# The So-Called Persian Weight Coins of Larissa

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First, I should like to thank the organizers of this conference for inviting me. I must say that as an enthusiast for Archaic and Early Classical Greek coinage I was somewhat apprehensive about speaking on a Thessalian topic. When one thinks of Thessalian coinage, it is to the 4th century and the Hellenistic period that one is drawn. Fortunately, a colleague logically suggested that, given my interest, I look at the very first issues of Larissa, Herrmann's Group I. It turns out that the corpus of available coinage has grown significantly since Herrmann's 1925 study[1], allowing for a substantive reassessment. I hope to show that Herrmann's analysis, while perhaps an adequate product of its time, was flawed methodologically. The title of my paper as given in the program: "The Persian Weight Coins of Larissa", needs to be modified to: "The So-called Persian Weight Coins of Larissa". With the help of metrology, iconography, and numismatic-stylistic comparisons, I intend to show that Larissa's coinage only began after the Persian Wars. Herrmann's Group I, rather than running from 500-479 B.C., starts roughly in 479/475 and ends around 460.

The numismatic scholars of the generation before Herrmann who studied the coins of Larissa – Head, Babelon and Gardner – were unanimous in believing that the early issues with the grazing horse on the obverse and the sandal of Jason on the reverse (Pl. 1, no. 1) were struck on the Aeginetan standard (albeit perhaps a reduced variant)[2]. Herrmann noticed that the drachms of Group I were of an average weight that was meaningfully lighter than the later *taurokathapsia* drachms (Pl. 1, no. 2) of the early "Federal" coinage – 5.2 g vs. 5.7 (vs. a theoretical 6.1)[3]. The same was true of the half drachms which have a head usually identified as Jason on the obverse and a sandal on the reverse (Pl. 1, no. 3) and obols with a female head presumably the nymph Larissa on the obverse and again the sandal on the reverse (Pl. 1, no. 4). Herrmann was right to notice a difference (which has been confirmed by a larger sample pool) but erred when he sought to explain it by a radical change in standard. Before suggesting a simple explanation for the difference in weight, it is instructive to review Herrmann's arguments. For Herrmann, international trade and relations were the key motivations in choice of standard. The selection of Aeginetan weights would imply a desire to exchange coins with Thessaly's neighbors to the south, Boeotia and Phocis. If one wanted to have one's coins accepted in foreign markets, especially a first issue, Herrmann reasoned, one would never strike them too light. Instead the coins must be on another standard; since we know that Thessaly medized, the Persian standard became the logical choice for Herrmann. That standard could only have survived, he postulated, from *c.* 500 B.C. when Persian influence was first felt in the region, until the Persian retreat after 479[4]. Hence the coins can be closely dated

[1] Fr. Herrmann, *Die Silbermunzen von Larissa in Thessalien*, *ZNum* XXXV (1925), 1-69.

[2] B.V. Head, *Historia Numorum*, London 1911, 291. E. Babelon, *Traité des monnaies grecques et romaines*, Paris 1901-1933, II.1, 1008. *BMC, Thessaly to Aetolia*, xiii-xiv.

[3] Herrmann, 3f.

[4] Babelon, op.cit., 6.

providing a much-desired chronological anchor both to numismatists and historians. Our desire for such fixed points is so great that it is little wonder that Herrmann's conclusions have not been challenged[5].

Herrmann's case, however, is flawed both conceptually and metrologically. The early coins of Larissa are found in no hoards outside Thessaly for good reason. Their purpose was not for international trade or export because, as far as we know, Larissa had no easy access to silver in this period. Larissa's early coinage was a fractional coinage designed to facilitate everyday commercial transactions within the borders of the polis. The extent of monetization is evidenced by the presence even of hemiobols (Pl. 1, no. 5, petasos on obv.; inscription on rev.) whose existence was unknown to Herrmann. The coinage of early Larissa was intended for a domestic circulation. Keeping it underweight kept it at home. One can easily envision how the polis used the profit of conversion of heavier full weight Aeginetan coins into the local coinage on a drachm for drachm basis to provide the silver to sustain the local coinage itself. The Federal coinage, by its very nature, was intended for a wider circulation (although still geographically limited) and hence its closer conformity to the weight standard, though still on the light side (5.7 g. vs. 6.1; obols, .87 vs. 1.0).

More convincing, perhaps, than this common sense argument is the fact that the early coins of Larissa do not coincide closely with what we now understand of the Persian weight system[6]. The Persian standard turns out, on examination, not to have been a single standard and certainly was not used as a tool of imperial domination. It is telling that Persian weights were not adopted anywhere in Thrace or Macedonia during the period of Persian occupation. The sigloi struck at the start of the fifth century were on what we now call the light Persian standard of 5.3 g. This contrasts with the 11.2 g "double sigloi" standard used in southern Asia Minor and Cyprus during the same period. Only after the Archaic period did the siglos begin to conform to this heavier standard of 5.6 g (equal to half of the 11.2) that Herrmann mistakenly took to be the operative standard in the pre-Persian war period. This is important because, while the early drachms of Larissa average only 5.1 g, four of the 17 recorded specimens weigh more than 5.4 g and the heaviest comes in at 5.60[7].

If Group I cannot be dated by weight standards, perhaps Herrmann's dates can still be supported by iconography. It was only in 1831 that James Millingen[8] recognized that the sandal on the coins of Larissa referred to the story of Jason losing one of his sandals in crossing the river Anauros. The story survives in the literature of the fifth century B.C. in Pindar's IV *Pythian* and fragments of *Pherecydes*. It seems reasonable to assume that the male figure wearing the petasos on the hemidrachms is intended as an image of Jason himself. Early commentators on the iconography of the coinage of Larissa such as Samuel Birch of the British Museum writing in the very first volume of the *Numismatic Chronicle* saw no break in iconography from the Group I coins to the next drachms of the Federal issues with the *taurokathapsia* type[9]. The heroic male-figure wrestling the bull was but another depiction of Jason. Already recorded in *Pherecydes* is Jason's yoking and plowing contest with Medea's father Aeetes in which he had to subdue brazen-footed

[5]For example, C. Kraay, *Archaic and Classical Greek Coins*, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1976, 115; T.R. Martin, *Sovereignty and Coinage in Classical Greece*, Princeton, N.J. 1985, 34-35; *CAH*, 2nd ed., V, 99.

[6]For a summary of recent research on the Persian standard and the impact of Persian rule on local coinages, see O. Casabonne (ed.), *Méchanismes et innovations monétaires dans l'Anatolie achéménide*, Varia Anatolica XII, Istanbul 2000, especially the papers by Casabonne, Destrooper-Georgiades and Picard.

[7]The author hopes to complete a full corpus of the first issues of Larissa and would appreciate any additional information.

[8]J. Millingen, *Ancient Coins of Greek Cities and Kings*, London 1831, 50.

[9]S. Birch, On the Coins of Thessalian Larissa, *NC* I (1838), 227.





fire-breathing bulls. This easy identification has not seen much acceptance in modern literature (Aliki Moustaka being a notable exception in at least entertaining the thought)[10]. The youth on the *taurokathapsia* coins is often referred to as Thessalos or simply a youth. Herrmann's appellation of *Stierbändiger* is typical. If the natural interpretation of the youth as Jason throughout is accepted, then a break in the coinage caused by the Persian War seems less likely. An issue of hemiobols of a transitional type (Jason head obv., horse head rev.) between Group I and the Federal coinage supports this flow (Pl. 1, no. 6). (Compare the reverse to that found on the obols and hemiobols of the Federal coinage: Pl. 1, no. 7).

Finally in regards to iconography, no one seems to have asked the question whether the choice of Jason was a logical one for the coinage of a medizing state. It is a good principle not to try to make political interpretations of coin types especially when dealing with icons such as gods or heroes. Nevertheless, historical events have been shown to affect types. It still seems reasonable to interpret the wreath on the coins of Athens as reflective of her victory over the Persians. And it would be wrong to consider the ancient Greeks naïve as to the meaning of their coin types. Having said this, if one were to accept Herrmann's dating and weight standards, one would reasonably expect a type that if not flattering to the Persians, was at least apolitical. Let us consider Jason. While a Thessalian hero, he is not from Larissa but Iolkos and therefore Larissa's decision in putting Jason on her coins must have been, at least somewhat, deliberate. The choice of a hero rather than a god is most uncommon[11]. If we think at all about the story of Jason and Medea, we must surely realize that he is not the obvious choice of a medizing city-state but quite the contrary. One only has to open the first pages of Herodotus (I.2) to read how the Persians believed one of the opening acts in Greco-Asian hostilities and a link in the chain that led to Persia's invasion was no less than the expedition of the Argonauts. Jason's stealing of Medea is the inspiration and justification for Paris' seizing of Helen and the unending cycle of hostility that follows. Also according to Herodotus (VII.62), albeit improbably, the Medes considered Medea as their eponymous matriarch.

It might be relevant here to mention another Thessalian hero, Protesilaos. He was the first Greek to step off the ships upon landing at Troy as well as the legendary founder of Scione. The famous coins of Scione depict the head of Protesilaos with a full facing eye on the obverse and a ship's prow on the reverse. In 1926 when George Hill first correctly interpreted the legend, he, despite working with a generally higher chronology based on an earlier dating of Athenian coins, firmly came down on a post 480 date for the coins[12]. He could not conceive how the type could have been issued "before the removal of Persian domination". More recent numismatists rejected Hill's dates (despite his reputation as an art historian) solely on stylistic arguments. In Kraay - Hirmer, for instance the date given is 510-500; in Jenkins, it is 500-480[13]. New hoard evidence (the "Scione hoard" *CH* VIII.63 = *CH* IX.4, *NC* 2000, 262) shows that the Protesilaos coins only appear in 475 or later, after the Persian defeat, confirming Hill's usually impeccable judgment. Like Protesilaos, Jason is a symbol of Greek triumph over Asia and a perfect symbol for Larissa and then Thessaly to adopt after the Persian defeat. He is a hero for a new Thessaly trying to play down its medizing past.

Up to now most of what I have said have been arguments against Herrmann's thesis. Given the

[10] A. Moustaka, *Kulte und Mythen auf thessalischen Münzen*, Würzburg 1983, 74-76.

[11] G.K. Jenkins, *Ancient Greek Coins*, London $^{2}$1990, 32.

[12] G.F. Hill, Greek Coins acquired by the British Museum in 1925, *NC* 6 (1926), 120.

[13] C. Kraay, *Greek Coins*, New York 1966, 330 and n. 1 above. It should be noted that Cornelius Vermeule has recently returned to Hill's dating on similar arguments independent of new hoard evidence: "Protesilaos: First to Fall at Troy and Hero in Northern Greece and Beyond", *Florilegium Numismaticum. Studia in honorem U. Westermark edita*, Numismatiska Meddelanden XXXVIII, Stockholm 1992, 342.





absence of hoard data, is there any strong numismatic evidence that allows us to date positively the start of Larissa's coinage? The answer is yes and here we have to resort to arguments based on style – not art historical style, which has misled many a numismatist, but technical numismatic style. To be fair to Herrmann, the most crucial coin evidence for dating the early coinage was only published by Philipp Lederer in 1943, 18 years after his article. In the *RSN* and then as a separate publication: *Neue Beiträge zur antiken Münzkunde aus schweizerischen öffentlichen und privaren Sammlungen*[14], Lederer first presented a drachm from Group I at Larissa that allows us to pinpoint the series. The previously known drachms had either a cicada or a bird as an obverse symbol above the horse; this has a caduceus (Pl. 2, no. 1). The remarkable thing however is the presence of a dog (probably a type of spitz) under the horse. Lederer makes the obvious connection of the coin to the famous octodrachm of Alexander (e.g. *SNG Greece* II, no. 72, Pl. 2, no. 2). Lederer correctly saw his new type as belonging to the last issue of Herrmann Group I drachms. For a date, however, he relied on Gaebler's date of 480 for the Alexander octodrachm allowing him to accept Herrmann's framework. Today given our better understanding of Macedonian chronology based upon hoard evidence provided by the Asyut and decadrachm hoards, we know that the preponderance of Alexander octodrachms were struck only after 479 and the variety with the dog comes at the end of the series as evidenced not only by its fine style (a subjective guide) but also by the regularity of the lettering of the inscription on the reverse[15]. The die with the spitz should be dated to *c.* 460. (It is wrong to push it later as Raymond might do, as she includes it in her third group; the octodrachms are a continuous series and seem to be phased out along with other large denomination coins like those of the Bisaltai and the decadrachms of Athens.) The spitz appears not only on the Alexander octodrachm but also on Dionysos-type tetradrachms of Mende that should be dated to the same time[16] (Pl. 2, no. 3).

This dog provides us a link that helps us chronologically but also historically in associating the Larissa coinage with that of Alexander and other Macedonian mints. The caduceus symbol above the horse also has Macedonian counterparts on the coinage of Alexander (e.g. *SNG Greece* II, nos. 4, 20, 55). I think we can say with some certainty that the influence went north to south rather than the other way because of the following extraordinary coin. The obverse die is the same as the Lederer coin, but the reverse die is different (Pl. 2, no. 4). Here we see the sandal and axe enclosed for the first time in a square with the ethnic inscribed around it just as one would find at many of the Macedonian mints. This is the last die combination known from the series. The reverse style alone places the coin after 470.

Changing the dates of Group I to *c.* 479-460 has a cascading effect that coincides with the little we know of fifth-century Thessalian history. At some point (479-475) the Spartan king Leotychides launched an expedition to punish the Thessalians for their having supported the Persians. While we do not know the extent of damage, his campaign caused, we know, at least, from Herodotus (VI.72) that Leotychides was deposed for taking bribes from certain Thessalians. He was caught sitting on a sleeve full of silver. Pausanius (III.7.9) identifies the Aleuadae of Larissa as the bribing party. Whether or not this late evidence is to be trusted, it does seem safe to assume that Larissa

[14] *RSN* XXX (1943), 39-40; republished Bern 1943, 39-40.

[15] For bibliography see *SNG Greece* II (Alpha Bank Collection), pl. 1.

[16] S.P. Noe, *The Mende (Kaliandra) Hoard*, New York 1926, e.g. no. 78. While the die linkages of Mende are complicated by a seemingly random reusal of old dies, no. 78 can convincingly be put at the start of the series on account of not only the dog symbol on the obverse but also the asymmetrical lettering on the reverse compounded by the absence of the interior square which is a soon to follow later development. While this is not directly relevant to the topic under discussion, placing Mende 78 at the start of the series would have the beneficial repercussion of placing the anomalous Poseideios coinage at Maroneia to the beginning of its series. For the above reasons, I can not accept the interpretation of the "Scione hoard" proposed by Harold Mattingly in *NC* 2000, 261-263.





and probably much of the rest of Thessaly felt financial pain and loss of silver after Leotychides' campaign not to mention the previous financial impact of the Persian presence. Larissa probably had good reason to keep its first coinage on the light side. By the time the federal coinage was instituted, one might also adduce something of an economic recovery at least from the effects of the invasion.

The switch to the Federal coinage with the *taurokathapsia* types would date to the very period in which Thessaly reappears on the larger Greek stage. It would be coincident with the alliance with Athens in 462/1 and the inscription from Delphi which refers to the institution of Polemarchs[17]. To explore all the ramifications is beyond the scope of this paper. Scholars such as Franke and Liampi[18] have made a major start in identifying the Federal coinages and collecting the evidence. Hopefully by helping clarify the chronology, numismatists can make this information better available to historians who need all the evidence they can get to understand better this important but poorly recorded period in Thessalian history.

[17]See with bibliography, B. Helly, *L'état thessalien. Aleuas le roux. Les tétrades et les tagoi*, Coll. de la Maison de l'Or. Médit. 25, Lyon 1995, 226-230.

[18]P.R. Franke, ΦΕΘΑΛΟΙ - ΦΕΤΑΛΟΙ - ΠΕΤΘΑΛΟΙ - ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΙ, *AA* 1970, 85-93. K. Liampi, Das Corpus der Obolen und Hemiobolen des Thessalischen Bundes und die politische Geschichte Thessaliens im 2. Viertel des 5. Jahrhunderts v. Chr., *Hellas und der griechische Osten. Studien zur Geschichte und Numismatik der griechischen Welt. Festschrift für Peter Robert Franke zum 70. Geburtstag*, Saarbrücken 1996, 99f.



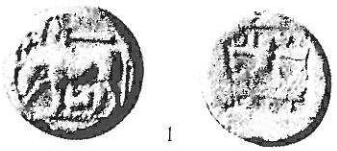


PLATE I

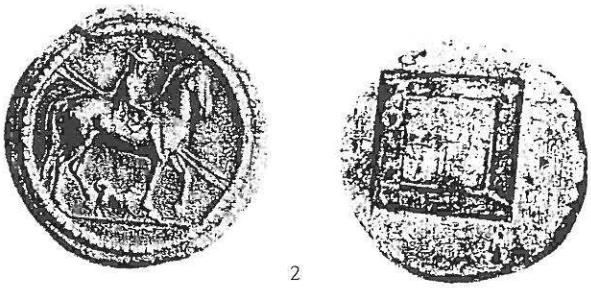


*1. Group I drachm. 5.10 g. Ex Leu/Münzen und Medaillen 1974, no. 143; 2. Group III drachm. American Numismatic Society; 3. Group I hemidrachm. 2.70 g. Ex Hess-Leu 1958, no. 155; 4. Group I obol. 0.78 g. Private collection; 5. Group I hemiobol. 0.41 g. Private collection; 6. Transitional hemiobol. 0.40 g. Private collection; 7. Group III obol. cf. Liampi Group I, no. 18.*

PLATE 2



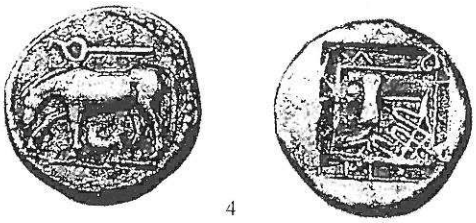
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*1. Group I drachm. 5.42 g. RSN 30 (1943), pl. 2, 23; 2. Alexander I octodrachm. SNG Greece II, no. 72; 3. Mende tetradrachm. SNG Great Britain I, 1, no. 123; 4. Group I drachm. 5.42 g. Private collection (Enlarged 1.4x).*