

# The Beautiful Decadrachms of Syracuse

## by Peter E. Lewis



Background: *The bridge to Ortygia*. (Source: Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Giovanni Dall'orto). Overlay pic: *Decadrachm by Kimon*. (Triton XVI, January 2013, lot 230).

THE decadrachms of Syracuse are considered to be the most beautiful coins from the Classical period of ancient Greece. To fully appreciate these wonderful coins some historical information is necessary. According to the Greek historian, Thucydides, Syracuse was founded by Greeks from Corinth in 733 BC. Their leader was Archias and they settled on the island of Ortygia, which is a small island just off the south-east coast of Sicily (Figure 1 – map of Sicily). Being on an island it was easily defensible and having a harbour to the north and south it became a hub of mercantile trade (Figure 2 – map of Syracuse). Moreover there were fertile plains on the adjacent mainland and a number of the citizens became wealthy land-owners. It was a boom town, and by 500 BC its territory extended over the whole of south-east Sicily. Further expansion was blocked by Gela, a city founded by Greeks from Crete and Rhodes in 688 BC. They in turn founded the city of Akragas further to the west early in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

Syracuse was ruled by an oligarchy, a small group of land-owners, but when a democratic revolution occurred they were



Figure 1 – Map of Sicily in 400 BC.

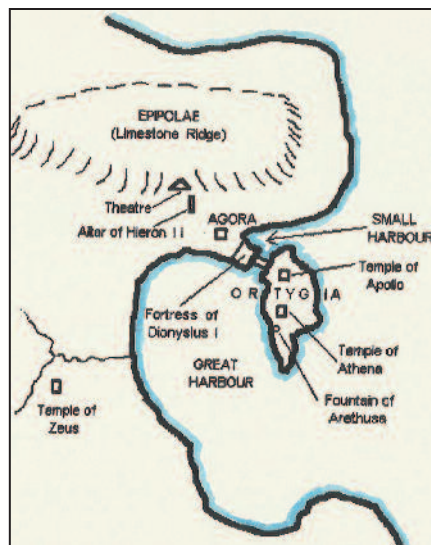


Figure 2 – Map of ancient Syracuse. (Source: *The Pocket Guide to Saint Paul: Coins encountered by the Apostle on his travels* by Peter Lewis and Ron Bolden. Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 2002. Paul visited Syracuse in 60 AD.)

expelled. They appealed to Gelon, the dictator who ruled Gela, and in 485 BC he gained control of Syracuse and made it his capital, while Gela was ruled by his brother, Hieron. Akragas was ruled by a dictator called Theron. Gelon cemented an alliance with Akragas by marrying Theron's daughter, Demarete. When Theron extended the territory of Akragas across Sicily to Himera, the ruler of Himera appealed to the Carthaginians for help. The Carthaginian army allegedly numbered 300,000, but in 480 BC it was defeated by Gelon with an army of only 55,000. Demarete intervened in the peace negotiations on

behalf of the Carthaginians and according to Diodorus Siculus, a historian of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, they rewarded her with the gift of a gold crown.

Diodorus said that when Demarete received the crown a coin was struck and called a Demareteion after her. Because no gold coins of Syracuse are known from



Figure 3 – The Demareteion. It is 34 mm in vertical diameter. Numismatica Ars Classica NAC AG, Auction 12 (8<sup>th</sup> October 1998), lot 433. [www.arsclassicacoins.com](http://www.arsclassicacoins.com) It sold for 440,000 Swiss Francs (Aus\$434,000 at current rates).



Figure 4 – Tetradrachm in the Demareteion series. It is identical to the decadrachm except that it is only 26 mms in diam. (Triton XVI, January 2013, lot 224. It sold for Aus\$124,000.)

this period it was assumed that Diodorus omitted to say that the gold was spent to make the large silver decadrachms that were called Demareteia. These coins have a chariot drawn by four slowly moving horses on the obverse, and a woman's head surrounded by four dolphins on the reverse (Figure 3). The woman is portrayed in an archaic style with an eye shown frontally, i.e. not in profile, and with the slight smile that is known as the archaic smile. In the exergue there is a lion, which was thought to represent Africa and the Carthaginians. Modern scholars, however, consider that these coins were struck during the period 470 – 465 BC because some tetradrachms in the same series (Figure 4) have been found in contexts which suggest they were minted at that time, not in 480 BC.

Oliver Hoover in his book *Handbook of Coins of Sicily* (CNG, Lancaster, 2012) says that apparently these decadrachms were introduced to meet the expenses incurred during the overthrow of the dictators in 466. Nathaniel Fick [www.writer2001.com/fick.htm](http://www.writer2001.com/fick.htm) has made a particular study of the Demareteion decadrachms and he argues that they were struck during the period 475 to 465, perhaps to commemorate the expulsion of the dictators or just to express the city's pride in its greatness.

When Gelon died in 478 BC he was succeeded by Hieron, who won a decisive naval battle against the Etruscans just north of

Naples in 474 BC. This secured the dominance of Syracuse in the region. A golden age ensued and the arts flourished in the prosperous city. The famous poet, Pindar, visited Syracuse, as did the dramatist, Aeschylus. After Hieron's death in 467 BC the autocratic government was replaced by a democratic one, but Syracusan hegemony was strengthened by a victory over the forces of Akragas in 445 BC.

A new chapter in the history of Syracuse began during the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. Fear of Syracuse siding with Sparta, as well as greed and imperialist aspirations, led the Athenians to launch a massive invasion of Syracuse in 415 BC. The whole story is told by Thucydides in *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (English translation by Rex Warner, Penguin, 1954). The Athenians were completely defeated. Retreating southward in 413 BC they were overtaken at the Assinarus River, 18 miles south of Syracuse. Many were killed and large numbers captured. Subsequently the Athenian soldiers were imprisoned in the quarries near Syracuse and treated harshly. The huge amount of money that they brought with them was seized, and it might have been used to produce the decadrachms for which Syracuse became famous. It is usually thought that these victory coins were minted in the decade following the war, but in his book Oliver Hoover has assigned them to the early years of the long auto-



Figure 6 – Decadrachm by Euainetos. 34 mms diameter. His signature EYA[IN]E is at the lower edge but only the tops of the letters are on the flan. (Triton XVI, January 2013, lot 232. It sold for Aus\$45,000.)

cratic rule of Dionysius I (405 – 367 BC). He says they were evidently used by Dionysius to pay his mercenary armies.

We know who made the dies for these numismatic masterpieces because the engravers sometimes signed their work. The two die-engravers were Kimon and Euainetos. It was unusual for coins to be signed but it happened occasionally at this time, presumably because the artists were so proud of their work. Kimon inserts his name discretely on the reverse of the coin, either on the woman's headband or on one of the dolphins (Figure 5). Euainetos puts his name at the lower edge of the reverse (Figure 6). For reasons of style it is thought that Kimon made his dies first and that they inspired Euainetos in his work. Hoover considers that the decadrachms of Kimon were produced from 405 to 400 BC, and those of Euainetos from 400 to 390 BC.

These decadrachms all have a chariot pulled by four galloping horses on the obverse with the goddess Victory flying above. She holds a wreath with which to crown the winning charioteer. Below the ground level there is a set of armour: a cuirass between two greaves with a plumed helmet on the right and a shield lying flat on the left. Sometimes the word ΑΘΛΑ (prizes) appears below the armour. This word could mean the prizes for winning a race or the trophies of war. In either case the armour could have been taken from the captive or dead Athenians. Sir Arthur Evans, the famous archaeologist who excavated Knossos in Crete, suggested that the coins themselves were the prizes and



Figure 5 – Decadrachm by Kimon. 33 mms diameter. The letters KI are on the headband. Behind her hair is the word ΣΥΡΑΚΟΣΙΩΝ (of the people of Syracuse). Rusty obverse die. (Triton XVI, January 2013, lot 230. It sold for Aus\$37,000.)



Figure 7 – Decadrachm by Euainetos with a shell behind the neck of Arethusa. 34 mms diameter. This beautiful coin is a fake. (Author's collection)

that they were awarded at the games held to commemorate the victory. They were called the Assinarian Games after the Assinarus River. It may be that the coins had nothing to do with the Athenian War and were just part of the large sum of money that Dionysius needed to pay the mercenaries to maintain his autocratic regime and to campaign in Italy.

Although Dionysius was a cruel despot he was interested in games and the arts.



Figure 8 – Decadrachm by Euainetos with a triangle under the chin of Arethusa. 34 mms diameter. (Triton XVI, January 2013, lot 233. It sold for Aus\$30,500.)

He sent contingents to the Olympic Games and wrote a tragedy that won a competition in Athens in 367 BC. It is said that when he heard of his win he was so excited and celebrated his victory with such enthusiasm that he became ill and died. His literary work, however, was generally adversely criticized. When the poet Philoxenus said how bad his poetry was, he was arrested and sent to the quarries. At the request of his friends he was released some days later and brought to the palace to listen to Dionysius reading one of his poems. The audience applauded enthusiastically, but when Philoxenus was asked for his opinion he simply said, "Take me back to the quarries."

On Kimon's coin the horses are moving in unison in a controlled way, although they are made to look more natural by having the second horse turning his head. On Euainetos' coin the horses are rearing up in an excited way and realism is added by having a small gap between the pairs of horses. On the reverse the differences are more obvious. Kimon's lady looks rather prim and proper, with the back of her hair neatly held in a net. Euainetos shows a



Figure 9 – Decadrachm by Euainetos with a pellet under the chin of Arethusa. 34 mms diameter. (Collection of St John's Cathedral, Brisbane. Image used with permission.)

wild personality with a wreath of reeds worn in hair that curls everywhere. Both women have four dolphins leaping around them indicating that they are surrounded by or in the sea. On some of his coins Euainetos puts a shell behind the woman's neck (Figure 7), or under her chin he puts a triangle (Figure 8) or a pellet (Figure 9). But who is this woman?

Although she is not named on the coins she is generally considered to be Arethusa, a nymph of Elis in Greece and a follower of the virgin goddess, Artemis. Ancient writers give different versions of the story of how the river god, Alpheius (Figure 10) fell in love with her when she bathed in his water. She fled from his sexual advances (Figure 11) and was transformed by Artemis into a spring on Ortygia. He pursued



Figure 10 – The Alpheius River in Greece. This is the place where the nymph jumped out of the water. (Photo by gusia at summitpost.org. Image used with permission)



Figure 11 – Engraving by Bernard Picart (1673 – 1733). Colour has been added. Alpheus is pursuing Arethusa who is being enveloped in a cloud by the goddess Artemis before being transformed into a fountain. The river flowed down passed Olympia on the plain. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 12 – The fountain of Arethusa on Ortygia. Papyrus reeds grow in the centre. The nymph has reeds in her hair on the coin. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 13 – Map showing the water of the Alpheus River passing through the sea to reach Ortygia.

her by flowing under the sea to be united with her in the fountain, which still exists today (Figure 12). One can read Ovid's version of the story in Book V, Sections 572-641, of his poem *Metamorphoses*, written early in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. It begins with the goddess Ceres asking Arethusa, "Why are you now a sacred fountain?"

*The waters fall silent while their goddess lifts her head from the deep pool, and wringing the water from her sea-green tresses, she tells of the former love of that river of Elis.*

This sentence is from the translation by Anthony S. Kline. You can read the whole story on the Internet. Just type 'Ovid *Metamorphoses* translation' into the search engine.

Another version comes from Pausanias, a travel writer of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. You can also read his account on the Internet. It is in Book V (5.7.2) of his *Guide to Greece*. Pausanias says that he cannot disbelieve that the Alpheus River passes through the sea to merge with the spring on Ortygia (Figure 13). The fact that in places the river did flow underground might have provided evidence for the story, but the reason Pausanias gives is that before Archias set out on his expedition he went to Delphi to seek the guidance of Apollo, and the god uttered this oracle:

*An isle, Ortygia, lies on the misty ocean over against Sicily, where the mouth of Alpheius bubbles, mingling with the springs of broad Arethusa.*

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