



Freshman Seminar

Gods, Goddesses and Flying Horses: A History of Coins

in Ancient Greece

J. Edward Taylor

Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics

A. Course Content

Like art? History? Economics? Ancient wars and empires? It's all here in this Freshman Seminar. The ancient Greeks invented coins and turned them into an art form. Coins are one of the best—and in some cases the only—surviving records left behind by ancient city states in this cradle of western civilization. They give us clues about how commerce and other human activities expanded around the Mediterranean. They tell us about Athens' dominance during the 5th Century BC, and then how it all came crashing down. Coins document the conquests of Alexander the Great. They portray the richness of Greek mythology and a diversity of other themes, from extinction to sex. They appear in the works of Aristotle and the comedies of Aristophanes. This Freshman Seminar will explore the evolution of Greek coinage; how ancient coins were made; the methods of ancient numismatic research; the archeological content of ancient coin hoards; ancient art on coins; the influence of ancient Greece on today's coins; the effects of government policies on the preservation of numismatic materials; ethics and numismatics; and the modern-day business of ancient numismatics, which has been transformed by the internet.

Background

The study of ancient coinage entails a fascinating combination of economics, history and art. The very first coins are believed to have been struck in Lydia, on the west coast of what is now Turkey, in the 7th Century BC. At that time, most exchanges were in kind, not cash, but to the East, precious metals were used as currency and carefully weighed for each transaction. The earliest unit of value was an ox, as anyone who has read the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer knows. When metals were used as currency for trade around the Mediterranean their values were adjusted to the "ox-unit" or *talent*. Metals were more practical currencies than oxen, and naturally over long

distances precious metals were more practical than bronze or iron. However, they had to be weighed and re-weighed for every transaction.

Aristotle described how a recognized authority, by striking ingots of gold, silver or electrum (an alloy of the two) with a mark certifying the quality and weight of the metal, could vastly simplify transactions. Early coins were valued only for the bouillon they contained, but the type or image struck upon them by a governing authority certified the weight and quality of this bouillon.

From Lydia, the idea of coinage spread both eastward and westward, but the Greeks turned it into an art form. Master engravers in hundreds of city-states transmitted the enormous artistic advances of classical Greece onto this new medium of gold, silver and bronze. Up to the conquests of Alexander the Great in 335-323 BC, local coinages flourished in Greek city-states and colonies around the Mediterranean. Each city state had its own design, or *tipos*. For example, Athens had Athena and her owl (also portrayed on the reverse of present-day Euros minted in Greece). There is the Pegasus in Corinth; the wheat ear in Metapontum; the boy riding a dolphin in Taras; a rose in Rhodes; a nymph being carried off by a Satyr on the island of Thasos; the hare of Messana. In some cases they are like tiny canvasses that tell stories, like the sacrificial scenes on the coins of Selinus and Himera in what is now Sicily, or the rodeos portrayed on coins of Larissa. These images conveyed the authority of the local state, but they also reflected identities and economic mainstays of Greek city-states and their people. The subjects portrayed on coins and the artistic development of coinage evolved through the complex human interactions that accompanied commerce, migrations, and conquest.

B. The seminar's goals for student learning, noting intended changes in knowledge, attitudes, awareness, skills, etc.

Few people have any knowledge of the origins of coinage, ancient economies, or the relationship between the two. The goal of this seminar will be to learn about ancient coins, but also to use them as a window into understanding the ancient world. One thing that makes ancient numismatics unique is the way in which it integrates art, economics, politics, and culture. Ancient die makers included some of the finest artists of the time, to such an extent that in some cases (particularly in the Greek city states of present-day Sicily), some artists signed their dies. This is not an art class; however, the development of art on coins through the Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic periods will be an important part of the curriculum.

C. Weekly schedule and field trips

One hour of class meeting and discussion per week will include slide shows, examination of ancient numismatic references (many now rare) published by the British Museum and major university presses (Oxford, Cambridge), ancient coin auction materials and websites, research and discussion. I expect that we will have the

opportunity to handle a few actual specimens of ancient Greek coins from Northern California collections.

D. Required activities outside regularly scheduled contact hours including readings, group work and film viewing

No required activities outside of regularly scheduled classes. There will be some outside readings, a mock internet auction, and in-class activities organized around student projects (see E, below), for which students may wish to meet outside of class.

E. Requirements and grading criteria

Grading will be based on an individual project and classroom participation.

Project: Each student will select an ancient Greek city-state that interests them (e.g., Corinth, Syracuse, Cyrene, Athens, or any one of about 1,000 others!), become the “class expert” on it, and write a short (1,500 word) essay about it. Everyone will be asked to informally share their discoveries with the class over the course of the quarter.

We will also try to decipher a few “digital coin hoards” and participate in a mock on-line ancient coin auction, choosing a coin and exploring how its characteristics are likely to affect its realized price. (This will be contingent upon there being a sufficiently important auction, preferably in the second half of the quarter when more students will have the information to make informed judgments.)

F. Recommended Books:

There are no required texts for this Seminar other than the reader that will be distributed and occasional articles on the topics we are covering, but I highly recommend that you pick up a few. This would be my priority list (you should be able to track all of them down on Amazon.com, Abebooks, or others):

1. Martin, Thomas R. 1996. Ancient Greece from Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times. New Haven: Yale University Press. This is a very handy and accessible reference that can help you place coins in the context of what was happening at the time politically, economically, and culturally.
2. Jenkins, G.K. 1990. Ancient Greek Coins. London: Spink and Son, Ltd. This is a beautifully produced introduction to ancient Greek coins, written by one of the greats. Nicest pictures of any book I have seen on ancient coins.

3. Rynearson, Paul. 2008. Collecting Ancient Greek Coins. Atlanta: Whitman Press. A great beginner's guide to the subject by a noted numismatist and classical scholar.

4. Kraay, Colin M. 1976. Archaic and Classical Greek Coins. New York: Stanford J. Durst. This book is the next step, after Jenkins, if you want to learn more and have a basic reference on archaic and classical Greek coins. It is more or less chronological, setting coins in their historical contexts and providing quite a bit more information and coverage than Jenkins. However, unlike Jenkins, it stops at Alexander the Great (335 BC), when the Hellenistic period begins. Kraay is one of the foremost world experts on ancient numismatics.

Tentative Syllabus

1. Introduction: Coins and Art in Ancient Greece
 - a. The Beginnings of Coinage
 - b. Why coins? Aristotle explains it
 - c. How coins were made, and by whom
 - d. Coin descriptions, grades and hoards
 - e. Ancient Coins Today: Places, Sources, Markets
 - f. Die Sequencing
 - g. Weight Standards
2. A famous find from Egypt and Europe's First Mint
3. Like taking owls to Athens: Europe's First Euro
4. From Archaic to Classical: Using art to Study Ancient Coins.
5. Pythagoras and the Coinage of Opposites
6. A Thousand Mints Bloom
 - a. Larissa Horses, Olynthos Kithara, Thebes and the Federation Shield, Neapolis Gorgon (Why you should always carry a mirror)
 - b. Love and Extinction in Kyrene
 - c. What Do You Do with an Illegitimate Spartan?
 - d. Sex on a Coin? The Satyr and the Unwilling Nymph (or is she?)
7. Sicily: The Apex of Coinage
 - a. Hares, Nymphs, and Lions
 - b. How the Gods Fought Mosquitoes
 - b. The Artists Signed their Dies
 - b. Carthage: Minting Coins from Conquest
8. The Macedonian Kingdom and the End of the Classical Era
 - a. The Transitional Coinage of Philip II (359-336 BC)
 - b. The Numismatic Conquest of Alexander the Great (335-323 BC)

- c. Valuing the Numismatic Legacy of Alexander the Great
9. Hellenistic Coinages (after the death of Alexander):
- a. The First Humans on a Coin
 - b. The Numismatic Battles of the Diadochi: Seleucus, Antigonus, Demetrius Poliorcetes, Lysimachus, and the Ptolemies
10. Ancient Numismatics Today: The Greeks' Numismatic Legacy and the Politics and Ethics of Ancient Coin Collecting

