

## The Athenian Coinage Decree: Inscriptions, Coins and Athenian Politics

The fifth century Athenian decree on coins, weights and standards, the so-called Coinage Decree, can be classified with certainty among the most controversial texts in the history of Greek epigraphy. The decree announces the decision of the city of Athens to impose its own silver coins, the Athenian tetradrachms, on its allied city-states, to the exclusion of any other silver coinage. There has been an ongoing debate concerning the chronology, content and ideological implications of the decree ever since the discovery of the first fragments at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The basic issues have not yet been resolved and the interest around the decree continues, particularly with the publication of a newly rediscovered fragment in the year 2002<sup>1</sup>. The focus of this paper is an interpretation of the decree in the context of the Athenian economy as a whole. Our interpretation, which is corroborated by the evidence from the newly published fragment, will shed new light on the decree, and shift the focus of attention from strictly chronological questions to the underlying policy of the decree and its implications for the study of Athenian economic history<sup>2</sup>.

The Coinage Decree consists of eight fragments discovered at various sites of classical city-states that were part of the fifth century Athenian *arche*<sup>3</sup>. Two fragments from Aphytis are located at the Thessaloniki Museum. Two fragments from Syme, one from Siphnos, one from Smyrna, and one from Odessa are now lost. Finally, one fragment from Kos is purportedly stored at the Kos museum but currently cannot be located<sup>4</sup>. The loss of these fragments constitutes a large problem, because they can only be studied from publication<sup>5</sup>. There is yet another fragment from Hamaxitos which Harold Mattingly (1993) first identified as belonging to the decree. Hatzopoulos accepts this fragment as part of the decree, though this is not the *communis opinio*<sup>6</sup>. A combination of all the fragments gives us a composite text of 57 lines.

The debate about the date of the decree revolves around the adoption of a high or low chronology for it. Initially a low chronology was proposed by Ulrich Wilamowitz-Moellendorf<sup>7</sup>. His argument stemmed from a single literary reference, namely a line in Aristophanes' *Birds*, presented in the year 414 B.C., in which the preserved ending *-μασι(ν)* has been restored either as *νομίσμασι(ν)* or *ληφίσμασι(ν)*<sup>8</sup>. However,

1. Hatzopoulos, M.: *Νέο απόσπλιμα από την 'Αφυτι του Αττικού Ληφίσματος περί νομίσματος σταθμών και μέτρων*, forthcoming in *Horos*.
2. We wish to express our gratitude to Dr. Miltiades Hatzopoulos of the Kera Research Center for Greek and Roman Antiquity in Athens. He kindly provided us with a draft of his forthcoming article in the journal *Horos* on the newly rediscovered Aphytis fragment and willingly answered our questions on the fragment, which he first presented at the XII International Congress of Greek and Latin Epigraphy in Barcelona in 2002. We are also indebted to Professors Alan L. Boegehold, Charles W. Fornara, R. Ross Holloway, Ronald S. Stroud, and Stephen V. Tracy for reading this paper and providing invaluable advice. Certainly, the views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the scholars mentioned above.
3. Although the fragments from Odessa and Smyrna most likely did not originate in these places. A possible provenience for the Odessa fragment is Olbia; the provenience of the Smyrna fragment is also questionable, since Smyrna does not seem to have been part of the *arche*.
4. Thomas Figueira (1998) 320-322 discusses the loss of the two Syme fragments, the Smyrna fragment and the Odessa fragment. Professor Kent Rigsby tried to locate the Kos fragment in the summer of 2003 but was unable to do so (personal communication). Dr. Angelos Matthaïou was unable to locate the Siphnos fragment in his recent search of the Siphnos Archaeological Museum (personal communication by Dr. Andrew Meadows). The two fragments from Aphytis are located in the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki (personal inspection of the first fragment by the authors and for the second, personal communication, Dr. Miltiades Hatzopoulos).
5. A workshop at Oxford in Spring 2004, organized by Dr. Andrew Meadows, will attempt a joint reading of all fragments, toward a publication of a composite text.
6. Figueira (1998) does not accept it.
7. Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, U.: *Aus Kydathen*, Philol. Untersuchungen 1, Berlin, 1880, p. 30, n. 56.
8. "The people of Cloudcuckooland shall use the same measures, weights and coinage as the Olophyxians" (verses 1040-41). This is the only literary source which may refer to the decree; notably it is not mentioned by Thucydides. On Thucydides and the decree, see Kallet (2001, 226).

with the discovery of the Kos fragment in which a three bar sigma appears, a high chronology was proposed which would place the decree in the 440's<sup>9</sup>. The argument was based on the fact that from the years 447/6 on the three bar sigma no longer appears in the Athenian tribute lists. The traditional view held, therefore, that all inscriptions with this letter form must be dated before this time. This is no longer an undisputed dating criterion, and current scholars are divided as to the most likely date for the decree. The date is extremely important because it has practical and historical implications. If the decree dates to the 440's, then it was issued at the height of Athenian imperial power under Perikles. If however, the decree is from the 420's, then it would be connected with Kleon's demagogy and his attempt to control subject states of Athens. Some scholars would place the decree even later, c. 415, on the eve of the beginning of the collapse of the Athenian empire, at a time when such a decree would likely have been ineffective<sup>10</sup>.

The newly rediscovered Aphytis fragment, which is not widely known, guides our interpretation of the decree to a certain extent. The first fragment from Aphytis was published in 1935 by E.S.G. Robinson and preserves the most lines of all the other surviving fragments. The second Aphytis fragment was originally found in 1969 by a resident of Athitos, modern Aphytis, who turned it over to the Thessaloniki museum. This fragment was not studied or published at the time, and became lost to scholarship. It was rediscovered in the storeroom of the museum a year ago. The fragment continues the text of the first Aphytis fragment with a single line missing between the two<sup>11</sup>. These two fragments give us a text of 38 of the 57 lines of the decree, thus making a substantial part of the original decree available for further study in a new copy. The first fragment has been discussed extensively. The second is only partially preserved, but a significant part of each line is extant<sup>12</sup>. Additionally, this fragment preserves the end of the decree which refers to the punishment of those who fail to comply with the mandates of the decree. Hatzopoulos suggests therefore that the Smyrna fragment, which concludes with an additional 19 lines not found in any other fragment, could be a later version of the decree<sup>13</sup>. Finally, the second Aphytis fragment resolves the ambiguity regarding the officials who are to oversee the enforcement of the decree. They were Athenian archons placed in allied city-states, rather than local magistrates<sup>14</sup>. This is crucial for our interpretation of the decree.

Along with the epigraphic evidence, we need to consider the numismatic evidence. Although many arguments have been presented regarding the interruption of minting in allied cities, in fact there is no obvious break in the coinages overall<sup>15</sup>. The evidence from coins is insufficient to establish firmly when, where, or whether the decree was ever implemented. Some mints show cessation of coining c.450 or before, others show non-stop activity. W.K. Pritchett was the first to suggest an examination of the Athenian coinage, to see if there was an indication of increased minting activity<sup>16</sup>. However, the dating of particular issues of Athenian coinage is a highly debated topic, thus no conclusions can be made along these lines. Attempts have been made to date the decree based on extant coins, and the decree has been used to date these same coins. These arguments are inherently circular, and thus ineffective. The only established fact is that all minting of allied silver coinage did not stop. If the decree had been issued in the middle of the fifth century, the degree of Athenian control of the empire was such that it should have been effective. Therefore, the numismatic evidence points to a low chronology. In addition, the evidence from coins must be examined as part of an Athenian economic policy as a whole, rather than as an indication of the implementation of one decree or another.

In recent years, interest has shifted from chronological issues specific to the decree toward the existence of a state-controlled monetary policy in fifth century Athens<sup>17</sup>. If there was such a policy, there are certain implications for future research and understanding of

9. Proponents for the high chronology include: Eddy (1973), Meiggs and Lewis (1988), Meritt, Wade-Gery and McGregor (1949), Robinson (1949), and Segre (1938).

10. Proponents of the 420's dating: Erxleben (1969), Mattingly (1970), Pritchett (1963, 1965), and Vickers (1996). Kallet (2001) considers the decree along with the *eikoste* tax in the last quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Charles Fornara argues for the 415 date.

11. Hatzopoulos, M.: *Νέο απόσπλιμα από την Άφυτι του Αττικού Ύψιφίσματος περί νομισματός σταθμών και μέτρων*, forthcoming in Horos.

12. For a full text of the rediscovered fragment, see Hatzopoulos, forthcoming.

13. These 19 lines refer to the bouleutic oath and the former decree of Klearchos. (Kallet, 2001, 214)

14. The hypothesis that the archons in the allied city-states were Athenians, rather than local magistrates, had been put forth in the past (Erxleben, 1969; Figueira, 1998; Kallet 2001).

15. Jenkins, K. G.: A note on Corinthian coins in the West, *Centennial Publication of the American Numismatic Society*, H. Ingholt (ed.), 1958, p. 367-379.

16. Pritchett (1965)

17. As elucidated particularly by Figueira (1998) and Edward Cohen (1992).

the decree. The existence of an established monetary policy would make the decree part of a general framework rather than the mere political or ideological statement of a specific leader at a single period in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, the existence of such a policy does not necessarily imply state control over all financial transactions. It seems doubtful that the authors of the measure even expected to exercise such control. Certainly it was no secret that transactions were being carried out in other kinds of money over which the state had no control whatsoever. We are reminded here of the two main categories of property in Athens: *apbanes* and *phanera* –that is, obvious and hidden– the obvious money being the only money which the decree had any hopes of controlling. People were using other media for their financial transactions besides coins, such as uncoined metal, Ionian electrum, and Persian gold. Paragraph 11 in Lysias' *Against Eratosthenes* is evidence of this practice:

I went into my bedroom and opened the money-chest. Peison noticed it and came in; on seeing its contents he called two of his underlings and bade them take what was in the chest. [11] Since he now had, instead of the agreed amount, gentlemen, three talents of silver, four hundred cyzicenes, a hundred darics and four silver cups, I begged him to give me money for my journey; but he declared that I should be glad enough to save my skin.

Even today we can see this phenomenon in modern Greece. British Sovereigns acquired and hoarded during from the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on were still being used in private financial transactions in Greece until recently. In modern times, however, we are more likely to find these pieces sewn into the hems of skirts rather than buried in the ground. There are many personal tales of elderly grandmothers producing these coins as if out of nowhere when a large purchase such as an apartment or college tuition is required. Thus it is clear that economies do not consist solely of currency issued by the existing government.

If we consider the Coinage Decree in the context of the overall economy of the time, then we can see that it must have been directed to only one part of this economy. This part, of course, was the marketplace. The purpose of the decree was to ensure the circulation of Athenian tetradrachms by requiring their use in public transactions, thus extending control over the

marketplace. This is not a new idea. In fact, as suggested by R. Ross Holloway (2000), the late 6<sup>th</sup> century Taranto hoard of 1911 (IGCH 1874) could be an example of just such control<sup>18</sup>. The hoard included various groups of foreign coins, including coins of Aegina, Athens, Corinth, Sicily, Northern Greece and the Cyclades, as well as uncoined cut-silver bullion<sup>19</sup>. These groups of non-Italian Greek coins must have reached Tarentum in trading transactions and it is Holloway's hypothesis that they were barred from circulation and came to be deposited in a sanctuary hoard which also included a parcel made up of the incuse coinage of Magna Graecia which we must assume was the recognized legal tender of the time at Tarentum. Thus only Tarentine coins and coins of the other South Italian Greek colonies constituting a monetary union were permitted to circulate freely on the market place of the city<sup>20</sup>.

A fourth century Athenian law also deals with the circulation of Athenian coin and imitations of the same in Athens. The law was issued in Athens in the year 375/4 regulating the circulation of Athenian silver tetradrachms<sup>21</sup>. The crucial difference between the 5<sup>th</sup> century decree and the 4<sup>th</sup> century law is that the law does not exclude the use of other coinage. It is only concerned with the circulation of money coming into Athens, because of the existence of many counterfeit (i.e. not of sufficient silver content) coins at the time. It is clear, therefore, that the purpose of this law was to deal with a practical problem within Athens itself. The 5<sup>th</sup> century coinage decree, on the other hand, is concerned with the imposition of Athenian coinage on the allied cities, even for internal circulation within the cities themselves. Undoubtedly, if it was implemented it would bolster the Athenian economy by the exclusion of the use of other currencies, as well as the added income from the fee imposed on money-changing transactions. Thus there is an undeniable practical aspect to the decree along with its political motivation. The harsh tone of the decree reveals the Athenian state attempting to prolong its control over the allied city-states –for example, the emphasis on

18. Holloway, R.R.: Remarks on the Taranto Hoard, *RBN*, 146, 2000, p. 1-8.

19. This is rather unusual compared to other hoards from Greek cities, which just have the kind of money that circulated normally in the area where they were deposited.

20. Two other hoards, the Gela Hoard and the Selinus Hoard, both seem to reflect a similar blocking of foreign coins.

21. Stroud (1974a)

strict penalties for those who fail to comply with the provisions of the decree. Furthermore, the fact that Athenian archons were in charge in the allied city-states is a definite sign of this attempt to extend control over them. The decree is not a product of secure Athenian imperialism but rather an indication of the uncertain political and financial circumstances of the Athenian state. Moreover, the epigraphic, literary, numismatic and historical evidence available to us reveals that the desperate measures of the decree were never really implemented<sup>22</sup>.

In conclusion, the existence of an Athenian monetary policy in the 5<sup>th</sup> century is clear. The Coinage Decree

was not therefore an isolated economic and political statement. It was an attempt to control the marketplace, a practice already seen in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century as evidenced by the Taranto hoard of 1911. The existence of the 4<sup>th</sup> century law confirms the continuation of such a policy. Moreover, the 5<sup>th</sup> century decree is best interpreted as an attempt by the Athenian state to reassert control over its allies at a time when that control was weakening. The confirmation given by the second Aphytis fragment that Athenian archons were placed in the cities to enforce the decree indeed suggests that this was a last ditch attempt to establish control over the city states under the guise of a common economic policy.

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22. It is important to remember that the provision of the decree did not only refer to coins but weights and standards as well. The standardization of weights and measures would facilitate transactions between the Athenian state and its allies. A characteristic example of this is provided by the Grain-Tax Law of 374/3 B.C. (Stroud, 1998) The Athenian state was receiving tax in kind from the allies; therefore the imposition of common standards would prevent the loss of revenues from this policy. Also, the ideological implications of the standardization of weights and measures are not negligible, cf. the wide circulation of standardized lead weights in the Aegean at the prime of the Minoan thalassocracy. (Petrucci, 1979)

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