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The Iconography of War: the *Leukippos* and ‘Alliance’ Coinages of Metapontum

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The fourth century BC was a turbulent period for the Greek colonies of south Italy. Facing increasing attacks by the indigenous Lucanians and Bruttians, many of the Greek *poleis* had by the middle of the century united in a defensive league under the hegemony of the Spartan colony of Taras, and its capable general Archytas. This ‘Italiote League’ was itself a successor to an earlier federation, founded in 393 BC and led by Croton, which had been all but destroyed by Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse, a few years after its foundation. After the death of Archytas in the late 360s, the Tarentines increasingly employed foreign generals, primarily from Sparta and Epirus, to lead the forces of the league. These generals minted coins at various cities of the region, employing and modifying existing iconographic symbols to assert their authority. Changes in obverse and reverse types as well as the recurrence, or lack thereof, of particular magistrates’ marks across the coinage of the cities of the league have the potential to illuminate the fraught relationship between Taras, its foreign generals and the cities which they claimed to protect.

The head of *Leukippos* is a common obverse type from the mid-fourth century onward within the silver coinage of

Metapontum.¹ According to the south Italian city’s foundation legend, *Leukippos* was sent by the Achaeans at the request of Sybaris to re-found Metapontum after its destruction by the Samnites.² The resettlement of the city was undertaken explicitly to prevent its territory from falling into the hands of Taras, with which the Sybarites were not on friendly terms. *Leukippos* is credited with securing the use of the site, and preventing Taras from regaining it. The colonists’ possession of the site was later confirmed through a treaty, concluded after a war between Taras and Metapontum. The figure of *Leukippos* thus does not only represent the founder of Metapontum, making it an obvious choice for depiction on the city’s coinage, but is also an anti-Tarentine symbol.³

The largest series of *Leukippos* coins at Metapontum falls towards the end of Johnston’s Class A and continues as the sole obverse type of Class B.⁴ It is also in Class B that the first occurrence of distaters at Metapontum is found, a denomination otherwise unknown in the city but common at Thurii. Class B has been dated to ‘... the time of Alexander the Molossian’s campaign and more specifically to the period when Metapontum was one of his main allies.’⁵ This Alexander (Alexander I of Epirus, uncle of Alexander the Great)



Figure 1. Johnston A3.1 (400–340 BC). Gale collection (ACANS).



Figure 2. Johnston A5.5 (340–330 BC). Gale collection (ACANS).

came to Italy in 334 BC with his soldiers at the request of the people of Taras to aid them against the Lucanians. Leukippos staters also occur in a group in Class A (3.1-4.6, 5.2-11; fig. 1–2) with an isolated specimen (6.10; fig. 3) occurring before the main series begins at the end of Class A and through into Class B. The Leukippos coinage under discussion comprises Johnston Class A: 3-4, 5.2-11, 6.10, 9.3-4; Class B: 1.1-4.4; Class D: 4.4-6.

Does the choice of this obverse type have any relationship with the contemporary political situation in southern Italy? Is it possible to view the usage of the Leukippos type, with its anti-Tarentine connotations, as representative of a period of hostility between Taras and Metapontum? There is literary evidence that at some point during Alexander's campaigns there was a split between Taras and her general.⁶ The main series of Leukippos coins (Class A 9.3-4, Class B; fig. 4–5) could thus be interpreted as having been minted after this split, when Alexander transferred the centre of minting activity from Taras to Metapontum and the city chose a type which recalled previous successes against Taras under the leadership of Leukippos. The substantial increase in the number of dies used for Class B is evidence

for the increase in minting volume which would have been required to make up for the loss of the Tarentine mint's output. While the order of Johnston's classes in her classification of the Metapontine coinage is quite secure, the lack of certainty regarding the order of issues *within* classes obviates to a large extent the problem presented by the occurrence of an earlier, much smaller group of Leukippos staters in Class A (3.1-5.11).⁷ The fact that there is no literary evidence for Metapontum in the period covered by Class A (340–c.332 BC) except for Alexander's campaigns also leaves open the possibility of an otherwise unattested conflict with Taras which might be represented in the numismatic record by these earlier Leukippos staters.

However, the identification of the usage of the Leukippos type as signifying in itself a period of hostility between Metapontum and Taras appears to be put into question by the existence of two issues of Metapontine Leukippos staters, signed ONA (A6.10; fig. 3) and API (A3.1; fig. 1). Several issues in Class A bear the inscriptions KAA, API or ONA. These signatures also appear at Taras during the same period, while KAA also appears at Thurii and Heraclea. These signatures have been widely interpreted



Figure 3. Johnston A6.10 (340-330 BC). Gale collection (ACANS).



Figure 4. Johnston B2.7 (340-330 BC). Gale collection (ACANS).



Figure 5. Johnston B3.4 (340-330 BC). Gale collection (ACANS).

as representing magistrates of the Italiote League who organised the minting of coinage on behalf of Alexander the Molossian.⁸

It seems unlikely that an anti-Tarentine type would be used on coinage organised by Taras or by officials representing a league under Tarentine hegemony. The identification of these signatures as representing league officials is convincing and cannot be easily dismissed. Ought we then to conclude that the *Leukippos*-head type did not hold such a specific, anti-Tarentine symbolism and thus does not necessarily represent a period of conflict between Taras and Metapontum?

It should first be noted that these two examples of ‘alliance’ coinages with

Leukippos obverses occur as part of a series which displays other obverse types, such as the head of Demeter, more widely used at Metapontum. Secondly, these ‘alliance’ signatures disappear with the introduction of Class B, whose sole obverse type is the head of *Leukippos*. At this point, the signatures change to AIIH and AMI (fig. 4–5), the latter appearing on the reverse of all the Class B *Leukippos* issues. If we accept the identification of the first signature group as Italiote League magistrates organising coinage for Alexander, then the sudden change in signatures and the ubiquity of the new signature AMI on the Metapontine coinage must also be explained with reference to the league. Johnston follows Holloway and Giannelli in interpreting the change as evidence of Alexander’s abandonment of the league and attempt to build an empire for himself. The new signatures are seen to belong to the latter part of his campaigns ‘...when Metapontum and Tarentum were left as his remaining allies.’⁹

If this were the case, we would expect the same signatures to recur at Taras and Metapontum, representing new officials who co-ordinated the minting of

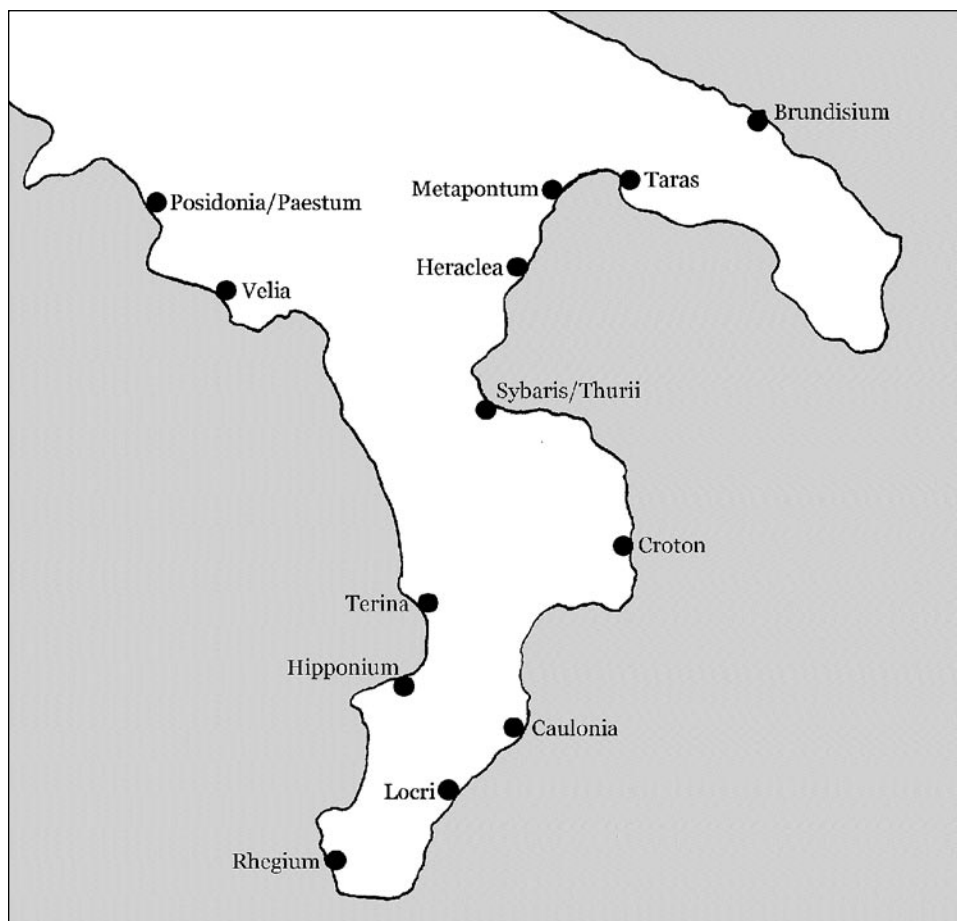


Figure 6. Map of southern Italy showing principal mints.

Alexander's coinage there during the short period between his break with the league and his death in 331 BC. The signature which occurs on all the reverses of the Class B coinage at Metapontum, AMI, does not occur at all at Taras during this period. The other signature found on the Class B Metapontine coinage, ΑΠΗ, only

occurs on a single issue at Taras which falls later in the fourth century.¹⁰

As noted above, Strabo indicates that by the end of his campaigns Alexander

had broken with Taras.¹¹ He also notes that Alexander tried to transfer the seat of the Italiote League from Heraclea, a Tarentine colony, to Thurian territory. Strabo's evidence for a split with Taras, the introduction of the distater, in common use at Thurii but not at Taras, the lack of a correspondence of signatures between

Taras and Metapontum and the introduction of a new obverse type at Metapontum, used exclusively of any other types during this period, all militate against the characterisation

of the last part of Alexander's campaigns as a period of independent 'empire building' based around Taras and Metapontum. A more likely interpretation is that Alexander split with Taras, which retained her role as hegemon of the Italiote League, and that this is what the change of signatures within the coinage represents. Tarentine officials who were responsible for organising the league's coinage on behalf of Alexander, represented by their signatures KAA, API and ONA, left no further mark on the coinage of Metapontum. New magistrates began to sign the coins (AIIH, AMI) and imported the Thurian denomination of the distater, as Alexander began to establish Thuri and Metapontum as his bases in the region.¹²

The parallel between the change of signature and the adoption of the *Leukippos* obverse type to the exclusion of any other symbols is striking, and perhaps hints at the complexity of Greek numismatic iconography. As the literary evidence for the cities of Magna Graecia is so scarce, their coinage is often the only evidence that exists for some settlements for long periods of their history. In the past there have thus been understandable attempts to assign specific meanings to certain symbols which appear on the coinage of the region, in an attempt to establish some foundations for its history in the absence of more specific material. This process inevitably has the undesirable side-effect of simplifying what may have been symbols with multiple connotations and meanings.

It is important to remain mindful of this when discussing the potential significance of the usage by Metapontum of the *Leukippos* type; its possible interpretations do not have to be mutually exclusive. During Metapontum's membership of the league,

while the type's implicit anti-Tarentine aspect would have been understood, its usage was deemed acceptable within the context of a varied series of obverses, where the other attributes of the mythical city founder would have been brought to the fore. The type could have been seen to symbolise the city's vitality and viewed as a general embodiment of the *polis*, in the same way as the depiction of its patron goddess or the ubiquitous ear of barley. However, when Metapontum split with Taras, Alexander's officials chose to use the *Leukippos* type to the exclusion of all others. This act was significant and explicit, and its implication was clear: the new coinage took on an explicitly anti-Tarentine character and would have been intended to recall *Leukippos*' capture of Tarentine territory and leadership in the war against Taras in the city's early history. Thus while the appearance of *Leukippos* coinage at a certain time at Metapontum does not *in itself* demonstrate that a war with Taras took place, the type was favoured on at least one occasion when this did occur. The appearance of this type on the coinage of Metapontum, then, may be viewed as a potential indicator of such conflict where other evidence does not preclude it.

Notes

1. The major study of Metapontine coinage is Noe (1927) with additions and corrections by Johnston (1984), continued down to the last coinage of the city by Johnston (1990).
2. For the account of the foundation legend and the role of *Leukippos* see Strabo 6.1.15.
3. The history of Metapontum remains obscure for extended periods due to the lack of literary evidence. For a brief outline of the history of Metapontum during our period and discussion of

- the literary sources, see Giannotta (1980: 9–16); for a more in-depth discussion of the problems surrounding Metapontine history see the *Atti del tredicesimo convegno di studi sulla Magna Grecia*, passim, and in particular Lepore (1974: 307–25). The recent complete publication of the University of Texas' excavations in the chora of Metaponto is invaluable for coming to grips with the archaeological evidence which forms such an integral part of our information about this city: Carter (1998). For a summary of the historical implications of these findings see Carter (1998: 5–17; 167–236).
4. All references to classes of Metapontine coinage follow Johnston (1990).
 5. Johnston (1990: 13). Alexander the Molossian, also referred to as Alexander of Epirus, was summoned by Taras and the Italiote League of Greek cities to campaign on their behalf against the Italic tribes of southern Italy from 334–331 BC. See Livy 8.3.6–7, 8.17.9–10, 8.24.1–18; Justin 12.2.
 6. Strabo 6.3.4.
 7. Johnston (1990: 7).
 8. Rutter (2001: 135). Note in particular A6.8, where KAA has been re-cut to read API, indicating definitively that these signatures could not represent engravers but must have been mint officials or magistrates: Johnston (1990: 53).
 9. Johnston (1990: 57).
 10. *HN* 944, *SNG Copenhagen* 858; see also Rutter (2001: 13). The type appears in the Bernalda hoard: Procopio (1957: 39.352).
 11. Strabo 6.3.4.
 12. It is often overlooked that this frequently cited passage in Strabo (6.3.4) discussing Alexander's links to Thurii does not state that he transferred the league meeting-place to Thurian territory, but merely that he attempted to do so; see, for

example, Mitchell (1969: 60), Lomas (1993: 43) who assume that the move was carried out. This is significant, because Taras would have retained nominal hegemony over the league while it continued to meet at Heraclea and thus over any subsequent league-wide minting programs, as represented by the KAA, API

and ONA signature group. This reinforces the identification of the Metapontine AIIH/AMI types as independent issues minted under Alexander, after the defection of Metapontum from the Taras-led Italiote League.

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