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THE DRACHMS OF HIMERA WITH *ASTRAGALOS* REVERSE

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One of the more significant Greek colonial foundations in Sicily was Himera, west of centre of the island's northern coast. What became a flourishing city state was planted around 649 B.C. by settlers from Zankle, situated on the Sicilian side of the straits of Messina, and from Chalkis in Euboea, Zankle's mother city.

At the end of the sixth century B.C. the men of Himera produced their first coins. The first issues struck were drachm pieces on the Chalcidian standard weighing approximately 5.80 grams. The obverse type was a strutting cock; the reverse featured a simple geometric design (plate, No. 1). A second group of Chalcidian drachms followed with the obverse type unchanged, but the reverse now displaying a hen in an incuse square (plate, No. 2).

In 484/3 Himera was conquered by Theron, dictator of Akragas in Sicily's south! His son, Thrasydaios, was installed as Himera's sub-tyrant. Its loss of independence is reflected by a dramatic change in the coinage. The Chalcidian weight system was abandoned in favour of the Attic standard deployed at Akragas. While the cock remained in place as obverse type, the hen of the reverse was replaced with a crab, the reverse type of the conquerors.

An initial group of coins of Akragantine type at Himera comprises didrachms and drachms.² A second issue, readily distinguishable from its predecessor on the basis of stylistic criteria consists of didrachms alone. Focussing on the former group, the extant didrachms exemplify 5 obverse dies and no less than 21 crab reverses, an anomaly which I do

not propose to discuss on the present occasion.³ The legend, *HIMEPA*, appears on the didrachms' obverses. The drachms exemplify 5 obverses and 12 reverses. 10 of the reverses feature, like all the didrachm reverses, the Akragantine crab. The type of the two reverses remaining is an *astragalos* (knucklebone). All the drachms bear their legend on the reverse. In the case of crab reverses it is *HIMEPA*; in the case of the two *astragalos* reverses *HIMPEAION*. The three obverses that are found in combination with *astragalos* reverses are also combined with crab reverses. The relative condition of the dies concerned suggest that the crab type was used first and subsequently replaced by the *astragalos*.⁴ Nos. 3 and 4 in the accompanying plate illustrate crab and *astragalos* drachms respectively.

As far as I am aware no-one has hitherto sought an explanation of the *astragalos*' brief appearance apparently at the end of a group in which the crab reverse is otherwise dominant and which is succeeded by another where it is ubiquitous. I make the suggestion that the *astragalos* drachms are to be brought into connection with a short-lived revolt of Himera against its Akragantine overlords attested by the historian Diodoros of Sicily.⁵ The uprising took place in 476/5 and was brutally put down by Theron of Akragas in person. The majority of the recalcitrant citizens of Himera were massacred and new settlers were brought in to replace them. Attribution of the *astragalos* reverse to the revolutionaries, briefly in control of Himera's mint, would provide an attractive explanation in particular for the different ethnic legends accompanying crabs and

NOTES

1. On the date and circumstances see T. J. Dunbabin, *The Western Greeks* (Oxford, 1948), pp. 420-421.
2. I rely for the statistical data presented in this paragraph on G. K. Jenkins, "Himera; the coins of Akragantine type", supplement to *Annali* 16-17 (1971) 21-36.
3. The disproportion in the case of the didrachms of the second phase of Akragantine type coins at Himera is even more dramatic and disconcerting; 10 obverse dies, 62 (*sic*) reverses.
4. So, confidently, Jenkins, *op.cit.*, p. 26.
5. Diodoros II.48. 6-8.

Provenance of illustrated coins

No's 1, 2 and 3 are held by the American Numismatic Society; No. 4 by the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, Paris.

astragaloi. *HIMEPA*, the city's name in the nominative case, which goes with the former effectively suggests Himera's subordinate status as part of the Akragantine empire. By replacing it with *HIMEPAION*, *of the men of Himera*, the rebels spelt out that they and not Thrasydaios and Akragas were responsible for the crab's transitory replacement. The legend, on the obverse, of the second group of didrachms of Akragantine type, is once again *HIMEPA*.

I should like to be in a position to offer an explanation of the astragalos itself consonant with my suggested context. Not a common type in the ancient world it turns up elsewhere

at Athens, southern Asia minor and Cyprus, and also on the Italian *aes grave* of Iguvium and Luceria. The astragalos was used in antiquity as an object of divination and also gaming. Its numismatic appearances are all, at present, uncomfortably enigmatic. One hesitates to suggest that the rebels, anxious to bring out coins with the least delay, opted for a reverse design (the obverses to hand were unobjectionable) that would present minimum difficulty even to the most unskilled of die-cutters. Such a view presupposes that prior to the upheaval, Himera's dies were produced by Akragantien craftsmen or local quislings who fled or were killed.

