

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Hellenistic World. Using Coins as Sources.* By PETER THONEMANN. Guides to the Coinage of the Ancient World. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xxxii + 232. Paper, \$34.99. ISBN 978-1-107-45175-9.

The first in a new series on ancient coinage organized by the American Numismatic Society, this book applies numismatic evidence of the Hellenistic world to four central themes: globalism, identity, political economy, and ideology. The goal is to open up a specialist field to a broader audience.

Thonemann begins with a narrative account of the Sinanpaşa Hoard, a massive accumulation of silver coins of Alexander the Great that probably represents the retirement package of one of Alexander's soldiers. The hoard serves to illustrate the huge quantities of coin struck by Alexander that would steer numismatic history for the next three centuries. Alexander's coinage created what Thonemann calls a global "Hellenistic monetary civilization" which spread far beyond the range of his conquests.

This civilization is surveyed in the second chapter (*The 'Big' Hellenistic World*) thus continuing the theme of globalism, and includes, very rightly, imitations of Hellenistic coinages struck in "barbarian" regions of the ancient world. The survey ends in the easternmost extremity of this monetary civilization with the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek coins. Even if the function of these peripheral coinages differed from that of the Mediterranean basin, the imagery, form and ideas behind them were certainly inspired by the Greek world.

Chapter 3 addresses civic identity, mostly in Asia Minor. The flood of Alexander's coins into Asia Minor resulted in a reduction of civic issues as compared to the region under Persian rule. By 300 BC, the poleis of Asia Minor were striking copies of Alexander's imperial coinage (the "civic Alexanders"), perhaps to express a new global Hellenistic identity. It is only in the third and second centuries BC that expressions of local identity re-appear on civic issues, taking the form of local divinities and symbols, such as Apollo Smintheus at Alexandria Troas. These issues were not meant to be new international trade coinages, competing with the older and well-recognized coins of Alexander,

which were still plentiful, but rather expressed the vitality of civic life and the identity of the issuing polis.

Coins struck by allied groups of cities and collectives (*koiná*) are discussed in chapter four. Thonemann uses the Aetolians, the Achaean and Lycian leagues as examples of alliances that struck coins to create a sense of group identity. By contrast, the cistophori (“basket-bearers”), struck by the cities of Asia Minor after 167 BC, are effectively the royal coins of the Attalids, but in the guise of a collective coinage. With the cista on the obverse and a bow case intertwined with snakes on the reverse, these coins lack a founding ruler-portrait, reference to a shared foundational event, or anything truly common to the issuing cities. Since the Attalids had been gifted control of their territory by the Romans, these coins literally forged a *koinón* (pun intended), creating the impression of a shared identity and alliance.

Finally, Thonemann considers the little-known coinages struck for festivals organized by groups of cities. He highlights the festival of Athena Ilias, whose organizers struck festival coins every four years. These issues, Thonemann suggests, had more to do with expressing a group identity amongst the participating cities than with paying athletes or facilitating trade at the festival.

Thonemann’s last chapter on identity explores the Hellenistic identity of coins in ‘fringe’ areas (chapter 5). This includes the short-lived native dynasty that used the Achaemenid title *fratarakā* and reigned near Persepolis in the third century BC, as well as the Parthians, their allies, successors and neighbors. Not infrequently, the issues of these non-Greeks bear the profile bust of a ruler, albeit in native dress, with a seated divinity on the reverse comparable to the Zeus of Alexander or the Apollo of the Seleucids. The imagery of these dynasties is “Greek in style and form, but combatively Persian in content and meaning.” (91) A similar mixture of Greek and non-Greek elements can be found on the coins of the Bactrians and Indo-Greek kings. Thonemann explores the question Greek identity being expressed by their issuers, but one wonders if the adoption of Hellenistic-looking coinage and Greek weight standards had more to do with the need to create an accepted form of payment than an expression of identity.

Chapters 6 and 7 explore basic questions about the political economy of Hellenistic coins. Like other ancient coin issuers, the Hellenistic states lacked modern monetary policies, and struck coins largely to pay their bills. This explains the erratic issues of many cities. But states did pay attention to the circulation of their coins beyond this point. Some, like the Seleucids, opted for an

open currency system, with coins struck on the international Attic weight standard that could move freely in and out of the issuer's territory. Others, like the Ptolemies and Attalids, opted for a closed or 'epichoric' system in which coins struck at unusual weight standards did not generally circulate beyond their respective regions.

Thonemann bravely adds a chapter on the place bronze coins in Hellenistic economies and their relationship to silver. As token coins, with a metal value not equal to their face value, bronze coins required laws to enforce their acceptance. Thus one would expect them to be purely epichoric, but many seem to have circulated outside of the realms of those who issued them, and (from epigraphic evidence) they were used for a surprisingly wide range of transactions.

Chapter 8 introduces political ideology, considering the visual languages of Hellenistic coins: royal and dynastic portraitures, the trappings and images of divinities, and other expressions of power. The ideological messages of Hellenistic coins would have been seen by far eyes than any statue, painting, or inscribed edict. Thonemann's final chapter (9) discusses the earliest Roman coins of Macedonia and Asia from Flaminius onwards. In both regions, Roman interference with local coinage is surprisingly minimal, and was surely meant to convey a sense of continuity. The denarius does not arrive properly until the reign of Augustus. Roman period civic issues in the Greek East (the so-called 'Greek Imperial Coinage') were another function of civic pride with Hellenistic roots. Those same roots, Thonemann concludes, can be found in the coins of Rome's client kings in Crimea, her Parthian and Sassanian enemies, and even in modern currency.

Apart from a brief appendix at the back of the book by Andrew Meadows, this is not, nor was it intended to be, a technical manual of Hellenistic numismatics. Nowhere is the procedure for calculating die outputs discussed, nor is there a guide to identifying Hellenistic coins. But those who require such information will easily find it elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

The achievement of this book, and it is no small accomplishment, is a highly readable and up to date account of Hellenistic coinage that successfully connects coins to broad historical questions. This book is a must-read for Greek historians

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. on the quantification of ancient coin production de Callatay 1995; 2006 and 2007; and on Greek and Hellenistic numismatics in general Head 1911; Mørkholm, Grierson and Westmark 1991; and Nicolet-Pierre 2002.

and numismatists alike. It has set a very high bar indeed for the next books in this new series.

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