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Notes on the Portrait of Nikias of Cos*

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Zusammenfassung: In den ausgehenden 40er und 30er Jahren v. Chr. beherrschte der Tyrann Nikias von Kos seine Heimatinsel. Während seiner Herrschaft, deren Dauer sich nicht exakt rekonstruieren lässt, prägte er Münzen mit seinem Porträt. Im vorliegenden Beitrag wird argumentiert, dass die Bildnisse, die entgegen gängiger Forschungsmeinungen weder das Diadem der hellenistischen Könige noch einen Lorbeerkranz tragen, sich aus politischen Gründen an denen Marc Antons orientierten.

Schlagworte: Nikias von Kos (d-nb.info/gnd/102400474), Bildnis (d-nb.info/gnd/4006627-7), Marcus Antonius (d-nb.info/gnd/118503529), Kos (d-nb.info/gnd/4829027-0), Münzbildnis (d-nb.info/gnd/4308642-1)

Abstract: In the late 40s and 30s BC the tyrant Nikias of Cos reigned his homeland. During his reign, which cannot be dated with absolute certainty, he minted coins with his portrait. This paper argues that these portraits, neither adorned with a royal diadem nor with a laurel wreath contrary to former research, were modelled after those of Marc Antony.

Key Words: Nicias of Cos, portrait, Marc Antony, Cos, coin portrait

Nikias of Cos is a figure from the ancient world about whom we are not very well informed. Despite the facts that he was tyrant of Cos approximately around the years 40–30 BC and that in this capacity he minted bronze coins with his portrait on the obverse, his vita has to be reconstructed with much effort from scarce hints in literary sources and a very broad but uniform epigraphic record¹. This paper will accordingly not rewrite the history of Nikias, but focus on an analysis of his coin portrait. After a brief historical introduction, the coinage of the tyrant and the questions connected with it will be briefly presented. The main goal of this article is to analyse the portraits on the obverses of these coins in depth for the first time and discuss them against the background of relevant contemporary portraiture.

I. Historical background

Rudolf Herzog has, with great efforts, pieced together the known facts from Nikias' life². One of his main achievements is the identification of Nikias the tyrant with Nikias the philologist and thereby establishing his early contacts with the spheres of power in Rome³. Suetonius characterizes him as an adherent of Pompeius

* Again, a variety of colleagues and friends have helped me during the work on this paper. For discussions, literature, and a variety of hints I thank Sebastian Whybrew, Tobias Esch, Simone Killen, Vassiliki Stefanaki, Despoina Nikas, Frank Daubner, Dieter Salzmann and Andrew Burnett. Of course, all remaining mistakes are mine.

¹ Literature on Nikias is not abundant. The most complete account of his career is still Herzog 1922, 190–216. Research has since then not produced significant new results concerning the reconstruction of his life and career, which clearly reflects the lack of extent sources; compare Syme 1961, 25–28; Bowersock 1965, 45 f.; Sherwin-White 1978, 141–145; Buraselis 2000, 30–65 (criticism of his analysis of Nikias' coinage below). D. Salzmann has, in his unpublished Habilitationsschrift, dealt with Nikias' coinage and portrait; Salzmann 1986, 184–187 (corpus of coins). 239–243 (analysis). A detailed study of his coinage (including a die study) has recently been published by V. Stefanaki; Stefanaki 2012, 126–130. 281–283 series XIX emission 51. I am grateful to her for sending me a scan from that publication.

² Herzog 1922.

³ Herzog 1922, 191. Nikias' youth and his family remain unknown. In a later anecdote it is mentioned that an ewe belonging to Nikippos (= Nikias) once gave birth to a lion, thereby predicting him future kingship while he was still an ordinary person; Ael. Poik. 1,29: λέγουσι Κώων παῖδες ἐν Κῷ τεκεῖν ἐν τινι ποιμνῇ Νικίου τοῦ τυράννου οἶν: τεκεῖν δὲ οὐκ ἄρνα ἀλλὰ λέοντα. καὶ οὖν καὶ τὸ σημεῖον τοῦτο τῷ Νικίᾳ τὴν τυραννίδα τὴν μέλλουσαν αὐτῷ μαντεύσασθαι ἰδιώτη ἔτι ὄντι. Deducing from the episode that he was a shepherd guarding other people's animals and not owning any cattle is not probable; contra Buraselis 2000, 38 f. Certainly his family must have been at least of some standing and income as their son could become a philologist; cf. Sherwin-White 1978, 142.

and Memmius, implying that he was in Rome with them until he was reported transmitting a love letter of Memmius to Pompeius' fifth wife. Through this he, together with Memmius, lost the emperor's favour and probably left Rome⁴. This episode of 52 BC shows that by this year, Nikias was not only in Rome, but had already made contact with the powerful men and women of the time. It is likely that the acquaintance with Pompeius goes back to the triumphal journey of the emperor through Asia and Greece after the third Mithridatic war⁵.

After a significant break due to Nikias staying in the East (where exactly we do not know and Herzog's assumption that he went to Athens with Memmius is pure speculation⁶), our sources mention him again towards the end of 50 BC, being on his way to Rome in the company of Cicero, who mentions him in a letter to Atticus as a fellow traveller⁷. From his return on he seems to have spent some time in the Roman capital, where he again seems to have lived in exclusive circles. Cic. ad fam. 7,23,4 mentions him in Rome in April 49 BC and tells us that he is a friend of Cassius, the later tyrannicide⁸. In 46 BC Cicero mentions Nikias again, this time as a friend of Dolabella, the later consul⁹. That he could be a demanding guest and yet able to lead cultivated conversations can be seen from a letter of 45 BC¹⁰, in which the orator mentions that he does not feel up to being his host at that moment. Some months later he stayed with Cicero again¹¹, but soon left, being called urgently to Dolabella¹².

Late in 45 BC we find Nikias in the entourage of this new patron. Cicero informs us about the special honours Caesar bestowed on the latter, of which he knew through Nikias¹³. The Coan seems to have been a very clever and opportunistic personality with wide spread connections in Roman aristocracy. This seems to have paid off, as we hear from Cicero that Dolabella, consul since March 44 BC, had chosen Nikias as a legate to go ahead of him to Greece and maybe Asia Minor to prepare the war against the Parthians, who threatened the

eastern borders of the empire. By the middle of 44 BC we hear that he is already in the east, though we do not know where¹⁴.

Unfortunately, literary sources are scarce from this point onwards. Strabo tells us that »in my time«¹⁵ there was a Nikias on the island of Cos »who also reigned as tyrant over the Coans«¹⁶. Since this Nikias is mentioned in a list of famous persons consisting of a pair of scientists and a pair of literary figures, he can with some confidence, as Herzog has ingeniously shown, be identified with the Nikias we have so far heard about¹⁷. Unfortunately, literary sources mentioning him directly are missing for these interesting years, but the fate of his island in the time between Caesar's assassination and the battle of Philippi is – although scarcely documented – very telling.

⁴ Suet. gramm. 14: *Curtius Nicias haesit Cn. Pompeio et C. Memmio; sed cum codicillos Memmi ad Pompei uxorem de stupro pertulisset, proditus ab ea, Pompeium offendit, domoque ei interdictum est;* »Curtius Nicias was an adherent of Gnaeus Pompeius and Gaius Memmius; but having brought a note from Memmius to Pompey's wife with an infamous proposal, he was betrayed by her, lost favour with Pompey, and was forbidden his house« (translation: J. C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library, Suetonius II, 1914). That he left Rome with Memmius is suggested by Herzog 1922, 194 since for some years our sources do not mention him.

⁵ Herzog 1922, 191.

⁶ Contra Herzog 1922, 194.

⁷ Cic. ad Att. 7,3,10. Whether he was an old acquaintance of Cicero and Atticus, as Herzog 1922, 195 suggests, cannot be deduced from the letter.

⁸ For the identification of this Nikias see Herzog 1922, 196 n. 1. He also must have closer contact to Brutus, as can be restored from Cic. ad Att. 13,9; Herzog 1922, 203.

⁹ Cic. ad fam. 9,10. Compare Suet. gramm. 14.

¹⁰ Cic. ad Att. 12,26,2.

¹¹ Cic. ad Att. 12,51,1. 53.

¹² Cic. ad Att. 13,1,3.

¹³ Cic. ad Att. 13,52,2.

¹⁴ Cic. ad Att. 14,9,3; 15,20,1.

¹⁵ The material for the Geographica seems to have been collected mainly between the years 20 and 7 BC. The formulation must not mean that Nikias was a tyrant in that time (which is unlikely considering his coinage). Strabo was in Rome from 44 BC onwards and was presumably well informed about the political events during the civil war, especially those concerning Greece; Lasserre 1979.

¹⁶ Strab. 14,2,19.

¹⁷ Herzog 1922, 206–208.



Many cities and islands of Asia Minor suffered in some way from the civil wars, either by choosing the wrong sides or by being raided. Among these was Rhodes, which not only had hosted Dolabella on his way to Asia Minor, but had refused to lend support to the case of the tyrannicides shortly after¹⁸. Thereafter the Rhodians first received a letter of Brutus, warning them to surrender to him and Cassius voluntarily or risking destruction of their city and slaughter of the male population¹⁹. Apparently overestimating the own military power, the Rhodians decided not to surrender, but first sent a fleet against Cassius, which was defeated by the Romans in two battles, the first of which became famous both through literary and numismatic sources²⁰. After this first defeat, a combined attack of naval and land forces led to the siege and surrender of Rhodes, which had lost almost its entire fleet.

Surprisingly enough, the Coans obviously managed the situation much better than their neighbours. The only literary sources for the year 42 BC, which let us get a glimpse at the risky and yet successful political manoeuvre that Cos managed to execute, are three of Brutus' letters. The first one, written after the defeat of Rhodes, calls on them to join the tyrannicides' cause, again threatening destruction and slavery²¹. From the second letter it becomes clear that Cos must have decided to support Brutus and Cassius – at least ostensibly. Brutus calls, in a slightly sharp tone already, for vessels that the Coans have promised to build and send him as support in his fight against the triumvirs. It is obvious that he had expected the ships much earlier, which leaves one wondering about the seriousness of the Coan offer. Brutus, however, seems to have waited a while longer without receiving the promised naval forces. In his third letter to Cos we learn that he has dispatched a legation to the island to get the ships. His legates reported to him that they were still under construction, which resulted in him writing an angry and yet helpless letter, accusing the Coans of having wasted too much time for their navy to be of any use.

It can be deduced that the Coans had managed on the one hand to come to terms with Brutus, ostensibly supporting him by building a fleet, and on the other to delay the construction of the promised vessels without being severely punished for this clever manoeuvre. In view of the fact that Nikias had been an acquaintance of Cassius (and possibly Brutus) and is on the other hand known to have been somewhere in the Greek east around these times, it seems reasonable to assume that he had returned to Cos by that time and was the mastermind behind the successful tactical manoeuvring²². This point is strengthened by the evidence of honours bestowed on him at an unknown time calling him son of the people, homeland-loving, hero, benefactor and saviour²³. The uniformity of the inscriptions and the small format of the bases suggest that they were part of a publicly organised form of honours for Nikias, involving the dedication of small-scale statuettes in (probably) private contexts²⁴. It is worth noting, however, that

¹⁸ App. civ. 4,66–70.

¹⁹ As had been the case in Xanthos, according to Brutus. Text and translation of the letters have been compiled in English by Jones 1994 (the letter to Rhodes *ibid.* p. 224 f.), who also convincingly argues for the letters to be authentic. As to this question, I share the view brought forward by Bengtson 1970, 37 f., Jones 1994 and others that the letters themselves are indeed genuine, though the answers are probably not.

²⁰ For example, App. Civ. 4,71; Cass. Dio 47,33. Several coins refer to the event with their images or details of imagery. They have been discussed in detail by Hollstein 1994, 122–126. See also Woytek 2003, 505–528; Biedermann 2018.

²¹ Jones 1994, 226 n. 26.

²² Herzog 1922, 211 f.

²³ Cf. the inscriptions on bases of statuettes offered to the θεῶν πατρῶσις for Nikias' well-being: Paton – Higgs 1891, nos. 76–80; IG XII, 4, 2, 682. 683. 685–690. 692. 695. 697–704. 706–711. For the phenomenon of dignitaries dominating politics in Hellenistic cities with (for some time at least) the consent of their fellow citizens, which lead to exclusivity in politics and the tendency to a dynastic trend in civic offices see Scholz 2008; Daubner 2021 (with examples from Kalindoia).

²⁴ For similar practices in Hellenistic kingdoms see Kyrieleis 1975, 137. 145; Dahmen 2001, 10 f. with examples. For the



the epigraphic formula does not imply a cult for Nikias as a god or demigod, but only attests offerings *pro salute* / ὑπέρ²⁵. Having guided the island through the dangers of Roman civil war and the interests of its imperators seems a suitable reason for being honoured the way Nikias was²⁶.

Only two further facts about Nikias are known. First of all, we know that at a certain point he became tyrant of Cos²⁷. Herzog thinks that the coins which will be discussed below and the above-mentioned inscriptions and honours suggest that his tyranny was not founded on force, but the circumstances as well as the exact dating of his rule must remain uncertain²⁸. It might be deduced from further examples in the east Mediterranean that Nikias was among the rulers installed by Antony after the battle of Philippi²⁹. This would, if he had not established himself earlier, make it probable that he came to power in 41 BC, maybe by being deployed by Antony or confirmed by him. Whatever might be the case, we know that Cos was on good terms with Antony, since the island allowed him to seize timber (including from a holy grove of Asklepios) for ships before Actium³⁰. We also know of Roman citizenship and privileges in commerce granted to a group of Coans by Antony at an uncertain date probably in the early 30s BC³¹, making it probable that he maintained connections with the island and its influential inhabitants.

We do not know much more about the reign of Nikias. Apparently, he died at some point late in the 30s BC, receiving an ordinary burial. After Antony's defeat at Actium, however, and maybe in connection with the execution of Turullius for defiling the grove of Asklepios, the Coans angrily reopened his grave, dragged the corpse out and »killed him a second time«³². As a reaction, Octavian seems to have issued a decree to protect tombs and the bodies of the diseased³³. Apparently, the inhabitants of Cos were having their revenge on Nikias for lining them up with the defeated party of the Roman civil war³⁴.

II. Coinage

During Nikias' reign, coins with his portrait were issued by a variety of eight magistrates

difficulty in specifying these »private« contexts of small-scale sculpture see the summarizing remarks in Schreiber 2016, 127–129. There is, however, no evidence for the assumption that Nikias demanded or installed a cult; contra Taeger 1957, 356 f.

²⁵ For this distinction see Pfeiffer 2008, 31–33. For dedications of statuettes and statues of the dedicators see Himmelmann 2001. The phenomenon of dedicating a statue of one god to another discussed by Chaniotis 2003a, 431–433 with further literature; Chaniotis 2003b, 11 f. with some examples from Roman imperial cult. Grammar of dedications and its change: Veyne 1962; Ma 2007; Kajava 2011, 562 f. with further literature.

²⁶ Herzog 1922, 208–212. Compare the honours for Theophanes and Potamon at Mytilene: Pawlak 2020; Salzman 1985 (concerning the portrait of Theophanes); Taeger 1957, 369 f.

²⁷ Strab. 14,2,19.

²⁸ Contra Herzog 1922, 208.

²⁹ Cf. Boethos of Tarsos (Strab. 14,5,14); Straton of Amisos (Strab. 12,3,14). For all these measures and further examples see (especially for the instalment of new client kings) see Raillard 1894; Buchheim 1960, 11–28; Magie 1950, 427–436.

³⁰ Cass. Dio 51,8,3.

³¹ The text of the statute is damaged and incomplete. At some point the name of the triumvir was erased and the stele smashed to pieces. M. Crawford rightly points out that the latter must not necessarily have happened in antiquity; the completest publication of the inscription Crawford 1996, 497–506; see also Buraselis 2000, 25–30.

³² Krinagoras of Mytilene, AP IX.81:

Μὴ εἴπης θάνατον βίτου ὄρον· εἰσὶ χαμοῦσιν
ὡς ζωῆς ἀρχαὶ συμφορέων ἕτεραι.

Ἄθρει Νικίεω Κώου μόρον· ἦδη ἔκειτο
εἰν Ἄϊδη, νεκρὸς δ' ἦλθεν ὑπ' ἥλιον·
ἄστοι γὰρ τύμβοιο μετοχλίσσαντες ὄχῃας
εἴρυσαν ἐς ποινὰς τλήμονα δισθανέα.

»Tell me not that death is the end of life. The dead, like the living, have their own causes of suffering. Look at the fate of Nikias of Cos. He had gone to rest in Hades, and now his dead body has come again into the light of day. For his fellow-citizens, forcing the bolts of his tomb, dragged out the poor hard-dying wretch to punishment«.

Translation W. R. Paton, *The Greek Anthology III*, Loeb Classical Library (New York 1915) p. 43.

The date of the epigram has to remain unsure; Geffcken 1922, 1861.

³³ SEG 8.13. For the provenance of the inscription see Harper et al. 2020.

³⁴ Cos was fined by Octavian for taking the side of Antony; Herzog 1922, 215 with sources.



whose actual function remains unclear³⁵. It is usually assumed that they are eponymous magistrates, thus indicating that the coins were minted over a span of at least eight years, concluding that the tyrant's reign lasted at least from 38 to 31 BC³⁶. However, Christian Habicht has shown that there is no reason to assume that the magistrates signing the coins were the eponymous ones or even yearly changing³⁷. They can therefore not be used to date the reign of Nikias, nor can they provide a pattern of minting. Vassiliki Stefanaki's die study furthermore found several connections of dies between different magistrates, indicating that minting might to some extent have happened in parallel³⁸. We simply do not know if coins were emitted annually or not. A date between the late 40s and 31 BC is hence the closest we get at the moment. This is also in accordance with the numismatic phenomenon of coinages of quartuncial standard appearing in the eastern Mediterranean³⁹.

The coins in question here are large bronzes engraved by skilled die cutters. The weights, according to Stefanaki's die study, range from 16,28 to 25,46 g with an average of 20,85 g (66 pieces). She has drawn attention to the fact that with this average weight they fit nicely into a variety of local and colonial coinages as well as the so-called fleet coinage of Marc Antony, suggesting that the coins were oriented towards the Roman numismatic and economic sphere⁴⁰. Diameters range from 30–33 mm and dies are fixed at 12 h. The obverses show a portrait of Nikias to the right with the legend ΝΙΚΙΑΣ⁴¹, the reverses are adorned with the bearded head of Asklepios to the right, wearing a laurel wreath tied with a tainia. The accompanying legends name the people (ΚΩΙΩΝ) and one of the above-mentioned magistrates.

Since Stefanaki's thorough study of the issue, only few new examples have turned up on the international market⁴² (see **table 1**).

The new examples do not add anything new to the corpus in terms of magistrates or dies.

The main focus of this paper is the iconography of the coins, more specifically the iconography of their obverses, the reverse image being quite straightforward and understandable in the context of Cos. Concerning the portrait of Nikias on the obverses on the other hand, some significant misunderstandings have dominated scholarship up to now.

The first one concerns the headdress. It is either interpreted as being a diadem⁴³, a tai-

nion, or a crown. The second one concerns the identification of the figure. It is either interpreted as being a diadem⁴³, a tai-

³⁵ RPC I, nos. [2724](#), [2725](#), [2726](#), [2728](#), [2729](#), [2730](#), [2731](#); Stefanaki 2012, 126–130. 281–283. The following magistrates are attested: ΧΑΡΜΥΛΟΣ, ΠΟΛΥΧΑΡΗΣ, ΟΛΥΜΠΙΧΟΣ, ΚΑΛΛΙΠΠΙΔΗΣ, ΕΥΚΑΡΠΟΣ, ΕΥΚΑΡΠΟΣ, ΔΙΟΦΑΝΤΟΣ and ΑΝΤΙΟΧΟΣ.

³⁶ Herzog 1922, 208; Syme 1961, 27 n. 68; Sherwin-White 1978, 144; Stefanaki 2012, 126.

³⁷ Habicht 2000, 322–326. The study of the coinage between the fourth and second century BC by H. Ingvaldsen reached a similar conclusion; Ingvaldsen 2002, 187–206.

³⁸ Stefanaki 2012, 126.

³⁹ Stefanaki 2012, 129. For the phenomenon in general compare Kroll 1997.

⁴⁰ Stefanaki 2012, 127–130. For the ›fleet coinage‹ see v. Bahrfeldt 1905; Buttrey 1953; Amandry 1986; Amandry 1987a; Amandry 1987b; Martini 1988; Amandry 1990; RPC I, p. 284 f. nos. [1453–1461](#), [1462–1470](#), [4088–4093](#); Kroll 1997, 124. 128 f.; Fischer 1999, 191–211; Amandry 2008; Amandry – Barrandon 2008, 230–232.

⁴¹ The only surviving examples of his portraiture, since the small bust (›bustino‹) of a child with the inscription ΝΙΚΙΑΣ ΤΥΡΑΝΝΟΣ has to be considered depicting somebody else and the inscription incised at a later point; original publication Jacopitch 1928, 95 fig. 77. The bust was in the ›Castello dei Cavalieri‹ of Cos and was recorded during a restoration campaign 1915–1916, during which a catalogue of over 1300 marble artefacts was collected. The pieces came from a variety of findspots and collections more or less all over the island of Cos; Jacopitch 1928, 92. Buraselis 2000, 41 n. 61 states he was not able to trace the piece. It has to be considered lost.

⁴² Dies are indicated according to Stefanaki's system; Stefanaki 2012, 281–283. Some of the coins collected by her have continued their journey through private collections and auction houses: Stefanaki 2012, no. 2184α = Bertolami Fine Arts, ACR Auctions, Auction 4 (05.12.2011) no. 7; Stefanaki 2012, no. 2231 = CNG, Electronic Auction 145 (09.08.2006) no. 95 = CNG, Electronic Auction 490 (21.04.2021) no. 23; Stefanaki 2012, no. 2198 = Fritz Rudolf Künker GmbH & Co. KG, Auktion 333 (16.03.2020) no. 318; Stefanaki 2012, no. 2224 = Gemini LLC, Auction 10 (13.01.2013) no. 118; Stefanaki 2012, no. 2205 = Stacks, Bowers and Ponterio, January 2017 NYINC Auction (12.01.2017) no. 2057 (in her list The New York Sale 11 [11.01.2006] no. 202 is missing for this coin).

⁴³ BMC Caria, 213 no. 196–200; Sherwin-White 1978, 142.



No	Weight	Dies	Commentary	Provenance
1	22,75 g	E9 / O15	Stefanaki 2012, 282 no. 2197; 494 fig. 2197 shows the closest parallel (one correction has to be made in Stefanaki's catalogue: her numbers 2192 and 2193 cannot be from the same obverse die).	Gorny & Mosch Giessener Münzhandlung, Auktion 181 (12.10.2009) no. 1782
2	19,24 g	E14 / O28	Stefanaki 2012, 283 no. 2231; 498 fig. 2231 shows the closest parallel.	Helios Numismatik, Auktion 3 (29.04.2009) no. 56
3	21,42 g	E16 / O37	Stefanaki 2012, 283 no. 2237; 499 fig. 2237 shows the closest parallel.	Naville Numismatics Ltd., Auction 31 (14.05.2017) no. 130; ex E.E. Clain-Stefanelli collection
4	24,95 g	E4 / O12		Roma Numismatics Ltd., E-Sale 31 (26.10.2016) no. 154
5	19,05 g	E15 / O43		Roma Numismatics Ltd., E-Sale 99 (07.07.2022) no. 407

Table 1: Coins to be added to Stefanaki's corpus



Fig. 1: AE; Nikias of Cos; 31 mm;
Fritz Rudolf Künker GmbH & Co. KG,
Auktion 333 (16.03.2020) lot 318 (scale 1:1)

nia⁴⁴ or called an unspecific wreath, sometimes with a questionmark⁴⁵. Kostas Buraselis wanted to identify it as some sort of knotted (woollen) band, marking Nikias as being in some form sacred, between the spheres of humankind and gods⁴⁶.

Andrew Burnett was, as Buraselis also saw, certainly right with his verdict that what we see on Nikias' head »certainly does not look like a diadem«⁴⁷. The diadem was a broad band, sometimes with decoration, tied on the back of the head and ending in a straight form (not with a pointed knot as a tainia)⁴⁸. The differences to what is shown on these Coan coins are striking. But it is also obvious that one main argument of Buraselis is certainly wrong⁴⁹: The headdresses of Nikias on the obverse and Asklepios on the reverse are certainly not the same. In addition, his identification of the latter's headdress as a twisted,

knotted headband is not correct. Burnett was right in identifying the wreath of the god as a laurel wreath. It is, admittedly, a slender one, with what seem to be two rows of laurel leaves very closely together. And Buraselis might have seen something very interesting, as a close examination of one of the better preserved coins of the series shows (**fig. 1**). It looks as if in regular intervals something is attached to the laurel wreath, giving the impression of loops. In addition, it is not tied with a tainia but with what seems to be a royal diadem. This feature can be observed several times, but has not yet been sufficiently explained⁵⁰. However, the general picture of the main god of the island wearing a laurel wreath remains valid.

If Nikias is not wearing a diadem and not a »Heroenbinde«, two possibilities remain for the identification of his headdress: a tainia or a wreath. Both are correct, as is clearly shown

⁴⁴ Stefanaki 2012, 126. 281.

⁴⁵ RPC I, nos. [2724](#). [2725](#). [2726](#). [2728](#). [2729](#). [2730](#). [2731](#).

⁴⁶ Buraselis 2000, 31–33. He clearly has in mind the so-called Heroenbinde, which should have a different form; Martin 2012.

⁴⁷ RPC I, p. 452; Buraselis 2000, 31.

⁴⁸ Salzmann 2012.

⁴⁹ Buraselis 2000, 32.

⁵⁰ Compare Salzmann 2012, 358 n. 83; Martin 2012, 270 with some examples.



by the enlargement of the obverse of the coin shown above (**fig. 2**). Thin stalks and leaves or needles emanating from a slim branch are easily discernible. The wreath is, on the other hand, tied at the back of the head with a tainia, actually making this a combination of two insignia, a wreath and a tainia⁵¹. The plan used for the wreath is not easy to make out, given the wear of the coins and the closeness in style of leaves and locks of hair. The form of the leaves exclude that it is laurel. One might think of Mediterranean cypress, as the sacred grove of Asklepios on Cos consisted of cypress trees and it was centre of cultic processions on the island⁵². The cypress was one of the sacred plants attached to Asklepios⁵³. The form of the twigs however seems to exclude an identification as cypress, since they are not ramified enough⁵⁴. The question as to which leaves are meant has to remain open. The tainia is, both in Greek and Roman culture, sign of victory and was therefore given to victors (both in real life as well as in art, in many cases directly by Nike/Victoria)⁵⁵. Building on this tradition we find examples of Hellenistic kings shown wearing a combination of laurel wreath and tainia in situations in which they seem to have been in some way victorious or successful⁵⁶. Nikias could therefore be marked, with the combination of a wreath and tainia, as both victorious and as a worshipper, maybe even a cult member, of Asklepios⁵⁷.

Nikias' portrait has already received some scholarly attention, especially by Burnett⁵⁸ and Buraselis⁵⁹. As the latter observed quite correctly, the wear of most of the examples of the coins makes it difficult to derive all the necessary details of the head from only one coin. The plates in Stefanaki's publication are certainly helpful to get a general overview, although one has to admit that the print quality is not too high⁶⁰. The following description is based on a combination of several pieces of above average preservation in enlargements (**figs. 2–5**).

The skull, structurally defined by its bones, is mounted on a narrow, sinewy neck with a



Fig. 2: Enlargement of the obverse of fig. 1

prominent Adam's apple. The back of the head is regularly rounded, whereas the face from the small pointed chin to the very high forehead is quite flat. A marked break is formed by a big, hooked nose with a protuberance marking it might have been broken at one point. From its sides, long and deep nasolabial folds stretch towards the sides of a narrow mouth

⁵¹ For the combination of tainia and laurel wreath, focusing on Roman iconography, see Biedermann 2020.

⁵² Ps.-Hippokr. Ep. 11 (Smith 1990, 58–61); Sherwin-White 1978, 339. Unfortunately, cypress is nowhere attested to have played a role in the cult of the healing god. Olck 1901, 1915–1938 for the cypress in cult, esp. 1923–1932; cypress in medicine 1913–1915. Attested as plants for wreaths in connection with the cult of Asklepios are olive, laurel and oleander; Nilsson 1906, 410; Blech 1982, 312.

⁵³ Ps.-Hippokr. Ep. 11; Thraemer 1886, 628.

⁵⁴ I thank Cathy Lorber for doubting my earlier identification and Thibaud Messerschmid as well as Simon Pfanzelt (both Botanischer Garten München-Nymphenburg) for their botanical expertise.

⁵⁵ See for example Lehmann 2012; Biedermann 2020, esp. 34–41.

⁵⁶ Biedermann 2020, 25 f. 40 f.

⁵⁷ We do not know what the insignia of the priests and other cult personal looked like; Ps.-Hippokr. 11.

⁵⁸ RPC I, p. 452.

⁵⁹ Buraselis 2000, 31–35.

⁶⁰ Stefanaki 2012, pl. 493–499. 514.



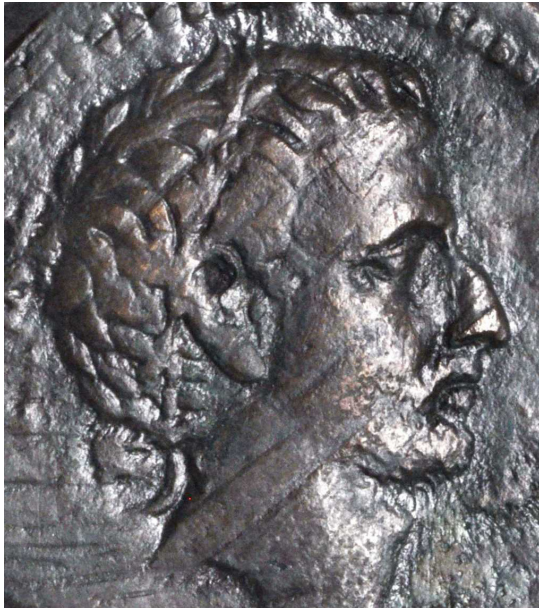


Fig. 3: Enlargement of AE; Nikias of Cos; 31 mm; Stack's, Bowers and Ponterio, January 2017 NYINC Auction (12.01.2017) lot 2057



Fig. 4: Enlargement of AE; Nikias of Cos; 32 mm; Bertolami Fine Arts, ACR Auctions, Auction 4 (05.12.2011) lot 7



Fig. 5: Enlargement of AE; Nikias of Cos; 31 mm; Helios Numismatik, Auktion 3 (29.04.2009) Nr. 56

cover almond-shaped eyes while the lower eyelid fades into a slender lacrimal. Sharply incised, short crow's feet complete the carefully composed eye region. The hair consisting of slim, curved locks emerges from a swirl on the back of the head. Over the forehead the sparse locks of hair form quite a well-defined hairstyle. Three strands are combed forward into the forehead, as if to hide a gradually growing baldness. Towards the right temple they are followed by a lock forming an S and four further locks simply curved downwards over the elongated ear. Cheeks, chin and upper lip are covered by a short, regularly trimmed beard. The head is adorned, as stated above, with a combination of wreath and tainia.

This portrait, with clear traits of verism, smooth and taut skin as well as contractions as marks of concentrated effort, fits well into a line of late Hellenistic royal portraiture as defined by rulers like Antiochos I, Orophernes, Hiero II or Philetairos⁶¹. In Nikias' lifetime, this

formed by regular lips, itself accompanied by sharp folds. The bulging brows are knitted above the nose, contracting with them the high forehead, leaving one or two parallel wrinkles across it. Thin, finely cut eyelids

⁶¹ Salzmann 2012, 362–379 for a quick overview of numismatic sources. A sculpture with a bearded portrait interpreted frequently as a Greek, the so-called Thermenherrscher, has convincingly been identified as Q. Caec. Metellus Macedonicus by Stephan Lehmann; Lehmann 1997.



style of portraits was popular in Rome, while also clearly having Greek roots, both in civic and royal portraiture⁶².

Recent scholarship has more or less unanimously concluded that Nikias' portrait was influenced by the early portraits of Octavian⁶³. This is, on the one hand, politically unlikely, given the fact that Cos in general and Nikias in particular maintained connections with Antony⁶⁴. Furthermore, it would have been unwise, even if there had been no direct connection between the island and the emperor, to show too much sympathy with the cause of Octavian in the realm under Antony's rule.

Apart from these arguments, Octavian's portraits are also markedly different in style and conception from those of Nikias. First of all it is quite obvious that there is no similarity with or dependence on the portraits of the so-called Octavians-Typus⁶⁵. Two schemes of portraits remain in discussion⁶⁶.

Scheme I was used for coins between 43 and 38 BC and its portraits are characterized by a youthful, smooth and unspecific physiognomy. The round heads show a full, almost chubby integument, a long pointed nose, a small chin slightly bent upwards and a small, full-lipped mouth. A closed, even cap of short, straight locks encloses the head⁶⁷. (figs. 6–8)

Since 42 BC, scheme II was in use in parallel with scheme I. Its portraits were minted until 36 BC – after 40 BC, in parallel with the first portraits of the ›Octavians-Typus‹ – when the so-called Siegesserie marked a turning point both in the depiction of portraits on coins⁶⁸ as well as in the history of the treatment of portraits in general – from a more general scheme which was not copied in every detail to a portrait type with copies as exact as possible⁶⁹. The physiognomic characterization of the portraits is the same as with coins of scheme I. The variation can be found in the hairstyle, as the portraits of scheme II show a role of hair at the neck of the head and above the forehead. Both are more voluminous than the rest of the hair, which is evenly combed downwards in straight locks again⁷⁰. (figs. 9. 10)

The brief overview of coin portraits of both schemes shows clearly, that on the one hand the characteristics are very generic and that on the other hand the exactness of the execution by the die cutter varies very much. The extreme youthfulness makes it impossible to conclude that the Octavian portraits influenced that of Nikias. The only parallel might be the beard sometimes attached to Octavian's image. But, on the other hand, an examination of the bearded portraits of Octavian demonstrates that these show a wide range of different beards with probably different meanings⁷¹, making it

⁶² Among the Roman portraits those of Marcus Antonius (Biedermann 2018, 18–43), Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (Trunk 2008), Sextus Pompeius (Biedermann 2018, 697–703), Lucius (?) Ahenobarbus (Lahusen 1989, 28 f.) or, as a late example, that of Agrippa (Fittschen et al. 2010, 29–33 no. 16, esp. p. 30) can be named. For the conventions behind this style of portraiture Zanker 1976; Zanker 1978, 34–39; Balz 1982; Lahusen 1989, 75–81; Fittschen 1991a (opposing Giuliani 1986). Bearded Greek and Roman private portraits with veristic traits along these lines are known en masse from intaglios and cameos from the second and first centuries BC; compare Vollenweider 1974, 25, 1–7; 44, 1; 45, 1; 129, 1–12 (interpreted as Greeks) and Biedermann 2013 with Roman examples. Bearded and veristic royal portraiture collected by Iossif – Lorber 2009, focussing on Seleucid examples, but including others too.

⁶³ RPC I, p. 452. Buraselis 2000, 31.

⁶⁴ See above and Herzog 1922, 212 f.; Sherwin-White 1978, 145; Crawford 1996, 497–506 (text and commentary of the *lex fonteia*); Buraselis 2000, 25–30.

⁶⁵ For the portrait type in general see Brendel 1931, 40–54; Curtius 1940, 47–53; Zanker 1978; Hausmann 1981, 535–550; Massner 1982, 32–36; Boschung 1993, 11–22. 61 f.; Fittschen – Zanker 1994, 1 f. no. 1; Fittschen 1991, 161–163

⁶⁶ For the following division into schemes and the coin types showing these portraits Biedermann 2018, 260–310 esp. 295–301. For the term ›portrait scheme‹ in contrast to ›portrait type‹ Biedermann 2018, 15–17.

⁶⁷ For the complete account of types cf. Biedermann 2018, Oct. M 1–16. 32. 33 (figs. 550–621. 742–764).

⁶⁸ The series is, as far as I see, the first example in which the three-dimensional prototype was depicted from both sides.

⁶⁹ Biedermann 2018, 15–17. 260–310 esp. 295–301.

⁷⁰ For the complete account of types see Biedermann 2018, Oct. M 18. 20–22. 38. 40. 41; figs. 628–644. 648–685. 808–829. 831–853.

⁷¹ Biedermann 2013, 35–38; cf. Hertel 2021 now with partly differing results.





Fig. 6: Denarius; Octavian; 43 BC; [RRC, no. 490, 1](#); scale 1:1 and enlargement; BM 2002,0102.4719;
© The Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 7: Aureus; Octavian; 43 BC; [RRC, no. 490, 2](#); scale 1:1 and enlargement; BM 1864,1128.8;
© The Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 8: Denarius; Octavian; 42 BC; [RRC, no. 494, 33](#); scale 1:1 and enlargement; [ANS 2012.34.23](#);
© American Numismatic Society





Fig. 9: Denarius; Octavian; 41 BC; [RRC, no. 518, 1](#); scale 1:1 and enlargement; [ANS 1937.158.349](#);
© American Numismatic Society



Fig. 10: Denarius; Octavian; 37 BC; [RRC, no. 538, 1](#); scale 1:1 and enlargement; Berlin, [object no. 18202287](#);
photograph by Dirk Sonnenwald

very difficult to find a reason why Nikias should have copied this specific form of a beard.

It was already mentioned that the underlying style of portraiture to which Nikias referred was also used by some Romans. Among these, we easily find one whose portraits show parallels to that of the Coan: Mark Antony (figs. 11–13). Especially coins of 42 BC, when his portraits still wore a mourning beard⁷², reveal astonishing parallels: the head has a similar general structure; the hair consists of even locks which form clear patterns across the forehead, the latter being divided by at least one wrinkle; the brows contracted above the nose which is quite big and slightly hooked; the use of mild verisms⁷³.

These similarities clearly indicate, from my point of view, that the model for Nikias' portrait was that of Mark Antony. This makes Nikias a forerunner of later client kings⁷⁴,

⁷² Biedermann 2013, 38–44; Biedermann – Haymann 2015, 301 f.

⁷³ For the types cited here Biedermann 2018, Ant. M 15. 16. 18. For Antony's portrait and the schemes in general compare Biedermann 2018, 18–43.

⁷⁴ Another early example is Tarcondimotus I of Cilicia, whose portrait is clearly influenced by that of Caesar (the huge amount of wrinkles, crow's feet, leather-like skin and bony substructure of the face) while at the same time picking up what seem to be elements of the ›antonian‹ style of portraiture, namely in the even, curly, short hair and the muscular, thick neck. He seems to have been born around 100 BC, having thus





Fig. 11: Denarius; Marcus Antonius; 42 BC; [RRC, no. 494, 17](#); scale 1:1 and enlargement; BM 2002,0102.4722; © The Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 12: Denarius; Marcus Antonius; 42 BC; [RRC, no. 494, 32](#); scale 1:1 and enlargement; Berlin, [object no. 18214935](#), photograph by Dirk Sonnenwald



Fig. 13: Denarius; Marcus Antonius; 42 BC; [RRC, no. 496, 2](#); scale 1:1 and enlargement; Berlin, [Object no. 18214950](#), photograph by Dirk Sonnenwald



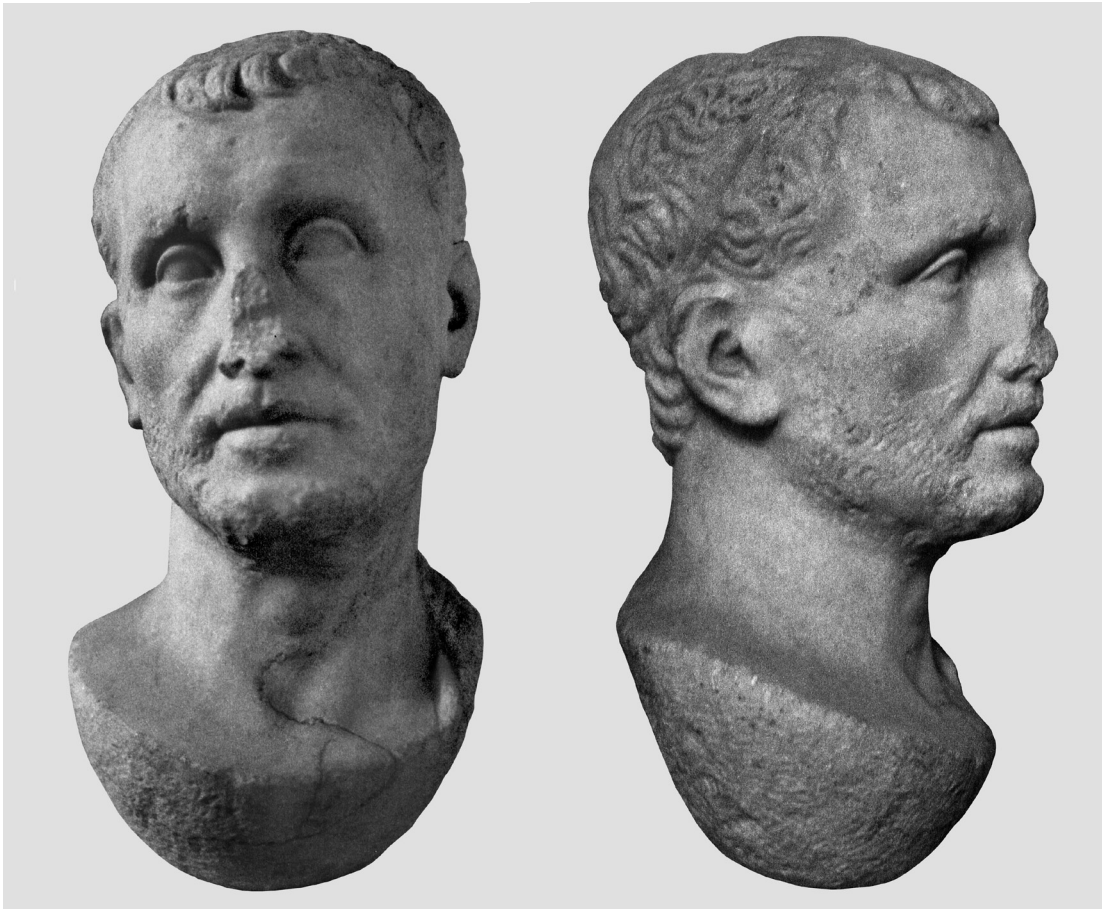


Fig. 14: Portrait head; Archaeological Museum of Rhodes Inv. E 48; photographs by Hans R. Goette

modelling their portraits according to that of Augustus⁷⁵. Probably having come into his position only a short while before having these coins minted, with at least Antony's approval if not his support, Nikias showed that he was a *philoromaios* and a *philantonius* with his portrait. On the other hand, the traits of the portrait all stemmed from a Greek tradition, fitting the likeness into the line of Hellenistic royal portraiture.

III. Searching for a sculptural portrait

Attempts to identify a sculptural portrait of Nikias have been extremely scarce⁷⁶. The marble bust of a boy with the inscription ΝΙΚΙΑΣ ΤΥΡΑΝΝΟΣ is probably, should the inscription be ancient, a creation of later times, when somebody wanted to recreate a representation of the dead⁷⁷.

Dieter Salzman has, hesitantly⁷⁸, drawn attention to the fact that there are similarities between the discussed coin portrait and

reached an age of probably between 50 and 70 years before he was installed as a client king by Antony; Wright 2009, 74. For Tarcondimotus I and his coinage see RPC I, no. 3871; Sayar 2001, 373–375; Tobin 2001 (focus on the dynasty); Wright 2008, esp. 115–118; Wright 2009 and Wright 2012 (with focus on the contacts of his dynasty with the Romans).

⁷⁵ The most prominent example being Juba II; cf. Salzman 1974; Fittschen 1974. Dahmen 2010 gives a great general overview of the phenomenon.

⁷⁶ That there must have been portrait statues is proven by a base found on Cos which according to its measurements once carried a statue; Herzog 1899, 67. 128 Nr. 192.

⁷⁷ For the bust and the identification see Jakopitch 1928, 96; Sherwin-White 1978, 142 n. 323. Discussion and falsification Salzman 1986, 243.

⁷⁸ I thank Dieter Salzman for drawing my attention to the head and discussing it with me.



a marble one in the Archaeological Museum of Rhodes⁷⁹ (fig. 14). It is usually identified as Poseidonios which cannot be true due to the fact that the person depicted is much younger, has a distinctly different facial profile and lower face and much more stylised eyes⁸⁰.

The portrait shows a middle-aged man with markedly veristic features and wide open, strongly stylized eyes. The receding forehead shows deep wrinkles, the broken nose seems to have been hooked, that mouth is girded with a deep cut. The hair is styled in small curls, reaching down deeply in the middle of the forehead and receding acute-angled towards the sides. The head shows traces of a band probably added in metal.

In comparison with Nikias' portrait on the coins, the similarities one finds in the lower section of the head (chin, mouth, nasolabial section, cheek, nose) are soon weighed out by clear differences. Especially three features prohibit an identification: the profile line of the face is markedly different; the forehead of the marble head is receding while that of the coin portrait is steep; and the hairstyle shown on the coins lacks the characteristically receding hairline of the marble portrait. The Rhodian portrait can therefore not be identified as Nikias of Cos, despite the fact that in these times one cannot yet expect the accuracy of later portrait types⁸¹.

IV. Concluding remarks

Nikias of Cos is one of the quickly rising and quickly falling illustrious characters of the civil war Mediterranean between the mid-40s and 30 BC. Obviously opportunistic, intelligent and eloquent, he managed to get in touch with and become a close acquaintance of most of the powerful Romans at that time. His cleverness not only allowed him to manoeuvre his homeland through most of these difficult times, he also built himself a nice position as a tyrant, receiving high honours on Cos. The exact time at which this happened is unclear. If we accept Antony's coins of 42 BC as direct models for Nikias' portrait, we can assume that shortly

after this year, Nikias' regime was established and his coinage minted. How long it lasted is equally unsure, but around 31 or 30 BC it seems to have ended with Nikias' death, burial and the desecration of his tomb.

His portraits show on the one hand his close connection with Antony while marking him on the other as a Hellenistic ruler. The headdress, a wreath with a tainia, probably connects him with the cult of the main god of the island, Asklepios, figuring on the reverse of the coins, and marks him as victorious. The coin series, as we see, embodies the complete political programme of a small tyrant between Hellenistic kingdoms, Rome and his homeland, trying to find his place in the dangerous times of the civil war which was sweeping over the whole Mediterranean world.

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⁷⁹ Salzmänn 1986, 242 f. Archaeological Museum of Rhodes, inv. E48. For a discussion of the head and a bibliography see Bairami 2017, Kat. 068.

⁸⁰ Salzmänn had already recognized that the head follows (as do the coin portraits discussed here) the same style of portraiture as that of Poseidonios; Salzmänn 1986, 242.

⁸¹ See above, note 69s.



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