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A SILVER FRACTION OF APTERA IN CRETE

H. Bartlett Wells

Standard literature indicates that the first small silver coins of Aptera weighed a little less than three grams. Thus Svoronos reports as follows for specimens known to him¹:

No. 6: 2.45 g London (BMC 4)
Paris (poor condition)

No. 7: 2.78 g Imhoof
2.80 g London (BMC 5)
2.59 g Munich
2.57 g Loebbecke
2.50 g von Rauch (in *Berliner Blätter*, I, p. 249, 4, 1863)

These are evidently hemidrachms or triobols of Aeginetic standard.

The coins bear on the obverse a female head right, with hair rolled, and on the reverse a bow with the string downward. The bow image is surrounded by various letters of the ethnic ΑΠΤΑΡΑ, part above and part below it, in either of two combinations.

The coins in this weight range are rather rare - in more recent times the British Museum has acquired, according to Dr. Martin Price, two further specimens of BMC 5, weighing 2.51 grams and 2.50 grams (and by the way, he indicates that BMC 5 itself is now registered as weighing only 2.36 grams), and SNG Copenhagen has as No. 433 one more, of 2.67 grams.

The presence at the Fogg Art Museum (Harvard University) of what is apparently an Aptera silver coin of the same period and with similar types but which weighs only 1.67 grams has led to a comparison with Aptera copper coins bearing the same sort of types. Svoronos gives the weights of only two of the copper specimens which he records under No. 8 - 2.10 grams (Imhoof) and 1.75 grams (Lambros). SNG Copenhagen has two coppers with types of this character, No. 323 of 1.89 grams and No. 324 of 1.95 grams. The Fogg Art Museum has one of 2.41 grams. All except the last of these four weights are far enough below the hemidrachms, and close enough to the 1.67 grams of our coin here, to make one consider whether this coin apparently of silver might in fact be a copper example chemically plated with silver after it had been struck, perhaps in modern times with deceptive intent.

The surface of the coin was therefore examined with particular care and under magnification (Figure 1).



Fig. 1

No tinge of copper was discovered anywhere, nor any of the variously colored corrosion salts that one might expect to see appearing upon exposed copper. On the other hand, the silver surface has been wasted, seamed, and pitted, so that one has a good look into strata of the metal lying below the original surface. These irregularities would have penetrated any light modern plating, and indeed foil-plating as well. Accordingly it seemed permissible to believe that this is in fact an ancient silver coin of Aptera new as to its reverse type and its denomination, which may be that of a diobol.

This reverse differs from those on the triobols in that its letter *rho* is reversed and it adds an *iota*; its inscription reads **IAP** ΑΠΤ, while theirs read **ΑΠΤΑ** or **ΑΠΤΑ**.

Inquiry has determined that no silver Aptera coin of anything close to this weight, or with such a reverse inscription as this, is present in the collections of the American Numismatic Society, the British Museum, the National Archeological Museum at Athens, or the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

Since Svoronos had so frequently referred to «Berlin» as the location of his specimens, and since a number of «Imhoof» coins could well have gone there, a slightly later inquiry was addressed to the Münzkabinett at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. In reply H.D. Schultz provided the gratifying information that a coin, struck from what seem to be the same dies as Figure 1 here and weighing 1.99 grams, is in that collection. Plaster casts were kindly presented by Dr. Schultz, and photographs from these are offered as Figure 2.



Fig. 2

It is clear from the Berlin specimen, which is evidently in excellent condition and has perhaps lost no weight at all, that 1.99 grams must be considered close to the standard at which the coin was struck. This renders even more tempting the hypothesis to the effect that both the coins illustrated are in fact diobols of Aeginetic standard - the Berlin one perfect and the Harvard one deteriorated through physico-chemical causes even though little worn in circulation.

Dr. Schultz writes that the records of his museum indicate that Imhoof-Blumer acquired this Aptera coin in 1890, thus after *Monnaies de la Crète Ancienne* went to press (it appeared in the same year), and that the coin came from Imhoof-Blumer to the Berlin museum in 1900. It is on that account that Imhoof-Blumer and the Berlin museum, both frequent sources for coin references in Svoronos, were unable to provide him with particulars on this coin for his book. He may have known of it from post-publication correspondence with Imhoof-Blumer or with the Berlin museum, but he may not have had occasion to publish the coin in his later work.

There are some mechanical points of interest in this pair of coins, but only one can lead to a definite conclusion for the present.

The final *iota* of the Berlin inscription is a simple vertical bar, whereas on the Harvard one it is like a modern capital letter «J». Close inspection of the curve on the Harvard coin shows that it is an addition to the original die. The metal of the coin stands at this point higher than in the rest of the intended *iota*. Thus the engraver's chisel must have cut deeper into the die at a point where a normal *iota* had already been incised. Hence the Berlin coin precedes the Harvard one in date.

There is a weakness to the chin of the female head on the Harvard coin, and the modelling of the eye is almost entirely gone. This is not wear from circulation, for some of the hair treatment (in much higher relief and more exposed to wear through its central position) can be made out. These conditions are a consequence of chemical attrition, and do not prejudice the thesis that the dies for the Berlin and Harvard specimens are the same save for the repair or amendment on the reverse of the latter.

But at this writing I have failed to find a reason in political or economic history to explain why, within the sixty years 330-270 B.C., Aptera should have produced (in addition to tetradrachms) both triobols and diobols, nor to show whether these two denominations were issued simultaneously; or if not, which came first.

Dr. Price writes me that it was hard to lay hands on silver in Crete, and that the small issues among its coinages plus the numerous overstrikes even among these reflect a need to keep silver within the island community. The increase in the number of mints at the beginning of the period 330-270 B.C. may, as Le Rider suggests, have been made possible through silver brought back by Cretan mercenaries paid off abroad, this supply gradually being used up until by 270 B.C. many civic coinages came to a halt. But that supply and its being doled out in Cretan silver coins does not seem to have had a bearing on these questions regarding mere denominations at Aptera.

The use of the reversed *rho* for the inscriptions here seems meaningless for Cretan dating within this period - Aptera coppers carry the reversed *rho* into the second and perhaps the first century B.C. (Svoronos 60 and BMC 18); and in the imperial period engravers at Cydonia seem content still to use inscriptions that are retrograde through and through (Svoronos 94, 117, 130 for example).

Whatever its date, the head on the obverse of the Berlin coin is a noteworthy achievement. The face is an unconventional and exotic one, almost awe-inspiring if it were not for a pervasive girlishness. There has been no falling off in artistic standards here.

¹ J. Svoronos, *Numismatique de la Crète Ancienne* (1890), 15.

² Thanks for this information are due respectively to Nancy M. Waggoner, Martin Price, Mando Karamessini-Oeconomidou, Daphne Nash and Michel Amandry; to the last named, in addition, for the information that such a coin equally fails to be represented among the casts made from Cretan coins by G. Le Rider and now preserved at the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris.

³ G. Le Rider, *Monnaies crétoises du V^e au I^e siècle av. J.-C.* (1966), 192.