

The Coins of Ancient Greece (C5)

Greek Numismatics is much more complicated than Roman Numismatics as there were so many city-states issuing such a wide variety of types, with very little to indicate the chronology of the issues. This set attempts no more than to illustrate a cross section from this large and diverse field.

Among the very earliest of all coins were those struck by the royal house of Lydia. These advanced the progression from pure barter to a monetary economy by placing as the type on one side of a lump of precious metal, the badge of the royal house. This gave authority to the piece of metal and whereas previously merchants had used pieces of gold and silver for convenience, but had had to weight and test them and mark them in some way to enable subsequent recognition, now people could trust their money on sight.

No.1 is an example of such a coin struck during the reign of Croesus (561-546). The obverse depicts the royal badge, the foreparts of a Lion and a Bull facing each other. The reverse simply carries the crude indentation caused by the punch which forced the metal into the anvil-die. Save for the comparatively few that were cast in moulds, all ancient coins were hand-struck between two dies, one set in an anvil, the other held in the hand.

Another state which produced some of the very earliest coins was Aegina. **No.2** is an obol or one sixth drachma from the period just after the Persian wars when the Aeginetan economy went into a decline as that of Athens' flourished. It shows the traditional Aeginetan type of a turtle on the obverse. A particularly wide range of animal types is to be found on Greek coins. The reverse still depicts no proper type but the punch marks have become formalised into a pattern.

The use of money spread not only Westwards to Greece, from Aviaplinor, but also Eastwards to Persia. The Persian king struck coins in silver and gold with no inscriptions, just a depiction of the great king on the obverse and a punch mark on the reverse. **No.3** is such a coin in silver, of the time of Darius the Great showing the king in a half kneeling - half running position, with a bow and a spear.

As the power of Athens grew during the fifth century so her coinage came to be used increasingly as a medium of international, as opposed to purely local exchange. The famous Athenian 'owls' spread throughout the Eastern Mediterranean world. **No.4** is a tetradrachm struck about the time of the Peloponnesian War. It depicts Athena on the obverse, and an owl with a sprig of olive on the reverse. Athens struck a particularly wide range of denominations from the dekadrachm right down to the hemitartemoron of 1/8 obol, all in silver. Issues in metals other than silver were very rare in the classical period throughout the Greek world and only became widespread in the Hellenistic and later periods.

Sparta, in her prime, did not produce coinage of her own but after she had ceased to be a unique and invincible state she adopted the use of coinage. **No.5** is a tetrobol from the early half of the second century, depicting Heracles on the obverse and an amphora between the twin caps of the Dioscuri on the reverse.

The coinage of many Greek states is extremely artistic and is often thought to have been unsurpassed by any coinage anywhere in subsequent years. The rare large silver coins of Syracuse signed in the die by the engravers such as Kinion or Evainetos, are generally regarded as the apex

of this artistry. The coinage of Corinth in a more modest way, also shows the flair of Greek art with its regal Athena Pegasus on the reverse. **No.6** is an example of this coinage. The otherwise obsolete koppa is to be observed underneath the winged horse.

No.7 is a stater of Thebes which depicts a Boeotian shield as its obverse type and a wine jar on its reverse. Doubt remains as to the letters but they are widely believed to indicate a pair of magistrates during whose office the coin would have been issued.

Coin **No.8** is a hemidrachm of Phocis struck just after her involvement in the Sacred War. The obverse depicts the facing head of a bull and reverse, the head of Apollo with a lyre behind it. Pretty well contemporary with this is coin **No.9**, a tetrobol of Philip II of Macedon. The obverse shows the head of Apollo with a naked youth on a prancing horse and the name of Philip on the reverse.

Among the most widespread of all Greek coins were the issues of Alexander the Great. He produced coins from a wide range of mints all over the territory within his control, from Amphipolis to Ecbatana. The captured treasures of the Persian royal house which were taken at Persepolis flooded the world with abundant coinage as much was converted into silver coins. **No.10** is a drachm depicting what is generally accepted as Alexander himself in the guise of Heracles with the skin of the Nemean Lion about him. On the reverse is Zeus enthroned with his sceptre and eagle, and Alexander's name behind his throne.

No.11 is a hemidrachm of Argos, another series with an animal type. The obverse of this coin shows the forepart of a wolf. The reverse incorporates magistrates' initials round a central motif of the initial letter of the states' name.

The many Greek colonies in the West also produced their own coinage. **No.12** is a didrachm from Tarentum in Southern Italy. This depicts the boy Taras on the dolphin which rescued him. Eponymous heroes were another popular type on Greek coins.

No.13 has been included primarily for the magnificent three quarter frontal portrait of Apollo on the obverse. It is a didrachm struck by Pixodarus the satrap of Caria 340-334. The Greek artists were successful with facing portraits in a way that no others have been since. The reverse depicts Zeus with a double headed axe and spear.

The final coin is a tetradrachm of one of the later Ptolemies of Egypt. It is very difficult to sort the Ptolemaic dynasty out because they all looked very much alike and, of course bore the same name. The basic types as shown on this coin remained virtually unchanged throughout, the king on the obverse and an eagle on a thunderbolt on the reverse.

This is just a tiny selection of what there is in Greek Coinage. It is particularly susceptible to photographic enlargement and undoubtedly the best book in this respect is Kraay and Hirmer, *Greek Coins*, New York W.D. Probably the best general work is still Seltman C. *Greek Coins* Methuen. 1977.

Norman Shiel