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# Copper Owls

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All true Athenian "owl" tetradrachms are pure silver and weigh close to 17.2 grams. One exception stands out: the emergency coinage of 404 BC.

The Peloponnesian War of 431 – 404 BC between Athens and Sparta drained Athens of her classical glory. Early in the war, plague broke out and took one-fourth of her people. Despite some Athenian victories, by 413, the Spartans were able to establish a fort at Decelea, in sight of Athens. Thus, Athens lost control of her famous silver mines at Laurion. The city resorted to several emergency measures. She tapped a huge inventory of silver dedications from the Parthenon temple in 409. In 406, gold adornments from the statues of Victory were converted to coin. Finally, about 404 BC, Athens was forced to issue copper owls.

The exact nature of these emergency coins is not well understood today. Most dealers and collectors commonly call any plated silver (fouree) owl of classical style an "emergency issue." The matter is more complex than this.

The "owl" was and is perhaps the most common and famous ancient coin. Hoard evidence tells us that copies of these coins of good silver and good weight and even of good style came from many places outside of Athens. This was not "counterfeiting" as we know it, but merely turning bullion into a commonly accepted form. Even the Athenians could not tell which coins were made at home, and which were imported from Egypt. It might not have mattered.

What did matter is that the coins be good silver. Plated fakes go back to the earliest days of coinage. In the Histories Herodotus says that he doubts the story that Polycrates of Samos fooled his Spartan mercenaries by paying them in coins made of gold-covered lead.

A decree of the Athenian assembly from 375 BC sets the rules for having an official "Coin Approver" in the marketplace. In case of a dispute between a merchant and a buyer, where the value is more than ten drachmas, this official was to test the coins. If they were false, he was to cut them, confiscate them, and dedicate them to the temple of the goddess. If they were good Athenian silver coins, the merchant was to accept them. In all other cases (not plated, but not Athenian) the tester was to return them to the buyer. This decree says nothing about genuine original Athenian silver plated fakes.

The comedies of Aristophanes shed some light and leave much unexplained. In *The Frogs* and in *The Women's Council*, there are allusions to changes in the coinage. In no case does the poet use any language that could be construed to mean that the emergency issues were silver-plated. He calls them "coppers."

The best evidence for the genuineness of these silver-plated emergency coins comes from a single hoard of "thousands" found at the Piraeus, the harbor of Athens. According to numismatists, these silver-plated coins are die matches for the emergency gold coins issued a few years previous. According to numismatists, the size of the hoard argues for its being an official issue and not a forger's stock. And yet, problems remain.

The Piraeus was about five miles from urban Athens, an hour and a half by foot. Being a port, it was a neighborhood thick with non-Athenian Greeks and other foreigners. Even the Athenian citizens themselves would be called "left wingers" in our terms: poor democrats. These were men who could not afford the armor of a foot soldier and who hired themselves out to the navy as rowers.

When the Spartans defeated the city, they created an oligarchy of thirty, who appointed eleven judges at Athens and ten more at the Piraeus. These men used the power of the state to execute their political enemies. They ran men up on phony charges in order to confiscate their wealth. The thirty granted citizenship to only 3000 and the rest fled for their lives to the Piraeus. Democratic forces then rallied and overthrew the "Thirty Tyrants." All of this played out between September 404 and December 403, about 15 months. It was during this time that the allegedly "official" issue of silver-plated Athenian owls was created and buried. It is as if a shipment of questionable \$100 bills made from New York Federal Reserve plates were discovered in a Brooklyn warehouse – and the number of boxes made them official government issues.

The Piraeus Hoard of 1904 (also called the Eleusis Hoard of 1904) remains questionable specifically because these are plated coins. It would have been financial suicide and a lot of trouble to create silver-plated owls. Yet, on the other hand, not one copper owl is known today. This is only the reason that the silver-plated owls are accepted as emergency issues. We have them. Dealers like to sell them. Collectors like to buy them. It has been said that coin dealers do not sell coins; they sell stories. If the collector "buys" the story, the dealer "gives" him the coin.