

More Athenian decadrachms

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WOLFGANG FISCHER-BOSSERT

MORE ATHENIAN DECADRACHMS

PLATES 7–8

Soon after the publication of my study on the Athenian decadrachm series several additional genuine specimens appeared. These new coins shed some light upon both the first and the final group of the decadrachm series, and since Silvia Hurter was a real connoisseur of Athenian decadrachms, it seems appropriate to present them in a volume dedicated to her memory.

In what follows, all references to coins, dies, etc., are to my full study.¹

0 O 0: Almond-shaped eye with a *caruncula lacrimalis*. Flat cow-lick. The bunch of hair in front of the ear is broadly rounded and has a triangular pattern at the center. The right olive leaf does not touch the dotted line of the crest but ends at the bowl. The middle leaf of the palmette points to the tip of the left olive leaf, while the tendril spreading downwards almost touches the ear. Full lips. The pendant hangs to the left of the jaw line. (Two minor cracks at the silhouette of the bowl.)

R 0: The olive leaves spring from different points. Broad wings; the middle row of feathers is a bit fan-shaped, while the lower one is almost vertical. Broad *alpha* with slightly slanting cross-bar, almost circle-round *theta*, crooked *epsilon* with short upper bar. (A small crack at the upper rim of the right wing, and a bigger crack at the lower end of the same rim.)

a) 42,38 6 Private Collection = Berk 166, 15 Oct. 2009, 137. Several cracks passing through the flan, visible at the edge in particular. Obverse: Deep triangular gash at the tail of the crest. Traces of corrosion here and there, especially at the surroundings of the eye. Reverse: Traces of corrosion on the left wing.

From the first sight, this new coin appears to be a sister of the famous Berlin coin I(a). In fact, it is hard to distinguish R 0 from the respective reverse die R 1. The proportions of the owl are quite the same and the distribution of the dots as well. Once after close study some slight digressions become recognizable. For instance, the line of the tiny dots on the upper rim (the 'coat') of the wings is a bit different (a detail that can be checked but by the casts, not by the photographs available). The *alpha* is somewhat smaller, and its position is higher in the field than with R 1. The *theta* is regular, its point being well-centered, while the *epsilon* is irregular enough, being crooked like with R 23. However, the most obvious point that separates the two dies from each other are the respective die-breaks.

¹ W. FISCHER-BOSSERT, *The Athenian Decadrachm*, NNM 168 (New York 2008).

Turning to the obverse die, the similarity to the Berlin coin is equally striking. Of course there are slight divergences with the palmette on the helmet, the pattern of the bunch of hair in front of the ear is different, and the upper tip of the vizor is more pointed. Otherwise, O 1 and O 0 resemble each other most closely. The photographs available are deceptive by their distortions; here the face of the Berlin Athena looks somewhat tense and less heavy than with the new coin. Having compared casts of both the coins side by side, I nevertheless find the differences minimal. Hence, the dies are based upon one and the same model and might even be the work of the same engraver.²

A technical feature both coins have in common is the softly rounded edge of the *incusum*. This is not due to a reverse die with round edges but rather to an immature minting technique: the flan was still too cold when the coin was struck, thus causing the flan fissures and driving the viscous metal off the edges. The best way of preparing a flan is to temper the heated silver in water just before striking; the object gets most malleable this way.³ Because both heating and tempering need considerable experience, the staff of the Athenian mint surely must have had to learn how to handle flans of that size properly. If so, the chronological priority of the two coins within the series is confirmed once more. The (relatively) small size of the reverse dies points to the same direction: R 1 measures 2.21 × 2.19 cm, and R 0 is even smaller: 2.10 × 2.09 cm. Hence the new coin must be placed right at the beginning.⁴

20α O 13.

R 21.

a) 43,73 8 Private Collection. Obverse: air bubbles («lunkers») on the neck guard and the cheek. Reverse: small minting-gaps on the stomach of the owl as usual. Traces of corrosion in the upper field.

The coin provides a die-link between the die pairs **21** and **22–23**, and thereby corroborates the place of **21** within the sequence. This may be considered as a confirmation of the typological method: it was the same distinct flatness of the reverse that posited **21** near the end of the series. Furthermore, the peculiar shape of the owl's wings, the downward slope of the rows of feathers in particular, is reminiscent of R 23.

The new evidence reveals an error in my earlier description of the obverse: it is true that Athena's eye has no *caruncula lacrimalis*, but it does have a pointed inner tip. Turning to the reverse die, it is now clear that both olive leaves spring from the same point. While such details do not matter for the typology or chronology, they nevertheless enable us to come to conclusions about coins that are extremely worn or cut in pieces.

A second point must be mentioned here: it is obvious that **20α**, **22**, **22α** (a die-combination to be introduced below), and **23** share the same obverse die O 13. The new coin **20α(a)** tells that up to now the die was known only in a secondary

² There are contemporary Athenian tetradrachms repeating the master model: J. N. SVORONOS, *Les monnaies d'Athènes* (Munich 1923–6), pl. 9, 3; Ch.G. STARR, *Athenian Coinage 480–449 BC* (Oxford 1970), p. 28 f. nos. 36–37 pl. IV.

³ E. BREPOHL, *Theorie und Praxis des Goldschmieds* (5. Aufl. Leipzig 1978), pp. 164–166.

⁴ Cf. FISCHER-BOSSERT, *op. cit.*, pp. 10–13.

stage. It will be argued that **20α** represents the earliest version of the die known so far, according to the development of the die-breaks. At first sight, however, the palmette on Athena's helmet tells the opposite (*fig. 1*):



Fig. 1 Helmet palmette of **20α** and **22α**.

While the palmette of **20α**(a) has three leaves at its end, the palmette of **22α**(a) has just the middle leaf. So the outer leaves appear to have been added by a recutting. A closer look reveals the outer leaves have been removed by slightly carving the surroundings of, and enhancing, the middle leaf. In fact, the obverse die of **22**, **22α**, and **23** has to be renamed O 13'.

Now it is easy to insert the new die couple into the sequence. On the obverse die the crack at the eyebrow is just starting to develop, and there are still no flaws at the lower eyelid. Thus, the extant specimens of **22** and **23** had not yet been produced when **20α** was being struck. On the reverse the upper olive-leaf looks very clear and sharp, while on specimen **21**(a) the same area is blurred by a flaw at the lower rim of the leaf (this is on the coin itself and does not come from the cast figured in the book). The die is not likely to have been recut here. Therefore the new die coupling **20α** must have been minted before **21**. We may also observe a cross distribution here: R 21 was still kept in use while O 13' was combined with R 22 and R 23. A similar process can be observed with O 17 in the same group. Perhaps this phenomenon points to an intensified and simultaneous minting on two or even more anvils, with dies sporadically wandering to and fro. This evidence for minting practices will be amplified by the next specimen.

22α O 13'.

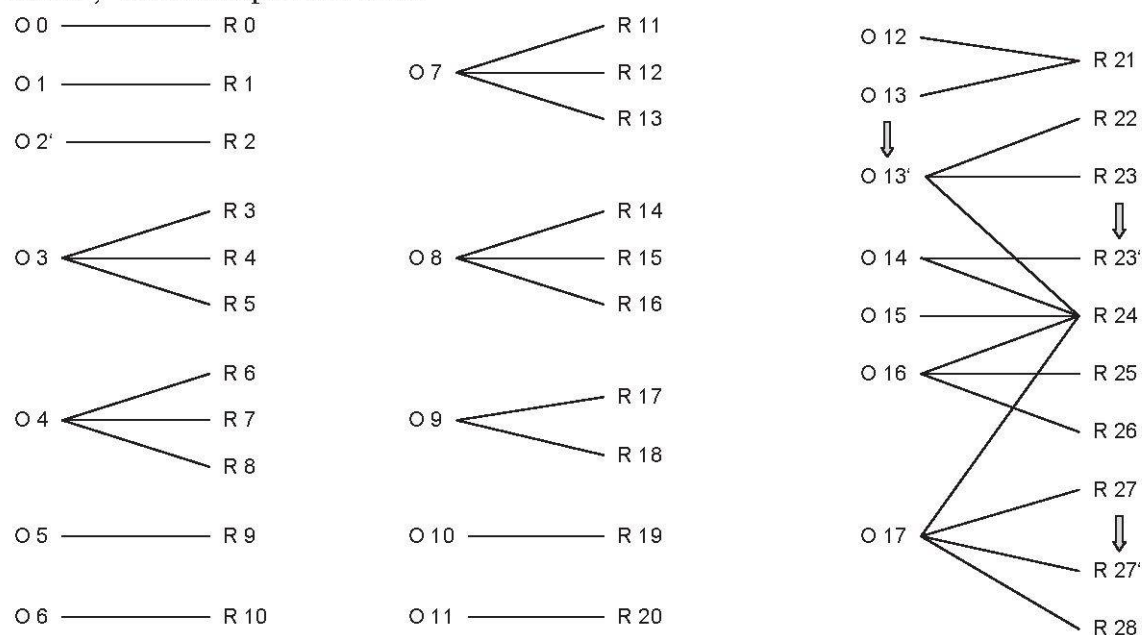
R 24.

- a) 43,03 2 Private Collection. Obverse: double struck; note the chin, cowlick and the dotted line of the crest. The missing central dot in the bulge of hair beneath the neck guard might be due to a minting-gap. Reverse: slight minting-gaps at the highest level of the relief on the stomach of the owl. Another slight weakness can be found at the olive-sprig. The gap in the *alpha* might be due to corrosion, however. Thin cut over the owl's beak.

R 24 was already the most often re-combined reverse die; now this position is strengthened by another die-link. At first sight the new specimen is not very typical of the late series, for the reverse does not look quite so flat. The upper edge rises exuberantly, almost like specimens of the middle series, for instance **14**(a) and **15**(a). Nevertheless a broad reverse die, measuring 2.53 × 2.53 cm, was used, and all four corners of the *quadratum incusum* are off flan.

The relative position of **22α** within the sequence is hard to establish. R 24 was combined with five obverse dies (O 13–O 17), and the evidence points to a disorderly use rather than to a clear sequence. At least the position of the obverse die (O 13') can be settled. There is a long crack running from the hair above the forehead to over the eyebrow. Like with **20α(a)** above, the flaws beneath the lower eyelid are still missing. Since the first mentioned crack is more developed than there, **22α** must be later than **20α**, and because of the missing flaws it must be earlier than **23** (as far as single specimens can tell). The relation to **22** needs a closer look. On Athena's helmet, there is a broad flaw on the right side of the stalk of the first (left) leaf. This flaw is still beginning with **22**. Consequently, **22α(a)** must have been minted soon after **22(a)**. While the die-link seems to fall in its place, the reverse die poses serious questions. There is a thin fissure within the upper half of the *epsilon*. This fissure is smaller on all the other relevant specimens. Looking like a very low edge on **26(a)**, the fissure can only be suspected with **25(a)** and **29(a)**. **33(a)** has it almost at the same stage as **22α(a)**. So the couplings **22α** and **33** seem to represent a late stage of R 24, **25–26** and **29** an early one. It may be added that a wave-like protrusion on the lower row of feathers of the owl's right wing corresponds to that result; as to this single respect, **33(a)** looks a bit later than **22α(a)**. The digressions are hard to define.

Before interpreting the different stages as a sequence the problematic specimen **26(b)** must be taken into account. As already discussed elsewhere, that specimen has obviously been recut in modern times.⁵ The fissure in question appears here to be at the same stage as with **25(a)** and **26(a)**. Unlike all the other specimens mentioned, there is a big crack running down from the tip of the hanging olive leaf into the left wing of the owl. At first sight, the crack seems to indicate a final stage of the die. All the other flaws, however, are contradictory. Weird as it is, specimen **26(b)** must not be used as a reference point for the history of the respective dies.



⁵ FISCHER-BOSSERT, *op. cit.*, p. 45 f.

It is now clear enough that the obverse and reverse dies of the final group **20α–33** cannot be grouped into a simple arrangement, one in which dies neatly succeeded each other. Several dies of the group, like O 17, R 21, and R 24 were combined in a way that does not conform to the overall sequence. Obviously these dies were used simultaneously with several counterparts, R 24 in particular. Connecting the beginning (O 13) and the end (O 17), R 24 makes it clear that the final group of the decadrachm series was minted within a short time-span. A cautious calculation is possible. The potential lifetime of a decadrachm die is hard to estimate, but due to its larger size it was certainly a good deal shorter than that of a tetradrachm's. Otto Mørkholm has shown that tetradrachm dies could have been kept in use for over three years, but his example appears to be an exception.⁶ The final group of the decadrachm series will have covered much less than three years; my own view is that it was struck over a period of less than one year.

30 O 17.
R 27.

b) 41,95 9 Private Collection. Obverse: some deeper parts of the relief, for instance in and around the ear, are still encrusted with the original patina. Reverse: a few cracks in the metal. A minting gap at the right side of the hanging olive-leaf.

This specimen is similar to its mate **30(a)**: all the flaws on the obverse represent the same stage of the die. On the reverse the minting-gap at the olive-leaf does not disguise the fact that the die is not yet recut; the leaf is still narrow. Having a flat reverse *incusum*, the coin is another example of the final group.

Unlike his colleague who made the obverse die of the two previous specimens (O 13), the engraver of O 17 loved the archaic touch of Athenian coinage. He tried to enhance the model by curved and tortuous, even stilted lines. Note the aquiline nose with its pointed tip, the subtle parabolic *filtrum* beneath, and the deepened area surrounding the swelling lips. Many lines are drawn like brush-strokes. One also notes the difference between the upper and lower eyelids, and the sophisticated harmony in the rim of the neck guard. The same taste can be felt in some details of the reverse die: the asymmetry of the hanging leaf (later made symmetrical, and boring, by the recutting), the pointed bars of the letters, the lazy brushwork of the *alpha*. The proportions of the owl hark back to 'early' models (cf. R 0 and R 1 above, and R 5) instead of keeping to the mannerism of the final group. Perhaps one and the same engraver was responsible for both the dies of this coin.

In any case, the final group contains both dies that are avant-garde (O 13) and dies that are emphatically archaizing (O 17). The coexistence of such diverging tendencies reminds us of the danger we face when dating single coins only by their style: without the evidence of the die-links, **30** might have been dated to much earlier times than **20α–23**.

⁶ Cf. O. MØRKHOLM, The Life of Obverse Dies in the Hellenistic Period, in: Studies in Numismatic Method Presented to Philip Grierson (Cambridge 1983), pp. 11–21.

Lastly, a few remarks on modern forgeries of the decadrachms.

F22) 46,58 5 Osnabrück.

I am glad to say that the Osnabrück specimen of the «Hoffmann» fake (**F22**) did not get lost in or soon after WW II.⁷ Christof Boehringer informed me that he studied the piece when visiting the Osnabrück Museum in 1964, and he was kind enough to make plaster casts from his 45 years old moulds for me. He also provided me with the weight and die-axis; the weight fits the ridiculously heavy weights of the whole «Hoffmann» group. Hopefully, the specimen itself will soon be found again among the museum's holdings. Then, perhaps, the ticket will inform us who the previous owner was (Ch. Schleddehaus?).

F76a) –,- - Seen in commerce 1977 (photo in LHS Forgery Archive).

This specimen of the «Burgon» fake was brought to my attention too late to be illustrated in my book; I would like to add the picture here. Like the other specimens of the «Burgon» group, this one betrays itself by the monstrous eye. Another treacherous feature is the fissured edge that occurs with several specimens (**F72**, **F73**, **F75**, and **F76a** as well). The coins look as though they had been struck on cold flans, i.e. something that is inconceivable with ancient coins of that size. Thus a modern device like a screw-press or even a lever-press might have been applied for producing these forgeries.

F87a) 40,75 11 Seen in commerce 2009. Several scratches on both sides. Minting-gaps at one eye and the stomach of the owl.

The last object to be dealt with here is another specimen of the most recent fake. It comes from the same dies as **F87**, and like that coin, was offered from Syria.

Zusammenfassung

Zu den bisher 40 bekannten kommen hier vier weitere Dekadrachma von Athen hinzu, alle derzeit in Privatbesitz. Drei davon bestätigen die Rekonstruktion der spätesten Gruppe dieser Serie, während die vierte offenbar eine der ältesten, wenn nicht gar die erste Stempelkopplung der Serie darstellt. Ferner werden drei moderne Fälschungen erörtert.

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⁷ Cf. FISCHER-BOSSERT, *op. cit.*, p. 58.



0(a)



1(a)



20α (a)



22α (a)

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30 (b)



F22



F76α



F87α

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More Athenian Decadrachms

