



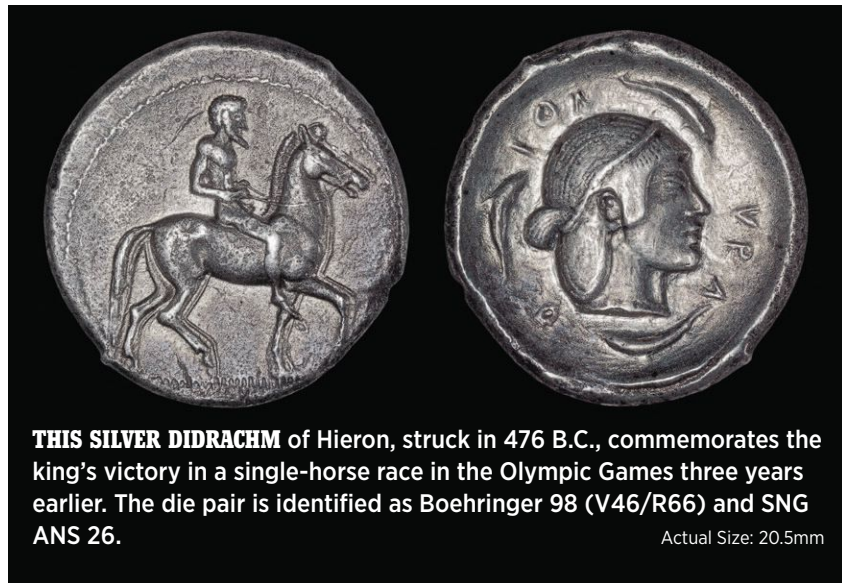
ODE TO A TYRANT

A variety of sources shed light on a Greek despot, his coinage and one of his proudest moments.

HIERON SUCCEEDED his brother Gelon as tyrant of Gela in 485 B.C., and, upon Gelon's death seven years later, of Syracuse. Both were masterful military men and ruled with iron fists. While not as famous as Themistokles and the Athenians for saving the Greek world in 480 B.C., they protected the empire from a lesser-known, but nevertheless deadly, force.

Hieron's silver *didrachm*, struck in or shortly after 476 B.C., depicts the capable and savvy tyrant of Syracuse riding his horse Pherenikos, an Olympic victor. Is this observation about a 2,500-year-old coin's origins merely arm-chair speculation, or is it based on hard facts?

▼ **BROTHERS GELON AND HIERON** were fierce warriors. They eliminated their enemies and relocated citizens to suit their objectives.



THIS SILVER DIDRACHM of Hieron, struck in 476 B.C., commemorates the king's victory in a single-horse race in the Olympic Games three years earlier. The die pair is identified as Boehring 98 (V46/R66) and SNG ANS 26.

Actual Size: 20.5mm

PHOTOS: JOHN NEBEL

According to Herodotus, on the same day Athenian ships (*triremes*) overpowered the Persian navy at Salamis, Gelon's army slaughtered the Carthaginian army at Himera on the north coast of Sicily. In his

History of Greece, author George Grote wrote, "there seems to be good reason for believing that the simultaneous attack on the Greeks both in Peloponnesus and in Sicily, was concerted between the Carthaginians and Xerxes—probably by the Phoenicians on behalf of Xerxes." The barbarians planned to attack from both east and west; Gelon managed to hold the latter.

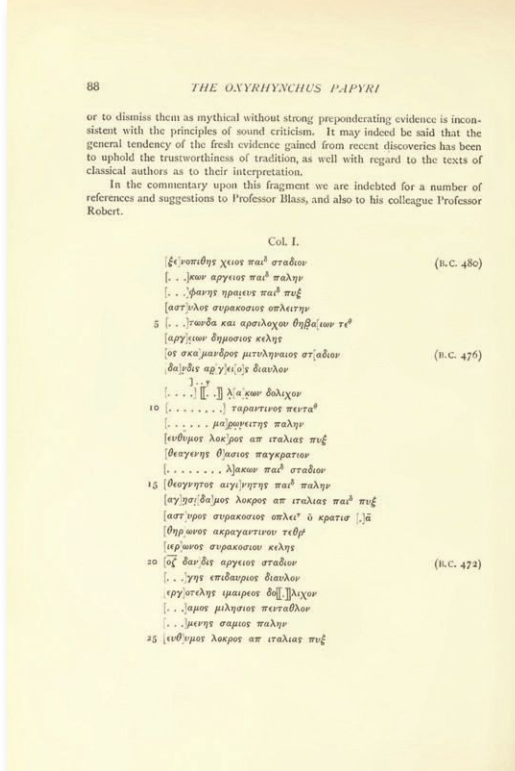
In "Sicilian Tyrants and their Victorious Brothers II: The Deinomenids," Monessa Cummins wrote that Hieron likely had a significant role in the bloody battle at Himera. Later, in 474 B.C., he successfully defended the Southern Italian city of Kyme again against the Carthaginians, a military operation Grote describes as "no way inferior to that of Gelo[n], and probably the greatest not merely in Sicily, but throughout the Grecian world."

The brothers eliminated their enemies and forcibly relocated



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▲ THE TEXT OF AN ANCIENT PAPYRUS, published in Grenfell and Hunt's *Oxyrhynchus Papyri, Part II* in 1899 (right), dates Hieron's victory at the Olympic Games to 476 B.C.

citizens to suit their objectives. But Hieron and Gelon were not just destroyers—they also were builders, chiefly of Syracuse. The city originally comprised only the small island of Ortygia. Over time, its fortifications expanded to the mainland, and Syracuse developed into a great city rivaling Athens.

Not surprisingly, the freedom-loving Greeks were wary of tyrants. So, to sway public opinion in his favor, Hieron brought great literary minds and philosophers to Syracuse, such as Pindar, Simonides, Bacchylides, Epicharmus, Aeschylus and Xenophanes. They were members of Hieron's court and helped solidify his position as a good king rather than a despot whose family seized power through military force. Pindar, regarded then and now as one of ancient Greece's greatest poets, played a big part in this strategy, as did the Olympic Games and his silver didrachm.

Pindar used his literary skill to extol Hieron in a lyric poem,

"Olympian 1" (translated here by William H. Race), that commemorates the king's victory in a single-horse race in 476 B.C.:

...nor let us proclaim a contest greater than Olympia.
From there comes the famous hymn that encompasses the thoughts of wise men, who have come in celebration of Kronos' son to the rich and blessed hearth of Hieron, who wields the rightful scepter in flock-rich Sicily.

The poet also invokes Kronos' son Zeus, king of the gods, who recognizes Hieron's right to wield the king's scepter.

As well, Pindar likens Hieron to Pelops, founder of the Olympics and a favorite of Poseidon:

Syracuse's horse-loving king, Fame shines for him in the colony of brave men founded by Lydian Pelops.

A papyrus published in 1899 by Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt dates Hieron's Olympic victory to 476 B.C. "The chronology of the three victories at Olympia of Hieron of Syracuse, upon which depends the date of the first Olympian ode of Pindar and the fifth ode of Bacchylides is at length settled."

Ever eager to enhance his reputation, Hieron likely issued the didrachm soon after his victory. In *Aristocracy and Athletics in Archaic and Classical Greece*, Nigel Nicholson explains that the young jockeys and chariot drivers were mere appurtenances. Races were between horses, and the owner of the winning steed received the accolades. The didrachm shows an adult rider, as Hieron no doubt thought it would be more effective to allegorically depict himself in that position rather than a nameless youth.

In "Olympian I," Pindar names the horse, and credits Hieron (in effect, the jockey does not exist):

...if the splendor of Pisa [near Olympia] and of Pherenikos has indeed enthralled your mind with sweetest considerations, when he sped beside the [stream] Alpheos, giving his limbs ungoaded in the race, and joined to victorious power his master.

In his comprehensive die study, *Die Münzen von Syrakus*, author Erich Boehringer attributes Hieron's didrachm to Gelon, as well as two earlier horse-and-rider issues (a *drachm* and a didrachm). This is not entirely inconsistent, as Gelon could have commemorated his brother's earlier equestrian victories at Delphi in 482 B.C. and 478 B.C. on smaller coins, while he commemorated his own 488 B.C. chariot victory (his sole Olympic achievement), on a number of larger and

weightier *tetradrachms*.

Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum (SNG): The Collection of the American Numismatic Society, Part 5, Sicily III: Syracuse-Siceliotes cites 480 B.C. as the didrachm's approximate year of issue. In *Greek Coinages of Southern Italy and Sicily*, N.K. Rutter compares coin inscriptions to those appearing on monuments and concludes that coins with the legend ΣΥΡΑΚΟΣΙΩΝ were minted in 479 B.C. and later. The letter Q (*koppa*) rather than K (*kappa*) had been used before the battle of Himera in spelling Syracuse. In Boehringer's die sequence, the transition from *koppa* to *kappa* occurred between die pairs #52 and #53; Hieron's didrachm chronologically appeared well after, as it was struck from die pair #98.

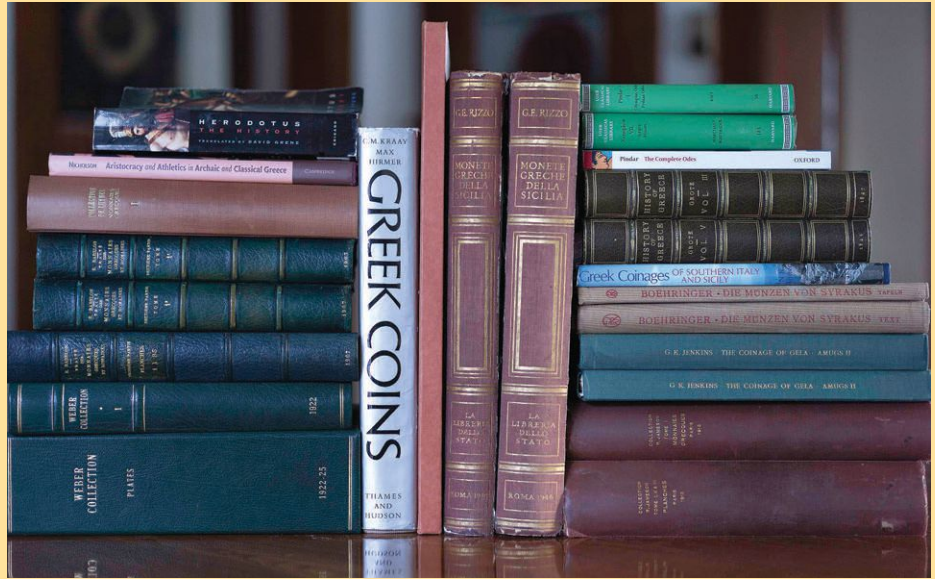
The didrachm's reverse tells a different story. It depicts the nymph Arethusa as if she is underwater, with dolphins swimming around her head. An attendant of the goddess Artemis, Arethusa sought relief from the hot sun in Elis, near the site that later hosted Olympic racing, and removed her garments to bathe in the clear, cool stream (Alpheos). Struck with desire for the maiden, the stream took human form and pursued her.

Frantic, Arethusa ran away, calling out in distress to Artemis, who enveloped her in a dense fog and rendered her invisible. The terrified nymph started to sweat and transformed into a rivulet, which Artemis directed through the earth, under the sea and to Syracuse, where Arethusa bubbled to the surface as a fountain on the island of Ortygia, the original site of Syracuse.

Pindar's ode shined a light on Hieron's Olympic horse-racing victory and the tyrant's desired hereditary right to the throne. In addition, his lyric poem provides some understanding of Hieron's signature didrachm.

ancients@money.org

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