TYCHE'S TWIN: LAODICAEA AD MARE’S USE OF JULIA DOMNA AS THE GODDESS OF FORTUNE

Stories of competition between two siblings are as common to Greco-Roman mythology as romantic comedies are to our modern age. Whether it is the tale of Polynices and Eteocles duking it out for the Theban throne, or the well-known tale of Romulus and Remus fighting for control of what would eventually become the Roman Empire, it appears that these tales share one common feature: competition.

Much like these familial relationships between humans, some ancient cities also shared a bond akin to sibling rivalry. Though they were inextricably connected to one another through a shared history, cult, myth or otherwise, these cities could not help the competition that always seemed to dictate their decisions. Laodicaea ad Mare and Antioch were two such cities. Their relationship was one seeped in a shared history, cult and commerce, as well as a constant vying for supremacy over the other. Though the superior title usually went to Antioch, everything the cities had been used to changed with the reign of Septimius Severus. For the first time, it was abundantly clear that Laodicaea ad Mare was the superior city over Antioch. In order to both proclaim its superior status and garner a stronger relationship with the emperor, Septimius Severus, Laodicaea ad Mare began to synthesis its patron goddess, Tyche, with its new empress, Julia Domna.

Before one can delve into the events that followed Septimius Severus’ rise to power, it is important to understand the tale of these two cities. Before the Roman Empire was even a realistic thought there was a different empire, the Seleucid Empire. This vast expanse of land was the product of Alexander the Great’s conquests and encompassed a huge area, mostly including Syria. Laodicaea ad Mare and Antioch were two of the first cities in this empire and they formed the Syrian Tetrapolis along with the cities of Apamea and Seleucia. The initial
purpose of this tetrapolis was supposed to be one of mutual help; Laodicaea ad Mare and Seleucia were the commercial centers, Antioch was the political center and Apamea was the military center. The tetrapolis lasted longer than the Empire that had initially brought it together, but the bonds of mutual benefit that had originally united the cities substantially deteriorated over time. Eventually, things got to the point that fierce competition between them was the norm in their relationships. Antioch retained a strong relationship with Seleucia by that city acting as the main port for Antioch. Less is apparent about the relationship between the other two cities of the tetrapolis, though it appears that Laodicaea ad Mare remained the main port city for Apamea, which was always a major military headquarters in Syria.

Despite the accomplishments and prestige of the other cities, there is clear evidence that Antioch remained the superior city for most of their shared history. For example, both Antioch and Laodicaea ad Mare began to mint Roman coinage around the time of Julius Caesar, an activity that continued uninterrupted until the reign of Septimius Severus. However, it is clear that Antioch was the chief mint in Syria until Septimius took that power away from them. The Antiochenes role as the chief minting place for the province was a direct result of their title of metropolis of Syria. Furthermore, Antioch was considered by many to be the Greek epicenter of the East, a title that was normally only contested by the Egyptian city of Alexandria.

Septimius Severus came to power in 193 AD alongside his wife, Julia Domna. It is important to note that this Imperial Family was atypical in a fairly uncommon way: none of them were actually Roman. Septimius Severus was African not only in descent, but also in upbringing;

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it has been said that he retained his African accent until the day he died. Julia Domna, on the other hand, was a Syrian princess from the town of Emesa with an alleged prophecy about marrying a king attached to her name. When she first became empress, her new status gave Syria a greater level of prestige within the Empire as the home of the Roman empress. Due to this hometown connection, many cities strove to depict their relation to her in any way they could. However, despite the fact that she was a Syrian princess, not all Syrian cities remained within the good graces of the emperor, and Antioch was one of them.

During the start of Septimius Severus’ reign, a usurper named Pescennius Niger was named emperor by various senators and cities, Antioch being one of them. Laodicaea ad Mare, on the other hand, remained loyal to Septimius Severus to the point that the entire city was besieged and the majority of the population was murdered at the hands of Niger during his campaign in the east. Once Severus had effectively quelled this rebellion and killed Niger, he turned his attention back to the cities that had either supported or betrayed him.

As a thank you for their unwavering support during Niger’s uprising, Severus bestowed the title of “metropolis” onto the city of Laodicaea ad Mare in 195 BC, and gave them money to rebuild while ensuring their future financial well-being. He also bestowed the surviving aristocrats with the title of Senator and decreed that the citizens should thenceforth call themselves “Septimians” after himself. Antioch wasn’t nearly as fortunate. Because Severus had now given Laodicaea ad Mare the title of metropolis, it meant that Antioch was no longer the leading city in Syria. This was especially painful for the citizens of Antioch because they had had sole control over this title since at least the third century BC and Laodicaea ad Mare was

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their biggest regional rival. It seems extremely likely that knowledge of this rivalry was part of Severus’ motivation behind bestowing the title of metropolis onto Laodicaea ad Mare, especially considering that the title was only viable during his reign. This shows an intent to embarrass Antioch and revere Laodicaea ad Mare, while also remaining aware that this shift in city power wouldn’t be economically viable forever. After all, though Laodicaea ad Mare was a major port city, it was in no way equipped to single-handedly handle the majority of Syrian commerce, especially when it was rebuilding as it was during that time.

It is important to understand why these rival sibling cities chose to support the men they did. Antioch and Laodicaea ad Mare were inextricably connected through their shared histories, yet, in this situation, their values proved to be entirely different. The reasoning behind this difference likely lies in politics and ethnic pride. Antioch had been the metropolis of Syria for centuries before Septimius Severus ever came to power, indicating that they shared a closer relationship with Rome than most provincial cities. It therefore stands to reason that because Niger was the thoroughly Roman candidate, they simply preferred him over the clearly African Severus. Antioch had nothing to gain by supporting Severus, and so they did not.

Laodicaea ad Mare, on the other hand, was in a position to make huge gains should Septimius Severus remain emperor. There is no indication that the city ever shared a particularly strong relationship with Rome, meaning supporting a Roman man for emperor would likely mean much of the same treatment and prestige that the Laodicaeans had garnered in the past. This is where Severus’ wife, Julia Domna, again came into play. Though Severus was African, Julia Domna was Syrian – from a town close to Laodicaea ad Mare, no less – which would inevitably lead to greater prestige for Syria and all of its cities should he gain power. What was even more important was the fact that Septimius Severus and Julia Domna had two, half-Syrian
sons. This would nearly ensure⁶ that there would be a Syrian emperor on the throne after Severus and that Syrian people would rise in prominence along with their new emperor.

After they had been awarded their new prestige from Severus, it was necessary for the Laodicaeans to espouse their connection to the Imperial Family in the most effective ways possible. There were many options that a provincial Roman Imperial city could exercise to show its connection to the emperor, one of which involved using the gods to show this connection. Tyche was the goddess of choice for the Laodicaeans because she was the shared patron goddess of Antioch and Laodicaea ad Mare. There is some evidence⁷ that there may have been a central temple complex to Tyche at Laodicaea ad Mare, but a lack of excavations has kept this theory purely speculative⁸. Despite solid proof of a temple to the goddess, there are abundant materials to indicate how important Tyche was to both cities. Proof of this is found through things like the famous Tyche of Antioch sculpture and the overwhelming prevalence of her on the coinage from Laodicaea ad Mare, especially when compared with other Syrian cities.

Laodicaea ad Mare began depicting Julia Domna as Tyche on their coinage sometime during the reign of Septimius Severus. It is very likely it was during the start of his reign, however it is extremely difficult to pinpoint the exact year since coinage with women on it wasn’t typically dated. This means an educated guess would place the creation of this particular breed of coinage between 195 and 202 AD. The most common depiction of Julia Domna as Tyche was one that placed her within the distyle temple that Tyche was known for on Laodicaea ad Mare’s coinage. It is clear that the depiction is supposed to be the empress, and not Tyche, because she lacks the turreted crown that Tyche is known for. However, by placing her within

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⁶ Should something have happened to the older son, Caracalla, there was another, younger son, Geta, to act as a back-up plan of sorts. Essentially, a Syrian emperor would be nearly guaranteed if Septimius Severus remained on the throne.
⁷ A major piece of this evidence includes the numerous coins that contain a distyle temple to Tyche on Laodicaea ad Mare’s coinage.
what we know from previous coins to be Tyche’s temple, it is unquestionable that this depiction is supposed to show the Empress Julia Domna as Tyche.

Something even more interesting than the actual depiction of Julia Domna as Tyche herself is the words that accompany it on the coinage. On the obverse of one of the coins (Figure 3) there is a picture of her in the distyle shrine and the words “ΑΥΓ∆ΟΜΝΑ ΤΥΜΗΡΤΟΠΟΛΑΣΩΝ.” When this is translated into English, it says “Augusta Domna of the Metropolis.” This inscription is pivotal for two reasons. First, it is showing off Laodicaea ad Mare’s new title of metropolis. Secondly, it is placing Julia Domna on the same inscription as its name and new title. This phrase is attempting to paint Julia Domna as Laodicaea ad Mare’s own.

So why is Laodicaea ad Mare’s depiction of Empress Julia Domna as Tyche on coinage different from previous cases? The answer lies back with their relationship to Antioch, but also with their proximity to Emesa. Julia Domna had been a princess from the royal family of Emesa, which was only around 76 miles from Laodicaea ad Mare, or a three day journey. This close proximity essentially made Julia Domna a local, Syrian girl in the Laodicaean’s eyes and therefore justified their characterization of her as one of their own. They felt this connected them intimately with the Roman Imperial family. When one couples their connection to the Syrian empress and their new nickname, the Septimians, with their status as a metropolis it is revealed that Laodicaea ad Mare now had a two pronged identity that they likely believed themselves, but even further wanted the rest of the world to believe with them. This was both as the capital city of Syria – which was also more important now because of Julia Domna – and as the people who were beloved by the Roman Imperial family.

Since it is clear that Laodicaea ad Mare was the preeminent city in Syria for the time being, it is time to turn our attention back to Antioch and comment on their activities immediately preceding Severus’ final battle with Niger. It is clear that Antioch supported Biger,
and proof of this lies in their coinage. Between the years 193 and 194 AD, the Antiochenes released coinage that had a bust of Pescennius Niger on it that also touted him at the emperor. The exact phrase on the obverse of the coin is, “ΑΥΤΟΚΑΙΚΑΡ ΠΕΣΚΕΝΙΓΙΠ,” or “Imperator Caesar Pescennius Niger” (Figure 4). It was during this time that Laodicea ad Mare refused to accept Niger as their emperor and the city was subsequently burned.

Along with losing its title as metropolis to Laodicea ad Mare, Antioch also lost its power to mint coins. This makes the minting of the coinage with Julia Domna as Tyche even more significant. It shows Laodicea ad Mare very clearly expressing the fact that it was the preeminent city in Syria, it had a close connection to Julia Domna, and, possibly most importantly, that it was finally better than Antioch.

Despite Antioch’s poor decision with regard to backing Niger, it was not a city that could be forgotten about for long. In the year 202 AD, a mere seven years after its fall from grace, it publicly appeared that Septimius Severus had a change of heart regarding Antioch, likely because of the wants of his half-Syrian son, Caracalla⁹. It was publicly proclaimed that Severus was allowing Antioch back into his good graces at the request of Caracalla and both father and son inaugurated the New Year at Antioch in 202 AD to highlight this statement. Shortly thereafter, Antioch regained its right to mint coins.

It was at this point in time that Antioch and Laodicea ad Mare reached an interesting new aspect of their relationship with one another. The fact that Antioch would soon surpass Laodicea ad Mare in importance was evident; after all, Severus had left the Laodicaean’s title of metropolis contingent upon him being emperor and he was no longer a young man. This put each city in an unprecedented predicament. Antioch now had to regain the status it had previously held while reasserting itself over Laodicea ad Mare. On the other hand, Laodicea ad Mare

needed to hold onto the elevated status it had become accustomed to. Looking to the coinage of these two cities can outline just how each of them approached their respective needs.

With the return of Antioch’s permission to mint coins came a return of their standard iconography. Much like Laodicaea ad Mare, Tyche had been a frequent icon on their coinage, however her depiction was slightly different and she was nowhere near as prevalent as Laodicaea ad Mare’s Tyche. Antioch’s Tyche was used as a personification of the city on the whole, and was normally depicted with her turreted crown and a veiled headdress (Figure 5). However, her usage on the reverse of coinage wasn’t nearly as common as the depiction of the imperial eagle or a simple laurel wreath. In fact, there is no evidence that indicates that the Tyche of Antioch was depicted on coinage at all after the reign of Hadrian and until the reign of Septimius Severus. This lack of Tyche and prevalent use of standard imperial iconography on coinage can be explained easily when one considers the fact that Antioch was minting for all of Syria and not just itself. This meant that their coins needed a certain level of standardization, as opposed to personalization, which was the easiest to achieve by using such general symbols. However, when Antioch was permitted to mint again under the reign of Septimius Severus, the Tyche of Antioch was used on coinage. This reappearance after nearly 70 years of absence is explained fully when one looks back to the relationship between Antioch and Laodicaea ad Mare.

When Laodicaea ad Mare gained the title of metropolis, it used Tyche on its coinage to espouse its new title, its connection to the Imperial family and to tout its new superiority over Antioch. Now that Antioch was back to being the superior city in everything but title, it was their turn to show who was really the preeminent one. With their return to minting status, Antioch released several variations of their standard coinage, nearly all involving the imperial eagle. However, Antioch also released a Tyche coin with more imagery on it than had been seen since the reign of Trajan. On this coin (Figure 6), the Tyche of Antioch was shown sitting on a boulder
with her standard dress of a turreted crown, chiton and pelops. In her hand, she holds ears of corn, a symbol of prosperity, and at her feet is the personification of the River Orontes, intended to show that this was indeed the Tyche of Antioch. So why use Tyche like this and at this point? The answer is clear. Antioch was sending a message to all, especially Laodicaea ad Mare, that it was still prosperous, it was becoming beloved by the imperial family and that it was the best city in Syria. Furthermore, by specifically depicting the Tyche of Antioch as holding the ears of corn, Antioch was effectively saying that Tyche was still theirs and that she was in no way the sole property of Laodicaea ad Mare.

After this point, Laodicaea ad Mare returned to its standard issuing of coinage. Though Tyche was still depicted frequently, by the reign of Caracalla, she was no longer being synthesized with Julia Domna. It is important to note that the city did refer to itself as “Laodicaea Metropolis” on coinage past the end of Severus’ reign, indicating it was going to milk the title for all that it was worth for as long as possible (Figure 7). In fact, records indicate that Laodicaea ad Mare kept this title on its coinage until at least the reign of Trebonianus Gallus, and likely until the fall of the Roman Empire (Figure 8).

There is something interesting to note about Antioch’s status after its temporary fall from grace. When looking at the coinage from the city, there is one major difference between it and Laodicaea ad Mare: the need to brag. As soon as Laodicaea ad Mare received its title of metropolis, it went to the mints and made sure that everyone would know just how great it had become. Furthermore, it tried to splash this eminence into the face of everyone who would see their coinage by not only showing off their connection to the empress, but also by placing the title of metropolis onto every coin that didn’t feature Julia Domna. Antioch, on the other hand, kept its coins almost purely imperial and, except for the coin with Tyche on it, the city made almost no effort to reassert its dominance. Simply put, it didn't need to. Everyone knew how
important Antioch was, and even though it had been temporarily disgraced, no one thought this fall from grace would last forever, let alone past the reign of Septimius Severus. By refusing to outwardly acknowledge its rivalry with Laodicaea ad Mare, Antioch managed to belittle their sibling city and reassert their dominance without doing a thing.

So, what does all of this say about the relationship between these two cities? For one thing, it reestablishes the obvious; Antioch always was the preeminent city. Though it lost this prestige for a span of seven years, there was no way that the city could be kept down for too long. Essentially, it was too important and any competition that may have been perceived between it and Laodicaea ad Mare was minimal and mostly only one sided. This seven year period also highlights Laodicaea ad Mare’s need for attention. For centuries, Laodicaea ad Mare had been placed under Antioch’s shadow, never being the best in the region, but always second to its superior sibling. When a situation arose that could give the city some level of autonomy, or even superiority, it is no wonder that Laodicaea ad Mare not only jumped on it, but also capitalized on it for as long as possible. This was the first and only time in its shared history with Antioch that it could say it was the superior city.

The tale of these two sibling cities ended far differently than the sibling myths of the Greco-Roman world, but still very much as one would expect it to. There were no burnt cities or dead relatives, but rather two cities that were still standing as tall as they possibly could. The long-established Antioch retained its superior status over Laodicaea ad Mare long after the strange blip on their shared-history’s radar, while Laodicaea ad Mare forever held onto the memory of its time as the number one city in Syria.
Bibliography


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Figure 1: BMC.104, 261. Laodicea ad Mare Mint. OB: IMP CMAV ................. Bust of Elagabalus right, laureate, wearing paludamentum and cuirass. RE: COL LAO[DI METROPOLEOS] Marsyas with wineskin on shoulder, and one hand raised, standing right before Tyche of Laodicea, who is seated left on rock, wearing chiton, peplos and turreted head-dress, and holding in right rudder, in left cornucopiae; at her feet, river-god swimming. [Pl. XXXI. 3.]

Figure 2: SNG Copenhagen.370, 25. Laodicea ad Mare Mint. OB: . . . M AVR ANTONI . . . Laureate head right of Elagabalus. RE: COL LAO . . . Tyche standing, holding in right hand rudder, in left small Nike (?).
Figure 3: SNG Hunterian.3212. Laodicaea ad Mare Mint. OB: AYT KAI CEΠ CEOYHP Laureate bust of Septimius Severus, right, with cuirass and paludamentum. RE: ΑΥΓ ΔΟΜΝΑ ΤΥΜ ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΙΣΩΝ Distyle shrine; within, draped bust of Julia Domna, right. [Pl. 22.]

Figure 4: BMC.346, 192. Antioch Mint. OB: AVΤΟΚΚΑΙΚΑΡ ΠΕΣΚΕΝΙΤΙΙΙΙW Bust of Pescennius Niger right, laureate. RE: ΠΡΟΝΟΙ A ΘΕΕΝ Eagle on palm branch looking left. [Pl. XXIII. 10.]

Figure 5: BMC.222, 178. Antioch Mint. OB: IMP VESP AVG P M T P Head of Vespasian right, laureate. RE: ANΤΙ OCHIA Female bust right, turreted (the City of Antioch). [Pl. XXII. 3.]

Figure 6: BMC.353, 193. Antioch Mint. OB: AYT KAI CEOYHΡΟΣCE Β Head of Septimius Severus right, laureate. RE: ΔΗΜΑΡΧ EΞ ΥΠΑ ΤΟ Γ Female figure (the Tyche of Antioch), wearing chiton, peplos, and turreted head-dress, seated right on rock; in right hand, ears of corn; at her feet, river-god Orontes swimming.

Figure 7: BMC.83, 258. Laodicaea ad Mare Mint. OB: AVTKAICEΠ CEOVHΡΟΣC Bust of Septimius Severus right, laureate, wearing paludamentum and cuirass. RE: ΑΥΓΔΟΜΝΑ
Within distyle shrine, head of Julia Domna as Tyche of Laodicaea right, head bare. [Pl. XXX. 10.]

**Figure 8:** BMC.112, 263. Laodicaea ad Mare Mint. OB: ΑΥΤΟΚΜΙΟΥΛΙΦΙ ΛΙΠΙΠΟΣϹΕΒ
Bust of Philip junior right, laureate, wearing paludamentum and cuirass. RE: ΚΟΛΛΑΟΜΕΤΡΟΠΟΛΕΟϹ The Tyche of Laodicaea, wearing chiton, pelops, and turreted head-dress; standing facing, looking right, holding in right rudder; in left, two small male figures (victorious athletes of Laodicaea?); in field, ΔΕ. [Pl. XXXI. 6.]