



# BLAZING DRACHMS

Struck in an area known for its oil, gas and bitumen deposits, some Greek coins depict monuments to fire nymphs.

**C**OLLECTORS OF ancient Greek coins likely are familiar with the attractive, late-Hellenistic drachms of Apollonia, which was situated on the Illyrian coast, near the modern city of Fier in southwest Albania. The obverse of these coins depicts a distinctive head of Apollo; the reverse usually is described as three nymphs dancing around a fire. The implication is that the flames are on an altar, perhaps

the site of abundant deposits of oil, gas and bitumen (a natural asphalt used as cement or mortar). The best surviving account of these deposits was given by the Roman writer Strabo in the 1st century, borrowing from the earlier Greek writer Poseidonius:

On the territory of the people of Apollonia in Illyria there is what is called a nymphaeum. It is a rock which emits fire. Below it are springs flowing with hot water and asphalt...the asphalt is dug out of a neighboring hill: the parts excavated are replaced by fresh earth, which in time is converted to asphalt.

(Strabo can perhaps be forgiven for his unfamiliarity with the nuances of organic chemistry.)

Apollonia was also renowned as a university town. Octavian (much later known as Augustus, the first Roman emperor) studied there under the tutelage of Athenodorus of Tarsus, and it was there that he received news of Caesar's murder. (How well he performed in class is not recorded.) Apollonia was described by Cicero in the *Philippics* as *magna urbs et gravis* ("great and important city").

What do petroleum deposits have to do with ancient coins? In the case at hand, quite a lot. The object of the dancing nymphs' adoration is not just any fire; it

actually represents the Nymphaeum of Apollonia, surely the only depiction of burning petroleum on an ancient coin.

Some background will make this clear. A nymphaeum (nim-fee'-uhm) is any monumental fountain consecrated to the nymphs, most of which are associated with water. Consequently, the term is synonymous with sacred springs or water-formed grottos. In later times, this equation of nymphaeum and sacred spring was extended to include purifying fountains in Christian basilicas.

Not Actual Size

▲ **APOLLO GRACES** the obverse of this Apollonian drachm, while nymphs dance around a fire on the reverse.

However, not all nymphs cavort in springs and pools: these indispensable female spirits preside over all aspects of the natural world. Some are found in forests, clouds, mountains and caverns, and a select few dance among the tongues of flame. These are the fire nymphs, or *Pyroeads*. Their nymphaeum is not so much a fountain as it is a mysterious, natural fire.

It's no wonder this fire was an object of veneration by Apollonians and Pyroeads alike. Its

◀ **THE REVERSE** of this hemidrachm depicts a *lagobolon*, a club used to dispatch rabbits. The obverse represents the nymphaeum at Apollonia.



▲ **IN ANCIENT TIMES**, nymphs were thought to watch over every aspect of the natural world.

within the temple precincts, and that the nymphs are burning incense or something of the sort. The truth, however, is much more unusual and thought-provoking.

Apollonia was founded around 600 B.C. by Greek settlers from Corfu and Corinth, near the boundary of a native Illyrian settlement. It was well known in antiquity as



unkindled flame resembled nothing else in the Illyrians' experience, the occasional tree struck by lightning notwithstanding. Bitumen was everywhere, understood as the gift—and sometimes the weapon—of the gods. Burning bitumen and sulphur rained on the doomed cities of Sodom and Gomorrah; in Babylonia, asphalt was painted on the doorposts of sick people's houses. The Roman writer Pliny the Elder offered a long list of pharmaceutical and

other uses of bitumen, ranging from curing gout to hastening menstruation to driving away snakes. What else could anyone—human or nymph—do in the face of this miracle but dance?

A very rare Apollonian hemidrachm shows the Pyroeads' nymphaeum, while the reverse depicts a *lagobolon*, a special club used to dispatch rabbits. On a small bronze, flames identical to those on the hemidrachm obverse are coupled with a lyre reverse.

On a few drachms of the very common cow-and-calf type struck in the 3rd to 1st centuries B.C., the standard "double stellate" reverse

is replaced by the nymphaeum and *lagobolon* of the hemidrachm. This remarkable innovation allows a plausible reconstruction of the relative chronology of all the nymphaeum types, and sheds some light on certain late non-nymphaeum Apollonian bronzes as well. It is the only instance in the entire, long history of the cow-and-calf type that the reverse was replaced by another design. One can reasonably surmise that it represents the

very last issue of the type, struck in conjunction with the hemidrachm and bronze around the end of the 2nd century. The nymphaeum subsequently was re-



▲ ON A SMALL BRONZE, the obverse resembles that of the hemidrachm, and the reverse pictures a lyre.

Not Actual Size



▲ A LAGOBOLON and flames replace the standard reverse on a common cow-and-calf type.

Not Actual Size

PHOTOS: HAUCK & AUFHAUSER (BRONZE) & CLASSICAL NUMISMATIC GROUP

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tained as a minor part of the design of Apollo/nymph drachms that dominated the 1st-century coinage of Apollonia.

The very rare nymphaeum bronze coin, known to the author as a single example, is linked by its lyre reverse with other Apollonian bronzes depicting Apollo on the obverse. These, in turn, are associated with large bronzes portraying Apollo's twin sister, Artemis.

The issuance of 1st-century Apollonian bronzes can be plausibly reconstructed as follows:

- 1) Nymphaeum/Lyre (valued at 1 unit), 2.44g.
- 2) Apollo/Lyre (2 units), 4.51g.
- 3) Apollo/Obelisk of Apollo (4 units), 8.72g.
- 4) Artemis/Tripod (8 units), 17.03g.

The images of Apollo on #2 and #3 are identical to those on the aforementioned drachms; the head of Artemis on #4 is similar as well,

distinguishable mostly by her diadem (as opposed to the laurel crown worn by her brother).

Two additional bronze types remain: an Apollo/Obelisk coin, the obverse of which differs markedly from #2 and #3 and perhaps was struck somewhat earlier; and a 4-unit Dionysus/Thunderbolt type, the reverse of which is linked to #3 and #4 by a shared monogram. Presumably, the latter coin replaced the 4-unit Apollo head as the series progressed.

As a postscript of sorts, I'd like to share a personal story. After cataloging the hemidrachm illustrated here for Harlan J. Berk, Ltd., I described it to my wife. She's professionally involved with the remediation of oil and gas spills, which sometimes requires burning, so I knew she'd be interested. However, I was surprised by her immediate reaction. "I want that!" she exclaimed.

That was easily accomplished. We purchased a piece and took it to Eve Alfille Gallery in Evanston, Illinois, a wonderful jeweler we've worked with many times before. We knew she would be able to incorporate it into a custom-made piece of jewelry without damaging the coin. The delightful pendant is shown above. My wife is now the only kid on her block—probably on any block—who can wear the Nymphaeum of Apollonia around her neck.

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**▲ A BLAZING PENDANT** holds a hemidrachm depicting the Nymphaeum at Apollonia.

Not Actual Size

PHOTO: EVE ALFILLE GALLERY

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