



Volume 24

Journal of the Numismatic Association of Australia



Nymphodorus of Abdera: mint magistrate and *proxenos*?

Kenneth Sheedy

A 5th century BC tetradrachm from Abdera is one of the most important coins to enter the ACANS collection in recent years.* It is an example of the very finest engraving style at Abdera; the obverse rendering of the griffin has been described as ‘undeniably spectacular.’¹ But it also has historical importance. The mint magistrate, Nymphodorus, known from only two other tetradrachms (the ACANS coin is the third), is an enigmatic figure who brings to our attention an episode recorded by Thucydides in his History of the Peloponnesian War (ii.29.1). The Athenians, wishing to secure military support to subdue the Thracian coast (as well as gaining access to the raw materials of Thrace, notably timber and silver), sought the assistance of the wealthy Abderite, Nymphodorus, in order to secure an alliance with the Odrysian King, Sitacles. The influence of Nymphodorus is suggested by the fact that his sister was married to the king. The alliance was concluded in 431 BC. The same man, working in conjunction with Sitacles, was also responsible in 430 BC for betraying the Lacedaemonian ambassadors sent to Asia. According to Herodotus (7.137), the men were at Bisanthe when they were caught by the Athenians; they were then sent to Athens to be put to death. Is the Nymphodorus named on the coin actually the *proxenos* of the Athenians, an earlier relative of the father-in-law of Sitacles, or simply a different man? There are many modern historians and numismatists who have expressed an opinion, and in this brief note I wish to revisit some of the theories and evidence.



Obv. A ΒΔ ΗΠΙ ΤΕΩΝ Griffin seated l, r. foreleg raised, jaws open and tongue projected; groundline; border of dots.



Rev. [E]ΠΙΝΥΜΦΟΔΩΡΟ in shallow incuse around quadripartite linear square. AR Tetradrachm (27mm. 14.29 grams). ACANS 10A4. May 1966: 127, A117/ P116 Period IV, Group LV.

* I thank Dr G Davis for his comments on an earlier draft and for valuable references.

¹ May (1966): 117.

Abdera lies on the coast of Thrace, 17 km NE of the mouth of Strymon River and roughly opposite to the island of Thasos. It was founded in 544 BC by Ionians from Teos in Asia Minor who had decided to establish a new settlement that was free from Persian domination (Hdt 1.168).² Abdera shared in the natural wealth of Thrace; it commanded good agricultural land and became famous for grain and wine.³ It has been suggested that an important reason for its rapid rise was the leading role played by Abdera in a lucrative silver trade.⁴ There were important mines around nearby Mt Pangeon and on Thasos. The relationship between Abdera and the Odrysian kingdom was significant in this regard (and for the general commercial prosperity of the Greek colony). Thucydides (ii.97.1)⁵ notes that:

Now the empire of the Odrysians in respect to its size extended along the sea-coast from the city of Abdera to the Euxine Sea as far as the river Ister. This stretch of coast constitutes a voyage for a merchant-vessel, if the shortest course is taken and the wind keeps steady astern, of four days and four nights.

The wealth and power of the Thracian kingdom are described as follows (ii.97.3):

As for the tribute which came in from the barbarian territory and from all the Hellenic cities over which the Odrysians acquired sway in the time of Seuthes – who succeeding Sitalces on the throne, brought the revenues to their maximum – its value was about four hundred talents in coin, and was paid in gold and silver; and gifts equal in value to the tribute, not only of gold and silver, but besides these all manner of stuffs, both embroidered and plain, and other articles for household use, were brought as offerings to the king...

He continues (ii.97.5):

Consequently, the kingdom attained to a great degree of power. For of all the kingdoms in Europe between the Ionian Gulf and the Euxine Sea it was the greatest in revenue of money and in general prosperity...

The coinage of Abdera indicates that the city-state played a major role in the trade in precious metals mined in Thrace though the Abderites themselves do not appear to have controlled mines. The earliest issues included silver octadrachms weighing 29.80g; their size (almost ingots) suggests they were designed to facilitate export.⁶ The volume

2 Loukopoulou (2004):872-875 offers a brief history of Abdera with bibliography.

3 Loukopoulou (2004):870-871.

4 May (1966): 1-2.

5 All translations by Charles Forster Smith, Loeb edit. 1969.

6 May (1966): 2, 59-66.

of trade is suggested by hoards found in Egypt and the Levant.⁷

The coinage of Abdera was the subject of an important mint study by one of the most distinguished numismatists of the 20th century, John M. F. May.⁸ The book was published posthumously in 1966 under the editorship of Colin Kraay and Kenneth Jenkins (May had died in 1961). May was the first to establish the sequence of a very complex run of issues (most signed by magistrates) minted prior to the capture of the city by Philip II in 350 BC. His book also contained an important study of the changing weight standards (and this had relevance for the study of other mints in the region).

May divided Abdera's coinage struck between c.540/35 BC and 365/60 BC into eight periods. Period IV, with which we are concerned, was placed between the conclusion of the Second Persian Invasion and what he believed was a break in minting during the mid 5th century BC caused by the Athenian Coinage Decree; May proposed the dates c.474/70 – 449/8 BC.⁹ He identified some 20 tetradrachm issues in this period (Group L/1 – LXIX) which he estimated would cover up to 25 years. These issues, all minted on a local Abderite standard of c.14.90g, are distinguished by the addition of the mint magistrate's name, written in full, on the reverse. Each issue (or 'Group') contained the coins struck under one magistrate. Group LV, the coins minted with the name of Nymphodorus, was represented by only two examples when May's study was published in 1966.¹⁰ They are the product of two separate sets of obverse and reverse dies – cat. 140: A116/P115; and cat. 141: A117/P116. The coin acquired by ACANS is another example of cat. 141: A117/P116. Let us focus firstly on the griffin. Almost from the beginning the official type of Abdera was a powerful griffin seated left and with right foreleg raised; the griffin was also the type of the mother-city, Teos.¹¹ By the end of the 5th century BC three different versions of this mythical creature were being depicted by the Abderite engravers: 'type A' – with straight primary feathers; 'type B' – with a 'less realistic, more decorative wing with feathers curling forward', and finally, 'type C' – with 'a plain wing with slightly concave surface.'¹² According to May, in Period IV the engravers of the griffin achieve their finest work, with 'a remarkable blend of imaginative

7 See Price and Waggoner (1975). The hoard contained 15 coins of Abdera: p. 36-37., cat. 129-143.

8 May (1966): vii (a list of May's publications). A lengthy review of the book was given by Raven (1967).

9 May (1966): 115-142. For a discussion of the Athenian Coinage Decree and the many problems associated with our understanding of this legislation see Figueria 1998: 319-465 and, more recently, Stroud 2006.

10 May (1966): 127 (London and Munich).

11 May (1966): 49, 59. The very first issue (Group 1) depicted a griffin moving forward.

12 May (1966): 89. Raven (1967): 292 observed that for May 'Greek coins were primarily a matter of art, though his study of them was solidly based on a thorough knowledge of the political and economic background'. This judgment is hardly supported by May's publications. May was clearly a skilful numismatist who could construct robust typologies. Although the chronology of his work on Abdera, for example, has been challenged (as has that of all Greek numismatic studies written prior to 1975) the organization of the issues and periods remains intact.

skill and technical accomplishment'.¹³ The die engravers for the coins of Nymphodorus and Kallidamas (who seems to follow Nymphodorus in the succession of magistrates) chose a type B griffin, with a curled decorative wing, heavy build, and 'ferocious mien'. Here this mythical beast 'is seen in all his glory, arrogant in pose, with wings unfolded and feathers spread in a manner unrealistic perhaps, but undeniably spectacular'.¹⁴ Unfortunately, the ACANS example has suffered damage, and this has taken away some of the detail.¹⁵

I now wish to discuss the dating of the coin.¹⁶ May detected a gap between the issues of Period IV and V.¹⁷ The evidence was typological: the tetradrachm weight standard of 14.90g was changed to a reduced Thracio-Macedonian standard of between 14.15 and 13.85g, and the reverse types now carried individual emblems within the central square (hydria, head etc.). May thought that the mint may have been idle for a decade.¹⁸ As an explanation for this interruption (and as a means of dating the hiatus) May suggested the enforcement of the Athenian Coinage Decree.¹⁹ This decree (known very largely from a 'jigsaw' of fragmentary inscriptions found at diverse places), which evidently required the members of the Delian League to use only Athenian weights and measures as well as Athenian coinage (and prohibited the issue of local coinage), was conventionally dated to around 449 BC when May wrote his book.²⁰ Harold Mattingly, however, has argued for a dating in 425/4 BC – and in this he was supported by two important pieces of epigraphic evidence – a new reading of a decree between Athens and Egesta, and a fragment of the Coinage Decree itself which names the city of Hamaxitos.²¹ A dating in the 420s is now generally accepted, though more recently Lisa Kallet has advanced arguments for an even lower date (once suggested by Wilamowitz

13 May (1966): 116.

14 May (1966): 117.

15 The magnificence of the dies is easier to comprehend in this recent example minted for Kallidamas (a much more prolific minter). <http://pro.coinarchives.com/a/lotviewer.php?LotID=453806&AucID=825&Lot=220>

16 For an early attempt to date the coins on the basis of style see Kleiner, G. (1950/1) 'Zur chronology der Münzen von Abdera', *JNG* 2: 14-20. Kleiner came to the conclusion (18-19) that the coins of Nymphodorus could be dated c.430 BC but his stylistic comparisons carry little weight, and he was clearly influenced by the possibility that the mint magistrate and the proxenos were the same. May makes almost no use of stylistic comparisons to objects outside the coinage to date the issues of Period IV.

17 May (1966):143.

18 May (1966): 143.

19 May (1966): 115. The decree is perhaps better titled the 'Athenian Standards Decree', because of the range of measures it covered, but is now too well known as the Coinage Decree. The complexity of this 'jigsaw' (Gomme1953/4) is stressed by Stroud (2006): 18-26. See also Papazarkadas (2009), 'Epigraphy and the Athenian Empire: Re-shuffling the Chronological Cards', in Ma, Papazarkadas and Parker (2009): 67-88.

20 See Lewis, D. M. (1987) 'The Athenian Coinage Decree', in Carradice (1987): 53-63.

21 Mattingly, H. B (1996): *The Athenian Empire Restored. Epigraphic and Historical Studies* (Ann Arbor 1996). The new evidence: 1-4 with bibliography.

and later Cavaignac), around 414 BC.²² It seems clear, however, that we have still to reach a satisfactory understanding of this legislation.²³ In support of his case, Mattingly argued that the important northern mints of Abdera, Acanthus, Mende, Maroneia and Ainos, mints of cities all allied to Athens, do not show a break in coinage during the 440s.²⁴ Instead, they appear to continue the production of coins down to the 430s or 420s. Here he was able to take advantage of a general down dating of archaic and (to a lesser extent) classical Greek coinage which was being driven by the evidence of coin hoards (most notably the Asyut Hoard).²⁵ This trend gathered momentum with the publication of preliminary studies devoted to the so-called Decadrachm Hoard found at Elmali in Lycia during the 1980s.²⁶ This deposit, dated c. 465-462 BC, included 19 coins from Abdera: six belonged to May Period II and 13 were tetradrachms of May Period III.²⁷ In the last group were coins from four magistrates, including HEGE (May cat. 72), ZEN (May cat. 81) and TELE (May cat. 83). Fried concluded that May had dated Period III (c.492-473/70 BC) too early, for the examples in the hoard showed no signs of circulation.²⁸ Kagan argued that there was no support for a break caused by the Athenian Coinage Decree (then dated c.449 BC) – and no room for an interruption to minting at Abdera until the end of the 440s or early 430s, ‘if one wishes to maintain annual magistracies.’²⁹ Their opinion, then, was that the dating of Period III could come down ‘by 10 to 20 years.’³⁰ Martin Price observed that coins of May’s Period II were found in the Asyut hoard and on this evidence could be dated down to 480 BC or later (May had suggested 520/515 BC – 492 BC).³¹ He argued that Period III continued until after 460 BC, and Period IV ‘must have continued uninterrupted into the 430s or even later.’³²

Let us now turn to Nymphodorus himself. As we have seen, May placed the coins of the magistrate in Period IV, which he dated 473/70-449/8 BC. Thucydides has this to say about Nymphodorus the son of Pythes (2.29.1):

-
- 22 Kallet, L. (2001), *Money and the Corrosion of Power in Thucydides: The Sicilian Expedition and its Aftermath* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London). Von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, U. (1880), *Aus Kydathen. Philol. Untersuchungen* 1 (Berlin 1880): 30-31. Cavaignac, E. (1953), ‘Le decret dit de Klearkhos’, *Revue Numismatique*, 5th ser.15: 1-7. See also the discussion in Kroll, J. H. (2009) ‘What about coinage?’, in Ma, Papazarkadas and Parker (2009): 195-209. See also Figueira (1998): 431-463 in favour of a date in the early 440s.
- 23 For a recent analysis, which takes in new finds (notably the fragment from Aphytis), see Stroud (2006): 22-26 with bibliography.
- 24 Mattingly (1996): 2.
- 25 Price and Waggoner (1975).
- 26 Carradice (1987).
- 27 Fried, S. (1987) ‘Introduction’ in Carradice (1987) 3.
- 28 Fried, S. (1987) ‘Introduction’ in Carradice (1987) 3.
- 29 Kagan, J.H. (1987) ‘The Decadrachm Hoard: Chronology and Consequences’, in Carradice (1987) 25.
- 30 Kagan, J.H. (1987) ‘The Decadrachm Hoard: Chronology and Consequences’, in Carradice (1987) 25.
- 31 Price, M. J. ‘The Coinages of the Northern Aegean’ in Carradice (1987) 45.
- 32 Price, M. J. ‘The Coinages of the Northern Aegean’ in Carradice (1987) 45.

In this summer, too, Nymphodorus son of Pythes, a man of Abdera, whose sister Sitacles had to wife, and possessing great influence with Sitacles, the Athenians made their proxenos with that king, although they had hitherto regarded him as an enemy; and they summoned him to Athens, wishing to gain Sitacles, son of Teres and king of the Thracians, as their ally.

Then shortly after (2.29.4-5):

And it was his son, Sitalces, whom the Athenians wanted to make their ally, wishing him to help in subduing the places on the coast of Thrace and Perdiccas. So Nymphodorus came to Athens, brought about the alliance with Sitacles, and got Sadocus, son of Sitacles made an Athenian citizen; and he promised also to bring the war in Thrace to an end, saying he would persuade Sitacles to send the Athenians a Thracian force of horsemen and targeteers.

As a result of his chronology, May suggested that Nymphodorus in Group LV might have been minted about 465 BC.³³ The appointment of Nymphodorus as *proxenos* for the Athenians at the court of Sitalces may be dated to 431 BC when the alliance between the Athenians and the Thracian king was concluded.³⁴ May then observed that if the mint magistrate and the *proxenos* of the Athenians was the same man, 'his career was evidently a long one; but if he had a daughter of marriageable age in the late thirties, it remains just possible that he is in fact the Nymphodorus of our Group LV'.³⁵ There was however, 'nothing against there being two men of this name'.³⁶ May could not decide on the matter, but the gap of over 30 years between his dating of the mint magistracy of Nymphodorus (c.465 BC) and the alliance between Sitalces and the Athenians (431 BC) clearly made the suggestion that they were the same man doubtful.

With the down dating of the May's Period IV, as a result of the evidence of the Decadrachm hoard, a new assessment becomes possible. Price, as noted above, suggested that the coinage of Period IV, 'must have continued uninterrupted into the 430s or even later'. On average then, May's dates for these magistrates (presuming that the magistracies were annual and that May's ordering is correct) should be lowered by 20 years. This places the mint magistracy of Nymphodorus c.445 BC. There is now only a gap of a little over ten years between the issue of the coins and the appointment of Nymphodorus as *proxenos*.

In 1977, prior to the discovery of the Decadrachm hoard, Mattingly had been able to use the down-dating of the Abdera coins from Period II found in the Asyut hoard, as well as evidence for down dating Period III from the Jordan hoard together with an overstruck coin of Ainos over Abdera (May cat. 92), to suggest that the dating of Nymphodorus as

33 May (1966): 150 n. 1.

34 May (1966): 120. A *proxenos* was a kind of honorary consul representing the interests of another city-state.

35 May (1966): 150 n. 1. Thucydides (2.29.1) says the wife of Sitacles was the sister of Nymphodorus.

36 May (1966): 150 n. 1.

mint magistrate at Abdera needed be to revised.³⁷ Price had already begun to question May's theory of annual eponyms.³⁸ Mattingly also challenged the claim that the Abderites named on the reverse of the coins acted as eponymous officials 'like the *archon* at Athens' – but suggested that chronologically the sequence did not break down till later, in Period V.³⁹ On the question of dating this one magistrate in Period IV, however, the numismatic evidence that Mattingly had available was hardly conclusive. He argued that prosopography could help date May Period IV. In his view 'Nymphodorus must be the Abderite "dynast" known to us from Herodotus and Thucydides'.⁴⁰ Mattingly concluded: 'His father's name Pythes appears on the coinage shortly before that of Nymphodorus, which virtually clinches the identification.'⁴¹ Furthermore, according to Mattingly, 'Sitacles' Abderite marriage should be put c. 450 and the premier position of Pythes' family, which it implies, would be suitably advertised by the contemporary issues of Pythes and Nymphodorus.⁴²

The name ΠΥΘΕΟ occurs on two tetradrachms from the very beginning of Period IV, in Group LI.⁴³ May rendered the name as Pythes, and noted 'little difficulty, from the consideration of age, would attach to Pythes of Group LI being the father of Nymphodorus' (and in this he has been followed by most scholars).⁴⁴ Fraser and Matthews have argued however, that the mint magistrate of Group LI, is Πυθέας (Pytheas) and not Πυθές, and that this man is not the father of Nymphodorus.⁴⁵

37 Mattingly (1996): 415-419. Reprinted from *Klio* 59 (1977), 83-100.

38 Price (1975) 37.

39 Mattingly (1996): 416.

40 Mattingly (1996): 417.

41 Mattingly (1996): 417. He also suggested (417, n. 64) that 'Pythes need not be Nymphodoros' father; a younger brother or a cousin (perhaps older) of Nymphodoros could have been so named'.

42 Mattingly (1996): 418.

43 May (1966): 123-3, cat. 130-131.

44 May (1966): 150 n. 1.

45 Fraser and Matthews (2005) sv. Πυθέας. Under Πυθές they list the much later Abdera magistrate of Period IX, Group CXXXVII, ΠΥΦΕΩ: May (1966) 293. Dr Elena González (National Hellenic Research Foundation) kindly provided the following comments in private correspondence: 'Fraser, in the volume of the *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names* comprising Northern Greece, proposes both nominatives, uncontracted (Πυθέας) and contracted (Πυθής), for the genitive form Πυθέο. In any other region, it would be more probable that it belongs to the first one (thus final omikron would represent ΟΥ), but Abdera is an Ionic colony and in Ionic these nouns usually appear with the contracted form, whose genitive is -εω (cf. for instance May no. 549). Given the early date of the coin it is not strange that omikron represented omega. O. Masson ('Quelques noms de magistrats monétaires grecs', *OGS II*, 432-433) considers it to be the genitive of Πυθής, without questioning it, and his expertise in Greek onomastics, together with the parallels from coin legends he collects, supports this hypothesis. K. Chryssanthaki-Nagle, for instance, in her recent study of the coins from Abdera (*L'histoire monétaire d'Abdère en Thrace, VIe s. avant J.-C. - IIe s. après J.-C.*, Athens 2007, 111-113) accepts it without discussion. To sum up, you can find linguistic arguments to support both options (Πυθέας / Πυθής), but the second one has a stronger case, given the dialectal environment'. Thus she supports May contra Fraser and Matthews.

Thomas Figueira followed Mattingly in suggesting that a dating of Nymphodorus could be obtained from the Abdera hoard, *IGCH* 698.⁴⁶ This was a find made in Thrace around 1850, which contained some 13+ coins of Abdera, ranging from cat. 79a (Group XXXVII) to cat. 147 (Group LVI: a coin of Kallidamas) all within Period IV.⁴⁷ Mattingly had attempted to date the deposit from May's catalogue in which the coins of Pythinnes, Nymphorus, Kallidamas and Nestis are the latest issues in Period IV. Figueira claimed that coins of Nymphodorus were included in the find.⁴⁸ None were noted by May. Raven claimed that May had underestimated the size of the Abdera hoard: 'one can find in his [May] lists nearly twenty further likely pieces with pedigrees going back to soon after 1850' (but does not cite the issues of Nymphodorus).⁴⁹ The Nymphodorus coin cat. 141a (Munich) was noted in 1881.⁵⁰ But this does not in itself prove that it belonged to the hoard. There is actually nothing to date this find externally; its chronology depends on that of the magistrates represented in the hoard (and not *vice versa*).

P.M. Fraser and E. Matthews in *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*, were able to identify four separate men from Thrace with the name Nymphodorus.⁵¹ The second of these (entry No. 11) is the Abderite mint magistrate known from May Group LV, and is here dated c.450-425 BC without discussion.⁵² But it seems unlikely that Group LV could be placed as late as 425 BC unless the sequence established by May can be challenged. Fraser and Matthews list a third Nymphodorus (No. 12) dated to 430 BC, and this is the man from Abdera known to Thucydides and Herodotus. Is it possible that there were two different men with the name Nymphodorus who held public office or played an active political role in Abdera at the same time? I suspect that the coincidence may be too great. I think it is now likely that they are the same man, who emerged in 431 BC as one of the most influential power brokers in Northern Greece. As the wealth of Abdera was greatly enhanced by its involvement in the silver market, which relied on metal from mines controlled by Thracian tribes, the activities of Nymphodorus, firstly as a mint magistrate responsible for the issue of silver coinage, and then as an ambassador to the kingdom of the *Odrysiens*, placed him at the very centre of Abdera's political and commercial interests.

46 Figueira (1996): 136.

47 May (1966): 296 (listing some 8 examples).

48 Figueira (1996): 136.

49 Raven (1967): 292.

50 May (1966): 127, cat. 141. The earliest reference is 'ZfN 1881, 106; Lambros'.

51 Fraser and Matthews (2005) : 258.

52 There is no reference beyond May (1966).

Abbreviations

Carradice (1987) = I. Carradice (ed.) *Coinage and Administration in the Athenian and Persian Empires. The Ninth Oxford Symposium on Coinage and Monetary History* (Oxford 1987).

Figueira (1998) = T. Figueira, *The Power of Money. Coinage and Politics in the Athenian Empire* (Philadelphia 1998).

Fraser and Matthews (2005) = P. M. Fraser and E. Matthews (eds.) *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names, vol 4, Macedonia, Thrace, Northern Regions of the Black Sea.* (Oxford 2005).

Ma, Papazarkadas and Parker (2009) = J. T. Ma, N. Papazarkadas, and R. Parker (eds.) *Interpreting the Athenian Empire* (London 2009).

May (1966) = J. M. F. May, *The Coinage of Abdera (540-345 BC)* (London 1966).

Loukopoulou (2004) = L. Loukopoulou, 'Thrace From Nestos to Hebros', in M. H. Hansen

and T. H. Nielsen (eds.), *An Inventory of Archaic and Classical Poleis. An Investigation Conducted by The Copenhagen Polis Centre* (Oxford 2004).

Raven 1967 = Raven, E. J. P. (1967) Review of J.M.F. May, *The Coinage of Abdera* (London 1966), in *Numismatic Chronicle* (7) 7, 1967, 289-297.

Price (1975) = M. J. Price and N. Waggoner, *The Asyut Hoard* (London 1975).

Stroud (2006) = R.S. Stroud, *The Athenian Empire on Stone: David M. Lewis Memorial Lecture Oxford 2006.* (Athens 2006)

Associate Professor Kenneth Sheedy was appointed the founding director of the Australian Centre for Ancient Numismatic Studies in 2000. He teaches in the Department of Ancient History at Macquarie University and is a member of its Ancient Cultures Research Centre. He received his doctorate in Classical Archaeology from the University of Sydney in 1987. Between 1988 and 1991 he was a curator at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. He was appointed deputy director of the Australian Archaeological Institute at Athens in 1991. In 1997 he obtained the position of curator for the Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum Project at the British Museum. His fields of research and teaching are Greek numismatics, and the art and archaeology of Greece with emphasis on the archaic period. He is currently working alongside A/P Damian Gore and Dr G. Davis on new studies of the archaic coinage of Athens.