

JANINA SYNAGOGUE TABLETS AND THE MONETARY DONATIONS¹

The Kehila Kedosha Janina website includes a section called “The Stones of Ioannina”. The stones, in the synagogue in our ancestral home in Greece, were beautifully photographed and translated from Hebrew by Sydney Levy after his trip in 2009.

Several of the stones cite a donation to the synagogue. Different coins are mentioned, most unfamiliar to modern readers. The information inspired research into coinage of the Ottoman Empire and the coins mentioned on the tablets. The variety of coinage speaks to the diverse nature of the Empire and to Janina’s place on its outer fringes.

The focus here is to get a measure of the donations, a feeling for the wealth of the donors, and indirectly an indication of the economic well-being of the Janina congregation.

This is an attempt only to scratch the surface. It is an initial look at the economic status of a few members of the synagogue from the mid 19th century into the early 20th century, i.e. the period before the catastrophe of the First World War.

Presented below are the plaque numbers as shown on the Kehila website, arranged in chronological order by the date on the stones, earliest first. The amount of the donation and the coinage are shown first. Information from various on-line sources is shown for each plaque. Analysis and conclusions are presented with the intent of giving an indication of what the donations represented at the time that they were given.

800 grush (1857) - Plaque 11. “Grush” and its many English language variations was the Greek and Turkish name for coins in the territories of the Ottoman Empire². Also

¹ “The Ottoman Empire was not able to set up a central coinage system and succeed in applying it within its wide borders during its first and middle periods. Various currencies which had different values were used in different regions of the Empire. Although the budgets of the administrations were usually done by using akche unit, they were also done by using other units. The Ottomans brought very pragmatic solutions on this by not interfering much with the customs, traditions and habits of local people on the newly invaded lands; so they had different currency units minted under different names as a result of these policies.

“The official currency of the Ottoman Empire was the akche minted from silver. In other words, akche was the only currency unit used to fix all the currencies valid within the Empire. The value of this currency based on silver was fixed by the central administration. The changes of the value of akche could affect indirectly the prices within the Empire, the prices of furniture, foreign trade, the costs of valuable metals, the costs of wars; in other words the lives of all the people living in the Empire.” From “The Unit of Measurement and Scale of Ottoman Coins”, by Necdet Kabaklarh.

²Wikipedia under “Groschen”, “used in the Middle Ages for all thick silver coins”.



referred to as “gurush” or “kurus”, and other variations, this monetary unit was introduced in the eighteenth century.³ It was minted in both gold and silver.

The grush initially was a large coin valued at 40 “paras”⁴. One para equaled 3 akche, so 120 akches, the smallest unit, equaled one grush.⁵ The relationships between the grush, para, and akche remained constant until the end of the Empire.

Shown above is a silver gurush weighing 25.65 grams.

Between 1850 and the end of the Ottoman Empire the silver content of the Ottoman akche had been devalued down to about 0.01 grams of silver.⁶

The daily wage of a skilled Empire worker averaged over the 1850s and 1860s was approximately 13.5 grams of silver; for an unskilled worker it was about 8 grams of silver.⁷ That equals about 11 grush per day for a skilled Empire worker and about 7 grush per day for an unskilled worker in mid 19th century.⁸

³ From “Ottoman Empire: Money”. “Kurus” [from the German ‘Groschen’] was, from 1844 to the 1970s, the standard unit of currency in the Ottoman Empire and was a subdivision of the lira. It was divided into 40 para, each para being worth 3 akce.” This from www.freebase.com/view/en/kurus

⁴ “The daily wage of an unskilled construction worker in Istanbul was approximately 8 paras or 24 akches during the early decades of the eighteenth century.” From “Ottoman Empire: Money” by Sevket Pamuk.

From Sevket Pamuk, a table in “Prices and Wages in the Ottoman Empire, 1469 - 1914”, we learn that the silver content of the Ottoman Akce between around 1700 and 1730 was about 0.13 grams of silver. The daily wage of an unskilled Empire construction worker, therefore, in the early 18th century was about 3.1 grams of silver [24 x 0.13 = 3.12]. Janina, being at the outer fringes of the empire, might have had wages very unlike those in Istanbul.

⁵From www.freebase.com/view/en/akce.

⁶See Pamuk, “Prices and Wages”

⁷Wage rates from Pamuk, “Prices and Wages” The U.S. FDR silver dime (1946 to 1964), by way of comparison, was 90% silver and weighed 2.5 grams. The skilled worker’s daily wage, therefore, would have been the equivalent of about 6 FDR dimes; for the unskilled worker it would have been the equivalent of about 4 dimes.

⁸13.5 grams of silver per day/.01 grams of silver per akche = 1350 akche per day/120 akche per grush = 11.25 grush per day wages for a skilled worker. For an

Using these data, the contribution of 800 grush would have been the equivalent of about 72 days pay for a skilled worker and about 114 days pay for an unskilled worker.⁹

Even assuming that the donors were not skilled workers but were merchants or other community leaders, a donation that equaled between three and five months wages of laboring neighbors was a very large sum of money.

Shown below left is a silver para weighing 0.55 grams .



1,000 Grush (1858) - Plaque 13. This was even a larger donation than that discussed above.

Shown at the right below is a silver akce weighing 0.20 grams. This was the smallest unit of Ottoman coinage.



8 (or 800?) Turkish Lira (1860) - Plaque 9. “Between 1844 and 1881, the lira was on a bimetallic standard, with 1 lira = 6.61519 grams pure gold = 99.8292 grams pure silver. In 1881, the gold standard was adopted and continued until 1914.”¹⁰

“From early in the nineteenth c., monetary stability was perceived as an important pre-requisite for reform and commercial development both by the Ottoman government and by European interests. After decades of frequent debasements and instability,

unskilled worker: $8/.01 = 800$ akche per day/ $120 = 6.7$ grush per day wages. From Pamuk; the averages used here yield somewhat lower wages in akche than shown in Pamuk’s table. Those figures correlate well with the data shown above for Istanbul wages 100+ years earlier, considering the silver devaluation of the akche.

⁹800 grush/11 grush per day wages = 72 days wages; $800/7 = 114$.

¹⁰Wikipedia, “Turkish lira”.



another *tashih-i sikke* operation was undertaken in 1844 which established a new bimetallic system based on the silver *kurus* [see above, “grush”] and gold *lira* with 1 gold *lira* = 100 silver *kurus*. The gold *lira*, the silver *kurus* and the silver 20-*kurus*, often called the *mecidiye*, became the leading coinage.”¹¹

The image above is an Ottoman Gold Lira with 6.615 grams of gold.

The Turkish *lira* was introduced in 1844 and replaced the *kurus* as the principal unit of currency; the *kurus* continued to circulate with 100 *kurus* equaling one *lira*.¹²

At the rate of one *lira* to 100 *kurus* (grush), a donation of 8 *Lira* would equal 800 grush, the same amount as shown in the first donation cited above. Since 800 grush was a considerable sum of money it seems likely that this donation was 8 *Lira* and not the possible 800 *Lira* speculated in Sydney’s translation. At the gold content shown above, 8 Turkish *Lira* was the equivalent of 52.9 grams of gold [6.615 x 8 = 52.9].

8 golden megids (1862) - Plaque 10. “I stopped by one of the Hasidic jewelers (there were as many Jewish jewelers as Arab carpet sellers) and showed him one of my diamonds. While arranging his black felt hat with each assessment, he offered a different amount for the gems in British pounds, French francs, or *megiddos*, Jewish currency.”¹³

“Megid” was not a coin used by the Turks (or the Greeks or Albanians); it does not appear in any of the researched coin books. Megiddo was a Biblical city. Perhaps the term “megid” was local to Janina describing a coin in circulation. It might have been used in place of “*Lira*”, with 8 golden megids equivalent to 8 Turkish *Lira*.

8 golden minir (?) and **6 golden megids** (?) (1893) - Plaque 7. See above for “megids”. “Minir” also was not a coin used by the Turks or neighboring countries.

A guess, based on the quantity of the donation, is that both “minir” and “megid” were equivalent to the Turkish *Lira*. As such, each of these donations was quite large.

¹¹ “An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, Volume 2”, p. 971, by Suraiya Faroqhi, Halil Inalcik, Donald Quataert.

¹²From <www.freebase.com/view/en/turkish_lira>

1,000 gissim (1893) - Plaque 8. "Gissim" was not a coin used by the Ottoman Empire, Greece, or Albania. Since the quantity is the same as for "grush", most likely it was a local name for that Ottoman coin. As such, this would have been a considerable donation.

40 Napoleons (1905) - Plaque 6. See "40 golden Napoleons", below.

40 golden Napoleons (1905 - 1906) - Plaque 5. From TIME Magazine, July 16, 1956: "The Price of Napoleon. As they have for generations, Frenchmen hedge their bets on the future by buying up and hoarding "napoleons"¹⁴ — golden 20-franc pieces. Napoleons are thus the truest reflection of a small Frenchman's faith, or lack of faith, in his government's financial stability."



Shown above is a golden Napoleon, 1865, with 5.84 grams of gold.

The gold Napoleon was minted between 1803 and 1914 in four denominations. A 20 franc Napoleon, shown below, is 90% fine gold and weighs 6.46 grams.

40 golden Napoleons represent 258.4 grams of gold. In 1905 the value of gold was \$21 per oz. 258.4 grams of gold equals 9.11 oz of gold. At \$21 per oz in 1905, a donation of 40 golden Napoleons was worth \$191.

Various on-line sources say that the average hourly wage in the U.S. in 1905 was 22 cents. Working a forty hour week would yield an "average" American worker \$8.80.

"The coins were first minted under Louis XIII, but take their name from Napoleon I, who put his own portrait on them when he was consul. For most of the past century they have displayed a republican rooster, but "napoleons" they remain." This footnote is in the TIME Magazine story.

At that rate, \$191 for the American worker would have been twenty two weeks wages. Most likely, a worker in Janina would work longer to earn the equivalent amount.

The golden Napoleon has 7% less gold content than the Turkish Lira (6.46 grams x .9 pure gold = 5.84 grams of gold for the Napoleon vs. 6.62 grams pure gold for the Lira.)

The 8 golden Turkish Lira equal 52.9 grams of gold. This donation in golden Napoleons represents almost five times that gold value. This donation was a very large sum.

500 Franks (1906) - Plaque 14. The "franc" or "frank" was the currency of dozens of countries, most notably France. It now is obsolete in all countries except Switzerland and about a dozen African countries.¹⁵

The assumption here is that the reference is to the French franc. Before the Great War one franc was worth roughly 20 cents or five francs to one U.S. dollar. 500 francs, therefore, would have been equal to about 100 dollars.¹⁶

Using the values for the Golden Napoleon above, a donation of 500 Francs would have been roughly the equivalent of 21 Gold Napoleons, a considerable sum vis a vis the grush and its equivalent in daily workers' wages.¹⁷

Another comparison is to what immigrants reported on their ship manifests when traveling to America. Many early 20th century immigrants from Greece to the U.S. reported \$20 on the ship manifest as the amount that they were bringing with them. A donation of five times what most immigrants left Greece with was a considerable sum of money.

Summary and Conclusion

From Sydney's work we have a sample of four plaques (numbers 11, 13, 9, and 14) from which we get an idea of relative value of the synagogue members' donations. In addition, plaques 10, 7, 6, and 5 refer to donations in gold coin.

The donations in grush and lira give us a reasonable guess at relative value. Those donations were equal to between three and five months wages for "average" Ottoman Empire workers, skilled or unskilled.

¹⁵From Wikipedia.

¹⁶From "The Value of Francs in Maigret Stories", found on-line.

¹⁷ $\$100/\$191 = 0.52 \times 40 \text{ Napoleons per } \$191 = 20.9 \text{ Napoleons.}$

Napoleons have a known monetary value for the early part of the 20th century. The donation in Napoleons was considerably more than the donations in grush or golden lira.

Pamuk's "Trends in Prices and Wages in Istanbul, 1469 - 1914" table shows a 25% increase in skilled workers' wages (in grams of silver) between 1860 and 1900 and a 4 % increase for unskilled workers. Granting that the wages in Istanbul did not necessarily correlate with those in Janina, they give an indication of order of magnitude.

With only a 25% increase in skilled wages since 1860 (the 52.9 grams of gold Lira donation), the 1905 donation of 258.4 grams of gold Napoleons (almost a 500% increase), was very large indeed.

The three donations in grush and lira were of the same magnitude. A fair guess is that there was a traditional donation amount. Since the "minir" and "megid" donations were of the same magnitude as the donation in lira, it is assumed that "minir" and "megid" were local names for the Ottoman Gold Lira. Those donations, therefore, also were considerable and represented months of wage for working members of the community.

Since the magnitude of the donation in "gissim", an unknown coin, is the same as that in grush, it is assumed that "gissim" was a local name for the Ottoman grush. That donation, therefore, also was considerable and represented many months wages.

The last donations for which we have records, Gold Napoleons and francs, were made at the same time. Both were even larger than the donations made half a century earlier in grush and lira, taking into account the modest rise in wages over that period.

Those who made donations as recorded on the synagogue plaques were prosperous members of the congregation and Janina community. The donations known to us one hundred and more years after the fact were substantial and reflect significant wealth and charity among members of the Janina congregation.

An interesting followup to this study would be to correlate this information and assumptions with the history of the Jewish community in Janina from the mid 1800s through the time that most of our ancestors left Greece for a new life in America.