

Coins and cultural contact: adoption and use of metal coins by
non-Greeks in ancient Calabria (6th-5th centuries BC)¹
Moedas e contato cultural: adoção e uso do metal cunhado por
não gregos na Calábria antiga (sécs. VI-V a.C.)

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Abstract: We are all familiar with the main questions involved in the adoption and use of coined metal by the Greeks back in the 6th-5th centuries BC; questions such as the steps in the expansion of the habit of coining in the Mediterranean; abstract value and concrete value; intrinsic value and “fiduciarity” of coined money, and so forth. In this short paper, our intention is to focus on coin and metal findings in general (hoards, excavations, sporadic findings) in Southern Italy during the 8th-5th centuries BC. Our case study intends to draw attention to the forms of contact between the *apoikiai* and non-Greek communities, showing how the expansion of coinage promoted cultural change in this area and period, especially concerning the notion of value.

Keywords: Cultural change; Notion of value; Ancient coinage; Cultural contact; Greek colonization.

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¹ All these questions on contact and cultural change in Western Greece are part of a research project under my responsibility, supported by the Research Foundation of the State of São Paulo (Fapesp), Process No. 18/09308-1. I have also presented a paper on this subject: “Cidades gregas na Calábria antiga: a configuração dos territórios de Lócris e Régio (sécs. VII-V a.C.)” (Florenzano 2019a) in a congress promoted by Universidade do Minho and Câmara Municipal de Guimarães (Portugal): *II Congresso Histórico Internacional: As Cidades na História: Sociedade*, in 2017. This paper was written at the same time as that by Florenzano (2019b), where the same subject is addressed in the context of Central Sicily in the 5th century. These two papers can be considered as “twin” papers.

According to Giovanna Ceserani (2012: 1), with regard to Magna Grecia, a region occupied by permanent Greek installations since the 8th century BC, “the importance of the region in giving shape to the modern imagining of the Ancient Greek world has been forgotten.” For this author, “Perhaps it is the pervasive idea of Magna Grecia’s decline and destruction, so well articulated since antiquity, that has eroded the memory of its significance” (Ceserani 2012: 1).

Indeed, the occupation of the entire southern part of the Italic Peninsula by the Romans from the beginning of the third century on and the shift in the historiographic focus

to Roman history or the developments of the Hellenistic period in the Eastern Mediterranean must have contributed to this “forgetting” of the contributions of Magna Grecia for the configuration of Hellenicity as a whole.

In this presentation, we intend to draw attention to this region, which is a primordial area of contact between Greeks and non-Greeks, mainly from the 8th century BC on, when the migratory movement and the installation of Greek *apoikiai* began on the Tyrrhenian coast up to Campania and the Ionian Sea, in what we now call the Gulf of Taranto (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Magna Grecia and Sicily.

Source: Labeca’s map of the area, Rodrigo de Araujo Lima.

Following the reflection so well formulated by Ceserani (2012) that we have just mentioned, we want to show how these Greeks, in their contact with local populations such as the Samnites, Sicans, Enotrians, Messapians, Iapigians and so many other native groups, participated with creativity in the construction of what we now recognize as Greekness. Our point is to insist on

the fact that contact is an engine for important social and cultural transformations, and departing from specific data, i.e., objects which incorporate value, I intend to demonstrate how Greek civilization had enough creativity and openness to accept Others and absorb different cultural traits, in processes of continuous negotiation. Thanks to the advances of archaeological analyses combined with literary sources, we now know that these negotiations often involved violent conflicts, but that they could also be peaceful.

Although I have been studying ancient Greece since the 1970s, I am only now in the process of constructing a reflection about cultural contact. Perhaps the notion of mobility and of cultural contact between different societies is the idea that can help us most in trying to figure out what we really are as Human beings in the current historical context, when newspapers are filled with news about such intense population movements. I am not the only one thinking about this, and I believe this Symposium reflects this concern. In addition, contact is a topic of special interest nowadays, when technology facilitates direct and immediate relations with societies that are completely different from our own. The question of contact as a conduit of transformation of society, I want to believe, has been guiding historiographical reflection for some decades, and this leads us to try to understand the criteria and effects of the relationships between human groups.

As I have already stressed in other occasions (Florenzano 2019a: 288), in the case of Southern Italy, Magna Grecia, the subject of cultural contact was largely treated and deepened in 1981 at a famous meeting in Cortona (Italy), and published in 1983 in a volume called *Modes de contacts et processus de transformation dans les sociétés anciennes* (École Française de Rome & Scuola Normale Superiore 1983). In this volume, there are important reflections on the question of “acculturation” or on the concept of “barbarian”, or on questions of otherness and identity. Also, questions about procedures and instruments of contact and the role of cultural contact in the change and transformation of ancient societies were debated, creating a world of case studies

and important ideas for the pursuit of research in this area. Apart from this systematization developed during the Cortona event, in the case of the Archaeology of Southern Italy, which interests us here, since the beginning of the 1960s, the Istituto per la Storia e l'Archeologia della Magna Grecia di Taranto promotes annual meetings in which new archaeological data and their respective interpretations are presented and debated, and then published in the form of proceedings. Also, in these volumes, the topic of contact has been sometimes addressed, insofar as the material data could indicate some kind of relation between Greeks and non-Greeks (Florenzano 2019a: 288). But it is one thing to register contact and population movements; it is another to mobilize data, whether material or written, to understand that the founding elements of Hellenic society, or of Hellenicity, of being Greek, depended on contact with other people, and were not strictly Greek creations or impositions. In this direction, in 2014, the same Istituto per la Storia e l'Archeologia della Magna Grecia di Taranto (2017) organized a meeting on "Ibridazione e integrazioni in Magna Grecia: Forme, Modelli, Dinamiche", which Proceedings have been recently published. The texts published in this volume represent a great theoretical advance in the subject we are dealing with.

In recent decades, archaeological data on the Greek and non-Greek presence in Magna Grecia has grown exponentially, in the same way that the theoretical debate on Greek mobility in the Mediterranean (and consequently on the forms of contact) has gained new contours, accompanying the development of the Historiography on antiquity. The theoretical debate on antiquity (Greek, Roman, Mediterranean, Classical, etc.) was in fact so deep, that a wave of revisionism was established, overturning traditionally accepted ideas about "Greek colonization", Greek expansionism and the Hellenization of other societies. Much of this revisionism is based on theories that are distant from empirical data and primary sources, whether textual or material (Florenzano 2019a: 288).

In this debate, the position expressed by a great Italian archaeologist, Carmine Ampolo (2017: 554), in the proceedings of the Taranto

Congress of 2014 cited above, offers me some comfort: "In the midst of the chaos that one risks entering with so much discussion about concepts, with so many different theories, what represents a safe haven is the primary source, archaeological, epigraphic and historical documents."

In our case, I must say that the best position is one of caution: we do not want to throw the baby out with the bath water. Our proposal is not to disregard the accumulated knowledge about Magna Grecia, or about the arrival of the Greeks in this region, but, along with this knowledge, we intend to mobilize the archaeological data in order to bring to light aspects of antiquity that did not necessarily interest the researchers of the past. And this is a crucial point: we have now shifted from the studies on ancient Greece based on the various individualized histories of cities, of *poleis*, to a history of Greece based on relations between *poleis* and between these and non-Greek populations (Florenzano 2019a: 289).

It is in this context and based on these presuppositions that, for this paper, we intend to mobilize a type of material data that, in the case of Magna Grecia, was not often approached systematically from the point of view of contact as a conduit of cultural and social transformation. These are objects that have incorporated or expressed value, and, to be more specific, our concern is to address the adoption of coinage in the environment of Magna Grecia in archaic times.

Initially, for this presentation to become intelligible to an audience which, I believe, is not formed by numismatists, I must define what I mean by coin: a metal disc, with defined weight and with images engraved on both sides (or sometimes – especially in the case of the very first coins – on only one side). Created by the Greeks in the 7th century BC, these small objects are still passed around to this day, be it in America, Europe or Asia. For how much longer we do not know, but perhaps the moment we will dispose of it draws high. In any case, for us, in our society, coins (and paper money) have some basic functions that make them equal to what we call money, as defined by economists: (1) as a means of exchange, (2) as unit of account and

(3) as reserve of value. That is, coins are used to exchange or trade goods, to evaluate those goods, and to save wealth.

Our rational way of approaching the past and the fact that to this day we use these small metal discs, which are transmuted into things that we buy, acquire and desire, lead us, by force, to identify a mechanical and simplistic “evolution” of coinage: coins were “invented” by the Greeks at the end of the 7th century BC, being made of precious metal and used as a measure and reserve of value and as an instrument of exchange. A coin has intrinsic value, i.e., “it is worth as much as it weighs”, and answers to the need of facilitating trade and payments in general, such as taxes, fees and even mercenary salaries. In order to do so, its issuing is monopolized by the authority of the *polis*, which *gradually* assigns a fiduciary face value to coined metal, disregarding the fact that coins are meant to be worth their weight in metal, and devaluing them in relation to the amount of metal present in each piece. Our modern point of view allows us to infer that by “inventing” coinage, the Greeks established a monetarized economy, an economy which represented an autonomous sphere of life in society.

In this monetarized economy, the notion of concrete and personal value in which objects that incorporated value were utensils with a social pedigree or social history, had disappeared. The adoption and use of money involved a society in which a new notion of value prevailed: the notion of abstract and impersonal value, where money would already exercise the three functions of modern currency (medium of exchange, unit of account, and reserve of value) (Florenzano 2000).

I believe that most numismatists still believe that the Greek coin, since its creation in the 7th century BC, incorporated all these functions. Or that these functions had already been present in it at least since the 5th century BC.

It is evident that this kind of vision stems from an Athenocentric historiography, in which the “Greek world” revolves around Athens, and sometimes around Sparta, Corinth or Thebes; a historiography that accepts as a general trait of all of ancient Greek economy the many details

described in written sources about the 5th and 4th centuries Athenian agora.

Our hypothesis, however, is one that assumes that there was a Greek world scattered throughout the Mediterranean and organized in very varied networks of relationships, often overlapping each other (Malkin 2011). In that sense, we may turn to the great Italian numismatist Laura Breglia (1964: 179), who, in 1964, has already told us that the adoption of currency in the Ancient Mediterranean was:

a process that was developed sometimes independently, sometimes with reciprocal exchanges and influences due to the interference of relationships and contacts, and therefore, the progress of this process was not regular and did not obey specific historical phases. Different monetary instruments coexisted not only in environments that were distant and different from each other, but also within the same environments.

Thus, if the production of coins operates the passage from a concrete to an abstract notion of value, in which coins become a *one purpose money*, embodying the three functions of modern currency, this passage was certainly not uniform and continuous, but a very long process which, in my view, begins in the century-old Mediterranean traditions of assigning value to metals as raw material.

In the Eastern Mediterranean, the use of silver predominated, as is clear from the numerous findings of fragments or pieces of rough silver, known as *hacksilver* (Balmuth 2001; Florenzano 2000; Kim 2001). When Greek *poleis* began experimenting with coinage at the end of the 7th century BC, they started by coining pieces made of *electrum*, a natural alloy of gold and silver. When Athens, Aegina and Corinth began to coin, silver was the only metal used. At the end of the 7th century and beginning of the 6th century BC, Greek coinage became a phenomenon which had an important role in the articulation and consolidation of the structure and identity of several *poleis*. In the 1940s, Louis Gernet (1968) pointed out how the adoption of coinage by some *poleis* had implied a fundamental change in the way of perceiving society and community

life. Naturally, his perception came from what was known about antiquity at the time, based on written sources and from the point of view of the historiographic paradigm that was currently in force (Gernet 1968). Also, in the 1950s, Edouard Will (1954), when analyzing Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, suggested that the creation of currency would have promoted a more egalitarian distribution of wealth, and that it was the basis of Greek democracy.

The production and use of silver coins is established almost naturally in the Greek colonies of the Western Mediterranean: several of the *apoikiai* of Magna Grecia and Sicily and of Southern France began issuing silver coins in the second half of the 6th century BC. From this date on, colonies and secondary colonies would gradually become part of the list of monetary workshops of Western Greece, always issuing silver coins (although we still cannot say for sure what were the sources of silver supply for these coinages).

Nonetheless, what is crucial to note is that the various native groups or non-Greek people of the Western Mediterranean had a millenary tradition of trading and dealing mainly with copper and consequently with bronze prior to Greek colonization, perhaps because this area was located in one of the main routes of distribution of these metals in the Mediterranean, allowing access to Northern Europe and the Iberian Peninsula, where tin and copper were obtained (Florenzano 2019b). This region was also where the Etruscans competed with the Phoenicians in the distribution of these important raw materials in the Mediterranean. The fact is that, specifically in the south of the Italic Peninsula, where the Greeks installed their *apoikiai*, they found native groups with a social and economic organization that was very different from theirs, who, unlike them, were not socially organized in cities. These groups had been used to expressing value through objects made of bronze of all sorts and formats for centuries, which were found by archaeologists both in precise archaeological contexts and in the composition of graves and shrine offerings, and also in sporadic findings, especially the so-called "hoards" (Fig. 2 and 3).



Fig. 2. Grave jewelry from Sala Consilina, Southern Italy. 8th century BC.

Source: Romito (2006: 27).

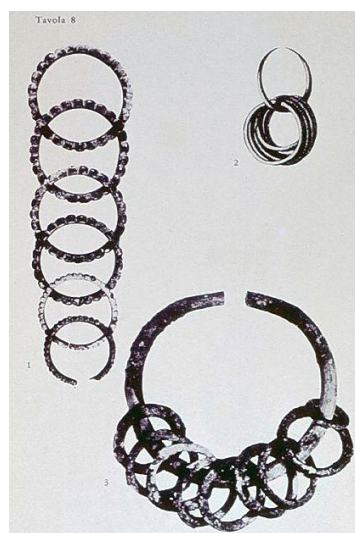


Fig. 3. Different types of bracelets from Cales and Suessula, Southern-Central Italy. VII-V centuries BC.

Source: Breglia (1964: table 8)

Moreover, specialized research has shown that when the Greeks arrived in the West, the various human groups that inhabited the Italian Peninsula and Sicily had a technical knowledge of metal treatment that was even

more sophisticated than that of the Greeks themselves (Breglia 1964; Stazio 1982), especially in relation to bronze.

We can say that these groups used bronze to estimate value, while in Greek communities and the Middle East, silver was the metal chosen for this purpose, even if bronze was also common and often present in sanctuaries and as offerings in tombs. It was in the West and among native populations of Southern Italy and Sicily that bronze was regarded as the main metal².

But what does value represent? What is value? Power, social hierarchy, social identity. It represents the recognition of a specific world view, the position of individuals in a group of people, and the acceptance of the social functioning of the group and, therefore, of its identity.

Now, if these groups of Southern Italy were used to adopting bronze as an estimate of value, what happened when the Greeks settled down there? And what happened when, after a hundred and fifty years had passed, these same Greeks began to use silver coins? What changes occurred in the way of expressing value? Which society is behind the different ways of expressing value, and what is the role of contact in this sense (Florenzano 2019b)?

And it is based on this that we suggest that the role played by Greeks and non-Greeks in the Italic Peninsula (and the same can be said for Sicily) was vital in the monetary phenomenon's long maturing process, specifically in the context of ancient Greece (Florenzano 2019b). In this sense, we may affirm that G. Ceserani (2012) is right in asserting that Magna Grecia's contribution to Hellenicity was forgotten by historiography.

We begin with the fact, already known and accepted by all (and considering the Greek world as a whole), that the very first Greek bronze coins were made in Magna Grecia in the middle of the 6th century BC (Brousseau 2013). The other presupposition assumed by specialized studies is that bronze coins have always been fiduciary. This means that they

have never had intrinsic value, but rather, only face value. It is also assumed, without much discussion, that the issuing of bronze coins was an almost predetermined stage of the "evolution" of economy, in the sense that fiduciarity promoted the impersonality of social relations and monetization of society (Florenzano 2019b).

In fact, in 2012, a workshop held at the François Rabelais University in Tours (France) sought to investigate the origins of fiduciary money by contextualizing it in a Greek environment. Published in 2013, the results were described in a volume that was rich in provocative reflections and that reviewed important and updated data on Greek bronze coins (Grandjean & Moustaka 2013). Although most of the texts deal with the expansion of bronze coinage in the Greek world from the late 4th century BC onward and during the Hellenistic period, there are two texts that specifically address the creation of the Greek bronze coin in a colonial environment in the Western and Eastern Mediterranean (Brousseau 2013; Grandjean 2013). The material data presented in this volume proves that the bronze coin was created in a colonial environment, and that the Greek West was responsible for minting the first bronze pieces (Brousseau 2013). What is remarkable in all the texts of this workshop is that at no time the fiduciary character of all bronze coins issued in the Ancient Mediterranean is doubted; on the contrary, bronze coins are always seen as fiduciary and as strictly dependent on silver coinage, fulfilling a complementary function in the various coinage systems already established.

However, if we consider the millenary tradition of expression of value through bronze, is it possible that the first bronze coins to appear in the Mediterranean world in the Greek West had a fiduciary value? Is it not our modern vision that leads us to this conclusion, based on what happened next (Florenzano 2019b)?

Studies show that these bronze coins also had a precise weight and denominations, and that they were connected to each other in an accurate weight system. Furthermore, when silver coins were present, they could have an

2 In another Greek colonial context - Northern Aegean Sea and Black Sea- we also find this tendency to estimate value through bronze objects. See Parise (1992) and Grandjean (2013).

iconographical and weight-related connection also to them. Could this much precision be related to simple face value currency?

My idea is that: (1) the first bronze coins issued in the Greek West had no fiduciary value; (2) these pieces are concrete evidence of experiences of contact, wherein the Greeks tried to function alongside and adapt to a centennial reality of expression of value through bronze; (3) they are part of movements of cultural negotiation with indigenous groups that, one hundred years later, would also begin to issue their own silver and bronze coins as a symbol of their specific identity; (4) currency acts as an agent of contact, insofar as it carries value; rather than only facilitating trade, it facilitates exchange at several levels other than the circulation of goods; (5) in archaic times, currency was loaded with symbolism, registering the identity of groups who manifested themselves with autonomy and organized themselves to produce and impose coins as a symbolic expression of value; and (6) it was in the Greek West, especially in Magna Grecia, that this step was taken (Florenzano 2019b).

In this sense, I happily quote my friend Ross Holloway, who, in an article on the introduction of bronze coins by Syracuse in the end of the 5th century and beginning of the 4th century, noticed the subtleties involved in this action:

The adoption of the bronze coin at Syracuse is not a sign of a more democratic policy or a growing commerce in the agora... it is the result of a revolution in thought, of a mindset that allows one to accept currency as symbolic value (Holloway 1979: 140).

We must therefore recognize how much larger the Greek world was than just Aegean Greece, and that the contribution of the West and of Magna Grecia, as Ceserani (2012) puts it – in the specific case of the question of the notion of value –, was fundamental. In this sense, contribution was informed by contact with non-Greek populations that, the way we see it, dictated the agenda of the growing development of the monetarization of ancient economy, consolidated in parts of the Mediterranean only in Hellenistic and Roman times.

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Resumo: Estamos todos familiarizados com as principais questões envolvidas na adoção e uso de metal cunhado pelos gregos nos séculos VI-V a.C.: questões como as etapas da expansão do hábito de cunhar na área do Mediterrâneo; valor abstrato e valor concreto; valor intrínseco e fiduciabilidade do dinheiro cunhado; e assim por diante. Nesta breve apresentação, pretendemos focalizar, sobretudo, as descobertas de moedas (tesouros, escavações, achados esporádicos) na Itália do sul, nos séculos VIII ao V a.C. Acreditamos poder chamar a atenção para as muitas formas de contato entre as *apoikiai* e as comunidades não gregas e mostrar como a expansão da cunhagem de moedas operava como agente de mudança cultural nessa época e período, principalmente no que diz respeito à noção de valor.

Palavras-chave: Mudança cultural; Noção de valor; Cunhagens antigas; Contato cultural; Colonização grega.

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