



FINE COIN OF CARTHAGE

The story behind a lovely silver tetradrachm from the 4th century B.C. is open to conjecture.

Barclay V. Head, the famous numismatist, author and British Museum curator, succinctly described the silver *tetradrachm* (Figure 1) as the “Finest known coin of Carthage. By a Greek engraver.” Nevertheless, the piece remains a mystery. Where was it minted and by whom? Who is the beautiful woman on the obverse, described drily in catalogs as an “uncertain female head to the left?” Why is the lion strutting, eyes beaming, on the reverse? What is the significance of the date palm, or the strange inscription in the exergue?

The coin’s story began when

800 Campanian mercenaries were hired, using Athenian funds, by allies Naxos and Katane, to aid in the invasion of Syracuse.

The soldiers likely arrived in Sicily in 415 B.C. and probably reached the battlefield in time to fight for the Athenians before the latter were crushed by Syracuse in 413. According to the historian Diodorus Siculus, following the slaughter “the Carthaginians bought horses for them all [the



PHOTOS: JOHN NEBEL

▼ **FIGURE 1:** This beautiful but mysterious tetradrachm (320-315 B.C.) of Entella, Sicily, deserves further study.

Actual Size: 25.9mm



mercenaries], gave them high pay, and sent them to Aegesta.”

Ian Lee, in his *Numismatic Chronicle* article entitled “Entella: The Silver Coinage of the Campanian Mercenaries and the Site of the First Carthaginian Mint, 410-409 B.C.,” deduces from Diodorus that the Greeks ultimately settled in the town of Entella, Sicily, which they shared with the original Elymian residents and the Carthaginian military. It was a multilingual, multicultural society where the soldiers might have raised families and been joined by other southern Italian /Greek settlers.

In his extensive four-part die

study of the Punic (Carthaginian) coinage of Sicily, published in *Schweizerische Numismatische Rundschau* (*Swiss Numismatic Review*),

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for convenience and is by no means intended to signify its true position in the coinage.” He dates the three alongside the inception of his “Punic Series 3” (317-314 B.C.), based on hoard evidence (with two

G.K. Jenkins illustrates this coin and two others, every one of extraordinary artistry. Each issue was designed by a different engraver and struck from single pairs of distinct dies.

Jenkins dubbed the three coins “Series 4,” adding “the fact that this group has been placed here is merely



▲ **FIGURE 2:** Apollo and his twin sister, Artemis, were born on the Greek isle of Delos. Both figures are associated with lions, statues of which guard a sacred route on the island. Below is a limestone statue of Artemis/Bendis from the 3rd century B.C.



hoards containing early Series 3 coins, and one or more Series 4 coins). By then, the last quarter of the 4th century, the immigrants would have been in their fourth generation, securely situated enough to attract master engravers, especially given the need for a large coinage to support the Carthaginian military. The Carthaginians were “virtually without coinage (even foreign) until the fourth century B.C.,” according to Paolo Viscona in “Car-

thaginian Coinage in Perspective,” published in the *American Journal of Numismatics* in 1998. They had to rely on the Greek **moneyers** in Sicily, as they had nothing in their North African homeland.

Coinage often honors a nation’s founding. Hence, an engaging supposition as to the identity of the portrait on the obverse of this tetradrachm is based on the lost history of Pompeius Trogus, whose epitome survives thanks to the later Roman historian Justin. The portrait on the coin must be Elissa, the founder and first queen of Carthage. (Virgil’s famous, legendary story of Aeneas refers to Carthage’s founder as Dido, hence Elissa is often referred to as Dido in numismatic references.)

Elissa had escaped to Carthage with an entourage from the Phoenician city of Tyre, fleeing her evil brother, Pygmalion, who had killed her husband (their uncle, Acerbas). Pygmalion’s crime was motivated by greed, as he hoped to obtain his uncle’s great wealth.

Elissa voyaged to Carthage via Cyprus, kidnapping 80 women to serve as wives for the men aboard her ship and to populate her future city. Eventually landing in North Africa, she bargained for as much land as

could be covered with an ox hide. Elissa cleverly directed that the leather be cut into the thinnest possible strips to encompass the greatest possible area, plausibly over 60 acres, which would have been land enough for the refugees to found a colony.

Once Carthage began to prosper, greed once again came to the fore when a neighboring king attempted to force Elissa to marry him. She chose death, preferring to rejoin her husband in the afterlife rather than become the king’s wife.

Jenkins raises questions about the identity of the female image in the Phrygian cap on the obverse of the tetradrachm and the lion on the reverse, as these symbols are not historically associated with Elissa. Jenkins proposes that the Greek goddess Artemis, well known to Greek engravers, is a much more likely subject. Artemis, Apollo’s twin sister, was born on Delos in a place guarded by lions (Figure 2), and is depicted wearing a Phrygian cap on vases and sculpture. Existing images of Artemis show her hair in ringlets, similar to the depiction on the tetradrachm.

In addition, Jenkins maintains that “the lion and palm tree type minted at Velia has little bearing on the Carthaginian type.” Meanwhile, Roderick Williams in *The Silver Coinage of Velia* states, “Now the Velian issue of a single reverse die is a minor one in comparison with the Carthaginian with three distinct pairs of dies and it can hardly be doubted that it is the



▲ **FIGURE 3:** The reverse of a silver nomos of Velia (left, 340-334 B.C.) might have influenced that of the Carthaginian tetradrachm (Figure 1) and perhaps even a later fourrée nomos of Velia (right, 300-280 B.C.)

Actual Size: 22mm (left) & 17.5mm

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS/BERNARD GAGNON & METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART/THE CESNOLA COLLECTION, PURCHASED BY SUBSCRIPTION, 1874-76 (STATUE); CLASSICAL NUMISMATIC GROUP (CNGCOINS.COM)



▲ **FIGURE 4:** *The reverse legend on the tetradrachm (top) is a mirror image of that rendered on a normal coin (bottom). This reversal is particularly obvious in the “MM” letters.*

Carthaginian which is influencing the Velian.” The two scholars obviously see a connection, but dismiss it. However, lions had been on Velian coins since the 6th century B.C. Velia is reasonably close to Campania, and Campanian engravers would have been familiar with Velia’s coinage designs. Thus, it’s logical to conclude that the numismatic form of the lion originated in Velia, influenced the later Carthaginian coin, then was reflected back to Velia in its more contemporary lion and palm tree form (Figure 3).

Says Jenkins, “The coin’s legend is quite without parallel and betrays confusion, since while reading, as it should, from right to left, each letter is reversed as if to read in the other direction.” To the contrary, I think the engraver knew what he was doing. The letters were reversed as they would be in retrograde Greek on an early Greek coin legend. The engraver was, in a manner, adding language to the coin’s Greek identity. After all, the tetradrachm already had a Greek goddess, a Greek pun (the date palm), and a Greek lion guarding the goddess.

Figure 4 shows the mirror imagery unique to this Punic die, comparing the tetradrachm’s inscription, S’MMHNT, to a normally rendered legend on another coin. Reading right to left, as Punic is written, the reversal can be seen clearly by comparing the MM’s—the third and fourth letters in the top inscription—with the second and third letters in the bottom inscription. According to Lee, the legends “are purely descriptive in content, that is, they accurately and

concisely describe a prominent feature—geographical, topographical or functional.” Thus, the features might have changed, and their descriptions were highly abbreviated...in other words we must just guess what was meant. Lee translates the legends as “[A coin issued by] the people of the camp,” and that camp is Entella.

Why this coin (and its two siblings) was made by refugees for refugees is a mystery. My guess is the three engravers engaged in a competition—fortunately so, as it resulted in extraordinary numismatic artistry.

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