GREEK SILVER & GOLD

Turning now to the early Greeks, it is notable that Mycenaean shaft graves have yielded much treasure, including gold and silver cups, such as the following (see Figure 3):

This Mycenaean silver cup is dated 1400–1300 BCE, from Tomb 92, Enkomi, Cyprus. . . . This type of straight-sided cup with a single spool-shaped handle is called a Vaphio cup. . . . Very large examples are seen carried by Aegeans in tribute scenes on Egyptian wall-paintings. . . . There can be no doubt that large numbers of precious vessels have been lost through melting down and re-use of the metal. (British Museum Web site:
http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/gr/s/silver_cup.aspx)

To judge from the shaft graves excavated by Heinrich Schliemann and Chrestos Tsountas, Mycenaean elites also had gold and silver cups, such as the one described below by Tsountas and James Irving Manatt in The Mycenaean Age: A Study of the Monuments and Culture of Pre-Homeric Greece (1897) (see Figures 4 and 5 below):
[Cauldrons] were placed in the grave as a form of stored wealth, perhaps without the special meaning which apparently attached to the gold and silver goblets. These are found chiefly with the bodies of men, and may be regarded as their proper insignia, to be used in the other world as well as this in their potations and libations. One of these, a gold goblet from Grave IV (Fig. 36) is not only a *depas amphikypellon*¹⁹, but it has a dove perched on each of the two handles, thus recalling the famous cup of Nestor described by Homer. (Tsountas & Manatt, p. 99)

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¹⁹ Homer uses the term *depas amphikypellon* for a two-handled cup. We owe its modern adoption to Heinrich Schliemann, the first major excavator of Troy. [http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/me/s/silver_two-handled_cup.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/me/s/silver_two-handled_cup.aspx)
Fig. 36. Gold Cup from Grave IV.

Figure 4

Figure 5
It was not uncommon for the surfaces of such vases to be worked in relief with scenes representing the glories and agonies of the heroic lifestyle (see Figure 6):

The vase, for which the large fragment is here reproduced (Fig. 95), was a wide-mouthed vessel of solid silver, save that the rim is plated with gold and the notched shield, riveted under the rim, is also of gold. The relief (as on the Vaphio cups) doubtless covered the entire surface, and might have afforded a complete profile of the hill-fort, with the entire array of its defenders and assailants. As it is, there remains enough to give us a most vivid conception of primitive warfare.

(Tsountas & Manatt, pp. 212–13)
It would be beyond the scope of this paper to discuss how prevalent such precious cups were in Post-Mycenaean Greek cultures—in other words, whether “Homer” (that aggregate of the bards of the Dark Ages), with emendations as late as the Peisistratids\textsuperscript{20}, is simply depicting the cultural reality of the time or embellishing it. It could be that Homer presented his audience’s heroic ancestors as having the types of table settings that other, richer, cultures of the time possessed and which his contemporary patrons doubtlessly wished to imagine their ancestors as having possessed. Poetic patrons in the Dark Ages may not have had on their tables any of the precious metals that Homer describes, since “Only very few craftsmen, in the employ of the

\textsuperscript{20} The three tyrants who ruled in Athens from 546 to 510 BC, Peisistratos and his two sons, Hipparchus and Hippias.
lords of the cities, can have been engaged in making plate and, indeed, after about 1400 BCE
gold and silver vessels were probably very rare” (Strong, Plate, 53).

Regarding Chryses’ staff being “golden” in Iliad, I, 15, Clyde Pharr’s remark on Homer’s
representation is apt: “Of course it was of gold, if it is to appear decently in epic” (Homeric
Greek: A Book for Beginners [1920], 32). The verbal austerity and concision of the Spartans was
so famed it gave us the word “laconic”, and minimalist brevity is a prized feature of poetry; but
the epic form is under no obligation to be pinched and ascetic, quite the reverse: it is expansive
and luxuriant – which for a writer is an easy virtue, as it costs no more to describe a cup as
“silver” than as “earthen.” Besides, as Pharr suggests, the Homeric audience would certainly
have expected that the key accoutrements of the major figures of such stories be highlighted in
silver and gold, a fundamental storytelling convention: a poet is more or less obliged to
represent the gods and ancient heroes as holding cups and scepters of the most extravagant
and attractive materials. Therefore, it is in such a light that we must approach Homer’s
representations of precious tableware, such as the following:

And beside them a beauteous cup, that the old man had brought from home,
studded with bosses of gold; four were the handles thereof, and about each
twain doves were feeding, while below were two supports. Another man could
scarce have availed to lift that cup from the table, when it was full, but old

Nestor would raise it right easily. (Iliad, XI, 632–37)

The Mycenaean cup depicted in Figures 4 and 5 is similar, although we can gauge the degree of
poetic exaggeration in the Homeric passage above by observing that this “real cup” has but two
handles and two doves. Such a two-handled silver cup is also mentioned several times as a
prize in Iliad, XXIII. Of the 24 uses of the word “cup” in the Odyssey, 9 are golden; of the 24 uses
of “cup” in the Iliad, only 5 are (Perseus text search).
# The Greek Tyrants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tyrant</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Reign</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pheidon</td>
<td>Argos</td>
<td>ca. 700–650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thrasyboulos</td>
<td>Miletus</td>
<td>7th C.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cypselus</td>
<td>Corinth</td>
<td>657–627</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Periander</td>
<td>Corinth</td>
<td>627–587</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peisistratos</td>
<td>Athens</td>
<td>546–527</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hippias</td>
<td>Athens</td>
<td>527–510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polycrates</td>
<td>Samos</td>
<td>538–522</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miltiades</td>
<td>Thracian Cher.</td>
<td>516–489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aristagoras</td>
<td>Miletos</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gelo</td>
<td>Syracuse</td>
<td>491–478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiero</td>
<td>Syracuse</td>
<td>478–467</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Greek tyrants, inspired by Lydian and Persian monarchs, unsurprisingly also had cups of precious metal: “The well-known bowl found at Olympia [Figure 7] bears an inscription declaring it to be the thank-offering of the sons of Cypselus, tyrant of Corinth [from c. 657 to 627 BCE], from the spoils of war” (Strong, Plate, xxv). He probably captured it from another tyrant, perhaps even the first known one, Pheidon of Argos (Aristotle, Politics, 1310b). Pheidon, thought to have lived in the first half of the 7th century, had silver sympotic ware and has been incorrectly credited with the invention of coinage. The rich Ionian tyrants, whether totally independent or under the Lydian or Persian yoke like their royal master, probably also had silver at their tables. The Peisistratids likely had silverware, too, and so almost certainly did Polycrates, the tyrant of Samos, from c. 538 to 522 BCE.
Because it was harder to extract, for some centuries silver was more valuable than gold. The Phoenicians, who discovered rich deposits of silver in Spain, employed it more widely than their neighbors, as can be seen from Homeric references to Sidonian silverware (Odyssey IV, 593). Xenophanes attributes the earliest coins to the Lydians, but these were forged of electrum, which, as already noted, was a naturally occurring mixture of silver and gold. The earliest known surviving coins were of Greek origin, made of silver and deposited at the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus (one of the Seven Wonders of the World) around 600 BCE. These early coins—whose prototypes may date to a generation earlier—were used for large-scale transactions, being little more than “ingots of the same weight” (pace Richard Seaford, who fails to note in his Reading Money21 (1993) the slow transition from barter to coin, via ingots and weighted dust). According to Eophoros (Strabo viii, vi), Aegina was the first polis to adopt silver coinage, equating it to the value of iron spits.

Pheidon, as noted above, was mistakenly thought to have been the “first of all people who coined money” (Etymologicum Magnum, s.v. obeliskos). He is also said to have exchanged new money for old iron spits, and to have dedicated the obsolete spits to the shrine of Hera at Argos, for use as a general standard of weight. Although some have found it convenient to

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21 In a later work, Money and the Early Greek Mind, Seaford talks about the potential of iron spits as money, and discusses their possible value (Seaford 2004, p.105).
claim that Pheidon invented coins in order to pay his hoplites, almost all now date his floruit to 680–660 BCE, which is too early for this to have been possible. The Etymologicum Magnum, a compilation by a 12th-century antiquarian, includes the following brief account:

Pheidon of Argos was the first of all people who coined money, in Aegina; and giving the coins and taking the spits in return, he dedicated them to Hera of Argos (Etymologicum Magnum, s.v. obeliskos). (As quoted in David M. Schaps, Invention of Coinage, 101)

Aristotle also mentions the Pheidon of Argos, first tyrant in all of Greece:

For almost the greatest number of tyrants have risen, it may be said, from being demagogues, having won the people’s confidence by slandering the notables.

For some tyrannies were set up in this manner when the states had already grown great, but others that came before them arose from kings departing from the ancestral customs and aiming at a more despotic rule and others from the

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22 The Latin term floruit, meaning “flourished”, is used here in its technical sense (aleit somewhat ungrammatically!), to indicate a period in which a person, or a movement, historical epoch, school of art, etc., was known to be either flourishing or at least, as it were, as “a going concern”. Broadly, the term denotes the peak of such activity. More specifically, it is often used in genealogy and historical writing when a person’s birth or death dates are unknown, but some other evidence exists that indicates when he or she was alive. In art history, the term is used when dating careers. It denotes the period of the artist’s creative activity, not lifespan.
men elected to fill the supreme magistracies (for in old times the peoples used to
appoint the popular officials and the sacred embassies for long terms of office),
and others from oligarchies electing some one supreme official for the greatest
magistracies. For in all these methods they had it in their power to effect their
purpose easily, if only they wished, because they already possessed the power of
royal rule in the one set of cases and of their honorable office in the other, for
example Pheidon in Argos and others became tyrants when they possessed royal
power already, while the Ionian tyrants and Phalaris arose from offices of honor,
and Panaetius at Leontini and Cypselus at Corinth and Peisistratus at Athens and
Dionysius at Syracuse and others in the same manner from the position of
demagogue. (Politics, 1310b)

Small silver coins “for daily use” are only well attested after 450 BCE, by Aristophanes, who cites
the Athenian rather than the Aeginetan or Corinthian standard for the weights of drachmae.
However, of particular significance here is the opening of very rich silver veins at Laurium in 482
BCE, which made Athens the principal producer of silver throughout Hellas, and drove down the
value of that metal in relation to gold, bronze, and iron, in much the same way that the Spanish

23 According to Herodotus (Herodotus v. 83), Aegina, was a colony of Epidaurus. Ephorus has it that Pheidon of
Argos established a mint in Aegina. From this mint’s output Kydonia on Crete began minting coins by over-striking
Aeginetan ones. Thus it was the Aeginetans who, Within 30 or 40 years of the invention of coinage in Asia Minor by
the Ionian Greeks or the Lydians (c. 630 BC), introduced coinage to the Western world.
silver mines in Mexico and Peru would do so two millennia later. Not only did the drachmae stamped with the Athenian owl become the dominant metallic currency after 470 BCE, but there was plenty of ore left over for sympotic ware. Athenian silversmiths then added the value of their craftsmanship to the surplus of a newly abundant, raw material.

Meanwhile, silver objects adorned only the tables of the symposia hosted by tyrants, men with commanding positions and taste in accordance. Perhaps the Baccidae at Corinth used silver before the tyrants, but most of the great tyrants almost certainly used it. These included early figures such as Pheidon of Argos, then later Thrasygoras, Aristagoras of Miletus, Cypselus and Periander of Corinth, the Peisistratids of Athens, and Miltiades, who, though an Athenian citizen, not tyrant, also ruled as a kind of Persian-supported tyrant in the Thracian Chersonese and arrived in Athens with “portable wealth” in 492 BCE (Burn, Greece, 159); then especially Polycrates of Samos, as well as perhaps Gelo and Hieron of Syracuse, and several others of Sicily, Magna Graecia, and especially Sybaris.

Vickers portrayed the ceramicists of the day as keen followers of current fashions in metal, under the ever-present threat of losing their fashion-conscious yet impecunious customers to more accommodating competitors. This claim is far-reaching, if not reckless: it portrays these ceramicists as desperate slaves to fashion, as haunting the workshops of the metalsmiths to
snatch up discarded drawings to use as models for their own designs. More realistically, it seems unlikely that common Corinthian or Athenian potters would ever have had the opportunity to visit the gatherings of wealthy tyrants, whether foreign or domestic, or to sketch, for later use in their own studios, the designs fashionable thereon (though there may have been more opportunity for appropriating silver designs after the much wider manufacture and distribution of silverware in Athens after 470 BCE).

FROM MILTIADES TO ALCIBIADES

Miltiades, however, was the first commoner known to have converted to silverware, and his example perhaps set a standard for other Athenians. For Athens, beginning in 470 BCE, was flourishing as no other polis ever had, and the rich socialites there went over en masse to silverware.

Along with Syracuse, after 470 Athens became the first polis to function as a metropolis—that is, as a city controlling other cities, a city with a population of more than 100,000. Although Pheidon may have been the first tyrant, Argos never became a metropolis. Sparta, despite