THE FIRST WOMAN TO BE PORTRAYED ON A JEWISH COIN: JULIA SEBASTE

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A rare coin minted by Philip, son of Herod, bears the distinction of being the first to portray a woman on a Jewish coin. The same Philip was the first to employ human images on Jewish coins in general and included images of both emperor Augustus and Tiberias as well as his own before honoring Livia, wife of Augustus and mother of Tiberius, near the end of his thirty-eight-year-long rule (4 BCE-34 CE) over the Golan tetrarchy northeast of the Sea of Galilee. It has often been explained that the distance of this territory from Jerusalem led to a lax attitude towards ethnic strictures against human images.

Figure 1 – “Julia Sebaste,” Coin of Herod Philip. Caesarea Philippi, 30 CE. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

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This particular coin (Figure 1) bears the image of Livia on the obverse surrounded by the inscription ΙΟΥΛΙΑ ΣΕΒΑΣΤΗ and on the reverse the depiction of an outstretched hand holding three ears of grain with the inscription ΚΑΡΠΟΦΟΡΟΣ and the date ΛΔ. This coin does lack the name of Philip, unique among his nineteen different coin issues. However, the style, especially the outward-directed legends, and correspondence of the date with other Philip coins leaves no doubt about who has minted this coin.²

Figure 2 – “Philip,” Coin of Herod Philip. Caesarea Philippi, 30 CE.
The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

The date ΛΔ points to the 34th year of the rule of Philip corresponding to the year 30/31 CE—a year in which Philip minted at least two other coins.³ Philip portrayed his own image on another rare smaller coin minted that same year (Figure 2).⁴ As in previous mints, his primary coin was one depicting the Emperor (Tiberius)⁵ on the

⁴ Meshorer, plate 8, number 12.
⁵ Coins with Augustus’ image were minted in 1, 8, and 12 CE and with Tiberius’ image in 15, 26, 29, 30, and 33 CE.