

Athens' glory financed by its rich silver mines

by Ken Swab; World Coin News Jan. 7, 1991

Of all the city-states in ancient Greece, Athens most readily springs to mind. Its rich silver mines provided the raw material for coinage, the history of which begins fairly early, about 615 B.C.E., or up to 70 years after coinage was invented in Lydia.

At this time in her history, Athens' economy was primarily based on pottery making, and this is also reflected in her coinage. The first coins show an oil vase on the obverse. The reverse has a typical cross design. This pattern had a functional, rather than an artistic or decorative one. It was made by grooves in the lower die, which were there to prevent the coin blank from rotating while the upper punch was being struck. The thickness of the coins, as well as the reverse design reflect the influence of coins previously minted in the Aegean area.

The first change in design followed that of a change in the design of the vases from which the coins were modeled. The thickness of the coins was also reduced. Although it seems strange for vases to be pictured on coins, they helped identify the fact of their coming from Athens. In a similar manner other states of the period displayed their major export product on their coinage.

The introduction of coinage to Athens was to have a profound economic effect in the state. It created an economic revolution in the Mediterranean communities. This in turn led to political strife. The matter then came full cycle to effect a change in the currency.

At first the coined money was scarce and tended to be hoarded by the richer and more successful merchants and landowners. It did not take the less prosperous long to discover the convenience of money. Peasants went from a barter economy to a monetary economy as merchants came to refuse wine and crops and demand money. The peasant could not determine the value of his work or control its value. Soon many of the peasants were deeply in debt to the rich and were slaves in everything but name.

The rapid degeneration was recorded by Plutarch: "Some were forced to sell their children, or fly the country to avoid the cruelty of their creditors; but the most part and the bravest of them began to combine together and encourage one another to stand to it, to choose a leader, to liberate the condemned debtors, divide the land and change the government."

Before this could happen, Solon was appointed archon by common agreement and was given complete power to institute reforms.

Solon instituted a currency reform. According to Aristotle, he changed the value of the mina from 70 to 100 drachms. The new standard was known as the Euboic Standard.

Solon, accomplished two important effects on the economy. First, the devaluation of the currency made it easier for the debtors to escape their plight. Coupled with the cancellation of debts where the threat of debtor's prison was used as security, this measure took the edge off the discontent of the poor.

The coins issued were still of the oil-vase type, but were smaller in size and weight. The denominations remained the obol (worth one-sixth of a drachm), drachm and didrachm.

An interesting parallel can be drawn from the currency change. As Athens was the meeting place for Doric and Ionic art, so it was for the city's monetary system. The denominations were derived from the Dorian system and were adjusted to meet the Euboic (Ionian).

When Solon left Athens around 590 B.C.E., the government fell into the hands of various factions of the aristocratic class. The various factions are clearly shown by examining the coins (and vases) of the time. For an example, we will study one case in particular.

The Alcmaeonidae, who had been in exile during Solon's archonship, returned shortly after his departure. Their coat of arms was a design of three legs. There is evidence of its use on 6th century B.C.E. Attic vases. This design is also found on didrachms of the period. A careful study of the reverse designs of the coins, shows that the identical reverse die was used for both a didrachm of the Solonian period and the immediately following reign of the Alcmaeonidae.

This was followed by a sudden change in coinage with the appearance of a strange tetradrachm coin. It was large and thick, with the head of Athena on the obverse. She faces right, with thick lips, large ears with earrings and large round eyes. On her head is a close fitting helmet with neck-piece and crest. A small volute decorates the back of the helmet. The reverse has an owl (the symbol of Athena) facing right, with its face full to the viewer. The head is large and the tail is short. Above and to the left is an olive on a stalk between the two leaves. To the right are the letters AOE. Around the reverse impression is an incuse square.

This radically different coin marked a change in the government of Athens. It serves as a sign of the coming to power of Pisistratus, the next great reformer after Solon.

Through various intrigues, Pisistratus was able to gain complete control of the government by 566 B.C.E. In that year he reorganized the Panathenian Festival. His purpose was to direct the people's attention more toward the worship of the city's patroness, Athena. The new coin was issued for this first festival to emphasize its importance.

The Alcmaeonid Megacles was able to force Pisistratus to leave the city around 556 B.C.E. by intrigues of his own. This was reflected by a return to the various designs of family blazons on the coins. Pisistratus returned by force to Athens within 10 years and became tyrant, forcing any noble who disagreed with him to leave the country. The design of Athena and the owl returned to the coins, along with their archaic smile.

Upon the death of Pisistratus in 528 B.C.E., his son Hippias succeeded him. The coins retained the same basic design, but the head of Athena gradually became larger, until she was no longer able to accommodate the plume on the helmet. There was another class of coins minted in his reign which were obviously different, however. These were specially designed to celebrate the Panathenian Festival. Although having the familiar head of Athena and the owl, the difference in workmanship is obvious.

The exiled nobles, meanwhile, were hard at work trying to regain power. By 510 B.C.E. they had succeeded in overthrowing Hippias and were back in power. To show this, the coinage was once more minted with the design of each particular clan. They did however keep the denomination of the tetradrachm in place of the old didrachm. Also retained was the thinner size with the flat or beveled edges.

The tetradrachm with the Gorgon on one side and the bull's head on the other gives a great insight into Athenian politics of this time. It has generally been assumed that the bull's head was the blazon of the Eteobutad clan. It had also appeared on small electrum coins issued by the exiles to pay the troops who had overthrown Hippias. The insignia of the Alcmaeonidae also appeared on those coins. The fact that the bull was now on the same coin as the Gorgon head implies that the Eteobutad clan had deserted the Alcmaeonid cause and allied themselves with Isagoras, whose symbol was the Gorgon head. This would be a logical development since he was a leader of the reaction against the democracy, and the Eteobutad clan was one of the leading oligarchical clans. Despite the addition of Sparta to this coalition, the Alcmaeonidae managed to force Isagoras out of power and into exile.

With the ascent of the Alcmaeonid Cleisthenes to power in 508 B.C.E., Athenian democracy began. Again the coinage returned to the now familiar type of the head of Athena. The purpose was to show unity as Athenians, not members of a clan. A second reason was the pride of the people in their city's goddess. Cleisthenes started a temple in her honor on the Acropolis.

Finally, their coinage was widely accepted and respected along the edge of the eastern Mediterranean. Reflecting the pride in the coinage, the quality of the coins' artwork improved.

The people of Athens, engaged in so much overseas trade, turned out a widely accepted coinage which became known throughout their realm of trade, but were hardly artistically inspired. It was not that they were incapable of it; note the quality of their vases, sculpture and architecture of the same period. The coins were of good weight and silver. The great demand for Athenian coinage prompted expediency rather than artistry. Only on special occasions, such as the Panathenic Festival, were skilled workmen employed. Generally speaking, the city with the most prolific and widespread coinage also had the most sloppily crafted ones.

The next great period in Athenian history began with the Persian Wars and culminated in the rise of the Athenian Empire. The great victory of Marathon deserved to be commemorated by coins. In the fall of 490 B.C.E., Athena facing right with olive leaves for a crown on the obverse. On the reverse was an owl, the letters AOE an olive branch, and a waning moon. The smaller denominations have the leaves on the helmet but lack the moon. It is the olive leaves and the moon which refer to Athens' triumph.

The leaves are a symbolic crown of victory. The moon refers to two things. The battle of Marathon was fought without the aid of the Spartans, because their religion forbade them from departing Sparta until the moon was full. Unable to wait until then, the Athenians fought the battle while the moon was in the last quarter. Secondly, it shows that the Athenians were able to win without the help of others.

At this time there developed a slight change in the hair style of the goddess. Originally it had been represented by a series of dots and lines, but on the later Marathon issues it is shown by a series of regular wavy lines.

Around 483 B.C.E. two new denominations were introduced: a decadrachm and a didrachm. The reason behind their conception makes a rather interesting comment on governmental practices in Athens. In the decade between the battles of Marathon and Salamis, Athens was occupied with a war with the island state of Aegina. During this war Athens discovered a rich vein of silver in the Laurium district near Athens. These mines produced so much silver that the state, instead of collecting taxes, was able to pay the citizens a bonus of 10 drachms. This practice was stopped on the advice of Themistocles, who convinced the people to use the surplus to construct a fleet.

This dole placed a particular pressure on the paymasters. Before this time only tetradrachms and drachms were coined. Furthermore, drachms were scarce. To make it possible to pay the citizens, these new denominations were coined. This enabled the paymaster to use five didrachms, two decadrachms or two tetradrachms and a didrachm or some similar combination to pay the 10 drachms to the citizens.

The didrachm was identical to the design of the tetradrachm of Marathon. The decadrachm has the same obverse, but the reverse shows an interesting change. The owl is there, but in a different pose. The head is the same, with the large eyes, but his wings spread toward the observer.

After the Persians had been defeated the second time in their attempt to conquer Greece, Athens became the preeminent power in Greece. Due to Persian raids, the Laurion silver mines were forced to close for a few years. Without the silver necessary for coinage, there were no coins minted. Athens resumed its coinage around 478 B.C.E., after the removal of the last of the Persian forces from Attica.

The coins from this period were issued in many more denominations than before, especially in smaller values. An explanation for one of the strange values, a half drachm, may be that it was issued to pay jurors whose pay was three obols (a half drachm).

Within the empire itself, the Athenians realized that they should curtail the subservient states' right to coin their own silver. By doing this it would strengthen Athens hold on these cities and tie them even more closely to the city. It would also remind the people of their dependency on Athens for even a most common item as coins. Finally, it would guarantee a uniform standard of exchange throughout the empire.

By observing the end of coinage of various states, or their shift to the AtticEuboic standard, the progress of the empire can be charted. For example, the issues of the city of Eretria stop suddenly. This is directly due to the conquest of the island of Euboea by Pericles.

Around 454 B.C.E. the Athenians had transferred the treasury of the Delian League to Athens as one method of gaining control of the coinage monopoly. Five years later, they no longer used such subtle methods. They merely issued the following decree: "If anyone in the (tributary) states strikes silver coins, or does not employ Athenian coins, weights and measures, but employs foreign coins, weights and measures, he is subject to a penalty. Private citizens are to surrender their foreign silver at such times as may be convenient. The Athenian state will then exchange it. Each man is to write down a statement of his amount and hand it in to the Mint."

In this decree we can very easily see what has happened in the city of Athens. Once the showcase of democracy, it now thinks little of imposing its will upon other states. This is an example of the tyrannical rule of the empire. Here we can see clearly how much the coinage of a state is tied up with its national interests. There is a curious fact about the decree which tends to work against the above theory. The decree explicitly forbids the coining of silver coins, but does not mention any other metals. A number of states issued gold coins and in large quantities. The Athenians issued no gold coins of their own in this period, so that it may be that the coinage of their tributary states filled their need. Also, the gold coins bridged the gap between the Persian coins in the East, being equal to the Persian daric, and the Athenian silver issues, being equivalent to 24 dachms.

As a matter of commercial expediency it could have served the interests of the Athenians to allow the subservient states to issue their own gold coin. On the other hand, it would have been a simple matter for the Athenians to issue their own gold. Furthermore, a coin with the familiar design of Athena and the owl would have been readily accepted throughout their sphere of influence. It may have been that by letting the individual states strike the less circulated gold coins the Athenian government was allowing them some degree of autonomy, as a kind of safety valve for their nationalistic feelings.

The coins of the Athenian colony of Amphipolis are more refined in technique than contemporary Athenian issues. Because it paid tribute to Athens, it was barred from coining silver, as was stated in the decree of 449 B.C.E.; they became free from Athens in 424 B.C.E. through the actions of Brasidas a great Spartan general of the Peloponnesian War. With the close proximity of silver mines they embarked on the coinage of a series of quite beautiful coins. On the obverse is a head of Apollo in a three-quarter pose. The reverse shows a torch in a square, with a border around it giving the name of the city.

We look at such coins and wonder why the Athenians themselves did not hire such artists, especially during what is described as its Golden Age. It was one of those situations where the Athenians had started with a design, and, because of the coins' wide acceptance any change in its appearance could result in a loss of acceptability. Economic factors outweighed any consideration for artistic improvement. It was mentioned in connection with Amphipolis that it did not start coinage until freed of Athenian domination by Brasidas. The war brought a close to the Athenian empire and also brought about some interesting developments in Athenian coinage.

It should be remembered that Alcibiades had gone over to the Spartans around 414 B.C.E, about the time the Athenians were suffering their great defeat in Sicily. He advised the Spartans to fortify the city of Decelia. The close proximity of Decelia to the Athenian silver mines at Laurium also allowed many of the slaves working there to desert to the Spartans. The result of these mass defections was that the mines had to be shut down. This forced the Athenians to resort to using the money stored at the treasury. By 407 B.C.E., the supply of both minted and uncoined silver was exhausted.

The Athenians had decided by this time to equip a large fleet, in the hope that they would be able to inflict an overwhelming defeat on the Spartans, and turn the tables in their favor. To accomplish this, they took the gold

statues of Victory from the Parthenon and melted them. This gold was turned into the first gold coins issued by Athens. On the reverse, near the feet of the owl, a sprig of laurel was added to show that the gold came from the statues of the goddess of Victory, which were probably decorated with that plant. The head of Athena, as usual was placed on the obverse of the coins.

The coins quickly disappeared from circulation due to their value in a time of crisis. The next year the coinage acted as a forerunner to the political fate of Athens. The currency was debased with copper to such an extent that the poor quality of the coins was obvious after only a few weeks of circulation. It was of such devalued coins that Aristophanes wrote in *The Frogs*:

"Just as with our ancient coinage and the fine new minted gold,
These, sir, these our sterling pieces, all of pure Athenian mold.
All perfect of die and metal, all the fairest of the fair,
All of workmanship unequalled, proved and valued everywhere,
In demand amongst the Hellenes and Barbarians far away:
These we use not. But the worthless pinchbeck coins of yesterday,
Vilest die and basest metal, now we always use instead."

In the fall of 405 B.C.E., the Athenians' naval power was totally destroyed at Aegospotami, ending the Peloponnesian War and Athens' political leadership of Greece.

This discussion of Athenian coinage ends here somewhat arbitrary with the demise of the Athenian empire. One sees on Athenian coinage design that was basically static, with Athena and her owl. Despite this basic design, one can see that Athens' history is mirrored in her coinage and its changes. Coin design in the world of Athens changed not out of whim, but as a reflection of political changes in the issuing states.