

Of Owls, Wooden Walls, and Flower Girls

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The Athenian tetradrachm of the Fifth century is probably the most-well known ancient coin. On the Obverse is the goddess Athena in a crested helmet adorned with a garland of three olive leaves. Athena wears earrings and a pearl necklace. On the reverse is her owl. Many towns honored Athena but the Owl is the badge of Athens. Along with her owl, and the "ethnic" AOE (A-TH- E: alpha-theta-epsilon), the reverse features, an olive branch (her plant, a source of food and a symbol of peace) and the crescent moon. Arguably, the crescent moon represents the Battle of Salamis, which may have occurred on the morning of a crescent moon.

A rich vein of silver was struck at the state mines in Laurium. This silver had previously been paid out to the citizens as a bounty. Themistocles had argued successfully for the construction of a fleet of ships because the Oracle at Delphi had predicted that "the wooden walls would hold" when the Persians attacked. Athenian silver was spent on this project. The Persians overran Ionia and Greece. They looted and defiled Athens. But their fleet was destroyed by the Athenians at Salamis Harbor. Persia was checked.

Athens was rebuilt. The Parthenon was restored. The Acropolis we know now was created then. (One of the projects was a 25 to 30 meter statue of Athena that stood above the city.) The average worker received one of these coins as a month's wages. They are called "tetradrachmas." They weigh about 17 grams, perhaps a "75 cent piece." (Four drachmas of 4+ grams each. Drachmas were divisible to six "obols" of about 2/3 gram each. The "obol" was a day's wages for a citizen on jury duty or a rower on a galley.) The tetradrachma is about the diameter of a US quarter and about 3 times thicker.

From 480 BC to 420 BC, the Athenians struck at least 10 million and perhaps 20 million "owls." Some of the silver came from city- owned mines nearby, much of it was taken from Athens' allies as payment for defeating Persia.

The "owl" became the trade coin of the Eastern Mediterranean. It was imitated for centuries in Phoenicia, Egypt and even "Arabia Felix" the place

we call Yemen. Today, a typical owl in American Fine costs about \$500. Coins that have test cuts, banker's marks, etc., or are in Good, run about \$200. The dealer with the most apparent inventory is Jonathan Kern in Lexington Kentucky. His extremely reliable mail-order service issues owls like an Athenian contractor painting the Parthenon.

There are actually THREE kinds of owls: The archaic style of art ran from 550 to 450 BC. From 450 to 420 the "classical" style was issued. These are most common and most highly sought. After losing the Peloponnesus War against Sparta, Athens retired but again issued "new style" tetradrachmas in the Hellenistic times following Alexander of Macedonia and his generals. The New Style is actually, to the modern eye, the most beautiful, with an Athena in tune with the Elgin Marbles, Apollo Belvidere, etc. The side with the owl is a bit crowded with writing, however. (They also cost less than half of the earlier style because everyone wants the classical; archaic owls are even more expensive, being truly rare.)

The Archaic owls were known by several names: girls, virgins, garland girls. These were struck at the time of Peisistratos, the tyrant of Athens and his rival, Solon the Law-Giver. The word for "girl" or "maiden" (parthenos) carries a presumption of chastity. Not so the "stephanoi" or garland girl who was assumed to be the "flower girl" if not street slut of her time. The abusive name stems from the changing social order as kings were replaced by tyrants.

Tyrants were not wicked rulers, but merely self-made leaders without a gene-pool of supporters. They used coinage to buy loyalty and from 650 BC to 550 BC, changed the social order of the Greek world. Once freed from heredity, politics (like physics) became a subject for philosophy. Tyranny laid the foundation for democracy. Democracy evolved into "res publica" the division and balance of powers. Monarchy still exists today, but monarchy justifies itself to the people. Before 550 BC that wasn't true. In paying for the creation of popular government and the wooden walls that saved it, the "owls" (or "garland girls") bought you the political freedom you enjoy today.