

STEVEN BATTELLE

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Athens, Attica, 449-404 BC, AR Tetradrachm

Bo80472 / U03234 17.2 Gm 22 mm

Obv: Head of Athena right, wearing earring, necklace, and crested Attic helmet decorated with three olive leaves over visor and a spiral palmette on the bowl. Rev: Owl standing right with head facing, olive sprig with berry and crescent in upper left field, AOE to right, all within incuse square. Kroll 8; SNG Copenhagen 31; Dewing 1591-8

The Athenian "owl" silver tetradrachm is unquestionably one of the most influential coins of all time. During the fifth century BC, when Athens emerged as the greatest of all Greek cities, owls were the most widely used international coin and helped to spread Greek culture throughout the Mediterranean world. With the help of her powerful navy, and through the taxation of her allies, Athens accomplished to gain pre-eminence in Hellas and achieved a celebrated prosperity. The Athenian tetradrachms were well-accepted all over the Mediterranean world, while several imitations modeled on them were issued within the Persian state. The Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) exhausted the silver resources of Athens and eventually destroyed irreparably the Athenian supremacy. With the mines lost and their treasury depleted by the ruinous cost of the Peloponnesian war with Sparta, the Athenians resorted to an emergency issue of plated silver tetradrachms. These were officially withdrawn from circulation after the government was reestablished in 403/2. Testcuts were probably inflicted on most, if not all, Athenian tetradrachms in circulation at this point, to differentiate the silver tetradrachms from silver-plated "emergency" pieces. During the 4th-3rd century BC, the well-known Athenian types were maintained and only stylistic changes can be observed in the rendering of the designs. This tetradrachm bears the helmeted head of Athena on one side and two symbols of the goddess, an owl and an olive-branch, on the other. In Greek mythology, Athena, the goddess of wisdom and just warfare, rivaled Zeus himself in power and wisdom. It was Athena who gave the people of Attica the olive-tree. The owl is Athena's attribute or mascot. According to the mythology, Athena at times also took the form of her owl. The owl species depicted on Athenian Owls is the Athena Noctua, also called the Little Owl or Minerva Owl. Standing 6 to 8 inches and weighing 2.5 to 4.5 ounces, they range from the Mediterranean to Scandinavia. In ancient times the owl, as today, was a symbol of wisdom. It has also been suggested that the eyes of the owl were associated with a very ancient symbol for heaven in the form of a double circle (perhaps from the constellation Gemini that served as a guide to travelers by night). The Athenians were one of the first to commemorate a military victory on their coins. Following victory over the Persians at Marathon in 490 BC, the Athenians modified their tetradrachm to include a crescent moon between the owl and olive branches. The moon reminded Athenians that Darius, king of Persia, withdrew his forces under a waning moon.

