

The Coins and the Cult

T.V. BUTTREY

For centuries the Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone at Cyrene attracted the attendance of the faithful, whose dedications included coined money. The numismatic evidence is virtually continuous from the late 6th century B.C. to the middle of the 4th century A.D. and is scattered throughout the site. Thus we might expect the finds to provide a good survey of the small change in use in Cyrene for almost a millennium (see box). But contrary to all expectations, the finds from the Sanctuary included over a hundred silver coins and even four of gold, quite abnormal for an excavation that produced no hoards.

A second feature is the large number of bronze coins relative to silver among the later Cyrenaican issues, including relatively low value pieces of the sort customary in excavations but not necessarily to be expected at a sanctuary site. As we shall see, these results illustrate intensity of worship rather than general monetary circulation, and the particular denominations present may

Figure 1. A typical Cyrenean silver tetradrachm of the 6th century B.C. The earliest tetradrachms of Cyrene bore the design of the silphium plant (or its seed-pod), the plant which was to make Cyrene the richest city in Africa before the foundation of Alexandria. (All coins illustrated here were found at the Sanctuary and are shown at three times their actual size except for Fig. 2.)

Buttrey n.d., cat. no. 3





Figure 2a, b. (a) Gold coins are particularly uncommon among excavation finds. This quartet of 4th century B.C. issues (composed of an Attic gold stater, two Attic gold drachms, and an Attic gold tenth) from the Sanctuary presumably represents an expensive dedication. (b) Reverses of the coins.

Buttrey n.d., cat. nos. (clockwise from upper left) 101, 104, 102, 103

Excavated Coins as a Numismatic Sample

The interpretation of coins uncovered in excavation involves several numismatic and archaeological problems. It has to be assumed, and usually is obvious, that excavation finds are radically skewed toward the smallest and least valuable coins. They normally include no gold and very little silver, for people do not lose, or do not allow to remain lost, coins of significant value. We have it on good authority that the frugal housewife who has lost a silver penny lights the lamp, sweeps the floor, and searches zealously until she has found it, whereat she summons the neighbors to rejoice with her (Luke 15.8-9). No one in antiquity went about scattering gold or silver coins, or even bronze, carelessly over the ground. The more valuable coins were more earnestly sought if lost, and easier to see; the least valuable were of bronze which can be difficult to spot against the soil or floors of beaten earth. Even the bronze finds will be skewed, since it is easier to notice the loss of the larger sizes, and they are easier to

find when sought, so that they were less frequently abandoned.

There are other ways in which the archaeological sample is a skewed one. Coins may have been intentionally brought to and left at a location. Such is the case with, for example, hoards and votive deposits or dedications. Finds from these contexts may not fairly represent coins in circulation because the coins chosen for dedication or deposit are not themselves a fair representation. The skewing in this case may be the reverse of lost coins, with greater numbers of coins of high value than would be found in the general circulation.

In short, coins found on excavation do not normally provide a representative view of the whole range of the currency in question, and the reasons for this bias vary. Understanding how and why coins arrived at a site is a prerequisite to interpreting their roles in the society and politics of the day.

Glossary

- as:** the Latin word for "unit"; in Roman coinage, the basic denomination in bronze
- denarius:** the Roman ten-*as* piece in silver; slightly larger than our dime
- didrachm:** the Greek two-*drachm* silver coin
- drachm:** the basic Greek denomination of silver coin; in late 5th century B.C. Athens, a *drachm* was the daily wage of a skilled workman
- hemidrachm:** the half-*drachm* silver coin
- obverse:** the major face of a coin, "heads"
- quinarius:** the Roman half-*denarius* silver coin
- reverse:** the secondary face of a coin, "tails"
- semis:** a Roman bronze coin worth half an *as*.
- sestertius:** originally the Roman quarter-*denarius* silver coin; under the Empire, a large bronze coin worth four *asses*
- stater:** a generic denomination for some Greek gold or silver coins
- tenth:** in Greek coins the tenth of a *stater* or of a *drachm*
- tetradrachm:** the Greek silver four-*drachm* coin
- type:** the design struck on either face of a coin
- variety:** differentiation of coin type or legend

be of the kind especially appropriate to religious dedication: the prudent worshiper balances expense against benefits anticipated.

In addition to reflecting the nature of worship at the Sanctuary, the coins also reflect the politics and economics of the day. For example, both the largely Archaic and Classical coins of silver and the Ptolemaic coins of bronze were nearly all struck at Cyrene (see Table 1). The other two major Cyrenaican mints, Barce and Euesperides, and the numerous Greek mints abroad, notably the Ptolemaic mint at Alexandria, contribute almost nothing, which is consonant with other Cyrenaican excavations. While it may not be surprising that the bronze coins were minted locally in Greek times, we might expect that silver and gold coins from foreign mints would be in use. But the Archaic and early Classical silver coins include not a single piece struck outside of Cyrenaica, suggesting that at this period the precious metal circulation, too, was largely self-contained.

The 834 coins discovered in the excavation of the Demeter and Persephone Sanctuary have provided a mass of new information, but only to a small extent does that information illuminate the financing of the cult. Let us consider what we are learning about Cyrenaican coins, what we are learning from them about their political setting, and what more we can say about the Sanctuary because of their discovery.

Table 1
The Sanctuary coins
Of the 834 coins found, over 90 percent were struck for or in Cyrenaica.

	Gold	Silver	Bronze
Cyrene mint	4	108	613
Barce mint		2	
Euesperides mint		1	8
Roman Cyrenaica, 1st c. B.C./1st c. A.D.			7
Roman 2nd c. A.D. of Cyrenaica			17
other Greek mints		1	7
Roman		2	32
Byzantine			2
Islamic			1
modern			4
illegible			25
Totals	4	114	716

Table 2
The broad chronological distribution of all coins found in the Sanctuary

	Gold	Silver	Bronze
6th-5th c. B.C.		103	
4th c. B.C.	4	4	75
3rd/early 1st c. B.C.		5	551
late 1st c. B.C./1st c. A.D.		1	15
2nd c. A.D.			25
3rd c. A.D.		1	5
4th c. A.D.			12
Byzantine-modern uncertain			6
Totals	4	114	716



Figure 3. When a second design was introduced, for the reverse of the coin, it was usually of the local African deity, Ammon, identified by the Greeks with their own Zeus. The profile head of Zeus-Ammon became a characteristic Cyrenean coin type of the 6th and 5th century B.C., as on this previously unpublished Asiatic didrachm of about 475-435 B.C.

Buttrey n.d., cat. no. 97



Figure 4. A silver Attic drachm of ca. 510-490 B.C., one of many found in the Sanctuary; it was presumably an appropriate sum to dedicate to the goddess.

Buttrey n.d., cat. no. 14

Silver Coins of the 6th and 5th Centuries B.C.

The silver coins found at the Sanctuary raise an archaeological question. They by no means represent a cross-section of Cyrenaican coinage for they are almost all early, are predominantly issues not common in numismatic collections today, and include some new varieties. This relatively uncommon assemblage of Archaic and early Classical silver coins of the 6th and early 5th centuries forms the bulk (81 percent) of the silver finds (Figs. 1,3), while the common issues of silver civic tetradrachms and didrachms of the later 5th and 4th centuries are completely unrepresented.

This peculiarity cannot be explained by casual and random loss, even though the individual pieces were found scattered in the earth. Many of the early coins are of the largest denomination, least agreeably lost, i.e., tetradrachms, whose presence would be easily explicable in a hoard but not in random debris. Certain varieties of tetradrachm are

deduplicated, while others are wanting. At the same time the middle denominations of drachm and hemidrachm appear to be over-represented. And altogether there are so many of them. Such quantities of lost silver coins are never found scattered through excavation debris.

The explanation must be that they

“Such quantities of lost silver coins are never found scattered through excavation debris.”

derive from an unrecovered deposit (or possibly more than one), broken up owing to earthquake or land-slip. In the archaeological context of a sanctuary, such a deposit would constitute a votive dedication rather than a private hoard. The irregular donations of the faithful would also explain the curious composition of the group, richest in the middle

denominations and extending over several decades, yet uneven in its representation of the whole period.

The most obvious feature of the silver finds is the frequency of the middle denominations—almost two-thirds are drachms (Fig. 4) and hemidrachms. They are relatively common today in public and private collections but in the context of our finds these two denominations do seem to have been particularly abundant. Presumably they were the most appropriate denominations to attract divine favor. The still smaller silver denominations are scarcer in the finds, but this may be owing to the difficulty of spotting them in the soil during excavation.

It is not possible to say with any precision when the deposit was closed, and of course this sort of deposit might well have continued open and been added to from time to time. The distribution of issues suggest that it ran roughly to the middle of the 5th century B.C. After that time there is a rapid falling off of silver finds, indicating the closing of the deposit. Four gold coins dating to the 4th century were discovered (Fig.



Figure 5. The new type of bronze coin with the busts of Ptolemy Soter (shown here) and the goddess Libya. It was introduced under Ptolemy II after the Egyptian recovery of Cyrenaica in the mid-3rd century B.C., as a reminder of where power really lay.

Buttrey n.d., cat. no. 220



Figure 6. A relatively large bronze issued by Euergetes II as king of an independent Cyrenaica (163-145 B.C.), depicting an archetypal Ptolemaic eagle standing on a thunderbolt.

Buttrey n.d., cat. no. 281

2), but their relatively late date suggests that they were not associated with the silver treasure, although they too must have been dedications to the Sanctuary.

Coins of the Ptolemaic Period

The coinage of small change in bronze came relatively late to Cyrenaica, as to all Greek cities. It is only toward the end of the 4th century B.C. that it begins, and only then would we expect to find any coins at all in a conventional excavation. Almost all of the finds at the Sanctuary from this point on are of bronze. About three-quarters of the types known to have been struck between the late 4th and the early 1st century B.C. are represented to some extent. The types of coins often reflect local themes; for example, an issue of the Revolt of 313-312 B.C., bearing the figuration of the Tomb of Battus, recalls the foundation of the autonomous city (see “The Sanctuary’s History and Architecture,” this

issue). Or, they reflect the nature of the area, such as the small jerboa/crab coin which suggests Cyrene’s involvement with the land and the sea.

The archaeological remains of the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C. from the Sanctuary illustrate the conundrum inherent in the numismatic material, in that while there was major expansion of the Sanctuary at this time, there was a falling off in the value of votive coins. The expansion had to be financed somehow, and offerings must frequently have taken the form of money. But there are virtually no finds of silver or gold coins to document such offerings, and in evaluating the evidence of the bronze coinage, we have to allow that the finds may not be reliable indicators of financial activity.

On the other hand, the finds do indicate the tenor of the times. For example, on the re-establishment of Cyrenaica as an Egyptian province under Ptolemy II (ca. 258 B.C.), a new type of bronze coin was introduced. This type depicted busts of Ptolemy Soter and the goddess Libya, symbolically binding Cyre-

naica to the Egyptian kingdom (Fig. 5). The type was struck repeatedly for the next century and a half.

Coins of the Late Ptolemaic Period

From this point forward the traditional picture of the Cyrenaican coinage needs revision and considerable enlargement. The scholarship of this century has largely denied coinage to late Ptolemaic Cyrenaica, admitting a few pieces of Euergetes II, but none at all of his two successors, Soter II and Apion. Yet it is at this point that the Cyrene Sanctuary finds become particularly abundant (see Table 2). There had been a surge of coinage under Ptolemy III Euergetes, from the middle of the 3rd century B.C., and a much greater one in the last half of the 2nd century under Euergetes II, the younger brother of Ptolemy VI, who ruled as king of an independent Cyrenaica before ascending the Egyptian throne. His coins carry the Ptolemaic eagle in assertion of his own regal



Figure 7. An example of the dreadful small change of Soter II and Apion with which the coinage of Greek Cyrenaica ended. The type carries a stylized Isiac headdress.

Buttrey n.d., cat. no. 395



Figure 8. A bronze semis of the magistrate L. Lollius, struck for the Roman province of Cyrenaica, 1st century B.C.

Buttrey n.d., cat. no. 737

authority. About two-thirds of the Demeter Sanctuary bronzes are the small size pieces which can now be attributed to the last three Ptolemaic reigns in Cyrenaica, those of Euergetes II, Soter II, and Apion.

This predominance of late Ptolemaic coins coincides with the evidence of reports from other excavations and casual Cyrenaican finds. Particular interest lies in enlarging our understanding of late Ptolemaic monetary policy. In addition to the issues illustrated by the excavations, a range of ostentatious bronze denominations were produced by Euergetes II (Fig. 6) and these can now be attributed to Cyrenaica. The largest of these coins have not surfaced thus far in any reported excavation, but this is not surprising, since casual coin finds are always weak in the more visible and/or more valuable denominations. But several important finds of Ammon/eagle coins in addition to ours confirm the attribution. These issues reintroduced the Ptolemaic eagle reverse coin, which had not been struck in Cyrenaica for almost a century. We can surmise

that the traditional Ptolemaic coin type both legitimized Euergetes' reign and reflected his independence from the administration in Alexandria, whose officials had previously been authorizing the Soter/Libya issues for Cyrenaica.

On the death of Euergetes II the kingdom was inherited by Soter II. That he had coins struck in Cyrenaica is proved conclusively by the abundance of very small change, the kind of coin unlikely to travel far, signed with his name or monogram (Fig. 7). Soter's unquiet career included the loss of Cyrenaica to Ptolemy Apion at some unknown time late in the 2nd century B.C. Scholars have doubted that any coinage could be attributed to Apion. But there are late issues of Soter/Libya, Ammon/eagle, and Ammon/Isiac headdress which bear no eponym or monogram and are therefore not likely to have been struck under Euergetes or Soter. They also are of the smallest denomination, and wretchedly made, so that they can hardly fall anywhere else. The three types carry on from Soter, and like his must have been

issued in relatively large quantities.

Apion died in 96 B.C., leaving his kingdom to the Roman people. Apparently Apion's will actually referred to the royal estates and did not involve the cities and their territories. What little we know of the Romans' response for the first twenty years bears this out: apparently they simply collected the royal rents. For a long time there was no Roman coinage for what was to become the province of Cyrenaica (with Crete), nor any autonomous coinages of the cities. The latest unsigned small bronzes might be civic strikes, following the death of Apion. But the cities had their own traditions to draw on and there was no need to continue a Ptolemaic typology. As far as we can see they did not strike coins, and the Greek coinage of Cyrenaica, of glorious tradition, ended in the lamentable small bronzes of Apion.

If Greek gold and silver coin arrived in trade from outside Cyrenaica, we have virtually no trace of it. Bronze coins too seem never to have entered in any quantity. There is a single piece from Judaea matched by



Figure 9. Small bronze coin portraying the emperor Trajan, A.D. 98-117.

Buttrey n.d., cat. no. 778



Figure 10. A Roman bronze sestertius of the emperor Balbinus (A.D. 238), the kind of coin which must have been in everyday circulation in Cyrenaica.

Buttrey n.d., cat. no. 785

another reported elsewhere at Cyrene and a third found at Ptolemais. The Demeter Sanctuary produced one Achaean League hemidrachm; another was found at Ptolemais, and there is an unpublished hoard of them in the Shahat (modern Cyrene) museum. But the totals of such materials are very small, and what is

"the Greek coinage of Cyrenaica, of glorious tradition, ended in the lamentable small bronzes of Apion."

particularly noteworthy of Cyrenaican finds is the virtual absence of Ptolemaic coinage from Egypt until the very end—coins of Cleopatra VII and subsequently Augustus. The pattern of the finds from Cyrene's port, Apollonia, is similar: only one piece of Ptolemy II, then coins of Cleopatra and Augustus. The diffi-

culties of communication between Cyrenaica and Egypt, whether by land or by sea, seem always to have restricted the interchange of money.

Coinage from the west was even scarcer. The huge Carthaginian and Siculo-Punic bronze coinages which are found all over the western Mediterranean and even in Dalmatia are virtually unknown in Cyrenaica. Nothing appeared in the Demeter Sanctuary or the Apollonia excavations. All this confirms the commercial isolation of Cyrenaica from both Egypt and Tripolitania recently demonstrated by Fulford.

The Roman Coins

The Ptolemaic coinage is presumed to have ceased with the death of Apion. At some subsequent point in the 1st century B.C., production began of a local Roman provincial coinage specifically for Cyrenaica (Fig. 8). We have no useful information about the officials who signed it, which creates problems of relative and absolute chronology. Only the

issues of Cleopatra and Antony (he had given her control of the province) can be dated with any accuracy before the latest issues in the name of Augustus and Tiberius.

The denominations of this provincial coinage are explicable when keyed to Roman usage, and the occasional halved pieces reflect Roman adjustment. But in practice most small change must have continued to be Ptolemaic, now perhaps revalued to accommodate it to Roman coinage. Evidence of the continuity of use is the scarcity of the provincial coins, which cannot have provided a sufficient monetary stock to substitute for the earlier bronze. The small proportion of the provincial coins in the Demeter Sanctuary finds is typical and cannot be taken as having a special significance for the activity of the shrine.

Finds of Roman imperial coins in the Demeter Sanctuary are not numerous, but they run from Claudius in the 1st century to the middle of the 4th century A.D. There can be no doubt that Cyrenaica had already entered the Roman monetary orbit

already in the 1st century B.C. A century after the provincial bronzes ceased, local coinage again appeared, with silver and bronze coins bearing the heads of the Roman emperors Trajan (Fig. 9), Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius, together with the local type, the head of Zeus Ammon. Some of these even bore Greek legends.

For a long time these issues were thought to have been struck in Cappadocia, along with similar issues whose types referred to other provinces of the Empire. Excavations have now shown that these issues were used only in Cyrenaica, and a closer examination of style, fabric, and circulation patterns now make it certain that the mint was at Cyrene, where striking occurred from dies cut at Rome, or perhaps the coins were produced at Rome itself, for export to Cyrenaica. The motive for this coinage remains a mystery, since regular Roman imperial coinage was, and continued to be, in regular use in Cyrenaica. These pieces were in fact of Roman denomination: silver denarii and quinarii, with bronzes of several denominations. There is no knowing their purpose; since the first issue pre-dates the Jewish revolt of A.D. 115 they can have nothing to do with it or the subsequent Hadrianic rebuilding. (One could guess that the relatively large issues of low denominations were intended to replace the surviving small module Ptolemaic bronze, for there is no doubt that Roman coin continued to be pieced out with the Ptolemaic, examples of which have been found in the Demeter Sanctuary in contexts as late as the 3rd century A.D.)

These issues bear on our apprehension of activity in the Sanctuary, since the limited number of Roman

imperial coins alone might suggest that worship was less lively than in the Greek past. But when the Greek legend coins of 2nd century A.D. Cyrenaica are added to the Roman, the profile of the imperial coinage is greatly altered. For the first century there are only 2 coins, for the second, 25—by far the busiest period until the second and third quarters of the 4th century. Perhaps the coins should be associated with the embellishments provided in the Sanctuary, e.g., numerous dedications of statues. In contrast there are no small size finds at all for about a century between the 170s and the 270s A.D.

Whatever damage the earthquake of A.D. 262 may have done, the coins suggest that the Sanctuary had been quiescent for decades. However, the small total of imperial coins could in part be owing to their large size: everything up to the 270s A.D. is in bronze, and the usual Roman bronze denominations are much larger in size than the late Hellenistic Greek ones, hence less apt to be lost. For that reason one would suppose that the four large 3rd century sesterces (Fig. 10) were likely to have been deposits in the Sanctuary rather than casual losses. By contrast the excavation produced proportionately quite a lot of coins from the last years of the 3rd to the middle of the 4th centuries, coins much smaller in module and easier to lose.

The imperial coin finds end abruptly with Constantius II and Julian (A.D. 360-363). Something happened to the life of the Sanctuary, and the archaeological evidence suggests that it was the earthquake of A.D. 365. In contrast the coin finds of Apollonia continue regularly through the next three centuries, coming

down to Heraclius and the fall of the city in A.D. 642. The Demeter Sanctuary finds show clearly that worship had ceased there, and that even casual visits had ceased, for otherwise we would expect a scattering of odd losses. Instead there is nothing at all until two pieces of Heraclius and a single Islamic stray from 250 years later.

• • •

Our evaluation of the evidence of the bronze coins from the Sanctuary can only be provisional, for the comparative material is so slight. Only one other group of excavation coins from Cyrenaica of any size has yet been published, the finds from Apollonia. These were excavated from locations all over the city, whereas the Cyrene finds derive from a single locus, the Sanctuary. Yet the two groups are reasonably comparable. Both include examples from the whole sweep of Cyrenaican bronze coinage, from the 4th to the 1st centuries B.C. and on into Roman times, and in roughly the same proportions, so that it seems unlikely that all of the Sanctuary coins are dedications, rather than just losses. Presumably the sort of commerce in votive offerings known everywhere was conducted on the premises, and that would account for many of the losses in small change. At the same time, even tiny dedications of money—the widow's mite—can be of significance in the aggregate, so perhaps we ought not to reject too quickly the possibility that even the least prepossessing of the coins represented a heartfelt dedication to one of the kindest and most powerful goddesses. 2

Bibliography

Buttrey, T.V.

1977. "The Coins." In *Apollonia, the Port of Cyrene. Excavations by the University of Michigan 1965-1967*, ed. R. Goodchild, J. Pedley, and D. White, pp. 335-70. Supplement to *Libya Antiqua* 4. Tripoli: The Department of Antiquities.

Buttrey, T.V.

n.d. *The Extramural Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone at Cyrene, Libya: Final Reports*. Vol. 6, *The Coins*. University Museum Monograph. Forthcoming.

Fulford, Michael

1989. "To East and West: The Mediterranean Trade of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania in Antiquity." *Libyan Studies* 20:169-91.

Poole, R. S.

1883. *Catalogue of the Greek Coins in the British Museum: The Ptolemies, Kings of Egypt*. London: The British Museum.

Robinson, E.

1927. *British Museum Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Cyrenaica*. London: The British Museum.