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When is an owl not an owl? An analysis of Attic tetradrachms circulating in the southern Levant in the late fifth and fourth centuries BCE

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This research focuses on late fifth century BCE Athenian-style tetradrachms found in the southern Levant, to shed new light on whether they are genuine Athenian issues or local imitations. To address this important yet vexed historical question, we analysed the Pb isotope compositions of 22 coins from ten controlled archaeological excavations in Israel and compared them against the ~7,000 galena samples in the Lyon Pb isotope database. Twenty of the coins are of the "three-quarter profile eye" variety conventionally dated mid to late fifth century BCE. We found that they match Attic or Athenian-controlled silver sources, suggesting they are authentic Athenian issues and not imitations as some of them were originally categorised. We argue that these coins likely entered the Western Asian money supply during Athens' massive naval campaigns in the eastern Aegean in the third and final phase of the Peloponnesian War, and that the series should be refined to end with the city's defeat and loss of silver sources in 404 BCE. The fact that three of the coins are plated supports the contention that they were part of the series minted when Athens was under extreme financial duress. The remaining two coins are of the pi-*style series struck in the early 340s BCE, as proposed by John H. Kroll (personal communication and cf. also Flament 2023). The Pb isotope data indicate that our examples were not struck from Athenian silver casting doubt on the current theory that they were restruck Attic coins. These overall findings call for a reassessment of monetary sources, coin circulation, and local minting in the fourth century BCE in the southern Levant. This study also highlights the need for independent archaeological dating beyond reliance upon numismatic typology.*