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Photographe : André Longchamp

*Stater of Nectanebo II*

FGA-ARCH-EG-0363

Dynasty XXX, reign of Nectanebo II, 360-342 BC

Gold

1.7 x 1.7 x 0.3 cm

**Geographic origin**

Egypt

**Deontology:**

Collection Félix-Bienaimé Feuardent (1819-1907)

Frayse & Associés, Paris, November 26, 2009, lot n° 16



## INITIAL SKEPTICISM

Scholars suggest that the Lydians, whose kingdom was located in the Western litoral of the Anatolian peninsula of what is now the modern nation state of the Republic of Turkey, minted the first coins during the course of the 7th century BC. Thereafter most states in the Mediterranean basin began to mint their own coins so that a monetized economy shortly dominated most national and international financial transactions. Many of those early coins were minted in both gold and silver, but the ancient Egyptians were reluctant to adopt this new practice. They steadfastly adhered to their millennium-old custom of barter—exchanging commodities of equivalent value for other commodities. Their reluctance to adopt coinage has been attributed to their suggested religious aversion for the use of gold, considered to be the flesh of their divinities, and silver, considered to be the bones of their deities, for mundane, mercantile purposes. When the very first coin of the type to which FGA-ARCH-EG-0363 belongs was identified in 1901, scholars, aware of the reluctance of the ancient Egyptian to mint coins, were initially reluctant to accept its authenticity and considered it to be a forgery.

## DOUBTS DISPELLED, BUT WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THAT STALLION?

The appearance of a second coin of the same type in 1910 dispelled those initial doubts.<sup>1</sup> The coins were now accepted as genuine, but the galloping horse on one side and on the other side the hieroglyphic monogram, consisting of two hieroglyphs *nebu nefer*, the first suggested to represent a jewelry necklace of beads, superimposed over the second, *nefer*, representing the lung and windpipe, remained enigmatic. Over the course of time, a general consensus emerged regarding the interpretation of those images. The hieroglyphic monograph consisting of the two superimposed hieroglyphs, read *nebu nefer*, is generally thought to translate *the good [perfect] gold*.<sup>2</sup> Analysis of some of these coins reveals that their alloys are in fact 93% or more pure gold.<sup>2</sup> However, the polyvalent nature of the Egyptian hieroglyphs by which any given sign may be possessed of multiple meanings introduces an element of ambiguity into that interpretation because the hieroglyph for the rearing, trappings-less horse to the right on the reverse, or tails side of the coin, may also be read as *nefer*.<sup>3</sup> As a result the phrase might also be read, *nefer nebu*, “the golden stallion.”<sup>4</sup>

## A SHORT HISTORY LESSON ABOUT “ATHENIAN OWLS”

In order to resolve this seeming paradox, a brief historical survey of Egypt is necessary. The incorporation of Egypt as a satrapy, or province, within his empire by the Persian King Cambyses in 525 BC resulted in the introduction into Egypt of a partial monetized economy in which Athenian silver coins, originals or Persian imitations of same, were introduced for the first time. The use of real<sup>5</sup> or imitation

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<sup>1</sup> Chassinat, 1910; et Faucher et al, 2012, p. 151.

<sup>2</sup> Faucher et al, 2012, p. 158.

<sup>3</sup> Ashmawy, 2005, p. 147.

<sup>4</sup> Faucher et al, 2012, pp. 156-157.

<sup>5</sup> Shore, 1974.



Athenian silver coins,<sup>6</sup> which featured the head of the goddess Athena on one side, and the owl, her symbol as the goddess of wisdom on the other, was purposeful because these “Athenian owls” were universally regarded as one of the most stable currencies in the ancient world at that time. The Persians were forced to use coinage in Egypt because the economy of their administration had been monetized and required coinage for its continued, smooth financial operation. In order to convince the Egyptians to begin to use those coins, some of the Persian ‘Athenian owls’ were inscribed in demotic,<sup>7</sup> a late form of the hieroglyphs, which gained in popularity as the notational system in which every-day documents were being written.

### **THE ISSUANCE OF THE NEBU NEFER COINS**

The conflict, generally termed the Persian wars, in which the Greeks soundly defeated the Persians at Salamis (480 BC) and Plataea (479 BC), enabled the Egyptians to defeat the Persians and regain their independence.<sup>8</sup> The Persians, ever

chafing, resolved to retake Egypt. The commitment on the part of the Egyptians to remain independent changed the geo-political calculus of the ancient world as Greek mercenaries began to play an increasingly greater role in subsequent Persian-Egyptian conflicts. Amyrtaios, pharaoh of Dynasty XXVIII, and the pharaohs of Dynasty XXIX and XXX, were able to beat back any Persian threats, but not without the intervention of Greek mercenaries.<sup>9</sup> The imminent Persian threat against Egypt gained momentum during Dynasty XXX as the Persian king Artaxerxes III renewed his assault against pharaoh Nectanebo II (360-342 BC). Intending that Egypt should continue to remain independent, Nectanebo II was again forced to rely on Greek mercenaries, whose service required payment in coin. As a result, Nectanebo II broke with tradition and introduced coinage for the very first time by issuing the *nebu nefer* coins, represented by this example in the collections of the Fondation. These *good [perfect] gold* coins assured their value as legal tender for both Egyptian subjects and foreigners, mostly the Greek mercenaries and merchants upon whom his reign relied.

### **THE STALLION AND THE PHARAOH**

Although the device of the two hieroglyphs spelling *nebu nefer* have no parallels in contemporary coinage of other states, the motif of a horse, either with or without a rider, had gained wide currency as a numismatic device by the 4th century BC in the coinage of other contemporary cultures and was widely recognized. The Egyptian equine device on the *nebu nefer* series differed from depictions of equines on non-Egyptian numismatic issues.<sup>10</sup> Those generally stood four-square whereas the Egyptian horse was depicted galloping to the right. One can, therefore, suggest that

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<sup>6</sup> Buttrely, 1982; et Kagan, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Davies, 1987, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup>Wolfgang, 2010.

<sup>9</sup>Wojciechowska, 2016.

<sup>10</sup>Schonert-Geiss, 1984.



the galloping horse on these issues proclaimed their Egyptian origin. That origin was reinforced by the observation that the phrase *nefer nebu* might also be translated as “the golden stallion.” This translation accords well with Egyptian cultural norms which regarded the stallion as a prestigious, royal emblem.<sup>11</sup> And in point of fact, the god Horus, whose incarnation the Egyptian pharaohs were believed to be, was often regarded as *nefer*, “the young stallion.”<sup>12</sup> As a result, the horse and the phrase, *nefer nebu*, on these coins equated their value with the pharaoh who issued them.

### **ONE OF THE FINEST EXAMPLES KNOWN**

One inventory suggests that there are about eighty examples of these *nebu nefer* coins known; these can be divided into six general categories, depending on their design, all of which exhibit slight variations in the depiction of the galloping horse on one s

ide and the hieroglyphic motto *nebu nefer* on the other.<sup>13</sup> This particular example in the collections of the Fondation has been described as one of the finest

of its series ever minted.<sup>14</sup> It is termed a stater because of its value just as coins in the United States may be called dimes or quarters.

### **A FEATURED LOAN**

Because of its quality, and because of its use in conducting financial transactions between Nectanebo II, pharaoh of Egypt, and the Greek mercenaries in his employ, this coin is a featured loan from the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art to the J. Paul Getty Museum's special loan exhibition, *Beyond the Nile: Egypt and the Classical World* (27 March-9 September 2018), for which see this link:

[http://www.getty.edu/visit/cal/events/ev\\_1894.html](http://www.getty.edu/visit/cal/events/ev_1894.html) (consulted on 20 March 2018)

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<sup>11</sup> Faucher et al, 2012, 156.

<sup>12</sup> Meeks, 2005), p. 56.

<sup>13</sup> Loeben, 2014, pp. 74-75.

<sup>14</sup> Loeben, 2014, p. 75.



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