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Some considerations on the Cretan weight standard: local alignments and differences

ABSTRACT

This paper summarises some insights into the recognition of the weight characteristics of certain Cretan coinages. The best-known cases, on which recent studies have been published by mint sequence, such as those of Kydonia, Polyrrenia, Hierapytna, Phaistos and Gortyn, are used to highlight the existence of convergence phenomena in the monetary economy among Cretan cities. Conversely, some cases of differentiation and thus local choices in monetary policy will also be highlighted. Both convergence and divergence relate to the recognition of certain choices that reveal the existence of a well-defined monetary policy, consciously deliberated to meet certain needs, such as limited access to silver to transform into coins, or the desire not to leak silver outside the island. The result was a closed currency system that characterised the monetary choices of the Cretan towns.

KEYWORDS: numismatics, weight, Phaistos, Gortyn, Aegina, stater

If talking about the Cretan monetary system is particularly complex and involves the integration of multiple data, this is even more the case when analysing the weight aspects of the issues: their determination, fluctuations, and monetary financing interventions. By way of a purely preliminary examination,¹ our starting point is early Cretan coinage. If we want to reconstruct our reference context, we know that well before the first Cretan coin issues, silver coins from other mints were already in circulation.² They were mainly Cycladic, along with those from

¹ This paper is a preliminary reflection, as presented at the Congress, on a topic that is particularly complex and requires efforts to bring about concrete advances. The aim here is to provide food for thought for future analysis, albeit with the awareness that this text can only gather a little information and reflection on the subject. However, I would like to thank those who stimulated these considerations by commenting and providing me with data at their disposal.

² The Aeginetan system, used in Crete before the adoption of a local standard. In this system, one drachma was equal to six obols, so half a drachma was equal to three obols. When referring to weight, this amount is called hemidrachmon, which literally means half a drachm. The term τριοβελον is usually used for minted silver (on the Cretan context see Devoto 2019, 149-151, with previous bibliography). For a more in-depth analysis of the coinage of Aegina see Milbank 1924, 1-66; for a general overview see Sheedy 2012, 105-127.

Aegina in particular, which were widespread throughout the Mediterranean and in Crete.³ Monetary values are mentioned in inscriptions dating back to the mid-6th century BC. However, such values were mainly quantified in metal rather than coins used for transactions,⁴ in relatively high amounts generally referring to the payment of fees. By contrast, several inscriptions from the late 6th and early 5th century BC mention coins that were likely used for small payments with greater certainty, referring to rather high values such as staters and drachmas, as well as their fractionals such as triobols and obols.⁵ For example, the Gortyna Code⁶ mentions values expressed in staters. If we accept that they refer to minted coins, given the chronology of the inscription, we should take them to be foreign coins rather than those of Gortyna itself, which were to come a few years later.⁷

The availability of Aeginetan coins in Crete⁸ can be determined by at least two factors. The first is related to the presence of two hoards, one found in the area near Matala consisting of 71 coins, 70 of which are from Aegina and one from Thira. Contained within an Attic Olpe, they are dated between the third quarter and the middle of the 6th century B.C., yet their marked wear indicates long use and thus an interval of several decades from their production.⁹ To this we can add a smaller group of the same Aeginetan coins from Ierapetra.¹⁰

Moreover, coins from Aegina are also those systematically overstruck in the first issues on Crete.¹¹ The cities of Phaistos and Gortyna used old Aeginetan specie as flans for their own new pieces. This was possibly due to their availability and established reputation, as well as the weight of the originals having decreased from wear and tear.

³ The flow of coins from Aegina must have been continuous for a long time, especially considering that the mint of Kydonia produced coins in imitation of those with the turtle until at least 330/20, suggesting that the stream of coins from Aegina must only have stopped after the conquests of Alexander the Great (see Stefanakis 1999, 259).

⁴ According to A. Polosa, based on an analysis of the terminology of value quantification systems on inscriptions (Polosa 2005, 129-151), some of them use the terms 'stater', 'drachm' and 'obol' to refer to fines. From the late 7th to the 6th century BC, fines were imposed in tripods, cauldrons, and spits, whereas from the late 6th to the early 5th century BC, the words 'stater', 'drachm', and 'obelos' replaced or flanked the previously used terms (see also Devoto 2019, 149). At least at an early stage, these new terms seem to have been used interchangeably to denote both measures of weight and coins. It is possible that the assumption that they refer only to coins and not to weight measures is suggested by the description of the quantity used in the inscriptions. According to Kraay, the mention of 'staters' in inscriptions dating well before the beginning of local coinage, as well as the imitation of Aeginetan types from the mint of Cydonia, attest to the determined role these must have played in circulation (Kraay 1976, 49-51). On this topic see also Stefanakis 1999, 249-250 with a detailed analysis of sources and previous bibliography.

⁵ Following Bile 1988, 325, the terms that unquestionably refer to coined money are δαρκμα/δαρκνα, οδελος, τριοδελον, στατερανς/στατηρανς.

⁶ IC IV.72.

⁷ For the Gortyna Code (IC IV.72) and the relation with the starting of local coinage in general see Le Rider 1966, 162-172; Stefanaki 2007/08, 47-80; Stefanaki, Stefanakis 2013, 147-174; Carbone 2015-16; Carbone 2018, 1-10; Carbone 2020, 261-272 (all with previous bibliography).

⁸ On this topic Dunbabin 1947, 192; Kraay 1964, 79; Le Rider 1966, 168-175; Holloway 1971, 1-21; Stefanakis 1999, 250-258; Stefanaki 2007/08, 48; Sekunda 2002, 332.

⁹ On the IGCH 1 hoard, see Le Rider 1966, 168-175; Holloway 1971, 1-21; Stefanakis 1999, 250-258; Stefanaki 2007/08, 48; Sekunda 2002, 332-334.

¹⁰ Stefanakis 1999, 259; Stefanaki 2021, 491 (with previous bibliography).

¹¹ In the case of the coinage of Phaistos see Carbone 2020, 403-414; Carbone 2022, 148-155; on overstrikes attested at Gortyna see Carbone 2018, 1-10; Carbone 2020, 263-265 (with previous bibliography).



Fig. 1. Stater of Gortyn (11.62 g, 25.5 mm, 2h) overstruck on a coin from Aegina (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Chandon de Briailles 495).

In addition, we must consider that these coins (and thus their weight standard) were so well known that even their types were imitated, at least by the mint of Kydonia.¹² The imitations met demand and were easily accepted by a community that recognized the types in question as guarantees of the weight and quantity of silver in each piece. It has been noted that the coins of Cretan cities weighed less than the Aegina standard of 12.20 (or at any rate no more than 12.40) grams.¹³

While various theories have been put forward, it is crucial that this be analysed on a mint-by-mint basis today. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning at least two explanations for the phenomenon: according to Salvatore Garraffo,¹⁴ the missing percentage would be equivalent to a sort of profit on the part of the mint, and therefore of the city, to recover the costs of casting and minting. A kind of recovery of technical expenses in a city that did not want to lose out.

Manolis I. Stefanakis,¹⁵ on the other hand, suggests that the minting of lighter coins is not so surprising, as similarities can be found with monetary systems in other areas of the Mediterranean. Furthermore, he suggests that such a system could also have been beneficial in safeguarding the circulation of silver coinage on an island that consistently lacked metals, making it impractical for trade beyond the island. Minting coins of lower weight would therefore be an interesting monetary policy, experimenting with a kind of monetary protectionism, as would become more evident in later phases (think, by way of example, of the so-called 'closed currency system' implemented in Ptolemaic Egypt).¹⁶ The above two theories have received the most consideration in subsequent numismatic research, although reading between the lines

¹² Stefanakis 1999, 24-67.

¹³ For a general overview of the Aeginetan weight standard see Kraay 1967, 329; Beer 1980, 92; Mørkholm 1991, 9; Psoma 2016, 95-98.

¹⁴ Garraffo 1974, 59-74.

¹⁵ Stefanakis 1999, 260.

¹⁶ Ptolemy I's abandonment of the Attic standard (based on a drachma of 4.3 g) in favour of the Phoenician or Ptolemaic standard (drachma of 3.575 g). For a framework on this topic see de Callatay 2005, 117-134; Lorber 2012, 212-234; Panagopoulou 2016, 179-190 (all with previous bibliography). For a comparison with the Attalid system, see Meadows

of other publications there is no lack of further keys to interpretation. Although Stefanakis' proposal appears to be supported by the available data, it is worth questioning whether the mint truly needed to recover the costs of producing the coin. In this case, it would be an exception that has not been verified elsewhere, even if it is clear that the production process was complex and sometimes involved cutting foreign coins to fit as new flan in the weight locally in use, as previously demonstrated by George Le Rider.¹⁷ What remains evident, as suggested by Stefanakis again, is that we should be referring more properly to a "Cretan weight system".¹⁸

The practice of using a lower weight than elsewhere is evident in Crete from the inception of minting until its end, prior to the introduction of Roman provincial issues. During the Classical and Hellenistic periods, coins used on the island underwent reduction processes – so much so that in addition to the Cretan standard based on the reduced weight of Aegina coinage, even momentary uses of the systems employed in Rhodes, Athens or the cistophoric standard of Asia Minor weighed less in the series produced on the island.

Indeed, this long-lasting phenomenon must have had two main effects: firstly, total prevention of any outflow of silver coinage from the island, which is in fact absent elsewhere except for a few coins.¹⁹ Secondly, it was a practice that created a constant need for coins of lower weight, sometimes at considerable rates.

In fact, we now can analyse these phenomena in more detail, if only because we have new, more detailed data on some of the major mints at our disposal. I refer to the work by Manolis I. Stefanakis on Kydonia²⁰ and Polyrrhenia,²¹ by Vassiliki Stefanaki recently published on Hierapytna²² and by Claudia Devoto on Knossos.²³ Furthermore, there is data on Gortyna²⁴ and Phaistos²⁵. Coins from the last two provide a starting point for analysis. The two mints have historically been considered closely related due to their use of the same types of Europa on the bull on the obverse and the lion's head on the reverse, as well as a similar legend (ΓΟΡΤΥΝΟΣ ΤΟ ΠΑΙΜΑ for Gortyna and ΦΑΙΣΤΙΟΝ ΤΟ ΠΑΙΜΑ for Phaistos).²⁶ This is a sort of joint coinage interpreted as a sign of sympoliteia or close connection between the two cities.

2013, 149-205. On the parallelism between Crete and Egypt regarding the adoption of a hermetic monetary system see also Stefanakis 1999, 262.

¹⁷ The different nominal value of the original coins and the probable need to keep minting costs low may be behind this singular technical procedure: the flans are often cut, which shows how they must have been processed to improve their weight or to recover metal. Le Rider 1966, 150; Stefanakis 2016, 72; Carbone 2018, 9.

¹⁸ This is also attested in inscriptions where the words 'ἀργύριον Κρητικόν' are mentioned. On this argument see Melville-Jones 1993, No. 310; Stefanaki 2007/08, 63; Chaniotis, Kritzas 2010, 180; Melville-Jones 1971, 128. For the characterisation and use of the Cretan weight standard, see Stefanaki, Stefanakis 2013, 147-174.

¹⁹ As, for example, a hoard (Scutari in Albania, *CH* V, 32) and a few bronze coins also attested. Further Cretan coins were also mentioned in the inventories of Delos, see Melville-Jones 1993, 194-195; Stefanaki 2007/08, 60; Carbone forthcoming (with previous bibliography).

²⁰ Stefanakis 1999.

²¹ Stefanakis 2013.

²² Stefanaki 2021.

²³ Devoto 2019.

²⁴ Carbone 2015-16; Carbone 2018; Carbone 2020.

²⁵ Carbone 2020; Carbone 2022.

²⁶ Svoronos 1890, 158-161; Sutherland 1959, 47; Carbone 2022, 67; Carbone 2022, 42.

It is believed that the production of early coins was announced by directly inscribing their value on them,²⁷ as a bond that was intended to last for a long time. If we look in detail at coin production, we see that there was an early moment when silver staters from the two centres weighed roughly the same. But this was to be short-lived, as after only a few decades the coins of Phaistos were slightly lighter. From around 330 BC, production grew more intense,²⁸ and the quantity of coins was considerable, but with a weight difference of 0.20 grams: not very much, but a clear and regular difference that places the two cities at variance in the making, use and circulation of coinage, emphasizing their autonomy. Phaistos was nonetheless able to produce a small amount of silver small change coins using the same amount of metal as before. Additionally, upon closer examination over longer periods, it is evident that Gortyna consistently minted Cretan weight staters of the same weight without any variation.

What happened in Phaistos is that from the second half of the 3rd century BC up until the destruction of the city in around the middle of the 2nd century BC, a more evident lower weight was used for coins.²⁹ This is unsurprising, because in a time of crisis that was only resolved by the destruction of the *polis*, it may well have been that the city could only mint coins with considerable effort, attempting to increase their number and optimize their quantity to maximize profit – a real economic policy imposed by special needs.

When examining the coins from mints with recorded production, the data becomes even clearer. The weights of the silver staters are all within a similar range, with minor variations. This was particularly evident during the peak of production between the first half of the 4th and the second half of the 3rd century.

Equally clear is the reduction that was already known, concerning a net lowering of the Cretan standard. This is the so-called ‘reduced Cretan standard’.³⁰ Several hypotheses have been proposed to explain the reasons for this downward policy. However, analysis reveals that all three mints – Polyrrhenia, Kydonia, and Hierapytna – minted coins of the same weight, without any variation. The reduction was (most probably) coordinated to standardise monetary values within the same economic circuit, possibly through an agreement or coordination between these and other cities.

However, it should be noted that this phenomenon was partial rather than universal across all mints. The reason for the discrepancy is unclear, particularly given the significant distance between the mints in question. To provide an overview, it is worth noting that the trend persisted until the introduction of Roman provincial coinage and the system employed in Rome. Currently, there is a specific issue with pseudo-Athenian coins that have the same types as the *stephanophoroi* of Athens but were produced in several Cretan cities. These coins have a lower weight than the official specimens, which also circulated widely on the island.³¹ The Cretan

²⁷ Manganaro 1978, 222; Howgego 1990, 1-25; Stefanakis 1999, 258.

²⁸ Carbone 2022, 160.

²⁹ Carbone 2022, 142-147.

³⁰ Stefanaki 2007/08, 54-56 (with previous bibliography).

³¹ Stefanaki, Stefanakis 2013, 161-163; Le Rider 1966, 294-297, 329-335; Cigaina 2020, 37. The pseudo-Athenian issue

versions bear about the same weight as the Metellus tetradrachms minted in Gortyna,³² a sign that the weight system must have been locally familiar anyway.

Two other series of cistophori also attest to the same system. The first is a probable Cretan issue in the name of Lepidus,³³ and the second are the Kydas cistophori.³⁴ Due to the limited number of specimens, it is difficult to establish their theoretical weight. However, we can conclude that all of them weigh less than the cistophoric standard and are always below the weight of the lowest cistophori from the mints of Asia, where large numbers of these coins were produced.³⁵

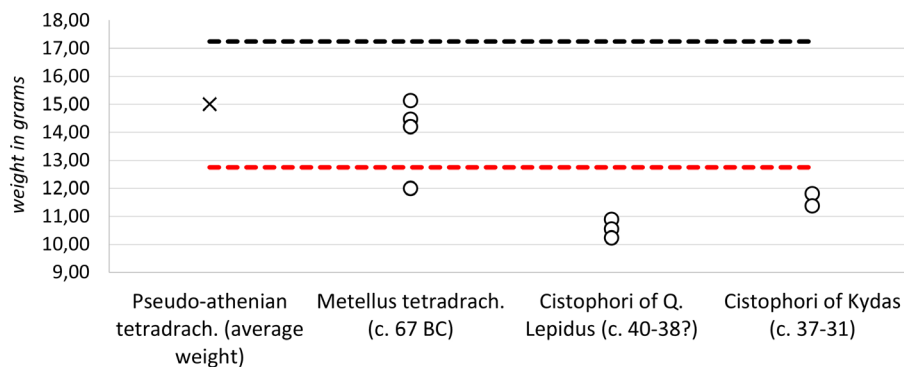


Fig. 2. Diagram of the weights of the last Cretan silver issues before the start of Roman provincial coinage. The black line indicates the Attic weight standard, the red line the cistophoric weight reference (from Carbone forthcoming).

Given the above, it is important to evaluate which assessments can be included in this analysis.

It can be stated that the initial coinage has a weight that is slightly higher than previously theorised, at approximately 11.80 grams. This represents a systematic reduction, but still 4% less than the Aeginetan standard.

A second phase, which coincided with the commencement of large-scale production and minting by several other mints, involved the adoption of a weight of approximately 11.10-11.20 grams, thereby bridging the previously theorised gap of about 7-12%.

However, not all mints adopted this measure, and in some cases, flans from previously minted coins were cut to fit the new standard.³⁶

It is evident that the reductions are not uniform across all cities; local choices linked to the beginning of production and responding to different monetary economy requirements contribute to this disparity.

is attested in seven different Cretan mints (Svoronos 1890, 369; MacDonald 1919, 300-304; Raven 1938, 135 Nos. 11, 24-26, tav. VI, 11; 150-155; Le Rider 1966, 294-295, 297, 301-302; Le Rider 1968; Stefanaki 2007/08, 57-58, 80.

³² Metenidis 1998, 117; RPC I³, 222.

³³ Tansey 2008, 183-189; Carbone forthcoming.

³⁴ Chevrolier 2016, 11-26; Rouanet-Liesenfelt 1984, 343-352; Chapman 1968, 1; Stefanakis 2000, 195-207; Carbone forthcoming.

³⁵ Metcalf 2017, 1-88 (with previous bibliography).

³⁶ Le Rider 1966, 150; Stefanakis 2016, 72; Carbone 2018, 9.

These differences indicate a lack of coordination between cities, added to the fact that there is no evidence of a *koinon* or any relations that would justify the adoption of common measures. In contrast, the monetary landscape in Crete appears to be highly fragmented, even between towns in close proximity to each other, such as Gortyna and Phaistos. This suggests that different cities had distinct circuits for the use of coins.³⁷

To conclude, it is appropriate to define a few points of perspective for the future.

Systematizing the data, especially in the light of upcoming research on Cretan coins, will help us understand the specificity of local contexts. This includes the monetary policies of individual cities and their relationships with centres that are believed to have influenced them, not unlike what we observed earlier with Gortyna and Phaistos.

This context provides a laboratory for numismatic analysis. New models for extracting numerical values for analysis can be experimented with.

The chronology of coin production in historical and archaeological contexts that do not provide such information can also be explored. Such phenomena enable the reading of the economic dynamics of the entire territory, even in its relations beyond the island.

Finally, we can determine the true characteristics of a monetary production that was previously considered provincial. This production is now defined by a series of features that paint a more complex picture than previously anticipated.

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³⁷ It is worth noting that there is currently a lack of information on the circulation patterns of Cretan coins. The data available are often derived from hoard analyses, while only a few coins have been found in systematic excavations with detailed information on their location (see e.g. Stefanakis 2007, 307-321; Sidiropoulos 2020, 311-340 with previous bibliography),

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