

## Coinage for an Ideal City: Money and Economy in Plato's *Laws*

In Plato's *Laws* 5.742a-b, a passage often cited by numismatists and economic historians, the Athenian speaker argues that the new city of Magnesia should have two kinds of currency: an “epichoric” local coinage for everyday use within the city, and an international “Hellenic” coinage for state affairs. While it does offer a rare glimpse of how different currencies interacted in ancient Greece, the *Laws* is a challenging and problematic source for historians because it constantly commingles Plato's concept of a normative 4th-century *polis* with his lofty philosophical ideals. By considering Plato's treatment of money and wealth throughout the work, this paper sets the coinage discussion in context and suggests a new approach to using the *Laws* as a source for Greek economic history.

Plato's comments on “epichoric” and “Hellenic” coinage have become a *locus classicus* for discussions of ancient Greek numismatics and monetary policy, for they promise to illuminate the issue of how multiple currencies were used side-by-side (Marcellesi 2000; Meadows 2014). In this regard, the passage in the *Laws* does resonate with other evidence, and scholars are quick to highlight connections between Plato's comments and the monetary policies pursued by real Classical *poleis*, especially Athens (Meadows 2009). What many such discussions ignore, however, is a fundamental difference in motivation and reasoning. When Plato proposes that the state enforce the use of local coinage and ban outside currency, his explicit goal is to forestall greed and corruption in the city; when real Greek *poleis* pursued a closed monetary system, on the other hand, it was for the sake of profit (van Alfen 2018). Thus, even though Plato describes familiar economic behavior, his explanation for it is unrealistic and idiosyncratic.

Plato offers contrived philosophical justifications not just for coinage, but for several economic matters discussed in the *Laws*. Crucially, the legal code described in the *Laws* is not that of a truly perfect city, but a compromise between Plato's ideal community and what he sees as the inescapable realities of *polis* life (Morrow 1960). Earlier in Book 5, the Athenian speaker describes the perfect city as one in which all property is shared in common, but he admits that such a regime is feasible only for gods or children of gods (739c-e). This statement not only indicates that the proposed laws are just second-best, but also emphasizes that private property is a definitive, ineluctable flaw of human society. All economic aspects of the *Laws* are therefore undesirable concessions, a point that is borne out in Plato's respective discussions of property classes (744b-d), trade (847d-e), and credit (953e-954a). These are mainly treated as necessary evils that must be carefully circumscribed, but Plato also tries to justify their value and explain their accommodation in the (almost) ideal city. Therefore, while the *Laws* reflects (what Plato considers) the quintessential features of a 4th-century *polis*, its explanations of economic institutions and behaviors are philosophically motivated, and thus wholly unreliable; only those things that can be explained by altruistic motives are allowed.

Looking at the *Laws* as a whole, it becomes clear that all its discussion of economic matters is colored by Plato's philosophical opposition to the moneymaking mindset and even to private property itself. Therefore, this paper argues, no passage from this work can be treated in isolation as a source for economic or monetary history, and the very inclusion of a certain policy, institution, or behavior in the *Laws* is more informative than whatever explanation Plato offers. For economic matters, at least, the *Laws* may reflect which aspects of the 4th-century *polis* were most important, necessary, or unavoidable, but cannot provide the real reasons behind them.

## Works Cited

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