

Ionian Silver Coinage and the Ionian Confederacy

This paper examines the first issues of silver coinage among the Ionian city-states in the sixth century BCE. Previously, the Ionians had used electrum coinage, which originated in neighboring Lydia, until the reign of Croesus (561-546 BCE) when, according to Herodotus (1.94), the Lydians learned to separate gold and silver from the electrum alloy. Thereafter, silver was the dominant metal for the civic coinage of the various Ionian city-states (Barron 1966; Balcer 1968; Konuk 2012). The coins, however, were not undifferentiated. They were struck on three weight standards: silver staters on the Lydo-Milesian standard (14.15 g), the Phocaic standard (16.8 g), and the Samian standard (17.4 g). They also contained a multiplicity of designs (“types”), usually an animal on the front (obverse) and a punch mark on the back (reverse). Moreover, scholars are also divided over whether the minting authorities were state officials or private individuals (van Alfen 2012). Nevertheless, as this paper argues by relating this numismatic evidence to the extant literary record, the appearance of Ionian silver coinage coincides with the growing political coherence of the Ionian Confederacy.

The first half of this paper details the numismatic material. It demonstrates how the evidence drawn from the Ionians’ choice of metal, weight standard, and typology can elucidate the economic, political, and military situations facing the Ionians in their relations with external threats (Lydians and Persians). Beyond the relations with non-Ionians, numismatic evidence can also bring to light the dynamics of relations between the Ionian city-states. Indeed, numismatic correspondence in shared weight standards and typology manifest undocumented interstate cooperation among the Ionians (Balcer 1970; Osborne 1996; Mackil and van Alfen 2006; van Alfen and Bransbourg 2013).

The second half of this paper combines the evidence from coins with what is known from the literary record about the new directions for the Ionian Confederacy in the latter half of the sixth century BCE. Strabo (14.1.3) and Pausanias (7.2.1-5.1), both working from earlier Greek sources, relate the early formation of the Confederacy but assume it operated as a political institution *ab origine*. Vitruvius (4.1.4-5) relates the construction of the Ionians' common sanctuary, the Panionion, but he, too, is confused about the early political nature of the Confederacy. This paper shows that the period for the first issues of silver coinage in Ionia is also the period when the Ionian Confederacy became a cohesive institution and took on a political character in addition to its previous religious one. Herodotus (1.142-148, 170, 5.108-109, 6.7), for example, reports four (possibly five) collective assemblies of the Ionians that took place between c. 550 and 494 BCE to discuss constitutional reforms, plan joint military actions, and determine territorial divisions. Whereas the literary sources are opaque, either because their information is incomplete or because they are not contemporary to the events, when they are combined with the numismatic material, a clear picture emerges of a distinct shift in the nature of the Confederacy – from a religious to a political and religious institution – in the late archaic age.

Although under Lydian and then Persian control throughout the second half of the sixth century BCE, the Ionians continued to mint autonomous issues of silver coinage. This paper concludes with a brief look at a series of coins that appeared during the Ionian Revolt (499 to 494 BCE) – staters, struck in electrum not silver, which followed the Lydo-Milesian standard. Their uniform fabric and reverse types – but diverse obverse types symbolizing the individual city-states – may, as some have suggested (Dengate 1968, 164; Kraay 1976, 30), indicate that this was an alliance coinage. This would reinforce the trajectory which this paper argues for the Ionians on the basis of their coinage and the ancient literary records: that, starting in the mid- to

late sixth century the Ionians became an increasingly cohesive group with a distinct shared political identity.

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