

Burial Coins in the Peloponnese: Testimonies of Monetary Relations and Coin Circulation

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In Greece, the practice of placing coins inside a burial appears in Macedonia at the beginning of the 5th century BC.¹ In the Peloponnese, the earliest known burials with coins date slightly later, just before the middle of the 5th century BC. During the Classical period, this numismatic practice in the graves of the Peloponnese is very limited. In the Hellenistic era, the custom is quite widespread without, however, becoming a strict rule in burial practices. Based on the position of the coins in the mouth or close to the head of the deceased,² it is estimated that one of the basic functions of the burial coins in the Peloponnese is connected to the custom of Charon's obol.³

Funerary coins reflect people's superstitions for life after death. However, apart from their symbolic value and contribution to chronology, they serve as testimonies of history, relations, and numismatic circulation within the region where they are found. The current study will examine this information.

Classical Period

According to published archaeological data the earliest examples of burial coins were found in Corinth inside a grave dated to 460–450 BC, and in Argos in the middle of the 5th century BC. The custom appears very limited in graves in Eva in Kynouria, during the end of the 5th – beginning of the 4th century BC, in Patras and in areas of Elis and Triphylia in Eleia in the first half of the 4th century BC (fig.1).⁴ The graph demonstrates the distribution of burial coins by mint and region: the twenty-eight coins found in Classical burials in the six aforementioned regions were issued in eleven mints (fig.2).

In the case of Corinth, nine out of the eleven burial coins were Corinthian (eight obols, one bronze), and only two came from foreign mints, Lefkada (an obol) and Thebes (a hemiobol).⁵ Local issues, contemporary with the burials, were coins in circulation. The discovery of foreign coins could be interpreted in the context of Corinthian relations with the specific regions, since silver and bronze coins of Lefkada and Thebes have been found either in public or religious areas of the ancient city.⁶

In contrast to the burial coins of Corinth, in the case of Argos a silver hemiobol was placed in just one grave of the city. The remaining burials contained silver obols of foreign Peloponnesian mints:⁷ Phlious (1), Kleonai (1) and Sicyon (5), as well as obols of Aegina (2). Even though Argos had a significant coinage and the commencement of its silver issues was quite early (in 470 BC),⁸ yet it is the use of non-local currency that is observed in the city graves.



Fig. 1: Map of the Peloponnese.

The predominance of the coins of Sicyon may belong to the wider context of the city's important status acquired during Sparta's hegemony. It was a vital ally for Sparta and remained essentially a member of the Peloponnesian League until its dissolution⁹ in the 360s BC. Sicyon, due to its geopolitical location, gave the Lacedaemonians unhindered access to the Corinthian Gulf and the Isthmus area. Sparta was not on good terms with Argos and the passage through its lands was not safe.¹⁰ According to J. Warren,¹¹ who has studied the coinage of Sicyon, its mint must have been the main mint of the Peloponnesian League during the Peloponnesian War. Furthermore, in terms of their relations, Argos and Sparta enjoyed a period of relative calm and stability following the battle of Mantinea in 418 BC. A thirty-year peace treaty was concluded and an oligarchic regime was established in Argos.

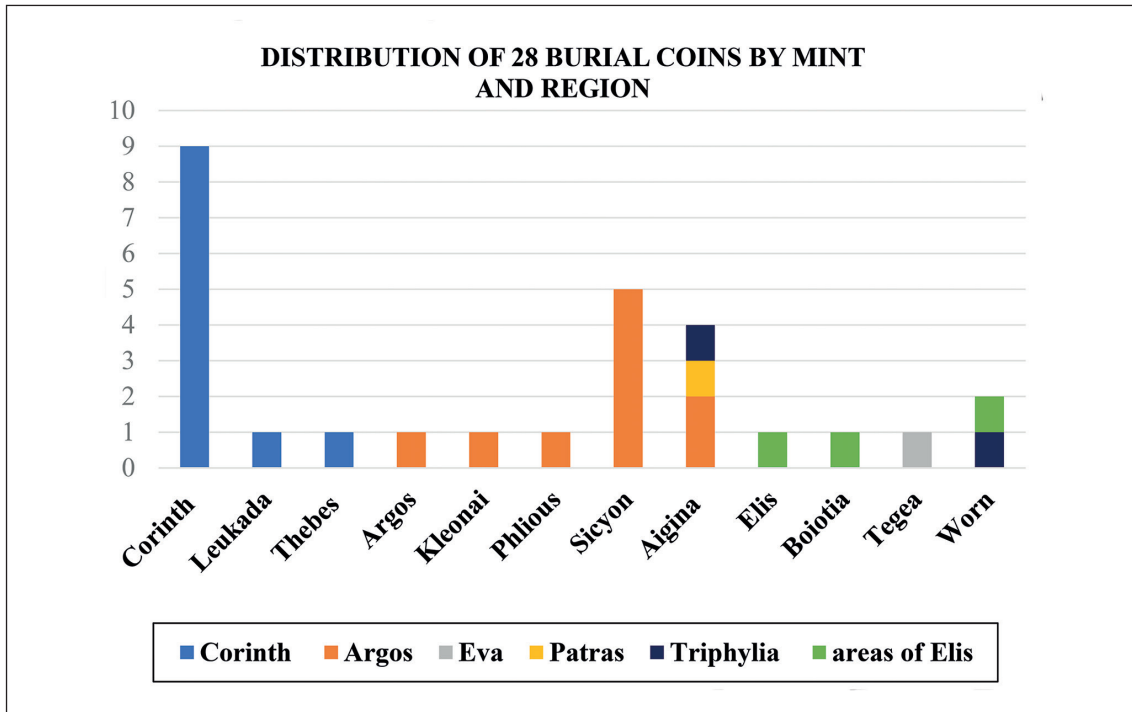


Fig. 2: Classical Period.

As seen in the graph, silver coins of Aegina were placed inside the graves of Argos, Patras, and Triphylia (fig. 2). The economic influence of Aegina in the Peloponnese was significant and based on the famous “turtles”, which were described by the ancient authors as “the currency of the Peloponnese” (Peloponnesion nomisma).¹² The earliest hoards buried in Arcadia and Elis contained only Aeginetan currency.¹³ With the exception of Corinth, almost all the Peloponnesian silver coins that were issued until the mid-3rd century BC were struck to the Aeginetan weight standard.¹⁴

In areas that did not produce their own coinage, burial coins offer evidence for local numismatic circulation. Thus, the silver obols of Aegina found in Patras and ancient Makistos in Triphylia, the silver trihemiobol of the Arcadian city of Tegea in neighboring Eva, the silver obol of Elis in a grave in the Cyllene area, the harbor of the capital of the Elians, were probably used in daily transactions before being deposited in graves.

Hellenistic Period

In the Hellenistic period, the burial custom in the Peloponnese appears widespread, since it is observed in the cemeteries of all thirteen areas under examination. Compared to the Classical period, the number of burial coins is larger, since the Hellenistic graves produced one hundred forty-five coins.

In the Corinthian graves, as in the Classical period, the local coins placed inside are contemporary with the burials. More specifically, of the fifteen burial coins, twelve were Corinthian: three silver obols and eight bronzes of the type Pegasus/Trident and one trihemiobol of the type Pegasus/Gorgoneion. Only three coins came from foreign mints: an obol of Argos, a diobol of Lefkada, and an hemiobol of Boeotia. Contrary to the local coins, the diobol of Lefkada and the hemiobol of Mycalessos in Boiotia were earlier in date than the burials.¹⁵

In Elis, the coins were found in four funerary monuments and a family cemetery in Triphylia,¹⁶ more precisely in the wider area of the acropolis of Platiana, which has been identified with the ancient city of Typanaiai. Of all the eighteen burial coins from Platiana, nine were issued by Sicyon (four triobols and five obols). As it was a region with no coinage of its own, the large percentage of finding Sicyonian coins in its graves is indicative of the local numismatic circulation. The presence of two obols of the Archaean League, which Tryphilia joined in 367 BC,¹⁷ falls within this context.

Furthermore, burial coins reflect the relationship of Tryphylia with other cities. Firstly, the absence of coins from Elis, the capital of the Elians, due to hostile relations between the two cities¹⁸ is noteworthy. Secondly, the coins of Corinth (one diobol), Argos (one triobol), and Sparta (one obol) reveal the city's relations with the powerful centers of the Peloponnese. Thirdly, the presence of a fairly worn tetrobol of Histiaia is associated with their widespread circulation during the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC in the Peloponnese.¹⁹ The individual case of a bronze coin of Cassander and – in an excellent state of preservation – the obol of the *Opountian Locrians* of 340 to 330 BC in a 3rd century grave, suggest that they could have been placed either as a family heirloom²⁰ or as non-legal currency.

In Hellenistic Pylos in Messenia, the burial practice appears at the end of the 3rd century BC in the graves of a tumulus. Bronze coins from Messene (1) and Megara (1) were used as burial coins, as were silver coins: one hemidrachm of Korone and one triobol of the Achaean League, contemporary with the burials.²¹ The coins from the graves in Pylos offer information on the history of the thriving Hellenistic city, which the Messenians and the Achaean League had claimed since the 3rd century BC. In 191 BC, Pylos joined the Achaean League concluding a separate treaty from the other cities.²² The coins of the other Messenian cities – Messene and Korone – as well as the Achaean League were probably in circulation in the city, since Pylos did not have its own coinage until the era of the Severan dynasty.²³

In Sparta,²⁴ this burial practice makes its appearance in the early Hellenistic times. The late presence of the funerary coins belongs to the general context of avoiding luxury and the acquisition of wealth (*chrematismos*)²⁵ that characterizes Spartan society, as well as the subsequent delayed silver coinage of the city during the reign of Areus I (309/8–265 BC).²⁶ In all sixty-eight burials of the Spartan cemetery, only three contained coins: a silver obol of Sicyon of 400–300 BC, and two silver obols of the local mint of Lacedaemon, issues of king Areus I. In addition, a bronze coin of Lacedaemon and one

of Sicyon were found in a late Hellenistic grave. The almost equal presence of coins struck in the local mint and Sicyonian coins reflects the relations between the two powerful cities.

In Argos, there is a wide distribution of the burial practice. Forty-one funerary coins came from twenty-one Hellenistic burials, from the city’s two cemeteries.²⁷ In the total coinage from Argos, only six were the city’s issues. As we have already mentioned, this phenomenon was observed in the graves of the Classical period. The mint of Sicyon with sixteen silver coins is predominant. The number of coins of Phlious (four silver obols and five bronzes) is also significant. There are also coins from Aegina (one obol), Corinth (four bronzes), Kleonai (one obol), Alea (one obol), Tegea, (one silver trihemio-bol), Pheneos (one bronze), and the Arcadian League, a bronze issue of the Megalopolis mint (fig. 3).

In the graves of Argos, the percentage of finding foreign Peloponnesian silver and bronze coins – and particularly those of Sicyon – is large, even though the numismatic production of the Argive city was particularly rich and long-lasting, until the 1st century BC.²⁸ Several coins of the mints of Sicyon, Corinth and Phlious also have been found in excavations in Argos. According to C. Grandjean,²⁹ the foreign small denominations were used by the citizens of Argos along with the coins of the city.

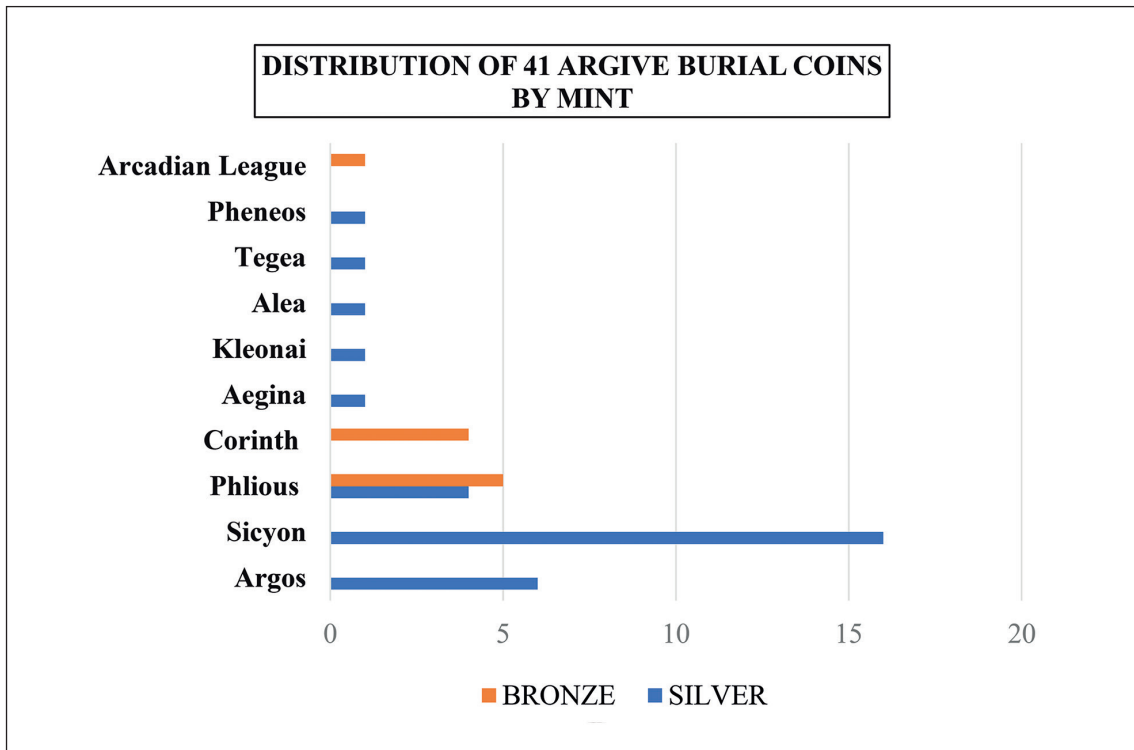


Fig. 3: Hellenistic Period.

Of the twenty-five foreign silver issues, eleven were quite earlier than the burials: three silver obols of Sicyon, three silver obols of Phlious, as well as the obols of Tegea, Aegina, Kleonai, Alea and Pheneos. In addition, of the six local coins only four were contemporary with the burials while in two cases they were more than one hundred years earlier.³⁰ The coins' chronology as well as their extensive wear indicate a long-lasting circulation.

Unlike the case of Corinth, where the local coins in circulation were dominant in the city's graves, the picture was completely different in Argos. In the burials of the Argive city, coins dating earlier than the graves and Sicyon issues that were widely circulating in the city were common. The remarkable presence of the Sicyonian coins in the 3rd century BC graves of Argos falls into the historical context of the period. Following its re-foundation by Demetrius Poliorcetes, Sicyon became one of the two main centers of the establishment of the Antigonids in Corinthia and held a prominent place in the years of the Macedonian authority.³¹ In the second half of the 3rd century, when Aratus ruled the city, Sicyon played a prominent role in the powerful political union of southern Greece after joining the Achaean League (251 BC).³²

In neighboring Asine, unlike Argos, the burial practice is limited. Coins were found in three of the seventeen graves from the city's Hellenistic cemetery.³³ More precisely, there were two silver obols of Argos, two bronzes and one obol of Sicyon, and one of the Arcadian League, struck in the mint of Megalopolis, all contemporary with the burials. The chronology of the graves corresponds to the period of the re-settlement and fortification of Asine, at the beginning of the 3rd century BC, in order to strengthen the power of the Antigonids in the southern Peloponnese through Argolis.³⁴ As in the case of Argos, the significant presence of Sicyon's coins in the graves of Asine reflects the economic importance of the city within the relative political and military stability in Argolis and Corinthia under the rule of the Antigonids. Furthermore, the funerary coins testify to Asine's relations with powerful Peloponnesian cities and, possibly, local numismatic circulation, since the city of Asine never issued its own coins.

In Arcadia, the funerary coins from burial monuments of the important cities of Phigalia and Alipheira are examined. The Arcadian cities had no coinage, except for a series of bronzes issued by Phigalia and Alipheira in the middle of the 2nd century BC, when they were members of the Achaean League.³⁵ In the burial monuments of Phigalia,³⁶ there were coins of the Arcadian League struck in the mint of Megalopolis (one bronze), since Phigalia was one of the members of the League in 370 BC. In addition, there were coins of the Achaean League (one triobol), from the mint of Lacedaemon neighboring Elis, Argos (one obol), and Sicyon (two obols and three trihemioobols). The grave in the funerary monument of Alipheira³⁷ also contained a bronze coin of Sicyon. The coins from the graves of the two Arcadian cities offer information on the relations they had with major centers of the Peloponnese and on the coins in use in everyday transactions.

In Hellenistic and late Hellenistic times, the vast majority of funerary coins were struck in Peloponnesian mints. Of the total of 121 silver and bronze coins, only seven

came from non-Peloponnesian mints, while the remaining were produced in sixteen mints of Peloponnesian cities (fig. 4). The large number of coins of Sicyon is noteworthy. One-third of these consist of burial coins and were found in the graves of nine regions: Sicyon, Aigion, Triphylia, Pylos, Sparta, Argos, Asine, Phigalia and Alipheira.

Based on the archaeological evidence, large quantities of bronze coins of Sicyon have been found in various excavated sites:³⁸ in Argos, from the second half of the 4th century to the 1st century BC; in Corinth, Nemea, Olympia and many areas of Achaia and Arcadia. Also, bronze coins of Sicyon were buried together with the bronzes of the city: such hoards, of Hellenistic times, have been found in Argos (Argos 1924, IGCH 217), Corinth (IGCH 200 and 263), Messenia (IGCH 301), and Arcadia (IGCH 184).³⁹ The earlier view that bronze coins were limited to local circulation⁴⁰ does not seem to be the case here.

Therefore, their presence outside the borders of their issuing authority requires an explanation. Indeed, as C. Howgego has pointed out, the distribution of coins is prob-

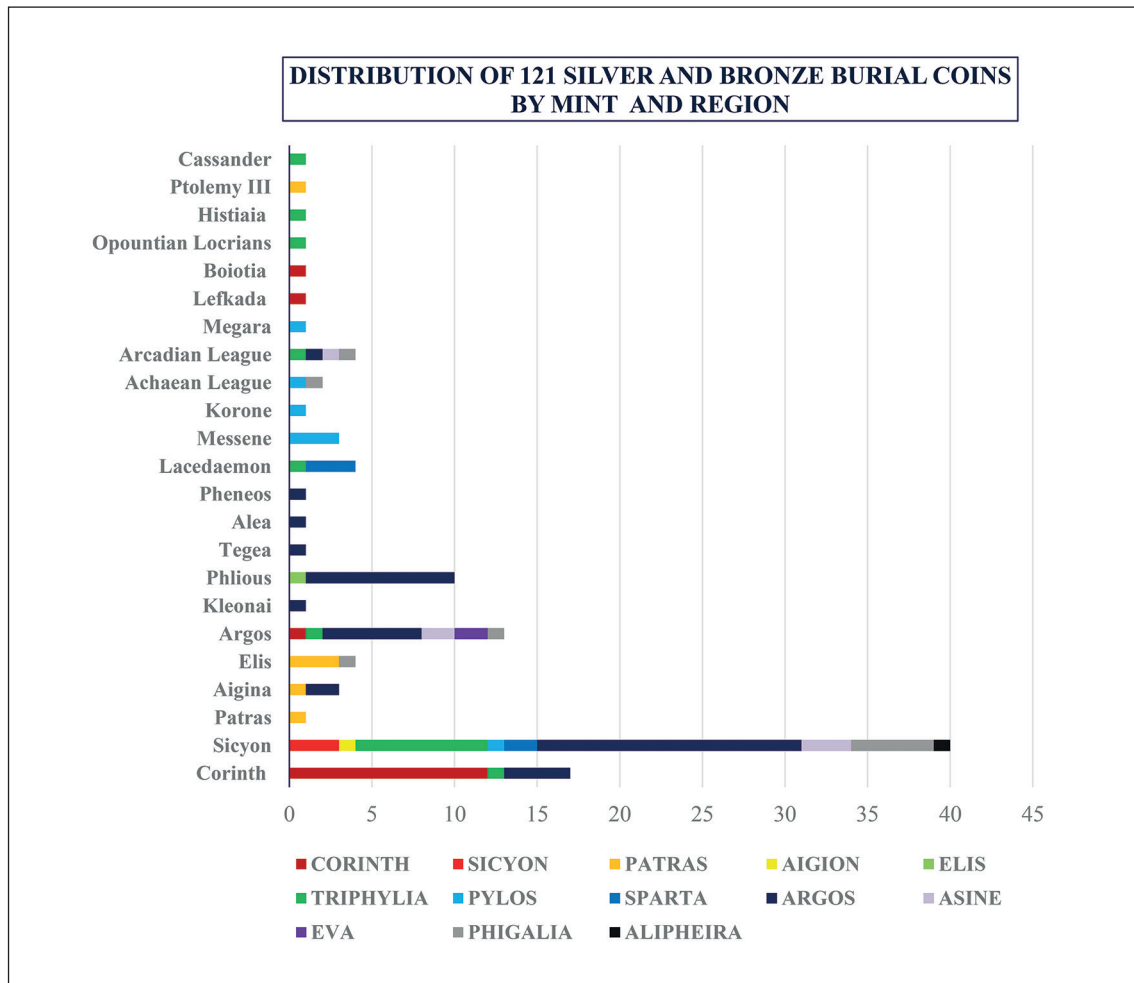


Fig. 4: Distribution of 121 silver and bronze burial coins by mint and region.

ably the best way to illustrate the aggregate movement of people.⁴¹ Based on the archaeological data and considering that the coins of the Sicyonian mint came second in circulation after those of the local mints in many areas of the Peloponnese, it appears that the bronze currency of Sicyon was probably accepted by the local issuing authorities in daily transactions.

In the Hellenistic and late Hellenistic burials in the Peloponnese, apart from the silver and bronze coins, it was customary to place a special group of funerary coins: the gold “pseudo-coins”. Out of the total of twenty-four “pseudo-coins” from the Peloponnesian graves,⁴² it is of interest that twenty of them are imprints, that is, they replicate accurately silver and bronze coins of Sicyon.⁴³

In the Hellenistic period, Sicyon held a prominent place in the years of Macedonian domination and gained a distinguished role under Aratus after joining the Achaean League. In 218 BC, the Macedonian king Philip V transferred the meetings of the Achaean League from Aigion to Sicyon.⁴⁴ The eminent position held by the city at the Synedrion is further demonstrated by epigraphic evidence, in which Sicyonians are treated as representatives of the Achaeans.⁴⁵ In conclusion, the dominance of Sicyon’s coins in the Hellenistic graves of the Peloponnese reflects the widespread circulation of Sicyonian issues in the region.

Notes

¹ Chryssanthaki-Nagle 2006, 93.

² For the custom of Charon’s obol, see Grinsell 1957, 260–263; Kurtz – Boardman 1971, 211; Garland 1985, 23; Morris 1992, 105 f.; Stevens 1991; Chryssanthaki-Nagle 2006, 89 f.; Nikolakopoulou 2017, 11–17.

³ Nikolakopoulou 2019 (under publication).

⁴ Nikolakopoulou 2017, 114–119.

⁵ Blegen et al. 1964, 83 f. 88 f.; Nikolakopoulou 2017, 31 f. 115 pl. 16.

⁶ Edwards et al. 1933, n.268; Price 1967, 383, n. 114–116; Williams et al. 1974, 58 n.113. 114, 60, n.142; Williams – Fisher 1972, 180 n. 133; Williams – Fisher 1976, 150 n. 89; Zervos 1986, 194 n. 117; MacIsaac 1987, 112 n.154. 155.

⁷ Nikolakopoulou 2017, 90 f. 95.

⁸ Flament 2009, 83.

⁹ Lolos et al. 2011, 66–70.

¹⁰ Lolos et al. 2011, 65.

¹¹ Warren 2009, 11.

¹² Kraay 1976, 95.

¹³ IGCH 15, 20.

¹⁴ Hoover 2011, Iv.

¹⁵ Nikolakopoulou 2017, 124 f. pl.16.

¹⁶ Nikolakopoulou 2017, 63–70. 130 f. pl.16.

- ¹⁷ Xenophon, *Ἑλληνικά* 7.1.33.
- ¹⁸ Arapogianni 2012, 414.
- ¹⁹ Tsourti 1999, 23.
- ²⁰ Estiot 2001, 518. 522; Brown 2008, 126.
- ²¹ Nikolakopoulou 2017, 71 f. 131.
- ²² Polybius 18, 42.7.
- ²³ BCD Peloponnesos, 815.
- ²⁴ Nikolakopoulou 2017, 76–78.
- ²⁵ Xenophon, *Lacedaemonian Constitution* 7. 2.; Holladay 1977, 118.
- ²⁶ Hoover 2011, 139.
- ²⁷ Nikolakopoulou 2017, 80–94 pls. 13. 16.
- ²⁸ Hoover 2011, 157–168.
- ²⁹ Grandjean 2016, 83 f.
- ³⁰ Nikolakopoulou 2017, 97.
- ³¹ Lolos et al. 2011, 72.
- ³² Lolos et al. 2011, 76 n. 89.
- ³³ Hägg – Hägg 1980, 60–64. 77–82. 101–103; Nikolakopoulou 2017, 101–104 pl. 14.
- ³⁴ Hägg – Hägg 1980, 129.
- ³⁵ Warren 2007, nos. 71–75. 670–702.
- ³⁶ Nikolakopoulou 2017, 107–110.
- ³⁷ Nikolakopoulou 2017, 111.
- ³⁸ Warren 1983, 23–56; Warren 1984, 1–24; Warren 1985, 45–66; Knapp – Mac Isaac 2005, 149–154; Grandjean 2012, 15–18.
- ³⁹ Grandjean 2012, 17 f.
- ⁴⁰ Le Rider 1989, 159–172.
- ⁴¹ Howgego 1985, 95, 101; Howgego 1995, 101 f. L. Robert (Robert 1951, 77, n. 8 and 1966, 113 f.) emphasized the importance of bronze as an indicator of people’s movement; S. Psoma (Psoma 2009, 3–38) has proposed the presence of bronzes outside the frontiers of their issuing authority in relation to military purposes.
- ⁴² Nikolakopoulou 2017, 21, 126–133. 139. 141. 143–145. 149 f.
- ⁴³ Nikolakopoulou 2019, fig.4. For the typology and the use of the “pseudo-coins” see Stefanakis – Nikolakopoulou 2019.
- ⁴⁴ Polybius 5.1.7–9.
- ⁴⁵ Lolos et al. 2011, 76 n. 89.

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