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THE HUNT DEKADRACHM

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This paper describes a Syracusan silver dekadrachm (ten-drachma) coin of c *400* BC*, now in the Hunt Museum, Limerick, that is set in a gold ring with a text in elaborate Lombardic letters of early fourteenth-century date identifying it as one of the thirty pieces of silver for which Christ was betrayed by Judas. It is an unusual and early example of this type of relic.*

The Gospel of St Matthew (26: 14–16) tells us that Jesus was betrayed by Judas for thirty pieces of silver:

> Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went unto the chief priests,
> And said unto them, 'What will ye give me and I will deliver him unto you?' And they covenanted with him for thirty pieces of silver.
> And from that time he sought opportunity to betray him.

The other Gospel accounts are similar, although Mark and Luke only mention money and do not specify thirty pieces of silver, while John simply mentions the betrayal by Judas. Matthew is the only one of the four to take the story further: he tells us (27: 3–8) that Judas later repented and took the thirty pieces of silver back to the chief priests and elders, throwing down the pieces of silver in the Temple before hanging himself. The chief priests took the silver pieces up, but said: 'It is not lawful for to put them into the Treasury, because it is the price of blood' (*quia precium sanguinis est* in the Vulgate version).

Throughout the Middle Ages various legends, accounts and commentaries expanded on this episode. Relics considered to be examples of the thirty pieces of silver have not been widely studied, or their significance realised. The only major study in English is by Sir George Hill who gave a paper on the subject to the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1904, which was subsequently printed in *Archaeologia*.[1] Hill's research showed that the thirty pieces of silver were sometimes identified with rings of wrought metal and sometimes with coins, which in turn were sometimes linked with the gifts of the Three Magi. Sometimes the coins are of silver, sometimes of gold.

The coin we discuss here (fig 1), while not unusual in itself, is significant for its relevance to this theme. It is a Syracusan dekadrachm of the late fifth century BC, or possibly the earliest fourth, from a well-attested series originating from dies signed by Euainetos.[2]

1. Hill 1905; he published a revised version in Hill 1920.
2. Gallatin 1930, obverse 9 and reverse 14.

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Fig 1. The Hunt dekadrachm, *c* 400 BC: obverse and reverse. *Photograph*: courtesy of the Hunt Museum, Limerick

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The series has been well studied: it suffices to say here that it is currently connected with minting by Dionysios of Syracuse during his attempts to counter Carthaginian aggression in eastern Sicily in the last decade of the fifth century BC.[3]

This particular example is not unknown to the world, and it is referenced in Hill's works,[4] but it has so far lain hidden in the depths of a mid-nineteenth-century Parisian catalogue,[5] in the Hunt Museum's website and museum guide[6] and in a general book on the archaeology of Greece.[7] The coin was purchased by John Hunt, a connoisseur of early medieval art, at an unknown date and in 1978 it was incorporated into his foundation, the Hunt Museum, in Limerick, where it now forms a small but outstanding exhibit.[8] It is associated with a numismatic card disc, with annotations in various hands. One of these, which says 'Rev 366 – same sale', might give one small clue as to its history. The reference is probably to Boehringer's reverse die 366 of the Syracuse series. Unfortunately, for our purposes, this is an extremely common die – Boehringer lists thirty-three such coins – but the disc does suggest that the sale of the dekadrachm took place after the publication of Boehringer's 1929 catalogue.[9]

What distinguishes the piece is the mounting of the coin (fig 2), and no doubt this is what drew Hunt's attention to it in the first place. The mount is of gold, with a ring for a pendant and plenty of lead to fix it to the coin, obscuring a little of its surface. Engraved on the mount are the words from Matthew 27 cited above – *QUIA.PRECIUM.SANGUINIS. EST* ('since it is the price of blood')[10] – and this inscription gives the piece its unique character.

Medieval attempts to identify the thirty coins of the Gospel are treated fully in Hill's excellent review and, as he points out, 'no single one of the professed relics was actually a coin of the kind that was in circulation in Judaea at the time of Christ'. Nearly all the coins in his list are of Rhodian origin and much earlier than the first century AD. One possible reason for this, as Hill points out, is that Crusaders used Rhodes as a base, and were probably familiar with the ancient coins of this island. Another possible reason, which Hill does not mention, is that, unlike this dekadrachm, several of these Rhodian coins bear the head of Helios crowned by the rays of the sun; to some viewers this might look like the Crown of Thorns associated with the Passion of Christ.

Among the other 'pre-Judas' coins that Hill lists, only two can be identified: 'an ancient barbarous Celtic imitation of a silver tetradrachm of Philip II of Macedon', reportedly 'sent from Silesia',[11] and the dekadrachm that is the subject of this paper. The dekadrachm stands out from the other coins both for its impressive size and for the fact that it is unlikely to have acquired its 'holy' status in the eastern Mediterranean world (something that is also true of the 'Celtic' piece). In antiquity, at any rate, these coins did not travel east, nor did most other pieces minted in the Italian peninsula. Exceptions are rare: perhaps the most

3. Rutter 2009.
4. Hill 1905, 250, no. 16; Hill 1920, no. 20.
5. Anon 1864, no. 1769 (the date of 1862, given in Mély 1899, is an error).
6. <www.huntmuseum.com/collection/collection-items/mg-034.aspx> (accessed 9 July 2015); Anon 2002, 107.
7. Johnston 1976, 118.
8. The date of purchase most probably precludes the otherwise attractive idea that the coin inspired Oliver Gogarty's poem, 'With a coin from Syracuse', which dates to 1933 or earlier.
9. Boehringer 1929, 208–10.
10. The text in the Anon 1864 catalogue omits the punctuation mark between the last two words.
11. Hill 1920, 110, no. 21, with n 2.

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Fig 2. The Hunt dekadrachm's mount, early 14th century AD. *Photograph*: courtesy of the Hunt Museum, Limerick

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striking example is a hoard of small Sicilian bronzes from central Greece of much the same date as the dekadrachm,[12] but these were probably the 'savings' of a mercenary who had been operating in Sicily; the pieces would have had little value in their place of discovery. The same is true of the five contemporary Sicilian bronze fractions from the Athenian Agora listed by Kroll.[13] A silver dekadrachm is a far different proposition, though the fragility of the *argumentum e silentio* is demonstrated by the find of a bronze coin of the Syracusan tyrant Agathokles, datable to *c* 295–290 BC, that was placed in the primary burial in a tomb at Kymissala, Rhodes, to be used as Charon's obol.[14] The political geography of the Mediterranean was much different *c* 300 BC than a century earlier, however, and the likelihood that our coin remained in Sicily or southern Italy must remain high.

This is corroborated by the nature of the script on the ring. While Hill describes the letters as Gothic, they are really elaborate Lombardic letters. The letter A has a straight bar rather than a broken cross bar. Exploring the dates of letters on bishops' seals in England, H S Kingsford dated the broken cross bar to the period from the early twelfth to the first years of the thirteenth centuries.[15] The straight bar appears to be later; it can be compared with that on the reliquary of the Holy Blood held at the cathedral of Boulogne-sur-Mer (Pas de Calais), which reads + *de sanguine ihu xpi* ('the blood of Jesus Christ'). This also has elaborate Lombardic letters, including the letter A with a straight cross bar, and probably dates from around 1308.[16] It seems likely that the coin-mount inscription dates from the same period. This would make the coin an early example of a 'thirty pieces' relic, based on Hill's observation that the use of Helios coins in this role on Rhodes seems to have supplanted that of an entirely different coin or medal, depicting St Helena, at some time in the fifteenth century.[17]

The coin was catalogued in Paris in 1864 and it may have been in France for some time previously. F de Mély notes three places in France that had 'thirty pieces' relics:[18] the Visitandines at Aix-en-Provence (Bouches-du-Rhône), Notre-Dame de Puy (Le Puy-en-Velay, Auvergne) and the Abbey de St-Denis (Paris). One of these could be the Hunt dekadrachm and St-Denis is the most likely. There is no mention of such an object in the abbey's 1634 inventory,[19] though a list of objects from St-Denis and from Ste-Chapelle compiled on 5 December 1793 included *deux pièces de monaie en argent*. Nothing further is heard of these two coins and they may, of course, be quite unrelated to the present object.[20] Even so, one might speculate that the object might have been held in a French, and possibly Parisian, treasury or church until the French Revolution, and that it passed into the hands of collectors subsequently. Only the chance survival of an accurate inventory description would allow it to be identified more securely.

12. Thompson *et al* 1973, no. 17. The findspot in central Greece is not wholly agreed: Martin Price, pers comm.
13. Kroll 1993, 171–2.
14. Stefanakis and Patsiada 2011, 81; Stefanakis *et al* 2015, 273; cf *SNG Copenhagen* 1942, 779; Calciati 1986, no. 142.
15. Kingsford 1929, 152.
16. Taralon 1965, no. 42, pl 139.
17. Hill 1905, 252.
18. Mély 1899, 509.
19. Montesquiou-Fezensac 1973.
20. Alcouffe 1991 reveals nothing that could be the coin.

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article décrit une décadrachme (dix drachmes) de Syracuse datant de vers 400 av. J.-C., conservée aujourd'hui au musée Hunt de Limerick. Elle est montée sur un anneau d'or qui porte inscrit en caractères lombards ouvragés du début du XIV^e^ siècle un texte la décrivant comme l'une des trente pièces d'argent remises à Judas pour qu'il trahisse le Christ. Elle constitue un exemple ancien et peu commun de ce type de relique.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Diese Abhandlung beschreibt eine syrakusische Dekadrachma-Münze (zehn Drachmen) von ca. 400 v. Chr., die sich jetzt im Hunt Museum, Limerick, befindet. Die Münze ist in einen goldenen Ring eingelassen, mit einem Text in kunstreicher lombardischer Schrift aus dem frühen 14. Jahrhundert, die die Münze als einen der dreißig Silberlinge identifiziert, mit denen Christus von Judas verraten wurde. Es ist dies ein ungewöhnliches und frühes Beispiel einer Reliquie dieser Art.

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