

A DIALOGUE IN METAL: SILVER, BRONZE, AND CROSS-CULTURAL CURRENCIES IN ITALY AND
SICILY

Money is not only a means of exchange or a store of wealth but also a strong expression of culture and identity. In our world of fiat currency, where physical money has almost no intrinsic material value, we tend to consider this meaning in terms of iconography rather than metal: the image on a penny or a quarter is important to us, but the metal value of the former is higher than one cent, and that of the latter far lower than 25 cents. Though coins and currency lie at the heart of modern economic development, it is easy to forget the fundamental importance of weight standards and metal preferences to the development of coinage in the ancient Mediterranean. My purpose is to investigate cultural identity and interaction in areas of contact between Greeks and indigenous Sicilian and Italic peoples through the lens of monetary practice. The coinage and standards of early Sicily and Italy indicate an intense economic interdependence between Greeks and indigenous peoples, and shed light on cultural interaction and international connections. We can trace the native influence on Italian and Sicilian coinage by closely studying previously ignored technical aspects of these currencies that reveal how the Greek colonists and native populations interacted. These technical aspects, as the products of unspoken or even unconscious cultural assumptions and habits, can be better indicators of cultural influence than the self-conscious selection of iconographic motifs. Take for example the first U.S. silver dollars, which depict a bust of Liberty and an eagle in a quintessentially “American” iconographic program. Closer inspection, however, reveals their Spanish heritage: these coins were on the same standard

as their popular predecessors, the internationally-accepted Spanish “pieces of eight,” considered legal tender in the U.S. until the mid-19th century.

When the Greeks arrived in Sicily and Tyrrhenian Italy in the 8th century BC, during their period of explosive migration across the Mediterranean world, they found the native peoples using bronze objects by weight as a form of pre-monetary currency. These bronze objects, tools, and ingots were reckoned against a native Italic libral pound, called in Greek the *litra* and in Latin the *libra*. The Greeks in Sicily, who in their homeland were using silver by weight as currency on the Near Eastern model, adopted the bronze tradition of their relatively silver-poor new home and began to use the native *litra*. This native bronze pound had an enormous impact on the monetization of Italy and Sicily (and indeed on modern metrology, in the form of the ounce, pound, and liter). Already in the 8th to the 6th centuries BC, Greek and indigenous cities all around the Tyrrhenian, from Sicily to Etruria, are using weight standards based on bronze pounds that vary regionally but seem to be bound together by mutually-divisible “conversion standards” that form the linchpins between differing local systems of exchange. For example, there seems to be a heavy *litra* of around 216 grams in Sicily, as well as a light one of about 108 grams, while in Etruria there were several heavy *libras* alongside a light *libra* nearly identical to the Sicilian one, around 110 grams. This 108 to 110 gram Tyrrhenian conversion standard allowed for equivalencies to be made between the Etruscan and Sicilian libral systems. From the very beginning of coinage in Sicily in 550 BC, around two centuries after the arrival of the Greeks and their adoption of the Italic bronze standard, Greek cities minted silver coinage equivalent to the indigenous bronze *litra*. The native settlements soon followed suit, attesting to the efficacy of the Greek efforts to integrate their own silver system with the local bronze standard. This standard further served to convert between the native bronze tradition and the imported Greek silver.

The importance of the litra has until recently been obscured by a traditional colonialist model of “Hellenization” in which “civilized” Greeks introduced silver coinage to foreigners with a “primitive” economy. My research further indicates that not only were the Sicilians using hybrid systems of exchange, but that the Romans and the Etruscans also adapted Greek-style coinage in a way that conformed to their own traditional notions of currency exchange, highlighting the persistent influence of local indigenous culture on the monetization of Italy and Sicily.

I am developing a model of cultural contact based on quantitative analysis of coins and currency in order to complement the more traditional qualitative approach. Rather than focus on iconographic choices or archaeological context alone, I examine the technical manifestations of this cultural interaction by analyzing the weight standards, coinage practices, and metallic preferences of both Greeks, indigenous peoples, and mixed populations.

Alongside the traditional dissertation, I have begun to assemble a database of ancient coinages, weight standards, and rates of exchange based on thorough statistical analysis and cutting-edge scientific methods. My further goal is to design a public ancient currency exchange website to act as a public-facing resource for my work. It will be called *Trapezites*, pronounced “trap-ed-ZEE-tace,” the Classical Greek term for a banker and money-changer. *Trapezites* would be designed to draw on the database that I am already assembling as part of my dissertation. Trapezites would take the format of a currency converter, and the nature of the source evidence – historical, literary, epigraphical, archaeological, numismatic – on which the conversion was based would be made clear, allowing the user to compare and contrast their results with full disclosure of the source.

My results stand in stark contrast to the traditional view of coinage as a Greek import adopted wholesale by Italic peoples, and suggest that the pre-Greek inhabitants of Italy and Sicily

had a much greater agency in the development of coinage than has been recognized previously. My ultimate goal is to develop a quantitative model that can be applied not only to the ancient Mediterranean but also to other instances of cultural contact in which different populations interact in part through a monetary economy. Such a flexible model, informed by scientific and statistical methods hitherto underused in the field of numismatics, would contribute significantly to the wider interdisciplinary study of cultural contact.