DIE ÄLTESTE BRONZEMÜNZE VON KATANA

The oldest bronze coin of Katane

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The coinage of the East Sicilian city of Katane has been particularly studied in recent times by Chr. Boehringer[1].

The bronze coin published here from a previously unknown first bronze issue of the Katanaeans fits excellently as a "missing link" into Boehringer's reconstruction of the early coinage of Katane and confirms his findings:

AE-Hexas, 3.22 g, ∅ 14 mm, die axis 310°.

Obv. KAT(αναίων),
Head of a bearded silen with receding hairline and horse ears to right.

Rev. Six-legged polyp, above it a tendril with grape cluster, below two value dots.

Bankhaus H. Aufhäuser Munich, Catalogue 5, 1988, No. 30, Pl. A.



1:1

3:1

This bronze hexas was issued simultaneously with the silver hexantes of the type silen head/winged thunderbolt, which Boehringer dated to the period ca. 415/405 BC[2]. Subsequently, silver hexantes of the type Amenanos head/winged thunderbolt were struck[3], simultaneously with bronze tetrantes and bronze onkiai of the same type[4].

[1]Chr. Boehringer, Bemerkungen zur sizilischen Bronzeprägung im 5. Jahrhundert v. Chr., SM 28/111, 1978, 49–65, esp. 56–59; and idem, Kataneische Probleme: Silberne Kleinstmünzen, Actes du 9e Congrès International de Numismatique, Berne 1979, Volume I (Louvain-La-Neuve-Luxembourg 1982) 71–83.

[2]op. cit. 1982, 78, type Hx 6–7.

[3]op. cit. Hx 9–15.

[4]op. cit. 1978.

With the conquest of the city by Dionysius of Syracuse in the year 402 BC, these coinages presumably came to an abrupt end.

The reverse image of the bronze hexas is adopted from the first bronze issue of Syracuse – and of Sicily altogether –, where ca. 420/15–410 BC tetrantes were issued of the type female head in profile (r. or l.)/octopus[5]. The litra standard is also the same; just under 20 grams.

Already in the second bronze coinage issue of the Syracusans shortly thereafter, with coins of different images, the standard was to drop to less than 14 grams, in Katane even to a full 8 grams.

For easy recognition of the new bronze denomination – beyond the marking with the two value dots – the Katanaean engraver came up with something special: On the one hand, the hexas is worth two onkiai, which the value dots indicate. But since the litra counts twelve onkiai, this two-onkiai coin is thus a sixth of a litra, as its name "hexas" states. Six such coins had to be laid down for one litra – exactly as many as the depicted cuttlefish has arms. For this didactic artifice, the engraver accepted the renunciation of two of the arms, which on the Syracusan model coins understandably belonged to the eight arms of the "eight-footer"/octopus. Six-armed polyp species do not exist, unless the animal had lost two of its arms in fights or accidents. Only in passing should it be noted that with the same intention on cast trientes (of four unciae), which were produced around 280/260 BC in Central Italy, an "octopus" with four arms was depicted amid four value dots[6].

The advantage of striking the hexas denomination in bronze instead of silver lies, in the truest sense of the word, at hand: the silver sixths weigh around 0.12 g and measure barely 7 mm. Aristophanes had similarly impractically tiny coins in mind when he had the impoverished Trygaeus speak of "little grains of silver" (ἀργυρίου ψακάς, in: *Peace* 121, performed 421 BC in Athens).

Later, the citizens of Katane struck no more hexantes until 402 BC, but other denominations, which had metrological reasons[7].

The time of the introduction of these first bronze coins in Katane, approximately 415/405 BC, was very difficult for the citizens of this city. When the Attic fleet appeared before Katane in 415 BC, the Katanaeans closed their city gates in order to side with Syracuse.

With a ruse, however, the Athenians succeeded in taking possession of the city, which they made their base in the struggle against Syracuse. The Katanaeans had to bear the vicissitudes of the fighting and the collapse of the Attic expeditionary corps.

In such a time of crisis, the introduction of bronze coinage, which in contrast to silver or gold coinage had only a vanishingly small metal value, could be enforced more easily than in prosperous years.

Above the "hexapus" on the bronze hexas, a grape cluster is depicted. With this, the silen on the obverse was brought into connection with the thiasos of Dionysus for the first time in Katane. Previously, the Katanaeans had seen in their silen the god of their freshwater springs[8]. The transformation of the silen image may be an indication of the influence of the Athenians in Katane. Especially in Attica, the silen was regarded as a follower of Dionysus; Dionysus had been built up there almost into a state god of the Athenian empire[9].

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[5]op. cit. 1978, 56.

[6]E.J. Haeberlin, Aes Grave, Das Schwergeld Roms und Mittelitaliens (Frankfurt a.M. 1910) Pl. 66; E.A. Sydenham, Aes grave, a study of the cast coinages of Rome and Central Italy (London 1926) 104; Schweizerische Kreditanstalt Bern, Coin List No. 52, January 1988, No. 118.

[7]op. cit. 1982, 79.

[8]M. Bernhard, Dionysos und seine Familie auf griechischen Münzen, JNG I, 1949, 47.

[9]cf. RE V, 1 (1953), s.v. Dionysos (2), (Kern) col. 1010–1046, esp. col. 1019–1025.

