

The Third Side of the Coin: Sicilian or Turkish Hoard?

A Book Review of David Weimer's *The Sicilian Hoard*

by [Michael E. Marotta](#)

(C) Copyright 2000 by Michael E. Marotta

Fictional works built around numismatics are few and far between. We still talk (thirty years later) about the *Hawaii Five-O* that featured the 1913 Liberty Nickel. *The Sicilian Hoard* deserves to be remembered at least as long and for more reasons.

David Weimer writes from experience. He is a fencer. He has traveled several times to England, Germany and Italy. He sails. His day job is teaching literature and creative writing.

As a result, his characters move through realistic and believable -- if unusual and startling -- circumstances. We relish a single TV episode in which some greedy person is killed over a coin. Unlike the *Hawaii Five-O* episode, however, Weimer is writing about ancient coins, not modern. A secretary cries that virtually every coin she handles comes dripping in blood. Ancient coins must be smuggled to be traded. Therefore, every transaction depends on the always illegal and often immoral actions of desperate men. In Weimer's world, the collectors and dealers are Italians and Germans so the disposable couriers are Sicilians and Turks.

No less disposable were the Athenians who, in 413 BC, suffered a horrible defeat when they attempted to invade Syracuse. Of perhaps eight thousand troops, those few killed in action were the lucky ones. The vast majority were worked to death in the quarries that supplied marble for the new magnificent buildings of Syracuse. It is from this event that the coins in question originate. They are found in an excavation of the old site and the trail of blood ends three hundred pages later in Munich.

Like the *Hawaii Five-O* story, this one also displays a fantasy coin. The hero leaves the book with a dekadrachma, a large, dollar-sized silver coin commemorating the victory of the Syracusans. The engraver of these dies, like the hero, is an invention of the author. Not a fabrication is the stunning and enthralling art of the Syracusan engravers Eumenos, Kimon, Phrygillos, and the others. Their dekadrachmas have never been surpassed and once you see one you understand why some people are willing to kill in order to own it.

It is easy to surmise that Weimer traveled about Europe in the late 1980s and heard the story of the Hoard of Elmali from the key players. Perhaps he wrote his novel by changing the details of the hoard, making it Syracusan. Whether he did or not, it is also easy to see that the story is the same regardless of who, when, or what. Given

that Mediterranean governments criminalize antiquarians, it is inevitable that someone will be shot, someone will be sued, and someone will go to jail.

Fascinating also is the fact that the hero of *The Sicilian Hoard* leaves the book with a dekadrachma, a crown-sized coin. In this case, the dekadrachma commemorated the victory of the Syracusans over the Athenian invaders. In the case of the hoard of Elmali, the dekadrachma are Athenian coins. Read *The Sicilian Hoard* for yourself and decide where fact and fancy part ways.