

The Early Classical Coinage of Siphnos; some thoughts on the influence of Athens

There has been a remarkable increase over the last three decades in our knowledge about Cycladic Siphnos in antiquity¹. Much of this research has focused on the mining of silver and gold, and on the uses made of this mineral wealth². Herodotus (III. 57-8) tells us that their good fortune enabled the Siphnians to achieve fame through the dedication of a marble treasury in the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi (constructed shortly before 525 BC)- in which the island's annual tithe to the god would be housed. But the island's citizens and the institutions of their community have remained shadowy at best. Some of the most important information that we do possess has come not from Siphnos, but from Attica. A recently discovered Athenian decree from the archonship of Alkaios (422/1 BC) honours Polypeithes of Siphnos³. Angelos Matthaïos, who published the decree, noted that Polypeithes belongs to an island family long-known through Laurion mining leases held by Kallaischros and Stesileides. The men of this Siphnian family also served as trierarchs for the Athenian state. Their activities in Athens will be the subject of a separate publication in which I plan to explore the contribution of these men to the Athenian mining industry.

Siphnos was one of the first Greek communities to mint coins⁴. In around 540 BC, only a few years after the earliest issues of Athens and Corinth, Siphnos began striking didrachm staters of Æginetan weight (12.2g) which were closely modelled in style on contemporary Æginetan issues (fig. 1). On the obverse we see an eagle in flight. On the reverse, an incuse square divided into six segments by spidery arms that recalls the early linked series of Ægina⁵. There is almost no stylistic development evident in this first Siphnian series. It seems to have been concluded before the introduction of an incuse device with thicker ridges and some filled segments, which the Æginetans had begun to employ ca. 530 BC. It is probable that this first phase of coining was brought to an end by the attack of the Samian pirates ca. 525 BC.

The Siphnian polis did not recommence minting till shortly after 480 BC. These were their first issues in nearly half a century. The new staters (fig. 2) and tetrobols (or drachms) bear the head of Apollo on the obverse and the traditional eagle on the reverse. It would be no exaggeration to claim that the dies are among the most accomplished of this period, and are quite exceptional within the context of Cycladic coinage. The more archaic looking (and earlier) of the Siphnian Apollo heads (fig. 2) are remarkably similar to those of Athena in Group IIA of Starr's classification of post 480 Athenian coinage, while the more distinctly early classical examples might be compared to dies in IIB (fig. 3) and IIC⁶. A strongly Athenian flavour is even more evident in the reverse dies. The design of the eagle is traditional –with the spread wings of its archaic predecessors. But two new aspects claim our attention. Firstly, the deployment of the ethnic around the eagle and the addition of a symbol in the 'free' corner. If one compares the design with that of the Athenian decadrachms (Starr Group IIC) evident similarities become apparent (fig. 4). The run of the three letters begins in the top right corner and continues down in clockwise direction, so that the final two letters lie beneath the wings. A sprig of olive leaves occupies the top left corner of the Athenian coins while a leaf or seed fills the matching space of the Siphnian incuse. Secondly, the plan and engraving of the bird's feathers are also remarkable. The open wings of the owl have an initial 'cap' of stippled feathers, followed by a first band of short feathers with a curved lower boundary, and then a final row which sharply decreases from long outer feathers to the shortest

1. This was highlighted by a conference held on the island in 1998: *Proceedings of the 1st International Sifnean Symposium, Sifnos 25-28 June 1998* (Athens 2000) Vol. 1 (Antiquity).

2. Wagner, G. A. and Weisgerber, G. (ed.s): *Silber, Gold und Blei auf Siphnos, Abschnitt, Beiheft 3* (Bocchum 1985).

3. Matthaïos, A., in *Proceedings of the 1st International Sifnean Symposium* (op. cit. 1) 239-246.

4. This paper draws upon research to be presented in my forthcoming book on the archaic and classical coinages of the Cyclades.

5. Holloway, R.: An archaic hoard from Crete and the early Æginetan coinage, *ANSMN* 1971, 1-21.

6. C. G. Starr, *Athenian Coinage 480-449 B.C.* (Oxford 1970) 20-42.

of points near the body. The feathers of the body of the bird itself are marked with stippling. This same design is repeated in the Siphnian eagle.

I believe that these remarkable Siphnian dies were engraved by Athenian artists. It could be suggested that they are the work of a local engraver who simply imitated the Athenian designs. This presumes that the small community of this island had accomplished die engravers who were able to produce work of the highest standard. It also depends on the assumption that they could so thoroughly absorb the elements of the Athenian style (use of stippling, organisation of the feathers) that even minor details seem Athenian (note the outward curve of the longest feathers at the extremities of each wing). I believe that a more efficient and more likely explanation is that Siphnos was able to obtain the services of Athenian craftsmen for what appears to be only a fairly limited number of dies (this was not a large coinage).

The discussion might usefully be continued with a brief look at some rare Siphnian fractions. There are three obols (fig. 5) and one hemiobol which show important modifications to the types⁷. The obverse of these tiny coins appears to show the head of woman wearing earrings and with long hair rolled up at the back in *krobylos* fashion; this may well be Artemis. On the reverse the flying eagle is replaced by a standing eagle. The ethnic is now deployed on the right side of the obols, with a column of three letters in the same fashion as the ethnic on Athenian tetradrachms and fractions. The bird of both the Athenian and Siphnian coins is turned to the right (but to the left on the hemiobol). Their legs and talons are depicted in the same manner –turned to opposing sides. Given the small scale of these island coins it is difficult to discuss details of style. Nonetheless, it seems clear that this modification of the traditional reverse type has resulted in a design and figure which again echoes the reverse types of Athenian coins.

Athenian coinage had a profound impact in the Near East and Egypt where it was directly copied or came to exert a strong influence on the coinages of communities which

had previously little interest in local minting⁸. But this impact did not occur until the second half of the 5th century, after Athenian coins had flooded the markets and achieved fame for the purity of its silver. Athenian influence can also be seen at this time in coinages produced in the southern parts of Asia Minor, though mostly by non-Greek communities (such as the Lycians). On the Greek mainland and within the Aegean it rarely came to have an influence on the design of coinages –even at the height of the Athenian Empire.

It needs to be stressed that in the years shortly after 480 BC Athenian coinage was neither dominant nor influential in the eastern Mediterranean. It was never influential in the Cyclades where the local traditions were largely formed through contact with Aeginetan coinage. It is interesting to note that the few 5th century hoards from this region are dominated by local or Aeginetan coins. Why then did the Siphnians adopt types that were clearly indebted to Athenian coins, even, as I have suggested, employing Athenian die engravers?

We need to begin by recognising that shared design and style features in a coinage do not inevitably demonstrate a political or social indebtedness to the state in which these features originated. There can be no thought of Athenian influence, for example, in the communities in the Levant that copied Athenian coins. Within a region in which the Athenians were prominent, and the Cyclades were immediate neighbours of Athens, it might be thought to suggest some form of alliance. But this seems heavy-handed and simplistic –recalling earlier attempts by scholars to see coinage as essentially a political expression. The Athenians were manoeuvring to establish leadership in the Aegean through the apparatus of the Delian League but there seems no reason for a Cycladic island to mark this in its coinage.

Is it merely coincidence that when the only two naturally silver-rich states to the south of Thrace and Macedonia undertake minting after 480 BC their coinages show strong points of similarity? Future research must surely look to this common interest in the exploitation of mineral wealth.

7. Obols: Paris FG 391 (0.84g); Karlsruhe L 5685/1+2 (0.85g), Cambridge (0.85g); hemiobol: Karlsruhe L 5686/1+2 (0.40g).

8. Buttrey, T. V.: Pharaonic Imitations of Athenian Tetradrachms, *Proceedings of the 9th International Congress of Numismatics Berne 1979* (Louvain-la-Neuve 1982) 137-140.



Illustrations

- Figure 1* Siphnos, stater (London).
Figure 2 Siphnos, stater (London).
Figure 3 Athens, stater (New York; Starr cat. No. 33).
Figure 4 Athens, decadrachm (Berlin; Starr cat. No. 52).
Figure 5 Siphnos, obol (Karlsruhe). Enlarged.