

# Silvia Hurter : some memories and a new coin from Aetolia

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SILVIA HURTER: SOME MEMORIES  
AND A NEW COIN FROM AETOLIA\*

In the 1950s Silvia Hurter was an art student who needed a job, and she found one with the numismatic department of Bank Leu. By this lucky chance she discovered both her true *métier* in life and the mentor who led her to become one of the greatest practical numismatists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Because, of course, Silvia's life was intimately bound with that of Leo Mildenberg: he was the one who realized what she was capable of and who trained her, worked with her, and encouraged her to soar to heights that she herself would never have thought possible. Deep down she never really believed she was as good as she was: she had a great respect for scholars with their academic titles and distinctions and always deferred to them, even though she often knew far more than they did. She also never realized how much respect the really good scholars, collectors and dealers had for her; wrongly, she probably always saw her lack of an academic degree as the one thing that held her back from even greater recognition.

She and Leo Mildenberg made a remarkable team: he was the embodiment of the old, erudite and cosmopolitan European charm that characterized the great dealers of the past and was himself a link to that past. Silvia was in many ways quite different – she was very 'Swiss' in the sense of being very serious, very discrete, much less outgoing and a lot less willing to compromise with people and things she disapproved of. So they moved in tandem over the years.

When Silvia entered the world of numismatics in the mid 1950s it was quite different from the way it is now: there were far fewer dealers and the trade was dominated by a number of famous firms with long histories; the links between the trade and numismatic scholarship were close and friendly. Through Leo she met all the great dealers; she met the 'honest' smugglers – those old time Sicilians whose fathers had dealt with Jacob Hirsch and who rarely told lies and never sold fakes (so different from those of today!); she met collectors of all kinds, some at the end of their careers and some at the start. With Switzerland's liberal laws and famous discretion it was a perfect place for the coin trade: everyone gathered there and Silvia met everyone. She knew all the stories, either hearing them from Leo or being part of them: she heard the tales of Herbert Cahn's visits to Greece during

\* I first met Silvia Hurter when she came to Greece to give a lecture in 1977 when I was working at the Agora for the American School of Classical Studies. On my first trip to Switzerland, in 1978, when I was introduced to Leu and saw how things worked; in 1979, I came again and was hired, effective 1 January 1980. Leo Mildenberg and Silvia Hurter were incredible people to work for and with. For years I corrected Silvia's English, and that of various writers for the *Rundschau*, while she corrected everything I did and put up with my sense of humor. We had plenty of arguments over the years but I always kept the great respect I had for her as a person and for her vast knowledge. Remember, in a field where the chief suppliers were South Italians, Balkanites, Greeks, Turks and Arabs, none of whom particularly viewed women as equals, her success in surmounting those obstacles was doubly hard won. I am honored to be able to write this essay in her memory, but, quite honestly, I expected her to live on into her 90s and outlast us all.



the Civil War when he obtained all the best pieces from the Petsalis collection, how the Gotha coins came to Basel, and how some of the Pennisi coins left Acireale. She knew who found the hoards, what was in them and where they went: information she shared with scholars like G. Kenneth Jenkins, Colin Kraay, Otto Mørkholm, Martin Price, Margaret Thompson and so many others.

One of her first real triumphs came with the famous Kunstfreund catalogue<sup>1</sup>; she not only helped Leo, Herbert Cahn and Pierre Strauss write the catalogue, she was also responsible for a great number of the magnificent photographs within it. She was, of course, a superb photographer who was justly renowned for the quality of her work – her only equal being that other ‘H’, Max Hirmer. The sale was such a success, and so much of the success was due to Silvia’s photographs, that the directors of Bank Leu gave her a Hasselblad with all the useful lenses and attachments as a sign of their appreciation. She had met the late owner of the collection, Charles Gillet, and had not thought very much of him (she thought even less of his companion, Marion Schuster, who had inherited the collection and from whom it was bought by a consortium consisting of Bank Leu, Münzen und Medaillen and Ratto). Another great triumph of Silvia’s was her superb catalogue of the collection of Roman Republican coins owned by the French collector E.P. Nicolas<sup>2</sup>. This was the first time that such an extensive collection was catalogued based on the then new standard work of Crawford<sup>3</sup>, and she was immensely proud of it. Nicolas, however, was not. A day or two before the sale he arrived in a fury because the catalogue was not done according to Babelon<sup>4</sup>, which was for him an unforgivable lapse. Not only that, but she had carefully removed all the forgeries in advance and he did not agree, and he was enraged at the estimates and insisted on putting stiff reserves on a large number of the coins the day before the sale! Silvia was extremely upset and even wanted to cancel the auction, but Leo calmed her down and the sale became one of the most famous and successful Republican sales ever held (most of the reserves turned out to be unnecessary). She did, however, have her revenge. When the unsold coins later appeared at auction in Paris after Nicolas’s death, they went for far less than they would have sold for had they not been reserved at Leu (*and the fakes appeared there as well*). The Leu sale also was the occasion of a very amusing story that illustrates just how close-mouthed Silvia could be. Several months before the catalogue came out Charles Hersh, the distinguished Republican collector, came for a visit – he was a great friend of both Silvia and Leo. He sat down and Leo and Silvia began showing him the collection; almost immediately Charles exclaimed, “But these are the Nicolas coins!” And Silvia replied, “No they aren’t.” This went on for about ten minutes, with Charles saying they were, and that he remembered them from viewing them in Paris, and Silvia saying they weren’t, until Leo finally said, “He knows. He has seen them in Paris – he knows they are the Nicolas coins! We can admit it.”

Her real love was the coinage of Magna Graecia and Sicily; she found their beauty to be overwhelming (and she loved the land as well, often going there on

<sup>1</sup> Bank Leu / Münzen und Medaillen, Griechische Münzen aus der Sammlung eines Kunstfreundes, 28 May 1974.

<sup>2</sup> Bank Leu 17, Silbermünzen der Römischen Republik, 3–4 May 1977.

<sup>3</sup> M.H. CRAWFORD, Roman Republican Coinage (Cambridge, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> E. BABELON, Description historique et chronologique des monnaies de la République romaine (Paris, 1885).



holidays). This love encompassed the bronze coinages, about which she learned so much from her work with the Virzi collection<sup>5</sup>. Surely the finest collection of Sicilian bronzes ever made, this was formed by Jacob Hirsch and his wife's lifelong associate and companion, Tom Virzi, the son of a great 19<sup>th</sup> century Sicilian dealer and collector. Silvia fully intended to publish the entire collection of over 2000 coins, since she had all of Virzi's notes, but, unfortunately, the record photographs fell into the hands of someone who refused to make them available save for an exorbitant fee (he was making money selling sets of the 77 plates to collectors and scholars); and the project was never completed.

Virzi's was just one of the many great collections that went through Silvia's hands: she took part in the breaking up of the Mazzini collection of Roman coins (divided with Ratto beginning in the late 1950s); the joint-sale and purchase of the Niggeler collection with *Münzen und Medaillen* in the late 1960s; the sale of large numbers of coins from the Brand collection in the late 1960s (brought to Leu via John Ford); the Gillet collection; the little known but superb collection of Greek coins belonging to L. Biaggi (bought jointly with Ratto – unfortunately no record photographs of these coins are preserved since, while much smaller than Gillet's, the quality was the same if not better); and, of course, the great Biaggi collection of Roman gold coins, the most extensive ever formed. This collection was bought jointly, once again with Ratto as a silent partner, for CHF 27,000,000 in 1978 (6,000,000 from each of the partners plus 15,000,000 as an interest free loan from Bank Leu – those were the days, weren't they!). The transaction was done in Lugano (Biaggi was a Swiss citizen) and, as the story goes, while there Silvia found herself stuck in an elevator with a suitcase filled with millions in cash during a temporary electricity failure! She and Leo had long worked with Athos Moretti, building up his unparalleled collection of Greek coins from Italy and Sicily (she was working on a projected *Sylloge* of his coins at the time of her death), and selling the vast majority of his Greek coins from non-Italian mints (his Roman coins were purchased by a consortium including NFA<sup>6</sup>). She was the force behind the joint Bank Leu/Numismatic Fine Arts Sale of the Garrett Collection from the Johns Hopkins University<sup>7</sup>; she actually thought it was a terrible deal but Leo, with his infinite charm and skill, pushed it through with the help of Bruce McNall. Leo was unstinting in his praise of her skills – he told everyone that her catalogues were better than any he had written himself; he was immensely proud of her but I think she was never able to fully accept the compliments he made about her. After Leo's official retirement Silvia was probably most pleased by her catalogue of the wonderful Greek coins that belonged to one of her oldest friends<sup>8</sup>; this was her last auction catalogue (and she did everything in it: text, photographs and layout); from then on she just edited.

<sup>5</sup> Bank Leu Auktion 6, Griechische Bronzemünzen Unteritaliens und Siziliens aus Sammlung Tom Virzi, New York, 8 May 1973.

<sup>6</sup> For his Roman gold, see, in part, Numismatic Fine Arts XXII, 1 June 1989, lots 1–170 (the forgeries in this sale, such as 26, 105, 122 and 126, came from another source).

<sup>7</sup> The Garrett Collection Part I, NFA/Bank Leu, 16–18 May 1984; Part II, Bank Leu/NFA, 16–18 October 1984; Part III, NFA/Bank Leu, 29 March 1985.

<sup>8</sup> Leu Numismatics 76, Greek Coins – An Exceptional Private Collection, 27 October 1999.



Of course, as most people who knew her know, she was a skilled editor. She took great pride in making anything anyone wrote better, whether they were auction entries or articles in the *Rundschau*, which she so ably edited for so many years<sup>9</sup>. Her aim was always clarity and economy, but she never sought to impose her own ideas or her own style on the writer; her greatest dislike was long-windedness and repetition – she was perfectly capable of pruning a prolix 30 page manuscript into a tight 8 page article! On rare occasions she would go too far: she once cut an article down very drastically and was quite pleased until she realized that she had cut out so much it no longer made any sense! She was also a co-editor of a number of important honorary and memorial volumes<sup>10</sup>, and, finally, was the editor and, often, the chief writer of the *Bulletin on Counterfeits* (1976–1999). She was a great expert on forgeries and had a virtually unerring eye in that regard, but this position did not make her all that popular; in fact, it made her a lot of enemies. She could look at a coin and just ‘feel’ there was something wrong about it in a way most other numismatists could not. She had a sense of rightness that she could be very undiplomatic about: she was convinced that all the Frog staters of Seriphos had to be fake, her reason being that the Greeks just would not make coins with frogs on them – it was too repulsive! And, of course, virtually no one believed her... though it turns out that she was quite right: all except the Montagu piece now in the British Museum were made by Christodoulos (and she thought the Montagu coin was false too)<sup>11</sup>. She could also be ruthless about publishing fake coins that came out in recent auctions: one dealer, who cherished a life-long dislike for her (the feeling was actually mutual), furiously asked her why she kept publishing his cover coins as false. She replied that she would stop doing so as soon as he stopped putting fakes on his covers... The main reason she gave up her editorship was due to the constant sniping she received from some ‘experts’ who could not understand why she refused to compare some coins she declared false with real ones in museums. She was sure, and their falsity was obvious to her so why should she bother? Just to please someone with no eye whatsoever? But, in fact, she could make mistakes too. One time Pierre Strauss came by to view the coins of Leu 25<sup>12</sup>. Silvia greatly respected him and Herbert Cahn, so much so that one might say she was in awe of them, and she was very proud of her work on this catalogue. She asked Pierre what he thought and he rather slyly told her that everything was excellent except for the mint of a Roman coin, lot 429, which was given incorrectly. She was shocked and said, but what mint is it? Geneva, he replied!<sup>13</sup> The coin was immediately withdrawn.

<sup>9</sup> She was editor of the *Rundschau* from 1987 until her death. She succeeded her idol, Herbert Cahn, who had himself succeeded Leo Miltenberg in 1979 (he had become editor in 1966). Three finer editors would be hard to find.

<sup>10</sup> References to those volumes can be found in the list of her publications in this volume.

<sup>11</sup> For the coinage of Seriphos and the controversy surrounding it, see now K. SHEEDY, *The Archaic and Early Classical Coinages of the Cyclades*. RNSSP 40 (London, 2006), pp. 42–47 and 175–176. In his review of this book, “Paros, Melos, and Naxos: Archaic and Early Classical Coinages of the Cyclades”, *AJN Second Series* 20 (2008), pp. 105–111, Jonathan Kagan (on p. 106) returns to Silvia’s opinion that the Montagu piece is also false, but he bases himself on stylistic grounds rather than instinct: I fear they are both probably right.

<sup>12</sup> Bank Leu Auction 25, 23 April 1980.

<sup>13</sup> R.A.G. CARSON, *The Geneva Forgeries*, NC 1958, pp. 47–58, especially pl. V, 11.



Her relationship with Leo Miltenberg was always a very complex mixture of respect, affection and conflict. When he finally retired (actually he never retired from coins, but his *official* retirement) he was always in and out of the office, looking at everything, checking things out, reading the mail that came in. This very much annoyed some people, and they wanted to ban him outright from the offices at Leu; luckily such a gesture of *impietas* was never carried out (he happily spent his last years in an office at the Sunflower Foundation, the creator of the Money Museum). What was really amusing, however, was that when Silvia 'officially' retired, she did exactly the same things Leo did! She even had the same mannerisms. But, of course, she was never really going to stop being involved with numismatics: she had a lot of projects in mind and wanted to establish her reputation as that of a true numismatic scholar rather than as the dealer who handled so many hoards and dealt with so many dubious characters (of course, without her help so many major finds, like the Hekatomnos Hoard or the Pixodaros Hoard, would have never been recorded, but that is rather politically incorrect now). As a consultant on contract with Leu, later LHS, she kept her office and had continued access to the library that she loved so much (she had virtually no numismatic books at home). Her consultancy also kept her from going elsewhere (and she had many lucrative offers). Her memory was phenomenal (she could remember coins she had sold, or even only seen, back in the late 1950s). Then came the accident in New York. Could it be that after the death of her beloved husband Heinz, a great bear of a man so different from her but so much her other half, nothing meant anything any more and when the opportunity came to join him she joyfully took it?

Her enthusiasm for coins never left her, especially those that were either stylistically beautiful or numismatically important. She could, in fact, never understand collectors or dealers who liked or handled coins that had been manipulated or fiddled with. One of my first duties was to show an American dealer the vast quantities of left over material in the 'back room' when we were still on the top floor of Bank Leu. He picked out a nice looking sestertius of Diadumenian that had been in the Niggeler collection and asked the price – she looked at it and said, "Oh, it's tooled and smoothed, you can have it for CHF 500." He and his Italian partner sold it for approximately 50 times that price in Italy where people did not look closely. She had her standards and stuck to them all her life. She also loved finding things that no one else saw: like the amazing tetradrachm from an uncertain Macedonian mint bearing a lion attacking a donkey that appeared unnoticed on the market before she correctly identified it<sup>14</sup>. So the following coin, which is important both by virtue of being unpublished and having a rather spectacular die link, would surely have interested her (*Fig. 1*).

<sup>14</sup> Bank Leu 33, 3 May 1983, lot 280. It had turned up in America with an East Coast dealer who bought it in an obscure Superior sale and put it in stock from which Silvia bought it. She was told that it had previously been acquired "... from the usual Turks." A die-identical piece was in Asyut but misidentified as Akanthos; M. PRICE – N. WAGGONER, *Archaic Greek Silver Coinage: The Asyut Hoard* (London, 1975), p. 40, 166 (illustrated on pl. IX).



Fig. 1 Aetolia, The Aetolian League. Tetradrachm, c. BC 239. 7.02 g, 11.

Obv.: Head of youthful Herakles to right, wearing lionskin headdress.

Rev.: ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ Zeus seated left on throne holding eagle in his right hand and scepter with his left; to left, below arm, boar's jawbone to right; to left and below throne, monogram.

References: Hitherto unpublished and not in Price<sup>15</sup>. Ex Lanz 146, 25 May 2009, lot 114. Now in a private collection.

In the Lanz description it was dated to c. 280–250 and tentatively ascribed to an uncertain mint in Aetolia, based on the boar's jawbone, which was also the symbol *par excellence* of Aetolia<sup>16</sup>. However, this coin is more than just an issue of an uncertain Aetolian mint – it is, in fact, the first large-size silver coin to be struck by the Aetolian League. The style of the coin is clearly fully Hellenistic and is immediately reminiscent of the well-known tetradrachms struck in the name of the League, which bear a similar head of Herakles on their obverses but, on their reverses, a seated figure of Aetolia in place of the enthroned Zeus<sup>17</sup>. When this coin is compared to those of the League an astonishing die link immediately appears: the obverse die used to strike this coin is the same as the die used to strike the earliest of the League's tetradrachms (Tsangari, Third Series, Group II, Issues 16, 460–461 and 17, 462–463; all struck by obverse die D 1 coupled with 4 different reverses)! In addition, the monogram to the left of Zeus on this coin is the same as one of the two monograms used on Tsangari 460–461; thus the close temporal connection between the Alexander type and the new Aetolian type is clear. The implications are also clear: in 239, if Tsangari's chronology is correct and I believe it is<sup>18</sup>, the Aetolians were preparing for war with Macedon and decided to produce tetradrachms and gold staters for military use. This tetradrachm was their initial issue but almost immediately the authorities decided that producing coins of Macedonian type for a war against Macedon was highly inappropriate. They then opted to retain the traditional obverse types for the high value gold and silver (Athena for the gold staters and Herakles for

<sup>15</sup> M.J. PRICE, *The Coinage in the Name of Alexander the Great and Philip Arrhidaeus* (Zurich/London, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> For the symbol see the article mentioned in the Lanz catalogue, A. JÖRDENS – G. BECHT-JÖRDENS, *Ein Eberunterkiefer als "Staatssymbol" des Aitolischen Bundes* (IG XII, 2, 15). *Politische Identitätssuche im Mythos nach dem Ende der spartanischen Hegemonie*, *Klio* 76, 1994, pp. 172–184.

<sup>17</sup> For the coinage of the Aetolian League see, D.I. TSANGARI, *Corpus des monnaies d'or, d'argent et de bronze de la Confédération Étolienne* (Athens, 2007). For the tetradrachms, see TSANGARI, nos. 460–506.

<sup>18</sup> See TSANGARI, *op. cit.*, pp. 250–253.



the tetradrachms) but to replace the Macedonian Zeus and Nike on the reverses of the silver and the gold with the more patriotic representation of a figure of Aetolia seated on the shields of their defeated enemies. This was done so rapidly that almost none of the Alexander-type tetradrachms got into circulation prior to the reverse change. This first obverse die was retained for the first Aetolian type tetradrachms and then, for unknown reasons, it was recut into Tsangari D 2 by changing the whole back of the lionskin covering Herakles' head!



*Fig. 2* Aetolia, The Aetolian League.  
Tetradrachm, c. BC 238–228. 16.97 g, 12.

By comparing the obverses of this coin struck from D 1, with that of Tsangari 468b<sup>19</sup>, D 2 (*Fig. 2*), it should be immediately apparent that while the back of the headdress differs, Herakles' eye brow, eye, nose, mouth and chin, the hair over his forehead, his sideburns, his ear, the lion's lower jaw and the ties under Herakles' chin are all exactly the same, thus showing that they are all struck from the same die. Even more interesting is the fact that Tsangari 460b and 464g both show a line-like die break in front of Herakles' nose (so do 462, 464e, 464j, 465, 468b, and 470–478 – perhaps others as well but some of the photographs are not clear enough to tell), once again confirming the identity of the dies. Thus we have the fascinating situation that a single obverse die, albeit one that was recut, was actually used with no less than 20 reverses (Tsangari 460–478, R 1–19 plus the Alexander reverse used on this coin)!

What this means I leave for other scholars to explore, but it clearly does show the remarkable interface between coins of two distinct types – the Alexander and the Aetolian – and the pressures that led to the suppression of one, seen as ideologically suspect in the eyes of its issuers, with one newly designed to express local patriotism in the face of a dangerous enemy. I think Silvia Hurter would have gotten quite a kick out of this and I hope she enjoys it, wherever she is now.

<sup>19</sup> Ex BCD, Münzen und Medaillen GmbH 23, 18 October 2007, 429; J. W. Garrett, II, Bank Leu/Numismatic Fine Arts, 16–18 October 1984, 208, and C. S. Bement, I, Naville VI, 28 January 1924, 1016.



*Abstract*

This short article is a very brief reminiscence about Silvia Hurter, with whom I worked and learned from for thirty years. The first part consists of some stories and tales that were either told about her or she told about herself. The second is the publication of the first known large silver coin struck by the Aetolian League. She would have appreciated it for its great numismatic interest, but she would also have enjoyed it because when it first appeared no one knew what it was. She herself was very good at making finds like this, and at researching them. I am most pleased to be able to dedicate this one of mine to her memory.

*Zusammenfassung*

Dieser Beitrag ist eine Reminiszenz an Silvia Hurter, mit welcher der Autor während 30 Jahren zusammengearbeitet hat. Nach Erinnerungen und einigen Anekdoten aus ihrem Berufsleben stellt der Autor die erste Tetradrachme des Aitolischen Bundes vor. Silvia Hurter hätte diese Entdeckung nicht nur wegen ihrer grossen numismatischen Bedeutung geschätzt, sondern gerade auch, weil zunächst niemand realisiert hatte, worum es sich bei dieser Münze handelt.

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