Acarnanian Astacus: new numismatic evidence

One of the most important ports of ancient Acarnania was Astacus on the west coast of Greece. Its geographical position secured control of communications and commercial transactions of the western and southern part of Acarnania, from the Ambracian to the Corinthian gulf. Heuzey identified the ancient town of Astacus with the modern village called Dragamesto based on a fragment of a stamped roof tile bearing the last four letters of the ethnic (ἈΣΤΑ).

According to Stephanus Byzantius, Astacus was a colony of the Cephalenians. There are no literary sources identifying it as a Corinthian colony. According to Thucydides, during the Peloponnesian War, a tyrant Euarchos, who had been temporarily exiled from the city, reclaimed his throne with the help and strength of the Corinthians. Thucydides tells us that the city soon passed into the sphere of Athenian influence, under the admiral Phormion, as did almost all of the Acarnanian towns. Finally, Astacus was a member of the Acarnanian League, and an inscription informs us that it remained a member at least until the middle of the second century B.C. Another important source is the list of Theorodokoi in the Asklepieion of Epidaurus, which is dated to 354 B.C. and proves the autonomy of the town at that time. In 206 B.C., peace is reached between Philip V and the Aetolians. It is during this period of coin transactions of the western and southern part of Acarnania, from the Ambracian to the Corinthian gulf. Heuzey identified the ancient town of Astacus with the modern village called Dragamesto based on a fragment of a stamped roof tile bearing the last four letters of the ethnic (ἈΣΤΑ).

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The first group includes staters of Corinthian types\(^{11}\). On the obverse behind the head of Athena is depicted as a symbol a cray-fish and the initial letters of the ethnic \(\text{ΑΣ}\). On the basis of these two elements, the inscription and the symbol, these rare coins were attributed to Astacus by Imhoof-Blumer\(^{12}\). They are dated to the middle of the 4\(^{th}\) century B.C. Kraay connects the issues with Timoleons’ Sicilian expedition\(^{13}\) (c. 344 B.C.).

Perhaps slightly earlier or at the same time as the first group, the mint of Astacus since they bear the first few letters of its own types, which are identified with certainty to the group, the mint of the city produces silver issues with parallels. The two coins are dated to the first half of the 4\(^{th}\) century B.C., on the basis of stylistic and typological parallels. The rendering of the head on the obverse shows a noticeable stylistic and typological relation to the coins of Epidaurus\(^{16}\), where the head of the cult statue of Asclepius is depicted\(^{17}\): according to the literary sources, the Parian sculptor Thrasymedes produced a statue of Asclepius and it is likely that the heads on the coins of Epidaurus were meant to copy this statue. The depiction of the horse on the obverse of the second coin is of no great surprise since we know from literary sources that the Acamarian mints, as the Thessalians, were renowned in antiquity for the breeding of horses\(^{20}\). Iconographical and especially stylistic parallels can also

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be found in the Thessalian numismatic tradition. Specifically, corresponding examples from Thessaly are known from the mints of Kierion and Pelinna. Moreover, the motif of the horse is a great favourite in regal Macedonian coinage, where it occurs for the first time on the issues of Perdiccas II (c. 452–413 B.C.). It was used as a type by subsequent rulers as well. The Astacus horse type shows a close resemblance to the coins of Alexander II (c. 370–369/8 B.C.) which date to the second quarter of the 4th century B.C. A comparison can also be drawn from the area of Akarnania and specifically with the mint of Palaion, dated to the second half of the 4th century B.C.

On the basis of the above evidence, we may conclude that the coins are dated approximately from the second to the third quarter of the 4th century B.C. Up to now, scholarly research has not recognised other silver coins attributable to this city, while the small number of coins known were probably associated with two single issues.

**Bronze**

To date, no bronze coins have been attributed to the mint of Astacus. The purpose of this paper is to present unknown numismatic evidence consisting of three groups of bronze coins, which provide a picture of the 4th century production of the city. There are five known bronze coins, having a similar iconographical reverse type, with the central image of the cupping-vessel (αναυρία), but different obverses. Four of them are unpublished, whereas the fifth has been mistakenly attributed to Thessalian Atrax.

**Group I**

**Obv.:** Female facing head.
**Rev.:** Cupping-vessel. In the field to l. forceps.

### 4. O1 R1
- a. Private Collection, 17 mm 5" 4.77g PLJ2
- b. Patras', Na49/38 16 mm 5" 4.75g PLJ3


The first group consists of two coins (Cat. Nos. 4a-b) bearing the same types: a female facing head on the obverse and a cupping-vessel on the reverse. The first (Cat. No. 4a) weighs 4.77g and the second (Cat. No. 4b) 4.75g. The two coins are badly corroded, so that the inscriptions on the reverse are nearly illegible. On the first coin, the letters ΑΣ can be discerned in the field to the right, which suggests an attribution of these coins to Astacus. Moreover, as will be discussed below, one of these coins was found in a burial hoard.

The two bronze coins presented here were struck from the same obverse and reverse dies. The flan is thick, a characteristic of coins of an early date, corresponding to the technique being used for the Acanrian coins. The head has stylistic parallels to the Apollo head on the coins of Amphipolis, as well as to Sicilian models. Moreover, there are stylistic and typological parallels in the depiction of Persephone from the mint of Elea and Thespiae in Epirus and from Anactorium in Acarnania. There are also similarities with the coins of Corinthe and especially with the issues bearing the facing head of the nymph Peirene, with her hair flying loose. Apart from the region of Western Greece, similar examples come from the area of Thessaly. More specifically, we can cite an example with the head of the Maenad from the mint of Eurea, the head of Hera from the mint of Gomphi and the mint of Perrholoi, all dated to the second half of the 4th century B.C. It is also worth noting the coinage of Thessalian Pharsalus, depicting the face of Athena, dated to the end of the 5th century B.C., according to recent research.

The interpretation of the iconography on the obverse is difficult, since the figure cannot be easily discerned. Nonetheless, it is tempting to correlate the representation

22. SNG München (Makedonische Königre), no. 16.
23. SNG München (Makedonische Königre), nos. 8–9, 39.
25. The coin is kept in the 6th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities of the Ministry of Culture in Patras.
30. SNG Cop. (Epirus-Acarnania), nos. 101, 305.
31. SNG Cop. (Epirus-Acarnania), no. 164.
33. Rogers, loc. cit., pp. 74-75, nos. 210-211a, fig. 89.
34. Rogers, loc. cit., pp. 76-77, nos. 214-217, figs. 92-95.
35. Rogers, loc. cit., pp. 145-144, no. 418, fig. 218.
of the cupping-vessel on the reverse with the image on the obverse and to suggest that this head may be a specific figure from the family of Asklepius, possibly one of his daughters or Epione, his wife. The type could also be interpreted as the head of a nymph. The fact that there is no source referring to the existence of a nymph connected with Astacus creates, however, an initial difficulty in such an interpretation. Yet it should be noted that similar representations of nymphs from other Acanthian mints, such as the facing head of the nymph Callirhoë on the coins of the Acanthian League, which appears as early as the 5th century B.C., make such an interpretation plausible. Another possible explanation of the figure is that it represents a female goddess. The goddess Artemis is known to have been worshipped at Astacus; epigraphical and archaeological evidence attest a cult of Artemis Agretera. It is unfortunate that despite these possible interpretations, the condition of the coin has obliterated any distinguishing features that would allow for an accurate identification.

The elements analysed above, the provenance, the flan, the iconographical similarity with the silver coinage of the Thessalian mint of Ekkara, dated from the second to the third quarter of the 4th century B.C., the female head to the l. on the obverse, is probably another issue of Astacus. Moreover, the type combination of Artemis and the cupping-vessel, can also be justified, since Artemis is related to Asklepius, as she is the sister of Apollo, the father of the healing god.

One more bronze coin, due to its reverse inscription, can be attributed to this Acanthian city. It weighs 2.63g. On the obverse of the coin (Cat. No. 5) is a female head to the left, wearing earrings. On the reverse is a cupping-vessel and as a symbol a forceps. I had the opportunity of examining a cast of the coin and I noticed that the retrograde inscription consists of the four letters of the ethnic of the people of Acanthus ΑΣΤΑ. The correct reading leaves no room for doubt that the issuing authority is Acanthus. Edgar Rogers, however, in his monography The Copper Coinage of Thessaly suggested that it was issued by the Thessalian mint of Atrak. He mistakenly read the inscription as ATRA and apparently connected it with sources that mention Asklepius’ provenance from Atrak.

Of great importance for the dating of the coin, is the hair style (Melenenfrisur) of the female figure. It also occurs on the head of Artemis depicted on the coins of the Macedonian king Philip II, dated to 342/1-329/8 B.C. Furthermore, strong typological and stylistic similarities can be found on the coins of the Thessalian mint of Ekkara, dated from the second to the third quarter of the 4th century B.C. The female head can be interpreted as the goddess Artemis, whose worship, as mentioned above, is attested at Astacus. Moreover, the type combination of Artemis and the cupping-vessel, can also be justified, since Artemis is related to Asklepius, as she is the sister of Apollo, the father of the healing god.

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The coinage of the city, both silver and bronze. Astacus, the only strong testimony is provided by

6. O1 R1 a. Private Collection 16 mm 2" 3.58g Pl.I, 5
7. O1 R1 a. Vienna, ex Sammlung Vierdort 15mm - 2.79g
Münsterberg, R.: Neuerwerbungen der Sammlung antiker Münzen 1920 bis 1924, NZ 58 (Neue Folge 18), 1925, p. 29, pl. 12, no. 4.

The third and final group presented here consists of two (Cat. Nos. 6–7) bronze coins. On the obverse, they bear a female head to the right, with earrings and rolled hair. Depicted on the reverse, is a cupping vessel and a forceps with the first four letters of the ethnic ΑΣΤΑ. The weight of the coins is 3.58g and 2.79g respectively. They were struck from two obverse and two reverse dies. The first one (Cat. No. 6) is so worn that the letters of the inscription are not discernible. The second one (Cat. No. 7), however, which is preserved in good condition, enables us to read the ethnic ΑΣΤΑ. The relative iconography of the reverse, but even more importantly the inscription, indicates that the coins belong to Astacus.

The depiction of the female features is different from that of the two previous groups. This however does not signify any chronological gap between them, since the characteristics of the female head goes back to the prototypes of the 4th century B.C. There are typological and stylistic similarities with the depictions of the nymph Callirhoe of neighbouring Stratus41, of the Thessalian nymph Larissa42, coins from the cities of the Chalkidice peninsula as well as the Macedonian royal issues43, all of which are dated to the 4th century B.C.

Having securely attributed to Astacus the above bronze coins bearing the cupping-vessel and a forceps, further evidence of the cult of Asklepius in the region must be sought. From the Acarnanian region the only information about the worship of the god is that given by Heuzey44, who refers to a relief with a depiction of Asklepius and Hygeia found in Aylia. Unfortunately, the relief is lost to us today. Consequently, since there is no epigraphical, literary or archaeological evidence for the cult of the god in Astacus, the only strong testimony is provided by the coinage of the city, both silver and bronze.

Cupping-vessels are often depicted in art; both on relief and vase-paintings, but originals have been preserved as well. In addition, they occur as numismatic types on the coins of Epidaurus45, Kos and the issues of ΑEkale46, a town in the island of Amorgos.

With the new numismatic evidence provided by the bronze coins that have been attributed to the city, the picture of the mint production at Astacus may be seen in a new light. As mentioned above, on the basis of stylistic evidence and the dates provided from the burial hoard, the bronzes are dated to around the middle of the 4th century B.C. It is unfortunate that we cannot connect and interpret this output with a specific historical event since we lack literary and epigraphical evidence. It is tempting, however, to suggest that this numismatic activity coincides with the time of the conquest of Acarnania by the Macedonian king Philip II and before the expansion of the Aetolian League in this area. The political situation apparently created the appropriate conditions for the mint of Astacus to issue these bronze coins in order to facilitate the daily transactions of its citizens.