

## Coinage and History of Messenia (Peloponnesus) until the end of the Hellenistic period

Sparta had prohibited coinage in Messenia until she was defeated at the battle of Leuctra (371) by Thebes. Then, Thebes created a new state in that region previously submitted to Sparta and the Messenian state very quickly issued its own coins. Citizens of Messenia (most of them were previously helots) discovered both civic life and coinage at a late, i.e. a relatively well documented period : therefore, Messenia is of special interest to study the reasons for issuing coins and the monetization of an ancient Greek state.

It is possible to separate the Messenian numismatic history in three periods<sup>1</sup>:

The first one covers the fourth and the third centuries BC until the annexion of the region by the Achaian League (*Koinon*) in 191 BC. This corresponds to the time when the whole region is unified under Messene's authority and there is only one mint in Messene . The monetary production is quite irregular and of limited importance : few staters\* (presumably struck with 1 obverse die) and triobols\* (2 obverse dies), more obols\* and *chalkous*\* were issued quite soon after the foundation (370/369), probably during or shortly after the occupation of Olympia (*ca* 365/362), then some bronze issues\* during the fourth century and the third quarter of the third century.

The Messenian state has been created by Thebes in order to confine Sparta in the Peloponnese (the Arcadian League was another buffer zone). Many of the citizens of the new state were helots and, for these reasons, Athens, both prominent slave state and close enemy of Thebes, was no more enthusiastic than Sparta: Isocrate (*Archidamos*) thought that the creation of the state was unfair because Messenia belonged to Sparta after winning since centuries; Lycurgus (*Against Leocrates* 62) considered Messenian citizens as *tuchontôn anthrôpôn* (of indiscriminate origin). Therefore, the new state was under threat until 338, when Philip II mostly enlarged Messenian territory at Sparta's expense. Then, Messenia enjoyed more security. The Messenian history is related

by Pausanias' *Periegesis* book IV only (second century AD), but his account (the «Messenian Pseudo-History») is dependent on ancient tradition which started to be created very soon after the foundation in order to defend the Messenian cause. It celebrates courage and loyalty of the Messenians during the wars against Spartans at the Archaic period: according to it, the Messenian state was destroyed and the region annexed by Sparta following dishonest trickeries.

The designs of the first Messenian coinage celebrates both main deities of the «pseudo-history»: Zeus Ithômatas (of the Ithome mountain) and Demeter who are supposed to have played the leading roles during the Messenian Wars on Messenian side and gave help at the moment of defeat to protect the last free Messenians and their sacred books.

Messenian coinage was mainly in bronze and was used through Messenian country. It is quite known that coinage is deeply bound with social entirety («totalité sociale») <sup>2</sup> and that new states usually use creative history and historical symbols to give a population the feeling of patriotism<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, issuing coins in Messenia was a efficient way to declare the Spartan domination over and the beginning of a new era. It was obviously a good way to promote the use of coins in a time of big socioeconomic transformations as well: the previous helots had become landowners and the cereals they grew were no more sent to Laconia; they could sell their products freely<sup>5</sup>.

1. Grandjean, C.: *Les Messéniens de 370/369 au I<sup>e</sup> s. de notre ère*, *BCH Supplément* 44, 2003.
2. Simmel, G.: *Philosophie des Geldes*, Berlin, 1977 ; Aglietta, M et Orléan, O.: *La monnaie souveraine*, Paris, 1998 ; Théret, B. et alii: *La monnaie dévoilée*, Paris, sous-presse.
3. Castoriadis, C.: *L'institution imaginaire de la société*, Paris, 1975.
4. Alcock, S.: A simple case of exploitation ? The helots of Messenia, *Money, Labour and Land* (Cartledge, P. et alii ed.), London and New York, 2002, p. 185-199.
5. Troxell, H. A.: The Peloponnesian Alexanders, *MN* 17, 1983, p. 41-94; Price, M. J.: *The Coinage in the Name of Alexander the Great and Philip Arrhidæus*, Londres, 1991, p. 163.

The second period of the Messenian monetary history corresponds to the second and the first centuries BC. The other cities of Messenia had been withdrawn from Messene's influence by the Achaian league and had become independent.

At that time, small Messenian cities (such as Korone and Thouria) issued coins of their own as well as Messene itself. Messene and Korone struck coins with Achaian and with autonomous types. The volume of the coinage struck by the minor cities remained small, but not the one from Messene, especially the hemidrachms (12 issues with 86 obverse dies)\* and some alexanders\* (1 obverse die) and tetradrachms\* of attic weight with Demeter and Zeus (3 obverse dies). The circulation of Messenian silver coinage is expanding to Asia minor (alexanders), southern Greece and Italy, at the time of the war against Antiochos III and of the Roman conquest. The bronze production is more significant than before : three denominations\* are regularly issued with many dies ( $\pm$  289 obverse dies for the biggest one).

I do agree with H. Troxell and M. J. Price who dated the Messenian alexanders tetradrachms of the war against Antiochos III (192/191-189/188)<sup>5</sup>. The other Messenian tetradrachms were probably issued during the preparation of the war against the Achaian league ca 183/182. The chronology of the Peloponnesian hemidrachms of *symmachic* weight is still in discussion<sup>6</sup>, and will certainly remain until the publication of some important hoards (as Olympia 1939, Poggio-Picenze 1954, Diakofto 1965 and Dyme 1986). Nevertheless, it is obvious that several Messenian silver issues were struck during the first century BC.

The third period starts with the victory of Octavian at Actium (31 BC). During that period, quite a lot of bronze issues struck during the second period were countermarked and put back in circulation. These countermarks look very much like those struck on Spartan coins during Eurycles government and there is a Messenian bronze issue\* whose types closely look like Spartan types (Herakles and his club) particularly those on Grunauer's group XXXI (very end of the first century BC). This suggests a close relationship between the two cities. Messene, whose relationship with the Princes was somewhat strained, could have been in one way or the other dependent from the Euryclids. Some Messenian bronze issues\* were struck at the beginning of the first century AD, for which the designs, size and metallic content are very close to the issues of the second period. Starting with the second century AD, begins a romanization of the types and alloys.

The third period is one of very limited monetary production in contrast with the second one, especially when Messene was a member of the Achaian league (191-146), during relatively peaceful years (in contrast with the third and the first centuries BC)<sup>7</sup>. The huge production of bronze coinage during the first part of the second century suggests a monetization of trade more complete than during the first period. The question is : what about the region during the Empire, when very few bronze coins were produced by Messene? Many bronze coins issued by other Peloponnesian mints (especially Corinth) circulated in Messenia during the Empire. Nevertheless, the end of the Hellenistic period probably was the Golden Age of ancient Messenia.

6. Grandjean, C. : Les comptes de Pompidas, *BCH* 119, 1995, p. 1-26 (symmachic standard); Warren, J.: The Achaian league silver coinage controversy resolved : a summary, *NC* 159, 1999, p. 99-109.

7. Grandjean, C.: Guerre et monnaie en Grèce ancienne : le cas du Koinon achaïen, *Entretiens de Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges Economie antique La guerre dans les économies antiques*, Saint-Bertrand (Andreau, J. et alii ed.), 2000, p. 315-336.

*Coins issued in the middle of the fourth century*

1. stater (aeginetan weight), Berlin 8694
2. hemidrachm (aeginetan weight), Paris Luynes 2282
3. obol (aeginetan weight), Oxford Oman (1947)
4. bronze coin (chalkous), Berlin Prokesch-Osten (1875)

*Coins issued during the second half of the third century*

5. bronze coin, Munich
6. bronze coin, Berlin Friedlaender (1861)

*Coins issued during the second and the first centuries (before 31 BC)*

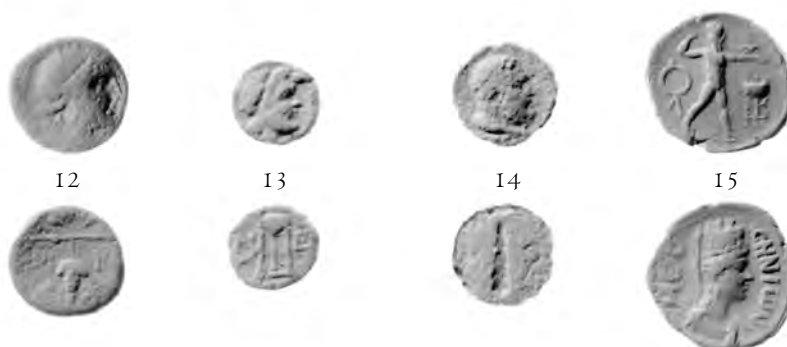
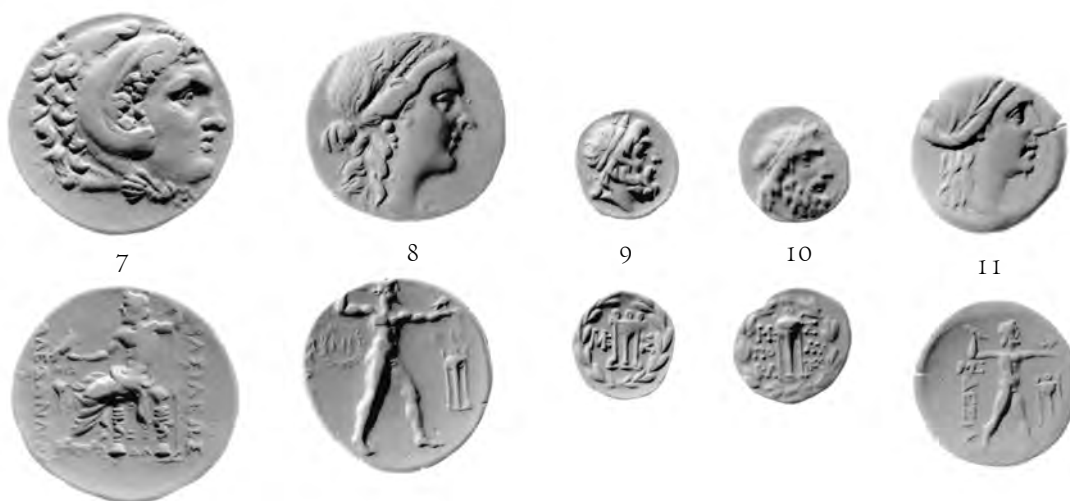
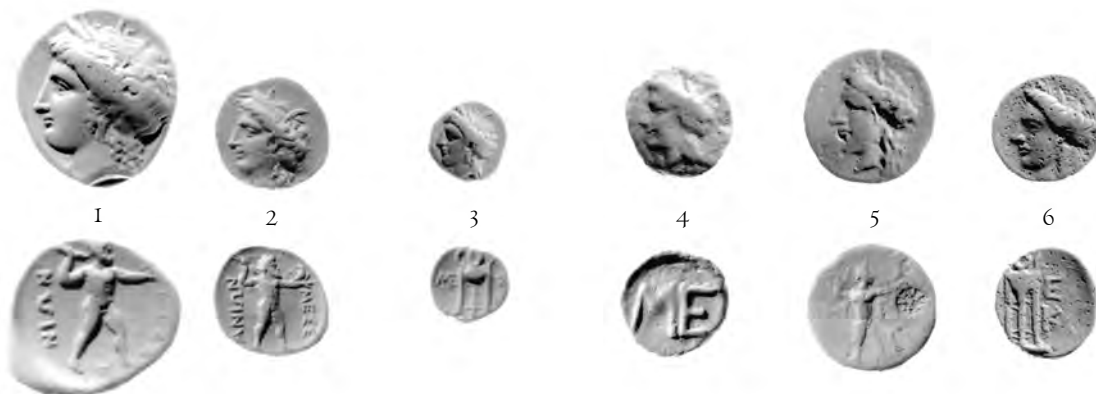
7. alexander, Paris, trésor de Baiyada 1949
8. tetradrachm (attic weight), ANS
9. hemidrachm (symmachic weight), Athènes 4220
10. hemidrachm (symmachic weight), Londres 1890.8.4.5 Chester
11. bronze coin (hemiobol?), Londres 1902.11.1.2 Grueber
12. bronze coin (trichalkous?), coll. BCD
13. bronze coin (chalkous), Paris Luynes 2284

*Coin issued during the end of the first century BC*

14. bronze coin, coll. BCD

*Coin issued during the first century AD*

15. bronze coin, Berlin Imhoof-Blumer (1900)



Photographs: C. GRANDJEAN, *Coinage and history of Messenia*  
Scale: 1:1