CHAPTER 4: THE PROBLEM OF SILVER IN ANTIQUITY

A very brief survey of precious metals in the ancient Mediterranean modeled after Marc Bloch's *Le problème de l'or au moyen âge* (The problem of gold in the middle ages) will help clear the air. For a while, in Egypt during the Old Kingdom, gold was apparently more plentiful than silver because of rich sources in Nubia and elsewhere. We also find even more gold ornaments than silver in Mycenaean graves. The Phoenicians, however, extracted vast amounts of silver from Spain and other sites in the western Mediterranean after 1000 BCE. And ever afterwards, silver was never more than one-sixth the price of gold.

Midas, king of Phrygia in Asia Minor ca. 800 BCE, was said to have had the “golden touch.” A sort of successor to him in Lydia, not far from Phrygia, King Croesus is believed to have struck the first coins ever made of electrum, a local ore containing a mixture of gold with silver. None of them survive. The Greeks of Asia Minor, however, whom Croesus had dominated to a greater or lesser degree, produced the first silver coins, some of which survive from a little before 600. They probably mined the silver locally, but the Homeric epics indicate that most

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16 Marc Léopold Benjamin Bloch (1886-1944) was a French historian who cofounded the influential Annales School of French social history. He is widely known for his unfinished meditation on the writing of history, *The Historian's Craft*. He was captured and shot by the Gestapo during the German occupation of France for his work in the French Resistance.
silver in the Dark Age came into Hellas from the Phoenicians. Croesus was captured and Lydia annexed in 546 BCE by Cyrus the Great, the Shah of Persia.

In their vast empire, the Persians accumulated much more gold and silver than had any previous empire from sources in Asia and Africa. Because they controlled the Phoenicians, they acquired silver, even from the parts of Europe those mariners had colonized. The Greeks themselves, those of Anatolia, having also been overrun by the Persians, were dazzled by Persian wealth. The golden coins, called darics, minted by Cyrus's second successor, Darius I (550–486 BCE). Known to history as Darius the Great, the shah of shahs, his currency was a potent expression of his greatness, the like of which the world had never seen – the coin is mentioned several times in the Bible.

Darius, known more as an organizer than a conqueror, nevertheless ordered a march into Thrace, the part of Europe adjoining the Dardanelles, around the edge of the Black Sea, in order to subdue the nomads there. His expedition, begun in 514, proved a disaster, and he returned to the Danube defeated, where he had left some Greek auxiliaries to defend his crossing point. Learning of his disaster, the Greek rearguard there, among whom was Miltiades, discussed at his instigation destroying the bridge before Darius could escape to safety, but was overruled by...
another Greek, Histaeus, the tyrant of the great Anatolian city Miletus, on the western coast of Asia Minor.

Until then, the “Greeks,” whether in Asia Minor or Europe, had been relatively poor, in spite of their far-flung colonies and extensive trading networks. By about 630, they had become wealthier than ever before, and tyrants first emerged among them about that time. Some of those tyrants came to use silver tableware (perhaps first in eastern Hellas, the area most under Lydian influence). They also may have begun to strike the first silver coins. But Greeks, other than tyrants, were still far too poor to dine off anything but fine painted pots, which began to be exported from Corinth at about this time—the famous black figures painted onto a yellowish clay mined near that emporium. They soon began to be imitated, challenged, and outdone by the Attic black-figure ones (both often homoerotic) on the reddish clay of Attica. Silver, however, was still scarce throughout Hellas, the relatively prosperous eastern Greeks being increasingly pressured for tribute by the Persians after their annexation of Lydia in 546.

The Anatolian Greeks, weary of Persian tyranny, and contemptuous of Darius after his defeat by the barbarians in 514, revolted in 500, led by Miletus, a tale told most dramatically by Herodotus. The richest of all the Ionian cities, Miletus was brutally sacked, as described in a
play, *The Sack of Miletus*, by Phrynichus, written 21 years before Aeschylus's tragedy *The Persians*, which reflected on the subsequent defeat of Persia.

After the brutal suppression by the Persians of the Ionian revolt in 500, Samos, hardly more than a mile off the Anatolian coast, flourished as never before under its greatest tyrant, Polycrates. Encouraging pederastic poetry and as well as pederastic art, he set a new standard of luxury in Hellas until he was lured to the mainland by the treacherous Persians and crucified by them in 522, shortly before they annexed Samos. Thereafter, the Persians continued to extend their power into Aegean islands and Thrace.

A contemporary of the dazzling Polycrates, the Athenian tyrant Hippias, like his own brother, Hipparchus, a lover of luxury, had sent Miltiades, a scion of the powerful Athenian clan the Philaidai, to regain control of the Thracian Chersonese, which we now know as the Gallipoli peninsula in European Turkey, betwixt the Aegean sea and the Dardanelles straits. While there, Miltiades married the daughter of the Thracian king, Olores, but after a while recognized the suzerainty of Darius, whom he had advocated undermining after that shah's disastrous Scythian expedition of 514. Expelled shortly afterward from the Chersonese (which simply means "peninsula") by the Scythians, he went back when those nomads withdrew. At that time, he
apparently seized control of the island of Lemnos with its rich silver mines, but after joining the Ionian revolt, he had to escape to Athens when the Persians put it down.

Acquitted there from the charge of having tyrannical power in the Chersonese, he was elected Strategos in 490 (i.e. one of ten such generals, or strategoi, chosen) assuming command of the spectacular Athenian triumph at the battle of Marathon. I believe he was the very first Athenian, except for tyrants, to use silverware at his symposia. In fact, he was the first private citizen of any Greek city to do so, certainly on the mainland, and probably even in the relatively richer eastern Hellas. Thus, he set the pace for high fashion in Athens, soon to be immensely enriched by the well documented events beginning in 482 when the silver mines opened at Laurium.