

# What is a hemitetartemorion?

by Peter E. Lewis



The agora (marketplace) at Ephesus. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

A hemitetartemorion is a very small coin that circulated in the ancient Greek world (Figures 1 and 2). It is silver and worth half a tetartemorion, which is Greek for 'a quarter part'. A tetartemorion (Figure 3) is a quarter of an obol (Figure 4), which is a sixth of a drachma (Figure 5). In Greek letters drachma is δραχμη. The word 'drachma' is usually written 'drachm' by numismatists and pronounced 'dram'. The Greek plural of drachma is drachmai, but they are usually just called 'drams'. The word occurs in the Bible but only in Luke 15: 8,9 (the story of the lost coin).

A didrachmon (Figure 6) is worth two drachms and is usually written 'didrachm' and pronounced 'didram'. The Greek

plural is didrachma, but it is usually written 'didrachms' and pronounced 'didrams'. The word occurs in the Bible only in Matthew 17: 24 (the story of the coin in the fish's mouth).

A tetradrachmon is worth four drachms and is usually written 'tetradrachm' and pronounced 'tetradram'. The Greek plural is tetradrachma, but it is usually written 'tetradrachms' and pronounced 'tetradrams'. The word does not occur in the Bible. The nomenclature is rather confusing, but it does not take long to get the hang of it.

Hemitartemoria and tetartemoria are tiny coins, but it is the weight, not the diameter that is the constant factor. For example, the hemitetartemorion in

Figure 2 has a diameter of 5 mms and weighs 0.08 gram, while the tetartemorion in Figure 7 also has a diameter of 5 mms but weighs 0.18 gram. In ancient times there were various weight standards, e.g. Attic, Phokaian, Milesian; and it makes the determination of denominations and their relationships to one another complicated. The most widely used weight standard was the Attic, named after Attica, which was the region around Athens. Because Athens was prosperous and politically influential the Attic standard became popular and was adopted by Alexander the Great for the coinage in his vast empire. It was



Figure 1 – Hemitetartemorion probably minted at Ephesus in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. It is 5 mms in diameter and weighs 0.08 gram. There is a bee on the obverse and the head of a lion on the reverse. It is unpublished in the standard references. (Collection of St John's Cathedral, Brisbane. Image courtesy of Musa Numismatic Art.)



Figure 2 – The coin in Figure 1 with an Australian 20 cents coin, which is 28 mms in diameter.





Figure 3 – Tetartemorion from Kolophon in Ionia, 490-400 BC. Diameter 6 mms, weight 0.22 gram. On the obverse there is a facing head of Apollo, and on the reverse a monogram of TE (for tetartemorion) in an incuse square. Sear 4343.



Figure 5 – Drachm from Abydos (opposite Gallipoli), circa 328-323 BC. Diameter 18 mms, weight 4.2 grams. On the obverse there is the head of Heracles wearing a lion-skin, and on the reverse Zeus enthroned. Sear 6731.



Figure 4 – Obol from Assos in Troas, circa 479-450 BC. Diameter 10 mms, weight 0.56 gram. There is a griffin on the obverse and the head of a lion on the reverse. Rosen 528 var. Saint Paul was in Assos in 57 AD.



Figure 6 – Didrachm from Velia in Italy, 350-281 BC. Diameter 22 mms, weight 7.65 grams. On the obverse there is the head of Athena wearing a crested helmet, and on the reverse a lion. Sear 460.

based initially on a didrachm of 8.6 grams (Figure 8). Therefore the drachm was 4.3 grams, the obol was 0.72 grams, and the tetartemorion was 0.18 gram. In their production the weights of the individual coins would vary slightly from the standard, but generally only within a fairly narrow range because silver was a precious metal and the weight of the coin was important to the people who used it.

The obol was a small coin but it was of particular significance to the ancient Greeks because in Greek mythology it was the fare to be paid to Charon, the ferryman who rowed the souls of the departed across the river Styx to Hades, the abode of the dead. Hades was ruled by Pluto and his lovely wife, Persephone, whom he had abducted (Figure 9).

Charon was a grumpy fellow and you would be in trouble if you did not have



Figure 7 – Tetartemorion from Phokaia in Ionia. Diameter 5 mms, weight 0.18 gram. There is a woman's head on the obverse, and a square punch divided into 4 quarters on the reverse. The archaic style of the head and the punch on the reverse indicate that this is an early coin possibly from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.





Figure 8 – Didrachm from Akragas in Sicily, circa 495-480/78 BC. Diameter 17 mms, weight 8.62 grams. There is a sea eagle on the obverse, and on the reverse a crab with a bird below. SNG Lockett 706. (Classical Numismatic Group Auction 94, Lot 72)

the fare. According to F. Guirand, writing in the *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, Charon was “a hard old man, difficult to deal with. Unless before embarking the shade of the deceased newcomer presented Charon with his obolus, he would mercilessly drive away an intruder so ignorant of local usage. The shade was then condemned to wander the deserted shore and never find refuge. The Greeks therefore carefully put an obolus into the mouths of the dead.”

An Italian Renaissance medallion or plaquette (Figure 10) shows Charon beating souls away from his boat. They do not have the fare and he is whacking them with his oar. No wonder the loved ones of a deceased person made sure he or she had the fare! Actually, because obols are not that common in grave-sites, it’s thought that the relatives probably gave the deceased a little extra, just to be sure.

Crossing the Styx has been a popular subject in art. In an illustration made for an edition of Dante’s *Inferno* in 1861, Gustave Doré, the famous French engraver, captured the sense of fear in that dreadful place as Charon approaches

the deceased who is waiting on the shore, no doubt tightly holding his obol. (Figure 11).

In a wonderful painting by John Stanhope (1829 – 1908) Psyche is about to cross the Styx and she is pointing to the coin in her mouth (Figure 12). The coin sits on the tip of her tongue and is the size of an obol. Charon must have accepted it because he transported her to Hades. She was a mortal woman and like all mortals her fate was to continue to exist in the underworld, but Eros, the god of love, had fallen in love with her and he begged Zeus to make her immortal, which he did. So the lovers were re-united in the heavenly realm. By this myth the ancient Greeks would have been assured that love conquers all.

Because hemitertemoria and tetartemoria are so small the names of the cities where they were minted are usually not indicated on them. Although the designs on the coins might point to a particular city, e.g. a bee for Ephesus, they can not be taken as proof. Richard



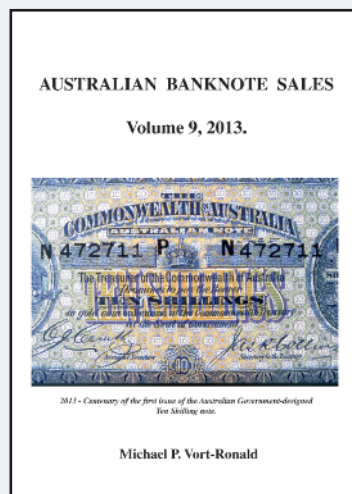
Figure 9 – Bronze coin (AE21) from Stobi in Macedonia. There is a bust of Caracalla (198-217 AD) on the obverse, and on the reverse Pluto in a chariot has grabbed Persephone as she was picking flowers in a meadow. She still holds the flowers in her hands! Josifovski 288-91 var. (Classical Numismatic Group Eauction 197, Lot 58)

Plant in his useful book, *Greek Coin Types and their Identification* (Seaby: 1979), lists nine cities that have a bee on their coins. A griffin, which was a fabulous creature with a lion’s body but the head and wings of an eagle, features on the coins of several cities including Abdera in Thrace, Phokaia in Ionia, and Assos in Troas (Figures 4 and 15). Also it is



Figure 10 – An Italian Renaissance plaquette in the National Gallery of Art showing Charon beating souls away from his boat with his oar. A deceased woman is offering an apple branch, but will he accept it? (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

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Figure 11 – Detail from an illustration in Dante's 'Inferno' made by Gustave Doré (1832-1883). It shows Charon rowing towards the shore. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

unlikely that these tiny coins would have been detected by the archaeologists excavating the sites of ancient cities, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, for many of them the mint is unknown.

Moreover, because they are so small they were very inconvenient to use and easy to lose. An older person with poor eyesight and diminished manual dexterity would have found them impossible to deal with. Therefore, by the fourth century BC they were largely replaced by bronze coins. At first there was an attempt to maintain the metal value of the coins by producing large bronze coins, and in Egypt there were bronze drachms that weighed about 70 grams (Figure 13). But these heavy lumps were also inconvenient to use and they were eventually replaced by token bronze coins. This token (or fiduciary) coinage was actually invented by the Greeks in Sicily and it underlies almost all the coins that circulate in the countries of the world today. It was in about the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century that the Sicilian

Greeks, probably first in the city of Akragas, hit on the idea of replacing the small silver coins with token bronze ones. The denomination was indicated on the coins by a number of pellets; and although the intrinsic value of the coins was much lower than the value placed on



Figure 12 – Painting of Charon and Psyche by John Stanhope (1829-1908). Psyche is pointing to the coin in her mouth. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)





Figure 13 – Bronze drachm of Ptolemy IV (222-205 BC). It is 42 mms in diameter and weighs 68.69 grams.



Figure 14 – Tetartemoron of Magnesia ad Maeandrum, circa 459 BC. Diameter 6 mms, weight 0.20 gram. The diademed head on the obverse is probably that of Archepolis, the governor of the area under the Persians. (Gorny & Mosch Auction 199, Lot 433)

them by the issuing authority the people accepted them as currency.

Despite all the inconvenience associated with hemitetartemoria and tetartemoria they are very interesting and beautiful coins, but unfortunately they are usually disregarded or neglected by coin collectors today. In *World Coin Encyclopedia* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1984) Ewald Junge says that tetartemoria have “little appeal to the average collector”. On the coin in Figure 1, the bee is very carefully drawn and is an accurate image of the insect. On the reverse, the pouncing lion still looks scary after 2,350 years. On a tetartemoron from Magnesia ad Maeandrum (Figure 14) the portrait of Archepolis (son of the famous Athenian statesman, Themistocles) is very life-like. You would recognize him if you saw him at the local supermarket, and the coin is only 6 mms in diameter! On a tetartemoron probably from Phokaia (Figure 15) the griffin on the reverse would still be able to frighten children, and some adults too. All these coins testify to the great skill and artistry of the ancient Greek die-engravers.

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Figure 15 – Tetartemoron, circa 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. Diameter 7 mms, weight 0.51 gram. There is a woman's head on the obverse, and the head of a griffin in a frame on the reverse. A linear frame occurs on the reverse of some coins of Abdera in Thrace, but this coin was probably found in Asia Minor and might have been minted at Phokaia. (Image courtesy of Dr Sergey Nechayev)

## 2014 ISLE OF MAN CROWN TO FEATURE SNOWSHOE CAT

THE banner on the email left CAB momentarily nonplussed: ISLE OF MAN CAT RELEASED. However, it was but the news that the 2014 Isle of Man Cat coin will feature a Snowshoe Cat and her kittens.

As Wikipedia tells us: “The Snowshoe is a rare breed of cat originating in the United States of America in the 1960s. Snowshoes were first produced in Philadelphia when a Siamese breeder's cat gave birth to three kittens with white feet.” The cats are a rarity due to the difficulty getting the coat markings correct.

The cats are affectionate and docile [*Definitely an odd-ball Siamese, Editor*]. They are very intelligent, enjoy water and may swim.

This is the 26<sup>th</sup> moggy in this long-lived series. As usual the 38.60 mm, 28.28 g coin comes in two versions: BU cupronickel and .999 fine silver proof. Mintages are unlimited and 10,000 respectively.

The coins are available from the Pobjoy Mint: [www.pobjoy.com](http://www.pobjoy.com).

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