

The Athenian Tetradrachm is one of the most famous coins of antiquity¹. On the obverse side, the coin features the head of Athena, goddess of wisdom and patron deity of the city state of Athens. On the reverse, it features an owl and an olive branch, a waning moon, and the Greek letters Alpha Theta Epsilon (ΑΘΕ). The owl symbolizes wisdom, and is frequently associated with Athena, as she is the goddess of wisdom. The waning moon is paired with the owl, as both are related to the night. As such, the moon simply makes it clear that this bird is an owl, and not some other bird. The olive branch is a reference to the myth in which Athena, in an attempt to claim Athens for herself, instead of Poseidon, causes the first olive tree to grow on the acropolis. The letters are an abbreviation for the name of the city itself, Athens.

These coins were first produced at some point late in the sixth century. Based on archaeological evidence, some scholars claim that the coins date to approximately the death of the Athenian tyrant, Peisistratos (527 BCE), while other scholars, focusing on the early style of the head of Athena, date its style to the reign of Peisistratos himself, or perhaps even the great Athenian wise man, Solon, early in the sixth century. This argument is based on a dispute between archaeology and art history. The oldest hoard of coins found by archaeologists dates to around 527 BCE. However, art historians argue that, based on the stylistic representation of Athena on the obverse of the coin in comparison with the representation of faces on contemporary art, such as pottery and statues, these coins date back even further in time. The Athenian Tetradrachm helped solidify what would become the most common style of coinage for many years, mainly double sided coins with the face of a god on the obverse, and a thematic representation of the polis and or god from the other side of the coin on the reverse.

The Tetradrachm was approximately the value of a single weeks' work for a laborer in Athens. The coins themselves, mostly minted from the silver from the Laurion silver mines, were

¹ The following information is compiled from "Ancient Greek Coins: The World of Ancient Numismatics," by G.K. Jenkins. G.P. Puntam's Sons. New York. 44-49, and 77-82. It is also supplemented by four years of studying the Classics at St. Olaf College.

very important in Athens, especially in the early to middle fifth century. In fact, when an especially rich vein of silver was found in these mines in 483 BCE, the profits from it were put towards creating the Athenian navy, at the suggestion of the Athenian politician and general, Themistokles. This decision ended up being one of the greatest decisions that the city state of Athens could have made, as it was this navy that Athens relied so heavily upon when it was attacked for the second time by the Persian army, especially at the Battle of Salamis in 480 BCE. Famously, Athens went on to be very powerful in the affairs of Greece until its loss to the Spartans and their allies in the Peloponnesian War. Later, when Athens had lost much of its wealth and power, it would mint these same coins, but would make them out of lead, and then simply cover them with silver. Both of St. Olaf's Tetradrachms possess cut marks where somebody in the past purposefully cut the coins to discover whether they were made entirely of silver, or only partially. Without the silver in these coins, it is very reasonable to say that Athens never would have gained the power and recognition that it did in the fifth century, a legacy that has lasted now for thousands of years.

In St. Olaf's collection, we have two distinct examples of an Athenian Tetradrachm. The fact that both coins contain the waning moon behind the owl on the obverse side suggests that they were both made sometime around or after 480 BCE, about the same time as the end of the Persian War. However, by simply looking at the stylistic differences between the two, it is possible to say that, while the first may be from approximately the same time as the end of the Persian War, the second piece is definitely later. This can usually be noticed most easily around the mouth, eyes, and decorations on the head, concerning how coarse or fine the lines are. If the lines, especially notable in the hair or jewelery, are more coarse, the portrayal is probably more archaic.

There is one other feature that distinguishes the two coins in the St. Olaf collection. The newer coin shows Athena adorned with olive leaves, while the older coin appears to lack them.

However, we can not be sure that the original mold did not have the olive branches on it, and that it is merely this specific coin that is lacking them due to the way it was cut. Obviously, it is missing the actual crest of the helmet, so it stands to reason that the leaves may also have been cut off. However, if this is truly a coin which does not represent Athena with the olive leaves on her head, it would give even more support to dating the coin at approximately 480 BCE.