Etruscan Numismatics: A Notorious Dating and Identification Problem

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After the purchase to two very rare Etruscan coins, Kenneth Jenkins, former keeper of the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum, published a very carefully thought-out article in the Numismatic Chronicle of 1955 stating “the dating of Etruscan coins is notoriously difficult … yet there appears to be no hoard evidence of value for chronology.” He went on to speculate that the Populonia X and XX value didrachm series probably reflected the central Italian bronze devaluations.

In this paper it is my aim to summarise current research and propose a possible framework for the dating and mint attribution for the main Etruscan gold, silver and bronze struck and cast coinage, based on latest research. Since this conference is confined to research into Etruscology over the last five years, it is providential that 2001 saw – thanks to Keith Rutter, Michael Crawford, Andrew Burnett, Anne Johnson and the late lamented Martin Jessop Price – publication of Historia Numorum Italy. As far as Etruscan coinage is concerned, this is the most important overall view published since the fundamental studies by Garrucci in 1885 and Sambon in 1906 and the more modern compilations by myself in from 1988 onwards and by Fabio Vicari.

Like the Egyptians, Phoenicians and Carthaginians, the Etruscans were slow to adopt the Greek invention of coinage. Setting aside the early 5th century BC Aurioi-type silver fractions of the Volterra hoard of 1868, which I believe are not of Etruscan production, the earliest struck silver coinage seems to be that of Vulci and Populonia. An attribution to the 5th century for these first issues of tridrachms, didrachms or staters and drachms is plausible since they seem to be struck on the Chalcidian silver drachm standard of theoretically about 5.8 grams, present at Etruria’s nearest Greek neighbour, Cumae, dated to about 475-470 BC and at other Greek cities important to Etruscan sea-borne commerce in the early 5th century such as Himera, Naxos and Zancle. The coins are of Greek style, but with an Etruscan flavour and predilection for exotic animals and monsters. The wheel with curved struts is also reminiscent of some 5th century Macedonian tribal coins. These early issues are
rare and seem not to have been exported; they have no mark of value and must have had a limited circulation in the primitive bronze-weighing economy of central Italy, unfamiliar with Greek silver. One interesting feature of the Vulcian series is the legend thezi and thezle,\textsuperscript{9} which has defied any attempt to identify a city name, more likely being a magistrate’s signature or something referring to sacred a precinct.

An issue of silver didrachms with a crudely engraved male head on a similar Chalcidian weight standard to the undenominated coins of Vulci and Populonia, but bearing the mark of value 5, has been tentatively attributed to Lucca during the last quarter of the 4th century.\textsuperscript{10} They correspond to a single silver unit of about 2.25 grams, probably representing the silver equivalent of a bronze \textit{as or libra}, derived from the Greek \textit{litra}. The \textit{libra}, attested in Rome’s XII Tables from the mid-5th century BC, was the unit used for weighing the roughly cast bronze bullion currency ingots and bars in Rome and central Italy, where several different weight standards may have existed concurrently. These male heads were probably followed by a more finely produced octopus/amphora\textsuperscript{11} silver series attributed to the mint of Pisa, but more probably issued by Populonia, also struck on the Chalcidian standard, but with exactly double the unit of value of the former. The marks of value 20, 10 and 5, give a silver unit or \textit{as} of about 1.13 grams, approximately one Roman scruple, and probably represent a devaluation of the bronze unit with regards to silver.

Populonia may have been the first Etruscan city to place a mark of value on its coinage, following a practice already established by the mid 5th century at Syracuse and other Sicilian mints for silver uncial fractions of the \textit{litra} and at Akragas silver 5-\textit{litrae} denominated \textit{pen} for pentalitron\textsuperscript{12} and \textit{LI} for \textit{litra}.\textsuperscript{13} The first Gorgoneion series\textsuperscript{14} has been dated to the second half of the 5th century by recent excavations at Prestino, via Isonzo,\textsuperscript{15} a chronology confirmed by the subsequent find of a rare 5-unit piece of the same series\textsuperscript{16} in the excavation of the early 4th century Etruscan sanctuary at Golasecca from the phase III A 2 stratum.\textsuperscript{17} The weight standard employed seems to be the Corinthian stater (or Attic didrachm) with a theoretical weight of about 8.6 grams, subdivided into 10, 5 and 2 1/2 units that seem to be on the Sicilian silver \textit{litrae} standard of 0.86 grams. An issue of staters on the Corinthian standard attested at Cumae, Etruria’s nearest Greek neighbour, dated to about 470-455 BC,\textsuperscript{18} may have provided the metrological model for this issue which was denominated with Etruscan numeral \textit{X} (=10); associated fractions are \textit{V} (=5) and \textit{II} (=2 1/2).

The second Gorgoneion silver series of Populonia,\textsuperscript{19} massive by Etruscan standards, with the mark of value 20, 10 and 5 units, is on the same metrological standard as the Hercules and Minerva 20 units, male and female head 10, and male head 5, 2 1/5 and 1 unit\textsuperscript{20} and by metrological association, are related to the Gorgoneion, lion, male and female headed 50 to 10 unit gold issues.\textsuperscript{21} Find evidence from the Ponte Gini di Orentino excavation\textsuperscript{22} suggests a dating for this whole phase in the first half of the 3rd century and may be connected with the First Punic War. The metrology of this phase, with marks of value exactly double those of the first Gorgoneion issue, may correspond to the elusive ‘Italian school’ introduction of the denarius proposed by Pliny to 269 BC,\textsuperscript{23} as it is exactly on the same standard and anticipates the Roman denarius system introduced during the Second Punic War in about 212/211, although there is some evidence in Sicily that the date of its introduction could be as early as 214.

An issue depicting a hippocamp with marks of value CC and C, almost certainly
attributable to Lucca, is on the same weight standard as the second Gorgoneion 20, 10 and 5 units, but the 10 units is expressed by two numerals of five (CC).

The origin of Etruscan cast bronze coinage is to be sought in the central Italian premonetary “aes rude” ingots or lumps and ‘ramo secco’ and plain bronze bars, which circulated as currency throughout Italy from at least the 5th century BC. The cast round “aes grave” coinage of Volterra,24 Tarquinia, including bars,25 and the Chiana Valley with its associated struck unciae and semi-unciae,26 are all firmly dated to the 3rd century BC, including a series of oval shaped aes grave possibly from Volsini.27 This cast coinage seems to mirror the extensive Roman series. The date of the inception of the aes grave is estimated to be about 280 BC and to have been progressively reduced in weight from libral to semi-libral at the outbreak of the Second Punic War in 217 BC. Further reductions took place until the cast bronze gave way to sextantal bronze in about 214-212 BC and the introduction of the silver 10-as denarius with its fractions, the quinarius (5-asses) and sestertius (2 1/2-asses).

Two large bronze series with the legends pupluna28 and vatl29 are exactly on the Roman post-semi-libral as standard dated by Crawford to about 215-211 BC. The Etruscans were not frightened to experiment, as is the case with an extraordinary struck bronze series with incuse reverses, probably from Populonia and based on a hundred units or centesimal system which may correspond to the struck Roman sextantal as, theoretically of about 54 grams. An even more remarkable issue from a metrological point of view is what I interpret as a dual-denominated decimal/uncial series30 over struck on earlier post semi-libral bronzes, while a similar, but slightly lighter issue seems tariffed /X or 11 centismae,31 both dateable to about 200 BC.

Last, but by no means least, is a spectacular gold series of high artistic merit probably from Volsini, with marks of value 20 and 5.32 The unique Apollo-like head/majestic bull walking 20-unit piece, now in the British Museum, is reminiscent of the bronze issues of the Latin colonies of Aesernia, Cales, Compitaria, Suessa Aurunca and Teanum in Campania,33 dated to the mid-3rd century BC. The reverse running dog 5-unit coin is reminiscent of the Chiana Valley male head/dog running struck bronze (HN Italy 70) of uncertain date in the 3rd century. This is an isolated series with a gold unit of approximately 0.225 grams, which places it before the main gold issue of Populonia with a gold unit of 0.056 grams issued in the earlier part of the 3rd century and possibly related to the intervention of Rome at the time of the slave rebellion at Volsini in 265/4.

Rodolfo Martini, Novella Vismara and I are in the final stages of publishing a catalogue of all known Etruscan coins.34 In order to make it as complete as possible, we would welcome any comments on dating, mint attribution, excavated finds or unpublished single coins or collections in Museums or private collections.

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NOTES

1. P. 132.
4. *HN Italy* 92-94; *IGCH* 1875.
5. *HN Italy* 206-209.
6. *HN Italy* 111-114.
7. *HN Italy* 513; Rutter 1.
9. *HN Italy* 207-209.
10. *HN Italy* 95-97.
11. *HN Italy* 104-106.
13. SNG ANS Sicily 986-995.
16. *HN Italy* 118.
17. *Quaderni Ticinesi* 22, 1993, 44.
18. *HN Italy* 524; Rutter 28-31.
20. *HN Italy* 155-183.
21. *HN Italy* 127-141.
23. *HN Italy* 23:44.
25. *HN Italy* 212-220.
26. *HN Italy* 56-75.
27. *HN Italy* 51-22.
28. *HN Italy* Populonia 184-188.
29. *HN Italy* 203-204.
30. *HN Italy* 189.
31. *HN Italy* 190.
32. *HN Italy* 221-222.
33. *HN Italy* 431, 436, 437 and 454.
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