wear a diadem, as he is accused in BJ ii.27. Sometime later, in a different (messianic) context, Simon, a royal slave, assumed the diadem, in Perea (BJ ii.57), and later yet, Athrongaeus the shepherd also donned a diadem, this time in Judea (BJ ii.62).

Suetonius reported that client-kings would often remove their emblems of royalty whilst visiting Octavian (Suetonius Augg. 60). We do not know if this practice is the basis for Herod’s behavior, or whether Augustus would have expected him to do so. We also have no inkling as to whether Octavian had already decided to accept Herod, or was only convinced by the latter’s speech or the removal of his crown. Nevertheless, Herod’s rule was reconfirmed at Rhodes (Ant. xv.195). Octavian also made sure that this ratification was sanctioned by the Senate and granted Herod many favors at that time (sections 1.2 and 1.4 above). These facts, and the position of Type 5, with its diadem obverse, as the first in the seriation of Herod’s undated coins, suggest that the coin was struck in 30 BCE, or soon thereafter.

Immediately after the account of the reconfirmation of Herod’s rule by Octavian, Josephus reported that Herod “returned to Judea with even greater honor and freedom of action” (Ant. xv.198). Besides referring to Herod’s reconfirmation, Type 5 may be an expression of the greater “freedom of action” bestowed upon Herod. This would be, then, Herod’s first coin minted under Octavian.

Above (section 5.2) it was suggested that the ßΓ coins were issued for a congiarium or donativum which Herod distributed upon completion of hostilities in mid 37 BCE. It may be that just as the ßΓ coins were intended for a congiarium at the beginning of Herod’s first reign, under Antony’s tutelage, the diadem/table series was minted as part of a congiarium distributed at the beginning of Herod’s second reign, under Octavian. This possible congiarium or donativum may also have been given in order to celebrate the tenth anniversary of Herod’s accession. The date of this event would have been 31/30 BCE. Familiar with Roman culture, Herod was likely to have known of the importance of the tenth anniversary, called the decennalia. Because Herod’s tenth year began with the battle of Actium, the results of which placed the future of Herod’s reign in doubt, he would probably have put off any celebration until after his meeting on Rhodes in the spring of 30 BCE. If we accept the autumn reckoning (section 5.1 above), the end of that year was October 30 BCE. When Herod returned from Rhodes, after succeeding so well in maintaining his relationship with Rome as well as expanding his territory, he most likely perceived his reign as being at its height. (This was also before his worst family and personal troubles began.) Herod would have had more than enough time to organize some type of celebration, and to distribute a commemorative issue. If there was time pressure to mint the coins, then (as noted in the previous section) it probably would not have been a problem to continue the minting into Herod’s eleventh regnal year.

The Type 5 coins may also have been minted in conjunction with Octavian’s presence in Herod’s kingdom in that same year (on coins commemorating