ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΜΕΙΖΟΝΟΣ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΣΜΟΥ

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Coinage in the Black Sea

Summary :

The Greek coinage of the western and northern Black Sea started circulating from the 6th century BC. Both areas are characterized by the initial introduction of peculiar bronze objects, whose monetary value is archaeologically confirmed. Silver, bronze and even gold coins have been unearthed and categorized according to their depicted images. Overall, the coinage of the area under investigation was strongly influenced by cultural, economic and political factors.

Date

Archaic, Classical, Hellenistic, Roman periods

Geographical Location

Northern, Western Black Sea

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1. Coinage of the Greek cities of the Western Black Sea Littoral

1.1 Mints and chronological patterns of their activity

The initial phase of coin circulation in the region under investigation is dated to the first half of the 6th until the beginning of the 5th cent. BC. It is characterized by the use of peculiar cast bronze objects in the shape of arrow-heads. Their monetary function is confirmed by their inclusion into hoards, their use as Charon-obols in Greek burials and the special content of their metal. Their circulation embraced a territory that spanned the Milesian colonies of Histros, Apollonia and Tomi as well as that of their chora. This fact along with the strong association of the arrow-head with the Milesian cult of Apollo Iatros allows to suggest that these anonymous proto-coins could have been produced by the above mentioned Milesian colonies.

Histros was the first Greek city of the region, which started to issue its own coins with its abbreviated city-name in the first half of the 5th cent. BC. They were small cast bronze coins depicting a schematic image of the solar disc in the shape of a four-spokes wheel. Histros as well as Apollonia and Mesembria might have started minting coins by the middle-second half of the 5th cent. BC. They were made of silver and produced coin types which later became traditional. In the second half of the 4th cent. – 3rd cent. BC the list of this region's active mints was expanded with the addition of Odessos, Callatis, Dionysopolis and Tomi. The minting activity of the Greek cities in the Western Black Sea Littoral was ceased around 70 BC, when they were captured by the Romans. It was resumed in the 1st cent. AD but not everywhere. Only Tomi, Odessos and Callatis struck small bronze coins from time to time during this century. A regular coin production in most of the cities started again under Antoninus Pius (138-161 AD). Apart from the older mints, the new and quite prolific ones of Anchialus and Markianopolis should be mentioned. The final minting of coinage in the region is dated to the first half of the 3rd cent. AD. The latest coins were issued by the mint of Odessos under Gallienus (253-268 AD).

1.2 Weight standards and metals

Silver was the main coin metal of the region under research during its autonomous period. It was struck mostly according to the Attic (drachma of 4,36 g) and Chian-Rhodian (drachma of 3,87 g) weight standards. In the 5th cent.

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BC drachma and its fractions were the main denominations in the issues of most mints. Only Histros was striking didrachms. Later on, at the beginning of the 4th cent. BC, Mesembria and Apollonia issued quite rare tetradrachms. At the same time, bronze coins started to being minted for the first time. It is noteworthy that some bronze coins of Apollonia had denomination indications of dichalkoi and trichalkoi, which was rather exceptional for Greek coinage.

In the 260s BC, Callatis, Histros, Mesembria and Odessos started issuing gold staters of Alexander's type, which could have been intended to pay tribute to the Galatians who invaded Thrace and the Danube region at the beginning of the century. In the second half of the 3rd cent. BC prolific issues of Alexandrine silver tetradrachms by the same mints were initiated. These coins could have served as "alliance coins" for the cities of the region; they were produced until the beginning of the 1st cent. BC, when they eventually gave place to the issues of gold Lysimachian staters.

In the course of the Roman period, only bronze coins of a denomination between two and five assaria were being struck.

1.3 Coin typology

The active use of one distinctive image on coins during a long period of time is the characteristic feature of these regional coinages. Histros constantly depicted on the reverse type an eagle standing on a dolphin. This picture was the city's official emblem as the epigraphic evidence testifies. In Mesembria the image of a four-spoked wheel on the reverse symbolized the solar disc in its zenith and should have been reminiscent of the city's name. Apollonia's coins illustrate images of the Medusa head and an anchor from the 5th to the 2nd cent. BC.

Bronze coins to a great extent reproduced the images of silver issues, though sometimes their representations were embellished with some remarkable depictions. Noteworthy is the image of the standing Apollo with a bow and a laurel branch on the bronze coins of Apollonia dated from the 3rd-2nd cent. BC. It could have reproduced the famous colossal statue of the god made by sculptor Kalamis and taken by Lucullus to Rome after the capture of Apollonia in 73 BC.

The first silver coins of Callatis were struck in the name of the Scythian king Ataias and apart from the usual images of Heracles and his attributes on the obverse, the reverse beared a peculiar image of a Scythian rider.

During the Roman period the coins' obverse normally depicted the portraits of emperors and members of their families. On the other hand, the reverses demonstrated a great variety of types. Apart from local deities and their attributes, reproductions of famous sculptures and architectural monuments had also been included. Worth mentioning is the image of Hermes with the infant Dionysos on the coins of Anchialus, inspired by the well-known sculpture by Praxiteles or the image of the city on the coins of Markianopolis.

2. Coinage of the Northern Black Sea Littoral

2.1 Main patterns of development

Two main areas of the Northern Black Sea Littoral should be distinguished as their first appearance and the initial history of coinage significantly differed.

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The North-Western area is characterized by the initial use of proto-monetary cast bronze objects in the shape of arrow-heads and dolphins. The former could have been produced since the first half of the 6th cent. BC in the Greek settlement on the island of Berezan (ancient Borysthenes), the latter had been cast in the Milesian colony of Olbia from the end of the 6th and during most of the 5th cent. BC. The Ionian city of the region, ancient Cercinitis, also issued in the 5th cent. BC cast arrow-heads and peculiar coin-like objects with images of arrow-heads on one side and that of a dolphin on the other. Despite their unusual appearance, their connection with the Ionian cults of Apollo Iatros and Apollo Delphinios as well as their monetary functions are certain as archaeological evidence indicates.

Since the second quarter of the 5th cent. BC, proper bronze coins, but still moulded, started being produced initially in Olbia and Nikonion and then in Cercinitis. It is noteworthy that they were not just token coinage, but had an intrinsic value defined by the quantity of metal used. In fact, there were very heavy specimens (over 300 g) that support this assumption. The transition from cast to struck coins in Olbia took place at the turn of the 5th – 4th cent. BC. This transition was followed by an abrupt reduction of bronze coin weights and and the adoption of token coinage as in other parts of the Greek world.

Contrary to the North-Western area, coinage in the North-Eastern part of the Northern Black Sea Littoral developed in a rather traditional way. It started by issuing Panticapaean silver coins at the turn of the 6th – 5th cent. BC. During the most part of the century Panticapaeum was the only mint in the region. In the second half of the century the city's mint could have been used for striking silver coins in the name of the barbarian tribe of Sindoi, who inhabited the Taman peninsula. In the last quarter of the 5th cent. BC two more Greek cities, Nymphaeum and Theodosia started producing their own silver coinage. In the next century new mints emerged in Chersonesos and Phanagoria.

The development of coinage in the Northern Black Sea Littoral in the 4th – 2nd cent. BC is characterized by its growing unification, reflecting close political, economic and cultural links among the Greek poleis. This process reached its highest point at the end of the 2nd – first half of the 1st cent. BC, when this region became part of the Pontic kingdom under Mithridates VI and local coins followed the model of the Pontic coin typology and metrology.

At the beginning of the Roman period (ca. in the mid 1st cent. BC), the monetary history of the region was marked by the cessation of most city coinages save Chersonesos. Olbia and Tyras resumed their coin issues only in the 1st cent. AD. City coinage of the Bosporan kingdom was completely replaced by the prolific royal issues, which lasted until 336-337 AD.

2.2 Main patterns of influence

Cultural, economic and political influence defined to a considerable extent the history of the Northern Black Sea coinage. The appearance of peculiar pre-coin monetary objects and cast bronze coins in Olbia, Nikonion and Cercinitis in the 6th – 5th cent. BC unavoidably should be related to the same issues of the Western Pontic cities and to the common Milesian origin of the colonists.

The leading position of Olbia and Panticapaeum as the largest trade and economic centers of the region caused the striking of gold staters in the 4th cent. BC by both cities. Lysimachian coinage of the 3rd – 2nd centuries played an

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important role in the basin of the Black Sea. This was reflected in the production by Tyras and the Bosporan kings of Lysimachian gold staters as well as in the production of silver tetradracms of this very type in Chersonesos.

Moreover, coinage was also influenced by the remote location of the Greek poleis in that region and their closeness to the 'barbaric' hinterland. Greek mints regularly took orders for striking coins in the name of barbarian tribes or kings and chieftains. In the 5th cent. BC Olbia issued silver staters with the non-Greek name of Eminakos. During the same century Panticapaeum minted silver coins of various denominations in the name of the Sindoi tribe. Cercinitis depicted images of Scythians on the obverse and reverse of its bronze coins of the 4th – 3rd cent. BC. The name of the Scythian king Sciluros turned up on bronze coins of Olbia at the end of the 2nd cent. BC. Gold and silver coins in the names of the Sarmatian rulers Pharzoios and Ininthemeus had been struck by an Olbian mint in the 1st cent. AD. It is noteworthy that all these issues, from the 5th cent. BC to the 1st cent. AD, had a purely Greek appearance although all coin types were to be associated with a barbarian client.

Finally, Roman influence was the last great impact on the local Greek coinage during the last period of its existence. One would say it had almost a comprehensive character starting from the very permission to strike coins and finishing with the borrowing of Roman weight standards and system of denominations, practically by all Greek mints. The only field where Greek mints could have still enjoyed relative freedom was in the selection of reverse (and not so often obverse) types, normally connected to local cults, legends and history.

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Glossary :

chora, the

The agricultural land (including villages and land-plots) belonging to a polis. It was bounded with the polis on an administrative and economic basis.

drachma

1. Ancient greek coin.
2. Ancient unit of weight equal to 1/400 of the "oka" (3,89 grams or the 1/8 of the ounce).

stater, the

The term "stater" was used in various areas of the ancient Greek world to define either a standard weight unit or the most important coin in precious metal (gold, silver, electrum) of a numismatic system. The dead weight and accordingly the value of a stater differed from one area to another and it was based on the weight standard effective in the various cities. Therefore, it was necessary each standard to be defined by the authority that issued it (e.g. Aeginetan, Attic, Boeotian, Corinthian).