



GETAS, KING OF THE EDONES

The Thracian ruler was the first in the Western world to declare his title on coinage.

GETAS, KING OF THE Edones (r. late-6th to mid-5th century B.C.), was the first ruler in the Western world to proclaim himself king on his coinage. On the *tristater* shown here, the legend begins on the left, inside the dotted border, continues around and ends in the exergue, with the last three letters in retrograde: ΓΕΤΑ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥ ΗΔ[ΩΝ]ΙΩΩΙ (“Geta[s], King of the Edones”).

Aside from his remarkable coinage, Getas is unknown, not surprising for the time and place. Michael Zahrnt writes in *A Companion to Ancient Thrace*, “The ancient Thracians had no literature, not even a script...we are dependent, on the one hand, on the archaeological remains and the coins, on the other, on the accounts of Greek authors.” (The latter referred to the Thracian tribes by tribal name, but not by ruler in Getas’ case.)

The Edones (an ancient Thra-

cian tribe) were subjects of the Persians for a period of time. According to Peter Delev’s “The Edonians,” in Herodotus’ *Histories* 5.11 (Book 5, Chapter 11) the historian states that the Persian King Darius granted Histiaeus control of “Mycinus in Edonian territory” in 510 B.C. This indicates that, before this time, the Persians were Edonian overlords, and Edonian territory was the Persian king’s to grant. Persia’s sovereignty continued through Xerxes’ invasion of Greece and his defeat, until the Athenian siege of Eion, which occurred in 476 B.C. (as dated by N.G.L. Hammond in *The History of Macedonia*).

Getas’ coins are quite rare. Margarita Tačeva’s 1998 “ΓΕΤΑΣ ΗΔΟΝΕΟΝ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ” lists 11 *tristaters* bearing seven different legends. A 2012 dissertation by Alexandros Tzamalīs notes a total of 22 examples.

As the Edones lacked a script, a Greek (or Greek-educated)

tribesman cut the coinage dies for Getas. In *Ancient Trade and Early Coinage*, Michael Mitchiner concludes, “The Edoni, for instance, issued a series of fairly primitive coins at Ennea Odoi, and when this coin series fell into decline they issued a series of magnificent coins in the name of their king, Getas.” He also states that since the Edones likely lacked the skill, a workshop, probably run by Greeks, might have manufactured coins for the Edones and neighboring tribes.

In her article “Inscriptions on Edonian Coins,” Mirena Slavova concurs. Referring generally to tribes in the area, she writes, “A remarkably important characteristic of this particular coinage however are the common motifs on the obverse and reverse dies, which can be explained by common cultural, historical, and mythological background, as well as by the fact the mints were common.”

Herodotus 5.7 gives a hint as to the meaning of the *tristater*’s obverse rendering: “Of gods, they [Thracians] worship only these: Ares, Dionysus and Artemis. Their kings, as apart from the rest of the citizenry, worship Hermes chiefly among the gods, and they swear by him alone and declare that they themselves are sprung of his lineage.”

Therefore, reasonably, the coin depicts Hermes, the Thracian god revered by nobility. In the Homeric hymn *To Hermes*, a work likely well known by Greek engravers, Hermes is described as “resourceful and cunning, a robber, a rustler of cattle, a bringer of dreams, a night watcher, a gate-lurker, who was



THIS RARE EDONIAN TRISTATER (c. 479-465 B.C.) proclaims Getas as “King of the Edones.” The obverse depicts Hermes with two spears and two cows; the reverse is punched with a simple, window-like design.

Actual Size: 31.6mm

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▲ **GODS OF GREEK MYTHOLOGY**, including Zeus (center) and Hermes (reclining, left).

soon to display deeds of renown.”

Hermes was the son of the randy Zeus and a cave-dwelling nymph, Maia. Midday after his birth, Hermes performed his first deed: he sprang from his cradle, captured an unfortunate tortoise that was walking by the cave’s entrance, and promptly gouged the flesh from its shell, which became the sound box of the first lyre.

For his second deed of renown, Hermes located Apollo’s herd of sacred, gold-horned cattle and stole 50. He attempted to avoid pursuit by reversing the beasts’ hooves and walking backward himself as he drove them to his mother’s cave, traversing sandy soil to further disguise the trail. An old man tending vines witnessed part of the show.

Hermes then killed and roasted two of the cattle, effectively making a burnt offering to himself. Meanwhile, a very angry Apollo followed the strange trail, helped by the observant old man, and tracked down the rustler. Apollo would have killed Hermes, but for the offer of a gift in recompense—the first lyre. Later, upon Mt.

Olympus, Zeus’ intercession ultimately ensured eternal friendship between the thief and sun gods. (Hermes explained that the cattle would reproduce and Apollo eventually would have his 50 back.)

Not typically carried by Hermes, the twin spears appear to be a nod to Thracian tradition, and to Getas himself. In “On the Problems of the Coinages of Alexander I Sparadokos and the So-Called Thracian-Macedonian Tribes,” Tačeva writes that “the two spears were the armament of the Thracian and Mycenaean aristocrats, bound by the Pelasgian (?) Orphic cult of the Kabeiroi. The royal power surviving in Thrace preserved them as a divine characteristic feature of the dynast’s rule.” (The Bulgarian scholar’s use of the question mark indicates how complex this history can be.)

However, if we take the coin at face value, the spears relate Getas to Hermes, his ancestor by Thracian tradition. As Tačeva points out in “ΓΕΤΑΣ ΗΛΟΝΕΟΝ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ,” the inscription emphasizes the familial association as ΓΕΤΑ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥ (King Getas) sur-

rounding the figure of Hermes. The inscription is in the nominative case, indicating Getas himself as Hermes, standing between the bulls with his twin spears.

In addition to satisfying the king (the design continued throughout Getas’ reign) and combining Greek and Thracian mythology, the engraver did something remarkable. He depicted the bulls’ heads facing slightly outward, rather than in strict profile, marking the beginning of more flexible representations. As such, this archaic coin anticipated numismatic art of the classical period.

This 28.3g silver tristater represented more than a week’s wages, too large for ordinary transactions, but convenient for trade or for paying tribute to the Persian king. Mt. Pangaion and its abundant silver mines provided the precious metal for the tristater, which adhered to the Persian weight standard. Doris Raymond’s *Macedonian Royal Coinage* describes the Thracio-Macedonian coinage as being based on the “Light Babylonian Weight-Mina” of 491g. The Edonian stater was $\frac{1}{50}$ of the light mina, or 9.82g; a tristater would nominally have been 29.46g. This coin is a little light at 28.3g, but Getas’ patron god was resourceful and cunning—a robber.

The coin’s inscription also reflects the east. Mirena Slavova discusses the seven different inscriptions cataloged by Tačeva; five of them are Ionic in nature, referring to Greek dialects spoken within the Persian territory to the east. This addresses another puzzle: Mitchiner describes the coin’s engraver as Greek, while Hammond asserts that “the perpetrator of the genitive ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ was presumably not a Greek at all.” Slavova’s explanation is that ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ is an asigmatic nominative; the final sigmas in ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ and ΓΕΤΑΣ have been dropped off, an Ionic practice. More simply, perhaps this was the



Greek engraver's attempt to fit the legend in a specific space.

Considering the Persians' trading partners and subjects or allies at different times, it's not surprising that the Edones had mixed relations with the western Greeks. When Peisistratus was exiled from Athens in the mid-6th century, he was treated well by the Edones as he made his way to Thrace. According to J.W. Cole in "Peisistratus on the Strymon," he "secured privileges at the hands of the Edonians, which subsequently they sought to deny others." Peisistratus returned to Athena a rich man, made so by Mt. Pangaiion silver.

However, as noted in Herodotus 7.109, the Edones joined the Persian invasion of Greece in 480 B.C.: "The Thracian peoples through which he [Xerxes] made his march are the Patti, Cicones, Bistonians, Sapaei, Dersaei, Edoni and Satrae. Of these, the ones who lived by the seaboard joined his host with their ships."

Herodotus 7.115 referred to the route they marched: "This road by which King Xerxes led his army the Thracians do not plough or sow but hold it in great reverence, right til my own time."

There is numismatic disagreement about the dating of Getas' tristaters. As noted in Martin Price and Nancy Waggoner's 1975 publication *Archaic Greek Silver Coinage*, the "Asyut" Hoard, which was buried around 475 B.C., contained no Edonian coins. Sallie Fried's 1987 "The Decadrachm Hoard: An Introduction" lists one Getas coin in that accumulation, buried in 465/462 B.C., according to Jonathan Kagan's companion article, "The Decadrachm Hoard: Chronology and Consequences." As such, the minting date for Getas' tristaters is often considered to be between 479 and 465 B.C. However, that dating is not certain. Price and Waggoner wrote about nearby tribal coinages that appeared in the Asyut Hoard,

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stating, “Regrettably not nearly enough is yet known to enable us to establish a relative chronology for the coins.” They dated those tribes’ coins between 500 and 480 B.C.

Two elements—a plain, window-like square reverse (“quadratum incusum”) and an obverse rather than reverse inscription—are similar to coins produced by the influential mint in Abdera. (According to J.M.F. May in his 1966 *Coinage of Abdera*, these are dated between 520 to 492 B.C.) The 1879 *British Museum Catalogue of Greek Coins Macedonia, Etc.* dates the two Edonian coins in the collection to c. 500 B.C.

In his 1979 *Archaic and Classical Greek Coins*, Colin Kraay wrote that tribal minting of large coins could have satisfied an “obligation to pay tribute in silver to the Persian Empire in the period 514/513-479.” Slavova noted that “the beginning of Getas’ rule must have preceded the Persian invasion into Thrace and Macedonia,

namely Darius’ expedition of 513 and Xerxes’ expedition of 480, because the large and expensive *octadrachms* [tristaters] (equal to 2 *darics*) suggest ‘a strong authority over a silver-rich land’ (Tatscheva [sic] 2006, 34).”

In her 1992 “On the Problems” article, Tačeva wrote, “Recently there is a tendency to predate the coins of Getas after those of Alexander, although [Doris] Raymond has reliably demonstrated the opposite through the paleography of A in the inscriptions of coins of both rulers.”

The date of minting aside, the coin introduces us to Getas, king of the Edones, a proud ruler who was a willing trading partner or ruthless enemy. His tribe was rich, thanks to the luck of geology. The only reason we know enough about Getas to speak his name is through the genius of an unknown Greek engraver who created only a few beautiful coins—Getas’ ultimate legacy.

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