

AIAC – Quaderni 2

Estratto

# INCONTRI DELL'ASSOCIAZIONE INTERNAZIONALE DI ARCHEOLOGIA CLASSICA

Stagioni 2017-2018 e 2018-2019

a cura di  
Évelyne Bukowiecki e Antonio Pizzo



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ASSOCIAZIONE INTERNAZIONALE DI ARCHEOLOGIA CLASSICA

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# Sommario

Ringraziamenti. . . . .	9
Steffen Oraschewski	
<i>Fatto di legno. Esempi nell'architettura monumentale a Roma</i> . . . . .	11
Sara Bossi	
<i>Materiali da costruzione a Roma: il tufo granulare grigio alle pendici settentrionali del Palatino</i> . . . . .	17
Charles Davoine	
<i>"Restitutor Vrbis: l'attività edilizia di Settimio Severo a Roma, tra necessità e ideologia"</i> . . . . .	23
Pia Mustonen	
<i>Tematica religiosa nelle monete delle donne della dinastia flavia (69-96)</i> . . .	27
Gianluca Mandatori	
<i>Ratio denariaria e denarii conati: l'introduzione della moneta argentea a Roma</i> . . . . .	33
Giuseppe Carlo Castellano	
<i>Coins in Context: Trade, Monetization, and Cultural Contact in the Tyrrhenian Sea</i> . . . . .	39

Chiara Cecalupo

*Reflections on the Numismatic Collection of Propaganda Fide from  
Archive Documentation* . . . . . 53

Konogan BEAUFAY

*Water management in the public baths of Central Italy: some considerations  
on the supply of water to the baths and the pools.* . . . . . 59

Silvia Cavigioni

*Le Terme di Tito sul Colle Oppio: storia di un edificio e del suo territorio  
seguendo i percorsi dell'acqua.* . . . . . 67

Matteo Marcato, Cecilia Zanetti

*Impianti termali e acque salutifere nelle province romane occidentali:  
alcune riflessioni.* . . . . . 75

Alba Casaramona

*Il Sepolcreto Salario: nuove prospettive d'indagine* . . . . . 79

Silvia Stassi

*Costruire, violare, placare: i riti del costruire e il mondo funerario* . . . . . 87

Michela Stefani

*L'area archeologica del sepolcro degli Scipioni a Roma* . . . . . 93

Livia Tirabassi

*Urbanistica punica della Sardegna meridionale: l'insediamento di Pani  
Loriga di Santadi (SU) alla luce delle recenti indagini.* . . . . . 99

Andrea Grazian

*Il Cispio. Lineamenti di topografia del sacro e storia sociale* . . . . . 105

Esther Rodríguez González

*Del Guadalquivir al Guadiana: la arquitectura en tierra en el mundo  
tartésico* . . . . . 111

Lena Marie Vitt

*Sacral reuse of prehistoric nuraghi in Punic-Roman Sardinia* . . . . . 117

Bruno D'Andrea

*Da Baal Hammon a Saturno? Fenomeni di continuità, rottura e trasformazione nella cultura religiosa dell'Africa di età romana* . . . . . 123

Bertrand Augier

*Ascesa al senato e proprietà fondiaria in età tardo repubblicana (90 a.C.-14 d.C.)*. . . . . 129

Rossella Pansini

*Archeologia della costruzione nel centro monumentale di Sala (Mauretania Tingitana): il caso della Curia Ulpia*. . . . . 133

Milena Mimmo

*Gli edifici di stoccaggio della città di Roma: dall'analisi strutturale alla proposta ricostruttiva degli Horrea Vespasiani*. . . . . 141

Ann Glennie

*Roman Cosa* . . . . . 147

Giuseppe Restaino

*Il tempio “ἐν τῷ προαστείῳ” di Eliogabalo. Problemi storici e topografici* . . . 151

Rubén Montoya González

*Villas romanas y sus espacios arquitectónicos en la provincia Bética: notas metodológicas preliminares para un análisis cuantitativo* . . . . . 157

Giulia Ciucci

*Architettura, linguaggi e spazi: la villa maritima come linguaggio condiviso nel Mediterraneo centrale e occidentale* . . . . . 163



Aurora Taiuti

*Imago feminae: tipi e varianti statuarie femminili nella tarda  
Repubblica e nella prima età imperiale . . . . .* 169

Matteo Pucci

«Qui ex agro [...] Labicano cognominantur», *Plin. Nat. Hist. III*, 63,  
5-6. *Lo studio dell'ager Labicanus tra fonti ed evidenza archeologica. . . .* 179

Giuliano Giovanetti

*Porti e approdi fra Urbe e suburbio. . . . .* 185

# Coins in Context: Trade, Monetization, and Cultural Contact in the Tyrrhenian Sea

Giuseppe Carlo Castellano\*



The Bronze and Iron Age *indigeni* of Sicily used bronze objects, tools, and ingots as currency, which they reckoned against an Italic libral weight standard that the Greeks called the *litra*.<sup>1</sup> Already during the premonetary period Greek colonists, particularly in cities like the Chalchidian colony of Himera that enjoyed close relations with the indigenous peoples, began to use this system of bronze exchange and with it the *litra* standard. This is clear from epigraphic, metrological, and archaeological evidence.<sup>2</sup>

With the introduction of Greek-style coinage to Sicily between 550 and 530 BC, the *litra* took on new significance as a small silver coin equivalent to the native bronze measure, first minted at Himera on the northern coast.<sup>3</sup> At Himera, the *litra* appears alongside traditional imported Greek denominations, namely the Chalchidian drachm and obol.<sup>4</sup> Though the first silver *litrai* were minted at Greek cities, indigenous Sicilians and mixed populations at settlements like Morgantina were minting their own silver *litrai* by the mid-fifth century. Initially bound to the native bronze standard, as at Himera, the *litra* was assimilated into the Euboic-Attic silver standard at Syracuse as one-

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\* Università del Texas ad Austin. Incontro AIAC del 22/01/2018 dal titolo “Volti e sfaccettature della moneta antica”.

<sup>1</sup> TRIBULATO 2012, 171.

<sup>2</sup> SJÖQVIST 1973; VASSALLO 2003; SOLE 2009.

<sup>3</sup> KRAAY 1983; CRAWFORD 1985; CACCAMO CALTABIANO 2011; SOLE 2011.

<sup>4</sup> MANGANARO 1999; MACALUSO 2008; ARNOLD - BIUCCHI 2009; SOLE 2009.

fifth of a drachm around 466 BC, replacing the older one-sixth fraction, the obol. This was done on account of the silver equivalent of the bronze litra being heavier than the obol, so that only five of these fractions could fit in an Attic-weight drachm.

The litra rapidly became the preferred fraction of the Euboic-Attic standard in Sicily, supplanting the traditional obol. These silver litrai allowed for conversion between the native bronze and imported Greek silver standards, suggesting significant contact and trade between native Italic peoples, Greeks, and hybrid populations.<sup>5</sup> This “Sicilianized” Euboic-Attic standard had spread throughout much of the Tyrrhenian Sea by the early to mid-fifth century, including most of Greek Sicily, Cumae in Campania, and Populonia in coastal Etruria (fig. 1). These regions were monetized to different degrees and in different ways, however, despite the shared Greek influence. Though the Tyrrhenian did come to be dominated by the same standard, the adoption and use of currency was not uniform nor was it entirely based on facilitating economic transactions. Rather, the monetization of the Tyrrhenian was regionally and culturally determined, with coinage on the same standard serving different economic and social functions in different areas.

In Sicily, we see a cooperative monetization that involves Greeks and indigenous peoples alike, through the assimilation of the native bronze and imported silver systems. Local and foreign coinage circulated widely together, but the older habits of metal exchange by weight persisted, particularly in indigenous contexts.<sup>6</sup>

Though it is often said that small coinage did not travel, this is untrue of the silver litra within Sicily. A Syracusan litra of the mid-fifth century BC was found in the bouleuterion at Morgantina. Other examples bear the countermark of a selinon leaf, suggesting that they travelled to Selinus and were there accepted as good currency. A hoard found at Agrigento, deposited in 450 BC, consists exclusively of small silver from all across the island, including

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<sup>5</sup> CRAWFORD 1985.

<sup>6</sup> SOLE 2011.

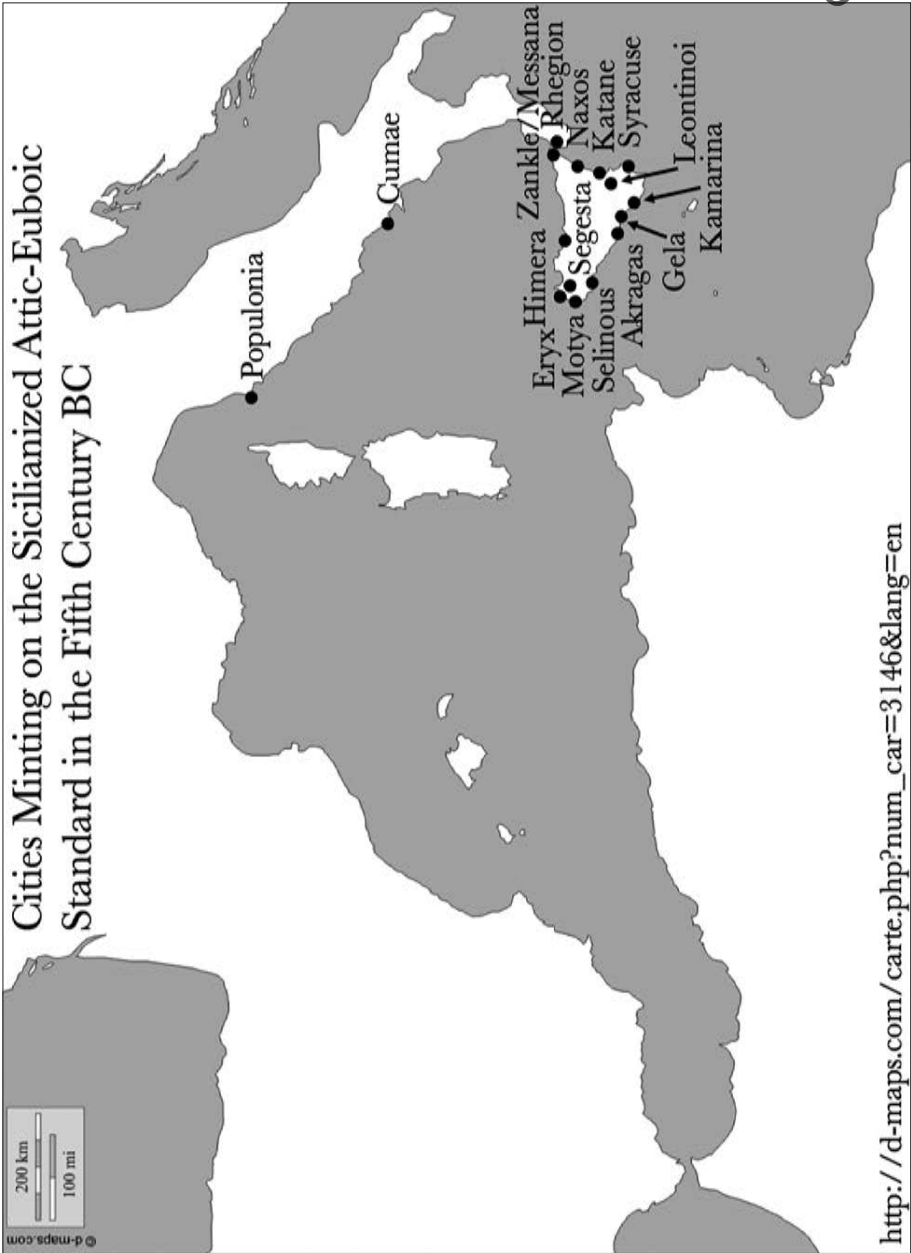


Fig. 1

coins of Akragas itself, Himera, Leontinoi, Syracuse, and Rhegion.<sup>7</sup> Another contemporary hoard from Messina also contained only small silver, in this case from Zancle/Messana itself, Rhegion, Akragas, Eryx, Himera, Hipana, and Segesta.<sup>8</sup> Eryx and Segesta were both strong centers of indigenous identity, and among the earliest native settlements to begin minting silver coins. Both of these hoards contain silver litrai. That such small coins travelled the breadth of the island, from Eryx to Syracuse, suggests widespread acceptance of the silver litra standard. Though a large number of foreign silver coins travelled to Sicily, Sicilian coins have very limited circulation beyond the island, and finds of Sicilian coinage outside of Sicily (with the exception of Rhegion) are rare. That said, Sicilian monetary practice clearly influenced that of mainland Italy, so that while the coins themselves do not seem to have travelled, the standards and systems of division did.

Cultural contact and the spread of coinage took on different aspects in different places. In Etruria, unlike in Sicily, there was limited circulation of foreign coinage, and what little local coinage was minted did not circulate widely even within the region. Though Etruscans may have minted some few coins as early as the fifth century, coinage was relatively uncommon in Etruria until the third century BC and the Italic tradition of metal exchange by weight persisted even more than in Sicily. What little coinage there was seems to have been minted on imported Greek standards and was not widely-used. Their economy was not monetized to the same degree as that of Magna Graecia until the period of Roman influence.

The Volterra hoard provides a most illustrative counterweight to the Sicilian situation.<sup>9</sup> Deposited around 500 BC, this hoard contains almost exclusively small silver from Phokaia and its western colonies, on the Phokaian standard, as well as the famous Hippalektryones and Gorgoneia, which are likely from the region of Massalia (fig. 2).<sup>10</sup> The hoard originally contained 65

<sup>7</sup> IGCH 2078.

<sup>8</sup> IGCH 2079.

<sup>9</sup> IGCH 1875; CRISTOFANI MARTELLI 1976.

<sup>10</sup> RUTTER 2001, 29.

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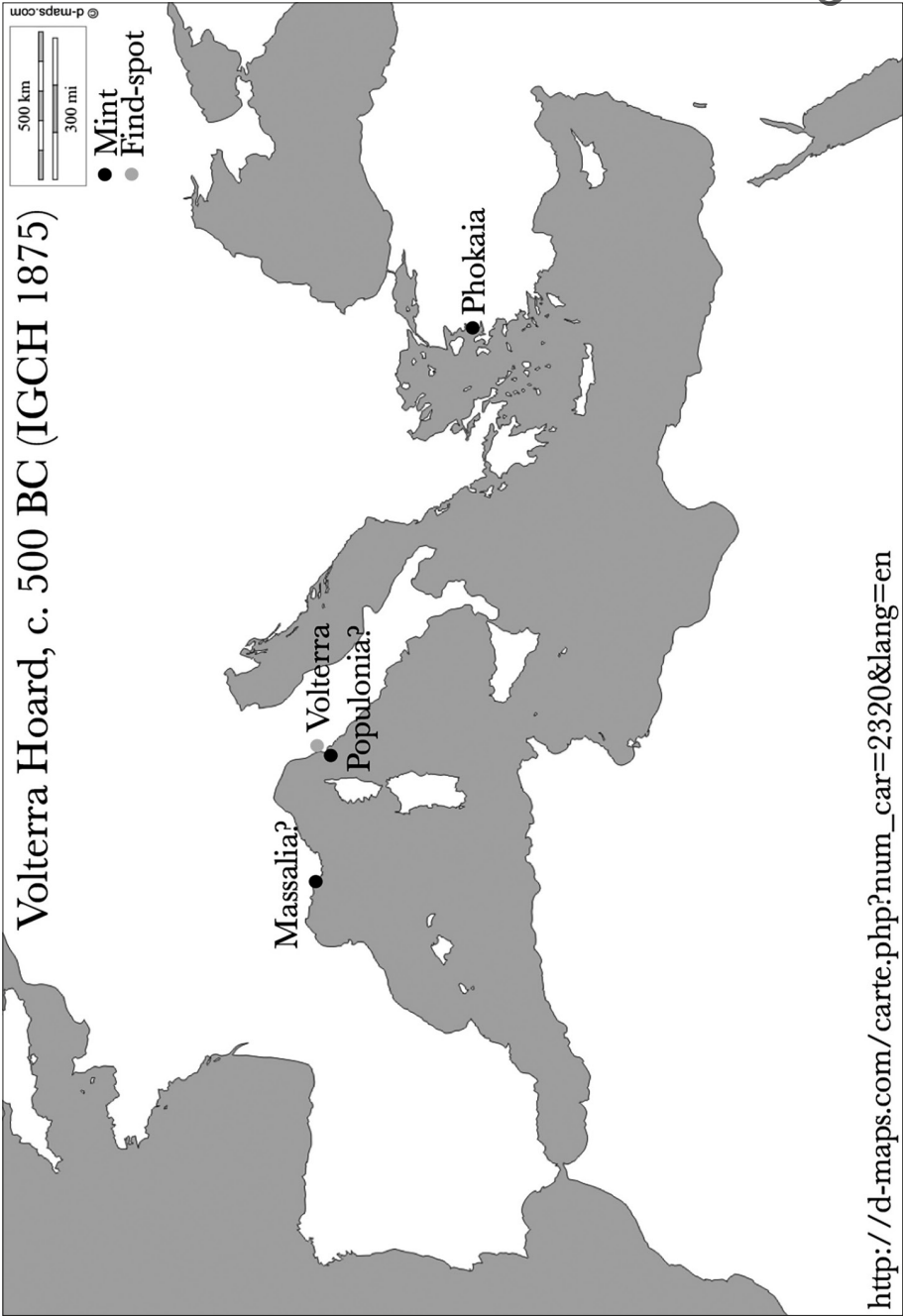


Fig. 2

silver coins. In addition to the coins, the hoard contained about a kilogram of silver bars and a small silver lion.

The Pegasi and Hippalektryones may be on the Milesian standard. In any case, the presence of multiple foreign standards in an Archaic hoard alongside silver bars and objects seems to suggest that the Etruscans of the time viewed silver coins as essentially small ingots, in the manner of hack-silber.<sup>11</sup> The Etruscans therefore seem primarily to have exchanged metal by weight. This stands in contrast to the Sicilian example, where the colonizing Greeks deliberately (and successfully) attempted to monetize the island on a Greek model by explicitly tying their silver issues to local bronze standards.

If the Hippalektryones and the Gorgoneia are indeed of Massalian production, the coins of the Volterra hoard provide further evidence for the strong connection between the Etruscans and the inhabitants of the Gallic coast, with whom they traded wine, iron from Elba, and *bucchero* vessels for slaves and Cornish tin. Whatever the exact origin of these coins, the Volterra hoard provides early evidence for the contemporary presence of coins on multiple Greek standards in central Etruria and in southern France, probably associated with the westward-facing Tyrrhenian trade.

Leaving aside the controversial evidence of the coins from the Volterra hoard, the earliest unequivocally Etruscan coinage to travel outside of Etruria belongs to the First Metus series from Populonia, dated to between 450 and 400 BC.<sup>12</sup> The First Metus coinage consisted of a relatively large issue of silver ten-unit pieces, accompanied by some fewer five-unit and two-and-a-half-unit pieces. They are distinguished by marks of value, with an “X” in Etruscan numerals for the ten-units, a “V” for the five-units, and “II<” for the two-and-a-half-units. These ten-, five-, and two-and-a-half-unit Populonian coins correspond in weight to didrachms, drachms, and hemidrachms, respectively, on the Euboic-Attic standard in contemporary use in Syracuse, where under Sicilian cultural influence the drachm was divided decimally into five litrai

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<sup>11</sup> CATALLI 1990, 35.

<sup>12</sup> CATALLI 1990, 41; RUTTER 2001, 31.

as opposed to the traditional Greek duodecimal division into six obols.<sup>13</sup> The basic unit of the First Metus series, then, is analogous to the Sicilian silver *litra*, though unlike in Sicily no single-unit coins exist *per se*. The *litra* standard appears to have spread from Sicily to the Italian mainland possibly via Cumae, where there was close contact between the Etruscans and Greeks and where the Attic-Euboic standard was in use from around 475 BC.<sup>14</sup>

The Euboic-Attic was by this time the most commonly used standard among Greeks in the Tyrrhenian region, under the waxing influence of Syracuse, and the adoption of this standard may speak to a Populonian desire (or even Syracusan pressure) to integrate themselves monetarily into the Tyrrhenian economic milieu. The Populonians used same decimal system of division for their coinage as the Syracusans, as opposed to the traditional Tyrrhenian, Greek, and Near Eastern duodecimal. In any case, the Euboic-Attic standard in use in Sicily and in Populonia was divisible into both *litrai* (one-fifth of a drachm) and obols (one-sixth of a drachm), and so would have served to convert between the decimal and duodecimal systems.

The First Metus may have been minted to meet military expenditures at Populonia during the tumultuous fifth century, when Etruscans, Greeks, and Carthaginians battled for economic and political power in the Tyrrhenian.<sup>15</sup> If indeed intended primarily as payment for soldiers, and not destined for the general market in a largely non-monetized region, these coins have similarities to other early coinages in such areas, for example the earliest Lydian coins in electrum. These have been interpreted as a means by which to pay bonuses for service or as gifts to loyal allies or retainers. It is therefore possible that the Populonian coins served a similar function. We face the possibility that these coins represent an early phase in monetization, where the weight system was utilized to standardize amounts intended as payment and not in order to guarantee widespread acceptance of the coins as money. This is in opposition

<sup>13</sup> PARISE 1985, 257–261; VECCHI 2012, 25.

<sup>14</sup> RUTTER 2001, 66.

<sup>15</sup> CRISTOFANI 1986, 144.



to the Sicilian situation, where the presence of small silver fractions may speak to the more general use of small change in daily market transactions. The lack of small fractions in the First Metus series supports the interpretation that these issues likely represented large-scale state expenditure.

The very few examples of these First Metus coins of Populonia found outside of their region of origin highlight the fact that in certain contexts coins could function not only as monetary instruments, but also as prestige items, markers of status, or ritual objects. The furthest afield are from Como in Lombardy, coastal Catalonia, and Aleria, Corsica.

A ten-unit silver First Metus was found in a secure archaeological context in Prestino, in the province of Como in Lombardy.<sup>16</sup> It is the only Etruscan coin found north of the Appenines. The site is associated with the Golasecca culture, a Lepontic Celtic-speaking late Bronze and early Iron Age society with close ties to the Hallstatt and La Tène cultures. By the fifth century the lucrative trade routes north through Alpine passes gave rise to a flourishing, hierarchically-organized proto-urban settlement dominated by local élites with close connections both to their Etruscan and Transalpine Celtic counterparts. The presence of Etruscan goods in the Golaseccian area has in the past been interpreted as evidence of strong Etruscan influence, but we must also be careful to emphasize the agency of the local élites who selected and used foreign goods. Just as in a later period when the presence of Italo-Roman artifacts does not necessarily mean that the area was “Romanized,” so in the earlier period the presence of Etruscan prestige goods does not imply any thorough “Etruscanization.”

The context in which the Prestino coin was found has been dated on the basis of the ceramic material to between 450 and 400 BC, corresponding to the Golasecca III A phase.<sup>17</sup> The excavations at Prestino reveal a sophisticated domestic and artisanal context. Stone architecture, decorative terracotta roofing, amber beads, personal ornaments of bronze, local fine-ware and imported

<sup>16</sup> DE MARINIS 1982, 506–509; CATALI 1990, 41; VECCHI 2012, 491.

<sup>17</sup> DE MARINIS 1982, 506–509.

Attic, Corinthian, and Etruscan ceramics, and the Populonian silver didrachm all suggest that the at least some of the occupants of the Prestino site were of high social status. Metal-working was done onsite, an activity often overseen or closely controlled by the élite. This may speak to a connection through the metal-trade, as inhabitants of the region were known consumers of both raw and worked Etruscan metal. This coin does certainly not represent evidence for the true monetization of this region or for the “normal” circulation of this coinage. It may be that in Como this coin functioned as silver bullion for its intrinsic material value.

While certainly indicative of close trade links between the Etruscan cities and their neighbors to the north, this coin is more than merely evidence for commerce, as previous scholars have emphasized.<sup>18</sup> I suggest further that the coin itself may represent a prestige object in the possession of one of the inhabitants of Celtic Como, possibly a member of the Golaseccian élite. That is to say that the coin may well provide evidence for trade, alongside many other objects found in the region, but we must retain the possibility that this particular coin was not necessarily part of a purely economic transaction and may have had social relevance as a gift. Indeed, trade was embedded in socio-cultural and even mythical structures, and it is highly unlikely that these people conceived of economics in the way that a modern audience might.

Much the same has been said of the earliest Electrum coinage in Lydia. These may have served as gifts or payments given by the state, a monarch, or a private individual rather than as fully monetized coins. Such objects, entwined in the ancient tradition of gift-exchange, could also serve as status markers or as ritual objects.

Our Populonian coin may provide evidence that as early as the mid-fifth century foreign coins were treated as prestige objects in Celtic Como. The relative lack of precious metals at Como during this period would have rendered even a small silver coin an object of value. Furthermore, it may be that the iconography of the gorgon's head was appreciated as a piece of art in

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<sup>18</sup> For example DE MARINIS 1982, CATALI 1990, VECCHI 2012.

miniature, given the clear esteem held for metalwork in the Padane and wider European cultural milieu, or perhaps was valued for symbolic and apotropaic reasons. It is possible, though highly speculative, that this coin may have represented pay for a Golasecchian Celtic warrior in Etruscan service, a situation for which there is ample literary evidence.

Aside from the Prestino coin, two other specimens of the First Metus have been found outside of Etruria. One, from an uncertain location in coastal Catalonia, is cut in half, suggesting that it may have been used either as a hemidrachm in a monetized context or as hacksilber in a premonetary one.<sup>19</sup> This represents the furthest spread of fifth century Etruscan coinage, at the end of the iron-trading networks extending westward to the Iberian Peninsula via Corsica and Gaul.

A First Metus didrachm was also found at the pre-Roman necropolis of Aleria in Corsica, the site of the ancient Phokaian *emporion* of Alalia, which was a rather mixed trading center under strong Populonian influence during the period in question.<sup>20</sup> If this sporadic find in fact formed part of a funerary assemblage, it takes on new significance as a prestige item or a ritual object. Both finds further confirm the fundamental importance of this westward-facing Tyrrhenian network to the monetization of Etruria.

The process of monetization in Italy and Sicily unfolded in a variety of regionally-specific ways that met the social, cultural, and economic exigencies of the local inhabitants. Sicily enjoyed an early, deliberate monetization that involved the assimilation of Greek and indigenous tradition with a view to facilitating economic transactions. In Sicily, the widespread presence of small denominations that facilitated exchange between the indigenous and imported systems speaks to fairly intense monetized trading relationships. Etruria, on the other hand, was late to develop a monetized economy, and the coins produced there in the earliest periods seem to have served a different function than in Sicily and Magna Graecia. Rather than serving primarily to facili-

<sup>19</sup> *Coin Hoards* IX, 702; ASENSI 1990; VILLARONGA 1993, 19, no.6; VECCHI 2012, 83.

<sup>20</sup> JEHASSE and JEHASSE 1973, 545, no. 2310; VISONÀ 1984, 229, note 4; CRAWFORD 1985, 305; CRISTOFANI 1986, 147; VECCHI 2012, 471.

tate trade or converting between standards, early Etruscan coinage like the First Metus may represent military expenditure. The Etruscan adoption of the Euboic-Attic standard under Syracusan influence should therefore not be taken as straightforward evidence that Etruria was integrating itself in the Sicilian monetary economy. Certainly, a shared standard would have facilitated the thriving metal trade in the Tyrrhenian, but Etruria was simply not monetized to the degree that Sicily and Magna Graecia were. In Etruria, early coinage seems to have focused mainly on large, higher-value coins like the First Metus. These larger coins could function outside of the Etruscan context as prestige items, as we see at Prestino. Even though these Etruscan coins do not function in a fully monetized environment, the marks of value suggest that the denominations were relevant and that their divisibility or function as coins was recognized. The early Populonian coinage shows a preference for the decimal division, following the Syracusan model, as opposed to the traditional Tyrrhenian, Greek, and Near Eastern duodecimal system. In conclusion, though Greeks were the bearers of standards like the Euboic-Attic, which travelled along Greek-dominated trade-routes, non-Greek agency is still very much on display in the way that these coinages were used.

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