

GREEK COINS IN THE
WILCOX CLASSICAL MUSEUM

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On the campus of the University of Kansas, tucked away in the neoclassical Lippincott Hall is a small, but elegant collection of classical antiquities and plaster casts of Greek and Roman sculpture. Among the antiquities is a tasteful collection of Greek coins spanning the history of the ancient Greek world. In this brief study we will examine three of these coins from the years 500 B. C. to 88 B. C.

I. Exhibit Number Seventeen: Silver Obol from Lampsacus (500-450 B. C.).

The oldest coin we will consider is a tiny silver obol from Lampsacus, a city near the Hellespont “celebrated for its wine and the chief seat of the worship of Priapus.” (Smith, pg. 169). The coin (as may be seen in my drawing in Figure One) portrays on the obverse a double-faced figure in profile and dates from 500-450 B. C. The image is unidentifiable although the description in the display case suggests it may represent Lampsake, a mythical figure from whom the city draws its name. Such double-faced images are generally referred to as “Janiform” figures from the name of the Roman god of doorways, Janus, usually portrayed as having two faces. The reverse portrays an image of Athena, the patron goddess of Athens. George Francis Hill in his work Greek and Roman Coins tells us that an obol at this time was valued at one eighth of a drachm. This places it’s value somewhere between .72 and 1.12 grams of silver. (Hill, pg. 64, 223).



Figure One

The years during which this coin was minted were dramatic and volatile times in the history of the Greek world. In 499 B. C. there had been a great revolt in Ionia against Persia. Athens had provided assistance in this revolt , which could explain the image of Athena on many coins. (Steltman, pg. 86). In the year 481 B. C. only a few miles south of Lampsacus, at the city of Abydos the Persian Xerxes I would lead his mighty army across the Hellespont on a floating bridge. Perhaps it was a resident of

Lampsacus itself who was the “Hellespontian” (Ἑλλησπόντιον) Herodotus quotes:

“Why, O Zeus, dost thou, in the likeness of a Persian man, and with the name of Xerxes instead of thine own, lead the whole race of mankind to the destruction of Greece? It would have been easy for thee to destroy it without them.” (Book VII.56, Finley, pg. 99).

It would not be outrageous to imagine that this very coin was held in the purse of such a man who would see this mighty army invade Europe then retreat two years latter.

The image portrayed on the coin is late archaic in style. The carving is precise; the pattern of the hair is uniform. There is symmetrical placement of the headband, with what appears to be an earring perfectly centered below a bow. The coin has no decorative border and there is very well little wear that has effected the figure itself. There is the hint of a collar at the base of the neck, but no further clothing portrayed. The eyes of both figures are in frontal position, although there appears to be a very slight foreshortening right at the bridge of both noses.

Although this figure is identified as a female, it actually shares more similarity to male figures in monumental sculpture than to female figures. One can see the same approach employed in the sculpture of the “Blonde Boy” (as seen in [Figure Two](#) borrowed from J. J. Pollitt’s [Art and Experience in Classical Greece](#), pg. 40) dated to around 480 B. C. Although the nose is a bit more delicately modeled, the linear pattern of the hair, the fullness of the lips and the elliptical eyes are virtually identical. Both the sculpture and the coin portray their figures in a stylized manner removed from true naturalism. While compared to early archaic works, there is some naturalism, the “cap-like” treatment of the hair is in dramatic contrast with the approach demonstrated in the next two coins.



[Figure Two](#)

II. Exhibit Number Twenty: Silver Tetradrachm from Miletus (ca. 328 B. C.).

The second coin in our study is the largest of those we will consider and the most elaborately carved. It is a handsome head of Herakles facing to the right produced at Miletus abround 328 B. C. As may be seen in my drawing in Figure Three, Herakles is easily identified by the lion's skin on his head and the paws wrapped around his neck. The reverse bears the image of a seated Zeus, in imitation of the famous sculpture of Zeus produced by Phidias at Olympia. Beside it is the name **ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡ** (Alexander). Hill tells us the standard tetradrachm at Miletus was between 28.36 and 28.48 grams. (Hill, pg. 224).



Figure Three

The coin is struck slightly off center, cutting off the bead border on the left two-thirds of the coin. This feature, common on many ancient coins is not a flaw but a result of the process used to produce ancient coins. G. F. Hill, in his work Greek and Roman Coins claims this often occurred. He writes:

No collar appears to have been used to prevent the metal spreading or slipping. The upper die being driven deeply into the blank by the first blow (thus producing the incuse impression) served fairly well to keep the coin in each place, ... But, although kept in place, the metal was able to spread freely; and to this we owe the irregular shapes and split fans which can hardly be said to detract from the charm of Greek coins. (Hill, pg. 149).

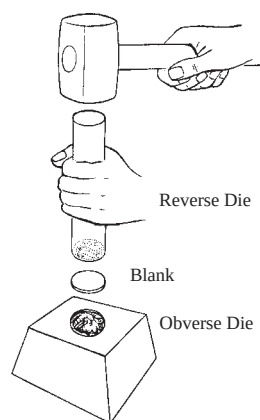


Figure Four

This process is illustrated in Figure Four (borrowed and modified from Norman Davis' book Greek Coins & Cities, pg. 24).

Images of Herakles were common throughout the ancient world during these years. Jean Cammann in the work Numanistic Mythology observes that after Alexander succeeded his father Phillip in 336 B. C. and then swept through Greece and Asia Minor he established mints at strategic points along the path of his journey eastward. The coins produced at these mints were used to pay his

troops and were also sent back to Macedonia to ensure his power back at home. Alexander chose specific images for these coins to communicate his vision of both his kingdom and himself. The figures of Zeus and Herakles portrayed on the Wilcox coin were two of his favorite choices. Cammann writes:

The career of Herakles, filled with romance, with struggles, all with successful achievement, was one to appeal strongly to the young king, launching forth on his own vigorous, but tragically brief encounter with life. (Cammann, pg. 35,36).



Figure Five

The figure of Zeus on the reverse served a clear purpose as well. Alexander claimed to be descended from Zeus. By placing his own name beside the seated deity he placed within the hand of thousands a valuable piece of political propaganda. (Cammann, pg. 35).



Figure Six

On the so-called “Alexander Sarcophagus” dated to about 320 B. C. there is an image of Alexander portraying himself as Herakles. John Griffiths Pedley in his work Greek Art and Architecture claims this “is the only contemporary representation of Alexander himself.” (Pedley, pg. 303). The face, (as shown in Figure Five, borrowed from Alpay Pasinli’s catalog of the Istanbul Archeological Museums, pg. 18) is virtually identical to the Wilcox coin. Although a bit earlier than either of these, the head of Dionysus from Praxiteles’ Hermes and Dionysus (ca. 340 B. C.) as seen in Figure Six (from H. A. Groenewegen-Frankfort’s Art of the Ancient World, pg. 321) displays the same, typically classical features. Pedley describes two such features of late Classical and early Hellenistic work as seen on all three heads - “detailed modulation of the forehead and a dreamy expression.” (pg. 297).

III. Exhibit Number Twenty-Six: Silver Hemidrachm from Rhodes (166-88 B. C.)

The final, and latest coin we will consider is a silver hemidrachm from the island of Rhodes dating from 166-88 B. C. As seen in my drawing in Figure Seven the head on the obverse is that of Helios, the patron god of the island in frontal view. The reverse displays a rose. Rhodes draws its name from the Greek word for rose - *hropon* (ρόδον). The coin has also been struck slightly off center, cutting off part of the hair on the right side. The detail of the hair that remains has been worn down on the edge. The tip of the nose is also worn down slightly distorting the face. There is no border, inscription or design other than the head itself. According to Hill the Rhodian standard was somewhat smaller than that of Miletus with the tetradrachm valued at between 14.90 and 15.55 grams of silver. (Hill, pg. 223). This would value our hemidrachm, at 2.48 to 2.59 grams of silver. Charles Steltman in his book Greek Coins explains part of the reason for the smaller dimension. In 167 B. C. when Rome “deprived Rhodes of all her possessions and reduced her power by making Delos, her rival, a free port, the coinage shrank to small dimensions.” (Steltman, pg. 254).



Figure Seven

Dr. Catherine Erhart in her dissertation entitled The Development of the Facing Head Motif on Greek Coins and Its Relation to Classical Art suggests that prior to the late fourth century B. C. Rhodian coins which portrayed the head of Helios emphasized the “flame-like quality of the god’s hair.” Sometime between 333-317 B. C., Erhart suggests “a more concrete expression of the god’s solar character -- the radiate crown -- was adopted by the engravers at the Rhodian mint.” This is generally associated with the rise of Alexander the Great. (Erhart, pg. 243-244). On the silver hemidrachm from the Wilcox Museum the flames are most likely in the form of a “radiate crown.” There is a symmetry to the rays which seems to suggest a crown. The description of the coin in the museum’s display case simply describes the “head

wreathed in flames.” If it is not a crown, that would not be without precedent. Erhart adds...

... no tetradrachms appeared without the crown after the initial change from “radiating hair” to radiate head sometime in the late fourth century B. C. -- although smaller silver continued to employ the unradiate facing head until late Hellenistic times. (Erhart, pg. 244-245).

Stylistically one can see a great divergence in this coin from the earlier representations of the same image. Norman Davis in his book Greek Coins & Cities displays a silver tetradrachm from Rhodes dating to the 3rd century B. C. While the obverse pictures a facing Helios with a radiate crown the expression lacks the drama of the Wilcox coin. The eyes are not set very deeply under the eye brows. The hair is rather poorly modeled drooping to either side with a center part awkwardly cutting the pattern in half. In contrast the coin from the Wilcox

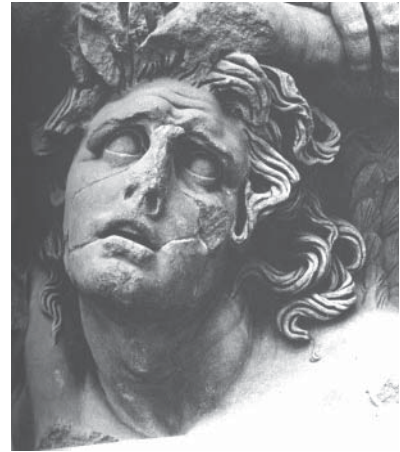


Figure Eight

is characteristically Hellenistic. The eyebrows dramatically jut forward. The hair whips to the right (in the portion which is unworn). The expression is almost one of anguish reminiscent of the giant Alkyoneos on the Altar of Zeus at Pergamon (as seen in Figure Eight borrowed from Groenewegen-Frankfort, pg. 361). Pedley claims the altar utilizes “both baroque and classicizing tendencies side by side.” (Pedley, pg. 332). Such could just as accurately describe the face of Helios on the Wilcox coin.

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