



SICILY

Art and Invention between Greece and Rome

Edited by CLAIRE L. LYONS MICHAEL BENNETT CLEMENTE MARCONI

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with ALEXANDRA SOFRONIEW

THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM • LOS ANGELES

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Sometimes called the *Mona Lisa* of ancient coins, the tetradrachm of Aitna is widely considered one of the most precious ancient coins in the world, or even the most precious. Its unrivaled reputation rests on several facts: it is the only surviving coin of its type, and is wonderfully preserved; it was engraved by an exceptional artist; and it is of paramount historical importance. First published in 1867 while in the collection of the Verga Catalano family of Catania, the Aitna tetradrachm was acquired by the Castellani brothers, Alessandro and Augusto, celebrated jewelers and collectors of antiquities in Rome. In 1882 they sold the coin for the enormous sum of eight thousand francs to the young Belgian collector Lucien de Hirsch (1856–1887). The only son of one of the wealthiest men of his time, Lucien de Hirsch built a collection of nearly nineteen hundred first-rate Greek coins before his premature death.

Acclaimed since the nineteenth century by leading numismatists, the tetradrachm of Aitna has been described as perfectly encapsulating a history lesson. The coin was struck in the name of the AITNAION—inhabitants of Aitna—most likely during the decade from 476 to 466 B.C., when the population of Katane had been relocated and the city refounded as Aitna under Hieron I, perhaps in connection with an eruption of the volcano. Alternatively, the coin may have been struck shortly after Hieron's death by the citizens of Aitna, newly expelled from the reestablished Katane, who settled at Inessa (consequently renamed Aitna) on the slopes of the mountain.

The iconography of the Aitna tetradrachm—a powerful head of Silenos on the obverse and a seated Zeus Aitnaios on the reverse—is unparalleled among Greek coins. Every detail is rich with geographical and mythological meaning.

SILENOS The son of Hermes or Pan, Silenos is the companion of the wine god Dionysos. Considering the lush vineyards surrounding Mount Etna, whose slopes were famed for their fertility, the figure of Silenos is most appropriate. Additionally, Silenos is described by Euripides in *The Cyclops* as the servant of Polyphemos, the one-eyed Cyclops who lived in a cave on Mount Etna.

BEETLE The beetle (*kantharos*) of Mount Etna, recently identified as the rare *Thorectes marginatus*, was the largest known beetle in the ancient world (Aristophanes, *Peace* 73).

ZEUS Zeus Aitnaios was the master of Mount Etna (Pindar, *Pythian* 1.6–7, 1.29–33, and 4.10); according to the *Aitna* poem, a Latin text of unknown authorship, Zeus buried Enkelados, one of the Giants, under Etna, and it was his final struggles that caused the volcano to erupt.

Figure 9
Silver Tetradrachm of Aitna

476–466 B.C. Diameter: 2.6 cm (1 in.); weight: 17.2 g (0.6 oz.). Brussels, Cabinet des Médailles, Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique, inv. De Hirsch 269

PANTHER'S SKIN The panther's skin is associated with Dionysos and thus with wine and vineyards.

VINE BRANCH Grapevines allude to the rich vineyards on the slopes of Etna.

THUNDERBOLT The thunderbolt is the chief attribute of Zeus and a symbol of divine retribution.

EAGLE The eagle is another attribute of Zeus and usually appears with him on coins.

FIR TREE In antiquity, the slopes of Mount Etna were heavily forested (Diodorus Siculus 14.42.4; Strabo 6.2.8), as they are today. The tree is most likely an *Abies nebrodensis*, a species of fir that is now endangered; only a few specimens, located on the northern coast of Sicily between Palermo and Cefalù, survive.

Die engravers' signatures appear on Sicilian coinage only during the late fifth century B.C. Despite numismatists' current preference not to attribute unsigned coins to anonymous "masters," one can make an exception for a small group of outstanding coins commonly assigned to the "Master of Aitna" or the "Master of Silens." The Aitna tetradrachm seems to have been produced by the same hand as that responsible for another spectacular issue struck at the nearby mint of Naxos, which shows a drinking—or perhaps already drunk—Silenos on the reverse (see fig. 2). Charles Seltman was especially enthusiastic about the Master of Aitna, whom he described as a "man of genius" who "made the most magnificent head of seilenos in all art." Two innovative features shared by the large, bearded male heads on the obverses of the Aitna (Silenos) and Naxos (Dionysos) tetradrachms deserve special notice: the wavy truncation of the neck is more sophisticated than the usual straight or slightly curved line observed on other coins; and the engraver felt free to go beyond the circular frame of the dotted border, which in both cases is broken by a long beard. These elements may be considered the trademarks of a master who did not hesitate to break the artistic conventions of his time.

FRANÇOIS DE CALLATAÏ

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Boehringer 1968; de Callataï 2010; Garraffo 1984; Naster 1959; Rizzo 1946; Seltman 1949 (see pp. 15, 54).

