

Comments on Greek Monetary Units

Post by "Cassius" of November 30, 2024 at 7:40 AM

These comments were part of a recent conversation on the costs of food and other items. I'm pasting them here as they might be usable to others in the future.

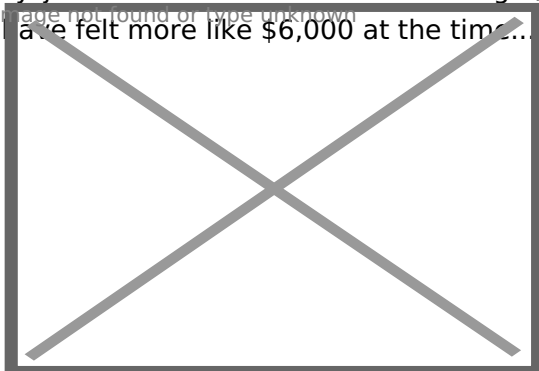
1 -

I wonder if there is anything to the idea that the diet in the garden was simple most of the time, perhaps largely home-grown, but then they went all-out once a month. Spending a mina on a dinner party is quite a lot, even if they had 100 guests.

A mina was equivalent to 100 drachmas. A drachma was about 4.3 grams of silver and was an average daily wage for average labor and had the purchasing power of around \$30 during Epíkouros lifetime. A full meal with meat, cheese and wine could easily cost a drachma. Epíkouros probably only spent so much on special occasions when hosting many people.

2 - Is it clear from the text that they're referring to a unit of currency rather than a measurement of weight? 1 Mina is either a lot of money or about 15 ounces. 15 ounces is a typical ribeye steak.

3 - Yeah, we'll have to figure this out together! I don't think a mina was ever in coin form, 15oz of silver (which was worth 100 drachma, and would be worth about \$350 today), would probably just be in the form of a small ingot/bar. But 15oz held more value in the past, and would have felt more like \$6,000 at the time... but I could be missing something.



[IMG_4953.jpeg](#)

4 - I guess the question is whether drachma, mina, etc were only used for the weights of precious metals or not. A dram (itself derived from drachma) is variously 1/16th or 1/8th of an ounce.

It looks like it's Plutarch's [Lives](#) to the rescue once again

Quote

[2] συνήρχοντο δὲ ἀνὰ πεντεκαίδεκα καὶ βραχεῖ τούτων ἐλάττους ἢ πλείους. ἔφερε δὲ ἕκαστος κατὰ μῆνα τῶν συσσίτων ἀλφίτων μέδιμνον, οἴνου χόας ὀκτώ, τυροῦ πέντε μνάς, σύκων ἡμιμναῖα πέντε, πρὸς δὲ τούτοις εἰς ὄψωνίαν μικρόν τι κομιδῆ νομίσματος: ἄλλως δὲ [p. 238] καὶ θύσας τις ἀπαρχὴν καὶ θηρεύσας μέρος ἔπεμψεν εἰς τὸ συσσίτιον. ἐξῆν γὰρ οἴκοι δειπνεῖν ὁπότε θύσας τις ἢ κυνηγῶν ὀψίσειε, τοὺς δὲ ἄλλους ἔδει παρεῖναι.

[2] They met in companies of fifteen, a few more or less, and each one of the messmates contributed monthly a bushel [medimnus] of barley-meal, eight gallons [χοῦς] of wine, five pounds [mina] of cheese, two and a half pounds [half-mina] of figs, and in addition to this, a very small sum of money for such relishes as flesh and fish. Besides this, whenever any one made a sacrifice of first fruits, or brought home game from the hunt, he sent a portion to his mess. For whenever any one was belated by a sacrifice or the chase, he was allowed to sup at home, but the rest had to be at the mess.

[bracketed text is mine]

That settles the question as far as I'm concerned. They're talking about the weight of the food, not the weight and value of the silver that was traded for the food.

5 - If there are 15 messmates, and every month each messmate brings five mina of cheese and two and a half mina of fruit (figs perhaps), that's 112.5 mina of food for the mess each month, which comes out to 3.75 mina per day per messmate not including the barley and wine, and, less frequently, meat.

Going by Wikipedia, a medimnus of barley was ~31 kg, and an Attic mina weighed ~0.4366 kg (nearly one pound)--71 mina per medimnus of barley. 35.5 mina of barley per messmate per day. That's clearly an absurd amount of barley, so I'll have to go deeper. The following two paragraphs are also from Wikipedia;

Quote

Sparta's agriculture consisted mainly of barley, wine, cheese, grain, and figs. These items were grown locally on each Spartan citizen's kleros and were tended to by helots. Spartan citizens were required to donate a certain amount of what they yielded from their kleros to their syssitia, or mess. These donations to the syssitia were a requirement for every Spartan citizen. All the donated food was then redistributed to feed the Spartan population of that syssitia.[143] The helots who tended to the lands were fed using a portion of what they harvested.

Quote

It is believed that an active adult male in the sixth century BCE would have needed to consume about eight medimnoi per year, with a typical female consuming a slightly lower amount. From these figures, it can be estimated that a young family including a father, a mother and three children would have consumed approximately 25 medimnoi every year. The payment required to receive a very high rank, therefore, would feed approximately 20 families.

If instead of trying to convert the medimnus to mina (likely a fool's errand) I just use this paragraph as a guide, it tracks with the amounts listed by Plutarch. Each messmate eats a half-medimnus of barley per month, which would make $\frac{6}{8}$ ths = $\frac{3}{4}$ ths of his diet at the mess barley, with the remainder of his diet being cheese, fruit, wine, and meat.

Edit; then again, even that would be 3.75 (cheese and fruit) + 11.25 (barley) = 15 mina per day of food. Roughly 4 to 5 times the usual amount by weight, but not out of the ordinary for a modern Olympic athlete during training (8000-10000 calories per day).

6 -

This is all good, helpful stuff, but a mina was definitely a unit of commerce during Epicurus' lifetime, whether coinage or not, because:

[redacted]

While we will probably never know the exact location of Epicurus's Garden in ancient Athens, we can take a number of educated guesses.

April 19, 2023

Quote

Source 2: The Testimony of Apollodorus the Epicurean (2nd century BCE via 3rd century CE)

Source 2 Text: Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Book 10.10-11.

Friends indeed came to him from all parts and lived with him in his garden (έν τῷ κήπῳ). This is stated by Apollodorus, who also says that **he purchased (πρίασθαι) the garden for eighty minae (ὀγδοήκοντα μινῶν)**; and to the same effect Diocles in the third book of his Epitome speaks of them as living a very simple and frugal life...

Also remember the context of the "spending a mina" on meals was in the slanderous book of Timocrates entitled Εὐφραντός ("Merriment"):

Quote

Again there was Timocrates, the brother of Metrodorus, who was his disciple and then left the school. He in the book entitled *Merriment* asserts that Epicurus vomited twice a day from over-indulgence, and goes on to say that he himself had much ado to escape from those notorious midnight philosophizings and the confraternity with all its secrets ; [7] further, that Epicurus's acquaintance with philosophy was small and his acquaintance with life even smaller ; that his bodily health was pitiful,¹² so much so that for many years he was unable to rise from his chair ; and that **he spent a whole mina daily on his table**, as he himself says in his letter to Leontion and in that to the philosophers at Mitylene.