

# The Coinage of Philistia in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries BC : a study in the Earliest Coins of Palestine [Haim Gitler, Oren Tal]

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Haim Gitler and Oren Tal

*The Coinage of Philistia in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries BC:  
A Study in the Earliest Coins of Palestine.*

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At the second Nickle Numismatic Conference held at the University of Calgary in the autumn of 2004, the present reviewer had the distinct pleasure of seeing a dramatic multi-media presentation given by Haim Gitler on the subject of Philistian coinage - a topic that he had been pursuing for some time with his colleague Oren Tal. The content of the lecture combined with a truly magnificent set of Powerpoint slides allowed the speaker and an obscure group of silver coins from the southern Levantine coast (mostly drachms and fractions) to hold the audience spellbound from beginning to end. Upon the conclusion of the presentation all that remained for the listeners were their hastily scribbled notes and the excited but slightly hollow feeling that comes from knowing that there was much more left unsaid and unshown. Thankfully, two years later, Gitler and Tal's *The Coinage of Philistia* has appeared in print, at last ready to reveal the latest thinking on the Philistian coin series.

The first two chapters serve as an introduction to coinage in Philistia (the Philistine Pentapolis of the Bible) and the southern Levant in general from the sixth century to the fourth century BC, with special attention to the influx of foreign coins from mainland Greece, Anatolia, and the islands. Using the evidence of Archaic coin finds from Achaemenid-period strata in controlled archaeological excavations, it is shown that some of these early coins arrived in the region soon after they were issued, but were treated as bullion and frequently cut up. Somewhat more significant is the view that the vast majority of Athenian-type coins found in the Levant are actually local imitations («Athenian-styled» in the parlance of the authors) based on prototypes datable to 454-415/13 BC, and that these coins represent the progression towards a moneyed economy in the region. Useful tables of excavated specimens of Archaic Greek coins and locally produced Athenian-styled coins from sites in modern Israel are also included in these sections.

In Chapter 3, the authors plunge into Philistian coinage proper, which they divide into two distinct categories, «Athenian-styled» issues featuring elements taken from the ubiquitous Athenian tetradrachm, and «Philistian-styled» issues involving local types. To begin, Gitler and Tal trace the history of Philistian numismatic scholarship from the work of Joseph Eckhel in the eighteenth century to that of Leo Mildenberg in the late twentieth century. As part of this historical review, Gitler and Tal make a strong case for rejecting the various terminologies that have been used to describe the coins (i.e., Graeco-Persian, Greco-Philistian, Philisto-Arabian, Philisto-Egyptian, and Philistine) on the grounds that they are based on erroneous ethnic and iconographic assumptions. Instead, the term «Philistian», which refers only to the geographical area in which the coins are found is to be

preferred, as it implies nothing about the ethnicity of the coin producers or users. This choice of terminology essentially mirrors the decision made by Ya'akov Meshorer and Shraga Qedar to refer to the related coinages of fourth-century Samaria as «Samaritan» rather than «Samaritan».<sup>1</sup>

Although of very minor importance to the discussion, readers should be aware that the drachm depicted in Fig. 3.5, 2 and identified as coming from the collection of Anton von Prokesch-Osten is actually a different coin. The drawing of the Prokesch-Osten piece in Fig. 3.3, 35 (erroneously referred to as Fig. 3.1, 35 at Fig. 3.5) clearly shows a coin with a different flan shape and an obverse that is struck off the flan to the left, whereas the coin photographed in the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin is off the flan to the right.

Having established a more fitting terminology for the coinage, the authors provide a solid historical and archaeological overview of the three cities named on Philistian coins (Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Gaza). Here it is pointed out that the populations of the Philistian cities were multiethnic and included elements from the original Philistine peoples as well as Judean, Edomite, Arab, Egyptian, and especially Phoenician elements. This cosmopolitan aspect may partly account for the eclectic typology of the coins, which draws on a variety of Near Eastern artistic traditions.

The illustrated catalogue of Philistian coins found in controlled archaeological excavations that follows the historical exegesis is remarkable for the great predominance of larger denomination Athenian-style issues in the finds and the complete absence of coins naming Ashdod or Ashkelon. The suggestion that greater use of soil sifting and the addition of metal detectors to the arsenals of controlled excavations are needed in order to avoid losing the archaeological contexts of the smaller coins to looters should not be taken lightly. Still, based on the limited evidence available, it is clear that Philistian coinage circulated somewhat beyond the borders of Philistia proper and into neighbouring Samaria and Judaea.

One of the most important features of this chapter is the coherent argument for the origin of Philistian coinage in the fifth century, rather than in the fourth century BC, the date championed most recently by Mildenberg. In support of this early dating, the authors look to the distinctly archaic features (i.e., frontal eye and archaic smile) found on many of the Athenian-style types and Philistian-style types featuring human heads. More compelling than the stylistic evidence is the presence of Philistian issues in the Jordan, Tell el-Maskhoutha, and Delta hoards (IGCH 1482 and 1649-1650), all of which can now be dated to the fifth century, in part thanks to new advances in our understanding of the chronology of the contemporary coinages of the Phoenician cities and a reassessment of the hoard contents by the authors. The suggestion that the Phoenician cities first produced anonymous imitations of Athenian coins before issuing their own well-known civic coinages and that the influence of these series spurred the Philistian cities to strike their respective Athenian- and Philistian-styled issues seems quite reasonable. After all, the cities had fallen under Tyrian and Sidonian control by c. 500 BC and some Phoeni-

<sup>1</sup> Y. MESHORER / S. QEDAR, *The Coinage of Samaria in the Fourth Century BCE* (Jerusalem 1991), p. 10.

cian stylistic influence is visible on the coinage (see below), although the latter is not nearly as prevalent as on the related coinage of Samaria.

A recurring theme in this section is that of Philistian coinage as an expression of autonomy. While it is certainly true that the bewildering variety of types, few of which directly refer to Persian authority or Sidonian and Tyrian hegemony in the region,<sup>2</sup> indicate artistic freedom, it is far from certain that the right to coin under the Achaemenids devolved to cities and dynasts by royal grant. If the Great Kings had truly recognized coinage as a symbol of autonomy,<sup>3</sup> it is remarkable that a number of the Persian satraps (governors who were regularly spied upon by the King's Eyes and Ears as a means of curtailing their autonomy) struck coinages in their own names and occasionally even with their own portraits (i.e., the issues of Pharnabazus at Cyzicus, Mausolus in Caria, Mazaesus at Tarsus, etc.). This is not to mention the host of disruptive Greek cities of western Anatolia that coined under Persian rule, but are not likely to have earned special privileges from the Great King considering their actions during the Ionian Revolt and in the aftermath of Xerxes' withdrawal from Greece. Likewise, if coinage had such symbolic force under the Achaemenids, it is very peculiar that the Great Kings did not have a more developed imperial coinage policy aimed at projecting the image of their authority throughout their empire. Instead, Herodotus (3.96) reports that they stored their vast metallic wealth in ingots and only struck coinage as need arose (primarily to hire Greek mercenaries and foment disunity among the Greek cities). One tends to doubt that the production or failure to produce coinage was of any great importance to the Great King, so long as local rulers provided the appropriate tribute on time and supported imperial political and military objectives when called upon.<sup>4</sup>

Even if there were some solid evidence for coinage as a privilege of autonomy in an Achaemenid context, we would still doubt the authors' interpretation of Philistian coinage as primarily political rather than economic in function. This view is partially based on Otto Mørkholm's remarks concerning civic bronze coinages of the Hellenistic period, but an article in the present volume of SNR 86 (pp. 63-90) shows the very close association between episodes of coin production and financial necessity at Gaza in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. While we would never doubt that the Philistian coin types and inscriptions naming Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Gaza have political meaning, it is very difficult to resist the thought that the coins were first and foremost intended to have an economic function. The fact that the coastal cities (i.e., those most closely involved with international trade) struck coins in their own names, but not the inland cities of Ekron and Gath, which

<sup>2</sup> The Great King may be depicted on XXIII.1, XIV.36, and XXV.1. Fortifications probably derived from the types of Sidon appear on XIV.1-XV.3.

<sup>3</sup> The classic arguments against coinage as an indicator of political autonomy in the ancient Greek world have been presented in T.R. MARTIN, *Sovereignty and Coinage in Classical Greece* (Princeton 1985).

<sup>4</sup> For a similar view, see I. CARRADICE / M. PRICE, *Coinage in the Greek World* (London 1988), p. 84.

appear to have been in decline under the Achaemenids also tends to favour a financial over a political motivation for Philistian coinage.

The primary text of Chapter 4 serves to introduce the impressive typological catalogue assembled by the authors, who should be congratulated for their restraint in limiting the attribution of coins to specific cities to those with toponyms inscribed on them. Anepigraphic coins and those bearing inscriptions other than city names are all separated from those of the named cities, even when shared types might make attribution to Ashdod, Ashkelon, or Gaza very tempting. This admirable caution is somewhat undermined by the suggestion (modifying an idea of Mildenberg's) that a central mint may have operated in Philistia to provide inscribed coinage for use in particular cities and anonymous issues for intercity use. The evidence adduced for this hypothesis is very slender indeed: a common weight standard, supposed unified die axes (3, 6, 9, and 12 o'clock), and shared iconography. Using these very same criteria, one would have to conclude that the vast majority of the coinage struck in the Seleucid empire was produced at a single central mint, despite the fact that the evidence of control marks, epigraphy, and finds refutes this possibility. The inscriptions also tell against the central mint theory for the Philistian issues. As the authors themselves point out, lapidary Aramaic was preferred for coin inscriptions at Ashdod, Phoenician script at Ashkelon, and no particular preference between these two at Gaza. Surely a central mint would not have employed several different North-West Semitic scripts at once and furthermore taken care to distinguish their use between cities.

The bulk of this chapter is taken up by 106 plates of excellent black and white enlargements (3:1) arranged in Sylloge-style with catalogue descriptions on facing pages. Because of the difficulties involved in classifying the marvellously eclectic coins of Philistia, the catalogue is arranged first by city, then by general style (Athenian-styled or Philistian-styled), and lastly by iconographic themes (i.e., Oriental heads, *bovidae*, etc.). The anonymous issues follow those of the named cities and follow the same principles of arrangement. The photographs are of very high quality and in many cases additional line drawings have been included when the details of the type have been rendered unclear by wear or test-cuts. The sheer variety of unusual types is stunning and will certainly be a boon to both numismatists and students of Near Eastern iconography, particularly since a great many of the coins have never been published before now. Nevertheless, the catalogue, which curiously fails to take advantage of the material that has appeared in commerce, should be supplemented by the list of sale specimens (and some omitted pieces from public collections), which will appear in an article by Wolfgang Fischer-Bossert in SNR 87, 2008. The reasons for this omission are opaque, especially when private collections were very closely studied. Indeed, the vast majority of the corpus for Ashdod resides in the Gil Chaya collection.

A number of Philistian-styled types are worthy of special comment because of the glimpse that they afford us of Philistia as a crossroads of Near Eastern cultures. For example, a bearded figure with grotesque leonine features and the feathered headdress normally associated with the Egyptian god Bes appears with some frequency on issues of Ashdod (II.3 and II.10-11), Gaza (VI.3 and VI.13-14), and several anonymous Philistian series (XIII.14, XVI.23-24, and XVIII.1-8). However,

on these coinages, the traditional form of the god is often modified or he is placed in a distinctly non-Egyptian context. For example, on the II.3 series of Ashdod, Bes has four wings, as on some Phoenician scarabs,<sup>5</sup> yet in Egypt he was normally a wingless deity. Likewise, on the anonymous and Gazaeen issues he is wingless, depicted facing and armed with his distinctive knife (*des*) following Egyptian custom. However, he is often poised to strike one or two facing animals, thereby usurping the position normally given to gods, heroes, and Great Kings in the Assyro-Babylonian and Persian artistic tradition. This Bes type is well known from Phoenician, Persian, and other Near Eastern glyptic evidence.<sup>6</sup> These peculiarities of iconography make one wonder whether this is really Egyptian Bes on the Philistian coinage or some local deity who has adopted the iconographic features of Bes, in the same way that Phoenician Ba'alat-Astarte often took on the attributes of Egyptian Isis-Hathor. It has been suggested that in Phoenecia, Bes may have represented the native Eshmun.<sup>7</sup> Thus Philistian Bes may possibly represent an important local god. Like Bes on series II.3, Kronos-El of Byblos reportedly had four wings sprouting from his shoulders (Philo of Byblos, *FGrH* 790 F2) and sometimes wears a feather headdress similar to that of Bes on the autonomous bronze coinage of Byblos in the first century BC.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Yahweh of Samaria may have been depicted as a Bes-like figure if the controversial inscription on Pithos A from Kuntillet 'Ajrud actually refers to the illustration that accompanies it.<sup>9</sup>

The head of Zeus-Ammon on an anonymous issue (XIII.2) was probably imitated from a fifth-century issue of Cyrene (BMC Cyrenaica 10, no. 42). The same plaited hairstyle found on Cyrenean tetradrachms of 470-440 BC also appears on the Philistian drachm, as do the apparent remains of the KV[PA] legend before the god's face. See also drachm XVI.10 for Zeus-Ammon apparently copied from a different issue of Cyrene from the same period (BMC Cyrenaica 11, no. 45). Likewise, some of the janiform head types (II.13, V.3, V.6, XIV.28, XV.4, XVIII.6-7, XIX.19) appear to be derived from the late sixth- and early fifth-century issues of Tenedos (BMC Troas p. 19, no. 2). It is perhaps unnecessary to point out that the imitation of these foreign types also supports the authors' dating of the start of Philistian coinage to the fifth century. It also tends to suggest a relatively early movement away from completely Athenian-styled types towards Philistian-styled types.

<sup>5</sup> J. BOARDMAN, *Classical Phoenician Scarabs: A Catalogue and Study* (Oxford 2003), nos. 22/95-96.

<sup>6</sup> BOARDMAN (as n. 5), nos. 22/17-68 and 22/72-73; K. ABDI, *Bes in the Achaemenid Empire*, *Ars Orientalis* 29, 1999, pp. 113-140.

<sup>7</sup> W. CULICAN, *The Iconography of Some Phoenician Seals and Seal Impressions*, *Australian Journal of Biblical Archaeology* 1, 1968, pp. 93-98.

<sup>8</sup> He actually has six wings on the Hellenistic and Roman issues of Byblos. See, for example, SNG Spaer nos. 1070-1071 and SNG Cop. Phoenicia nos. 135 and 137.

<sup>9</sup> W.G. DEVER, *Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet Ajrud*, *BASOR* 225 (Summer 1984), pp. 21-37; W.A. EMERTON, *Yahweh and His Asherah: The Goddess or Her Symbol?* *Vetus Testamentum* 49.3 (July 1999), pp. 315-337. It is perhaps no coincidence that Bes is also featured on Samarian coinage. See, Y. MESHORER / S. QEDAR, *Samarian Coinage* (Jerusalem 1999), p. 33 and nos. 53-54, 120, 152-153, 158, 198.

Phoenician influence is readily apparent throughout the corpus in the form of the guilloche borders (I.1, II.9, VI.16, XVI.7-8, XVI.25, XVIII.8), types involving raised and incuse (or pseudo-incuse) design elements (XIV.36, XIX.11), fortification types (XV.1-4) and the Tanit symbol (XII.19), which is mistakenly described as Egyptian in the text. A number of types, such as Bes the animal-slayer (mentioned above), the Archaic-style satyr-heads (II.9, VI.15), gorgons (XIII.24, XVIII.3), and even some of the janiform and «elusive motif» heads (XIV.22, XIV.35, XVI.19, XVIII.8, XIX.20) also seem to come to Philistia through the intermediary of Phoenician glyptic art.<sup>10</sup> The Persian (and Assyro-Babylonian) iconographic tradition is also recognizable in the treatment of double-protome bulls and horses (II.III.16-17, VI.1-12, XIII.17), the occasional depiction of individuals wearing the headgear normally associated with the Great King (XIV.36, XXIII.1, XXV.1), and types featuring Bes as animal-slayer (XVIII. 5-7, XXVIII.5).

Also notable is the decision to bring the controversial British Museum drachm (XVI.25Da) with the types of helmeted head three-quarter r./male deity on wheeled throne, back to the Philistian fold after it had been reattributed from there to Judaea by Sukenik and Mildeberg. The authors make a strong case for a Philistian origin on the basis of style and metrology, but unfortunately are unable to offer a new reading of the Aramaic legend. YHW, YHD, or even YHR still remain paleographical possibilities, although Gitler and Tal clearly prefer YHW as a potential reference to Jewish Yahweh.

Chapter 5 is composed of several brief studies of notable typological, paleographic, metrological, and metallurgical features of the coins. Included among these is a discussion of the so-called «elusive motif» types that appear with remarkable frequency on Philistian coinage and involve the use of secondary types hidden within the main type. Here, the authors put the Philistian «elusive motifs» into context with similar types of Samaria and Lesbos. However, we have some doubts about the profusion of Athenian owls that are reportedly hidden within the bodies of other animals. Comparison with other coins in the Philistian series shows that the supposed eyes of the owl are simply an archaizing treatment of shoulder muscles, while the feathered body is merely a collection of ribs.

The tables of paleographic forms and unidentifiable linear devices, as well as the presentation of four instances of graffiti are important for expanding the corpus of North-West Semitic inscriptions, while the tables documenting the XRF metallurgical analysis shows that Philistian coinage was produced to a high degree of purity. An extensive discussion of weight standards and die axis preference with numerous supporting statistical tables makes a convincing case for a local Philistian standard, probably founded upon a reduced Attic standard with its associated denominations. However, the use of the statistical evidence to argue for the production of Philistian coinage by a central minting authority seems a little misguided, as we have mentioned above.

A summary of the authors' conclusions appears in Chapter 6, which is followed by an appendix on modern forgeries of Philistian coins and an index of type motifs.

<sup>10</sup> BOARDMAN (*supra*, n. 5), nos. 31/1-3 (satyr-heads), 34/1-8 (gorgons), 37/1-33 (janiform and 'elusive motif' heads).

The extensive bibliography will be a great asset to anyone wishing to pursue further study of the Philistian series, while the seventeen black and white plates that conclude the volume show the coins at 1:1 scale.

Despite our reservations about some of the interpretations offered by the authors, there can be very little doubt that *The Coinage of Philistia* represents a landmark in the study of southwestern Levantine coinage in the Achaemenid period, correcting many errors of the past and providing the primary point of departure for all future enquiries into the Philistian series. The extremely high quality of the plates and the lively discussion of the text live up to the pre-press scholarly «marketing» that it received in Calgary three years ago. We only wish that the book had also included a supplementary CD-ROM of the original presentation.

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