



## Coinage of minor Hellenistic kingdoms

### Summary :

The coin issues launched by the kings of Pergamum, Bithynia, Pontus and Cappadocia played a significant role in the circulation pool in Asia Minor and they supplemented effectively the major numismatic issues struck by the Seleucids and by Lysimachus. The best-dated series, the silver coinage in the name of Mithradates VI Eupator, indicate that the bulk of coinage was intended to finance troops, yet most troops were not paid in coin.

### Date

323 BC onwards

### Geographical Location

Asia Minor

## 1. General Survey

After the death of [Alexander the Great](#) on the 10th of June 323, Asia Minor, more than any of the other sections of his gigantic empire which was conquered so quickly, experienced a long period of military trouble and political instability. Its central position rendered it a perfect battlefield for several decades. It is only after [Lysimachus](#)' death at the battle of Corupedium in 281 BC that the area, largely controlled by the Seleucids, acquired a somewhat more permanent political frame.

From a numismatic point of view, several facts deserve to be noticed: looking at the **hoards**, the silver coinage of Alexander the Great continued to serve as the dominant currency for more than a century. This does not mean that the Diadochi (the first generation of Alexander's generals) or later monarchs did not strike any coinage with their own types. However, their issues were a marginal phenomenon, if compared with the huge volume of the Alexander coins. Moreover, not every Hellenistic military leader used to issue coins (e.g. [Eumenes of Cardia](#)).

What follows is a brief summary of the more prolific or famous royal coinages struck in Asia Minor during the Hellenistic period. The large issues of Lysimachus or the [Seleucid](#) ones have been excluded, despite the fact that both these authorities minted coins at [Pergamum](#), for instance. Minor kingdoms of the Late or of the very Late Hellenistic period, such as Galatia and Paphlagonia, have also been left aside.

## 2. Pergamum

Shortly before the death of Lysimachus on the battlefield of Corupedium, Philetairus, son of [Attalus](#), revolted against him. Being in control of the fortress of Pergamum and guardian of the huge treasures left there by Lysimachus (9,000 **talents** = more than 200 tons of pure silver), he managed to create a kingdom for himself in these much troubled circumstances, recognizing at first the authority of the Seleucid king. The rocky hill of Pergamum, which until then was a remote insignificant place, became for a century and a half the capital of a brilliant dynasty and one of the major art centres. We do possess a set of very different brief issues struck at Pergamum: tetradrachms struck by Seleucus after his victory, with spectacular types: a horse head and an elephant (281 BC); regular tetradrachms of Alexander the Great in the name of Seleucus but struck by Philetairus (c. 280-274 BC); tetradrachms in the name of Philetairus but with a magnificent portrait of Seleucus on the obverse (c. 274-263 BC); lastly, tetradrachms of [Eumenes I](#), the subsequent Attalid king, carrying the massive, brutal head of Philetairus on the obverse. Philetairus' head was retained for a century,<sup>1</sup> just as the one of [Ptolemy I Soter](#), the founder of the Lagid dynasty. Eumenes I (c. 263-241), Attalus I (c. 241-197) and [Eumenes II](#) (c. 197-160) struck these large tetradrachms on an increasingly less sporadic scale (average of c. 1,5 obverse die per year at the beginning, c. 5 in the 190's). Obviously this issue, which does not comprise any smaller denominations, was not intended for local or daily transactions. Other coinages, both civic and 'royal', were launched around the same period. Not long after the [battle of Magnesia](#) (189 BC) and the concomitant [treaty of Apamea](#) (188 BC), which settled the policy dictated by Rome in the area, Eumenes II, who introduced an extraordinary issue carrying his name and portrait (c. 175-165 BC), modified his monetary policy.



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He introduced a new type of coinage, the '[cistophori](#)' (those which carry a cista): the weight of these coins was only  $\frac{3}{4}$  of that of the normal Attic tetradrachms, but they were considered equal in value. Just as happened in Egypt, since very long, or in [Rhodes](#), around the same period, everybody was forced to convert his 'good' Attic coins into this overvalued coinage. Apparently a closed monetary economy of this type must have led to the improvement of the kingdom's revenues.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Bithynia

After the collapse of the Persian rule as a result of Alexander's invasion, several areas of Asia Minor (especially the northern sections) experienced a vacuum of real power. Certain adventurers took advantage of this instability and proclaimed themselves kings. Among those, Zipoetes became king of Bithynia. His son, [Nicomedes I](#) (c. 279-250 BC), struck a few fractional, silver and bronze, issues. His son and successor, Ziaelas (c. 250-230 BC) is not known to have struck any silver.

It is under his grandson, [Prusias I](#) (c. 230-182 BC), who is generally regarded as the most prominent king of the dynasty, that the royal coinage of Bithynia started. It is during his reign that Pyrrhus, after being defeated by the Romans, took refuge to the Bithynian court. The Bithynian dynasty experienced uninterrupted succession from father to son throughout. From a numismatic point of view, the last kings ([Nicomedes II](#), [III](#) and [IV](#)) struck silver tetradrachms (attested since 149 BC but referring to a local era starting in autumn 297 BC), in the name and with a portrait of Nicomedes (I). This coin type lasted for more than 70 years.<sup>3</sup>

### 4. Pontus

The history of the [Pontic kingdom](#) developed along the same lines. The ancestor of what turned out to be the Mithradatic dynasty was a remote dynast coming from [Cius](#) on the Propontis who claimed to be of Persian origin. That we do not possess a single coin of the first kings ([Mithradates I](#) and [Ariobarzanes](#)) is unsurprising: monetization in the Pontic area was very restricted for long. For all the Black Sea shores East of [Amastris](#), three cities are known to have minted coins before the end of the 2nd c. BC: [Sinope](#), [Amisus](#) and [Trapezus](#). And, certainly during the first part of the Hellenistic period, these cities struck no bronzes but only large denominations of silver, presumably for military expenses. Compared with Bithynia, both royal and civic coinages were, until [Mithradates Eupator](#), very meagre and inappropriate for daily transactions.

The first coins of the kings of Pontus were gold **stater**s with Alexander's types and with the name of Mithradates (II or III ?, c. 220 BC). Interestingly enough, they share an exact combination of symbols with silver coins of Amisus, a mint already used for **satrapic** use in Persian times. The next kings, [Pharnaces](#) (c. 185-155 BC) and Mithradates IV (c. 155-150 BC), were responsible for astonishing portraits of themselves, rendered with exaggerated realism. That only one tetradrachm survives from the long reign of [Mithradates V](#) (c. 150-120 BC) is amazing, taking into account the many events of that period.

The most significant figure of the dynasty is obviously Mithradates Eupator, called the 'Great' (c. 120-63 BC). The fact that his abundant coinage is dated with exceptional precision (by years [following the same calendar as in Bithynia] and by months!) enables us, better than any other case in Graeco-Roman times, to study the rhythm of coin issues. The conclusion is rendered in a firm, non-symmetrical statement: indeed the bulk of coinage was produced to pay troops, yet most troops were not paid in coin. There is simply not enough evidence and we have to think of a more restricted use of coinage, in order to explain this phenomenon. In that case, mercenaries may have been the most obvious recipients of coined money in the Hellenistic period.

### 5. Cappadocia

The more strategic position of Cappadocia made it difficult for adventurers to establish themselves in the area without being noticed. Still the sons and grandsons of [Ariarathes](#), the last Persian satrap of Cappadocia in the 330's, managed successfully to emerge after half a century of great turmoil as an independent kingdom, under the attentive eyes of the Seleucid kings. Unlike most other kings (including the ones of Pergamum, Bithynia or Pontus), the first coins struck by Cappadocian rulers were bronze ([Ariaramnes](#) and [Ariarathes III](#)). The purpose of these small issues remains enigmatic. Their successors struck silver, mainly **drachms**, rarely tetradrachms: that is another distinctive feature of the Cappadocian royal coinages.<sup>4</sup>



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Coins from the Hellenistic Kingdoms

<http://www.ancientsculpturegallery.com/coins.html>

### Glossary :

**drachma**

1. Ancient greek coin.
2. Ancient unit of weight equal to 1/400 of the "oka" (3,89 grams or the 1/8 of the ounce).

**satrap, the**

The title designated a representative of the Persian king, and was widely used in the Persian language. In ancient writers the term usually designates an official of the Persian empire who assumes highest political and military power within the limits of his *satrapia*, the division under his command. Alexander the Great introduced the institution to the administrative organisation of his empire in the East. In the Roman empire, the office of the satrap was hereditary for Armenian nobles who administered an Armenian klima (=canton, a historic-geographical unit); in the case of the Armenian territories inside the Roman Empire, the satrap yielded limited power under the suzerainty of the Roman emperor.

**stater, the**

The term "stater" was used in various areas of the ancient Greek world to define either a standard weight unit or the most important coin in precious metal (gold, silver, electrum) of a numismatic system. The dead weight and accordingly the value of a stater differed from one area to another and it was based on the weight standard effective in the various cities. Therefore, it was necessary each standard to be defined by the authority that issued it (e.g. Aeginetan, Attic, Boeotian, Corinthian).

**talent, the**

Numismatic weight unit. The silver talent equaled 60 mnai or 6000 silver drachmas.

**Thesaurus [1. treasure (archit), 2. hoard (archaeol,numism.)]**

Space for storing, repository or treasure.

1. (archit.) Temple like structure of votive character. It was dedicated by different cities to famous sanctuaries (Delphoi, Olympia, Delos). It was used to store the cities' valuable offerings as well as the smaller offerings of their citizens.
2. (archaeolog, numism.) Collection of valuable objects or artifacts, coins and metal objects buried in the ground.