

The Silver Coinage of Velia [R.T. Williams]

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Objektyp: **BookReview**

Zeitschrift: **Schweizerische numismatische Rundschau = Revue suisse de numismatique = Rivista svizzera di numismatica**

Band (Jahr): **73 (1994)**

PDF erstellt am: **15.08.2024**

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R.T. Williams

The Silver Coinage of Velia

London, Royal Numismatic Society Special Publications no. 25, 1992.

Pp. xii + 152, 47 plates. £ 50.—. ISBN 0 901 40531 0.

The last few years have witnessed a number of notable publications concerning Magna Graecia, such as Johnston on Metapontum, Rutter on Campania or the team of Italian scholars who have produced a new study of Neapolis. Williams' book finds a well deserved place in this series, and will obviously be the standard work on the subject for the indefinite future.

The book enjoys a traditional approach: it leaves bronze issues on one side (referring us to the treatment by F. di Bello in *Soldi Numismatica*, a publication hardly likely to be available outside Italy), and offering only a summary treatment of the fractional silver (p. 4). The book's main concern is to present a die study of the silver didrachms and to classify them into a correct sequence of issues. This seems very successful; Williams has collected a very large number of specimens and gives a full die analysis of them; there are often a number of very similar dies, and the distinction between them is by no means easy. Development of fabric, changing weight standards, assessment of style and analysis of hoards are all utilised as modes of argument, as is a detailed examination of the complicated and sometimes baffling systems of «control letters» which appear on several phases of the coinage.

The coinage is divided up into several periods, which are assigned dates from the sixth to the third centuries BC, the bulk of the material coming towards the end of the coinage, in the later fourth and early third centuries. Sometimes uncertainties remain, as a result of a lack of evidence, and Williams sensibly emphasises the doubt in these cases: a good example concerns his period X, where the evidence does not allow its position in the sequence to be clearly established.

In this particular case, and indeed elsewhere in the book (period IV on p. 45), Williams entertains the notion that coins were made outside Velia, by a rather shadowy group referred to as the «Lucanians»; it is not really clear here whether he means the same people as the Lucanians to whom he attributes the semi-barbarous pieces elsewhere in the work, but it would not seem very likely that such an extensive and systematic group would have been produced by the individual forgers (or imitators), who were presumably responsible for the other imitations. Systematic groups of imitation coins are known elsewhere in the ancient world but not so far in Italy; and as the coins of group X have their own distinct characteristics (e.g. the use of the owl symbol or the letter A), which are not derived from any other issue, one is very reluctant to remove them from Velia, although the problems raised by Williams cannot obviously be explained away.

While the general development of the coinage and its relative sequence have been successfully established by Williams, mainly through his die study and analysis of hoards, the assignment of absolute dates is, as often, much harder. Three main approaches are used. The first is the occurrence of coins in hoards with better dated

coins of Metapontum, Taras, or wherever. Williams is, however, rightly cautious of relying on hoards alone, and brings in other considerations such as stylistic comparisons or presumed historical associations. But, as he acknowledges (p. 105), «style is a slippery criterion», and if one needs evidence of this statement one need look no further than the extraordinary group of coins of period IV, where the dies link pieces datable stylistically to 470, 440 and 390/80 BC! This sort of consideration is bound to make us pause when (p. 63) we are invited to compare Athena heads on coins of Velia and Thurium and conclude that it is obvious that both are from the same time. The understanding of and use of style is not helped by the variable control letters which appear from time on the coinage; it is very hard to see exactly what these denote, and this is a subject to which Williams often returns. On some occasions they belong to an alphabet, presumably a sequence of some sort, though it is not obvious that we need to think of annual issues each marked with a different letter. Elsewhere and more numerous, however, they are more enigmatic; in two periods we have full names (*Kleudoros* and *Philistion*), but here and elsewhere it is not clear if we are dealing with die engravers, mint (or city) officials, workshop owners producing coinage on contract, or whatever.

Problems also arise when we try to link the coinage to some of the events which we know of in Velia's shadowy history. This usually takes the form of linking particular symbols with historical figures (e.g. the triskeles with Agathocles, or the fulmen with Pyrrhus), and, although this approach is commonly used (e.g. by Johnston on Metapontum), I remain sceptical that one can interpret symbols as indications of authority. Sometimes they are too general (e.g. the fulmen), but even when they are more specific (e.g. the triskeles) it is not difficult to show that the same symbols occur elsewhere in contexts where there is no question of political authority (e.g. SNR 1977, p. 119). Moreover, I think that it is pressing the evidence to look for an explanation in terms of historical events for the occurrence of «foreign elements» on the coinage, or to see the adaptation of the Siculo-Punic «Dido» type as an indication of support for the Carthaginian cause against Agathocles (p. 102). For all we know these may have some internal Velian significance or just be artistic variations; too strict a political interpretation seems as misplaced here as the old attempt to see the horse's head on the roughly contemporary Roman coins as a reference to Carthage.

Because of such worries about the use of style and historical association, I think we do have to rely mostly on hoard evidence as a guide to dating (though see also below). It is, however, as Williams recommends, unwise to press the evidence of hoards too much and so we should be cautious about absolute dates given beyond a fairly general level of precision.

The problem of dating and of the exact significance of the type variations make it difficult to use the coinage to make a contribution to our scant knowledge of the history of Velia during this period. One can, however, raise some general questions. Williams does not say a great deal about his view of the function or purpose of the coinage, although on occasion he implies that it was primarily military (p. 50). The same conclusion is suggested by the concentration of the coinage towards the end of the period:

Period	Date	Obv. dies
IV (T)	400–365	14
V (Theta)	365–350/40	17
VI (Kleudoros)	350/40–320/10	28
VII (Philistion)	305–290	67
VIII	290–280	13
IX	290–75	17

These figures show that the bulk of the coinage falls at the very end of the fourth century and beginning of the third, the period during which we know that the south Italian cities were employing mercenaries in their struggles against both inland populations and external invaders; though we know little enough of the history of Velia in this period it does not seem unlikely that it too was involved in most of these conflicts.

The concentration of issues in this period is even more emphatic if (as I think we probably should) we lower the dates in the middle of the fourth century. The main reason for doing so concerns overstriking. The overstriking of Corinthian pegasi in Italy, documented most fully by Garraffo in his *Le Riconiazioni in Magna Grecia e in Sicilia*, also occurred at Velia, and it is important not to look at their occurrence at Velia in isolation. At Velia they occur in period V (Williams, p. 62 n. 3, says it also occurs in period X, but his text and catalogue make no reference to this in the relevant place), and although the only identifiable undertype is of Ravel's period IV of Corinth, the phenomenon of overstriking at other mints includes later coins, from period V of Corinth. This suggests that the end of Velia IV and the beginning of V should come down a bit in date, perhaps by some 20 years. Others may disagree: the question is a well known crux of Italian numismatics of the period, on which general agreement has not yet been reached and which new overstrikes alone really offer a chance of solving.

This review has concentrated on some points of disagreement in interpretation, but this should not draw attention from the main and very substantial attainment of the book, which is to provide a reliable and full corpus of material worked up into a very convincing overall arrangement. Those with an interest in Italy will be deeply appreciative of this achievement.

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