

Persian gold coins likely used to pay mercenaries found at site of ancient Greek city in western Turkey

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Archaeologists discovered a pot of gold Persian coins, called darics, at the ancient city of Notion in Turkey. The coins show a figure of a kneeling archer, the characteristic design of the Persian daric, a type of gold coin issued by the Persian Empire and probably minted at Sardis, 60 miles northeast of Notion, according to Christopher Ratté, a professor of ancient Mediterranean art and archaeology at the University of Michigan and director of the Notion Archaeological Project. Credit: Notion Archaeological Project, University of Michigan

A team of researchers led by a University of Michigan archaeologist has uncovered a hoard of gold coins, likely used to pay mercenary troops, buried in a small pot in the ancient Greek city of Notion in western Turkey.

The coins show a figure of a kneeling archer, the characteristic design of the Persian daric, a type of gold [coin](#) issued by the Persian Empire and probably minted at Sardis, 60 miles northeast of Notion, according to U-M archaeologist Christopher Ratté, professor of ancient Mediterranean art and archaeology and director of the Notion Archaeological Project, the project that discovered the coins.

The hoard, which the U-M team dated to the 5th century B.C., will provide another datapoint that can tell historians about the Persian daric's timeline and history.

"The discovery of such a valuable find in a controlled archaeological excavation is very rare," Ratté said. "No one ever buries a hoard of coins, especially precious metal coins, without intending to retrieve it. So only the gravest misfortune can explain the preservation of such a treasure."

Darics were minted from the late 6th century B.C. until the conquest of the Persian empire by Alexander the Great in 330 B.C., and the design of the coins remained the same with only minor stylistic differences. Researchers have tried to arrange the coins in a chronological sequence by analyzing those stylistic differences. One of the important aspects of the newly discovered hoard is that it is independently dated by other artifacts associated with the hoard.

"This hoard will provide a firm date that can serve as an anchor to help fix the chronology of the (entire sequence of coins)," Ratté said.

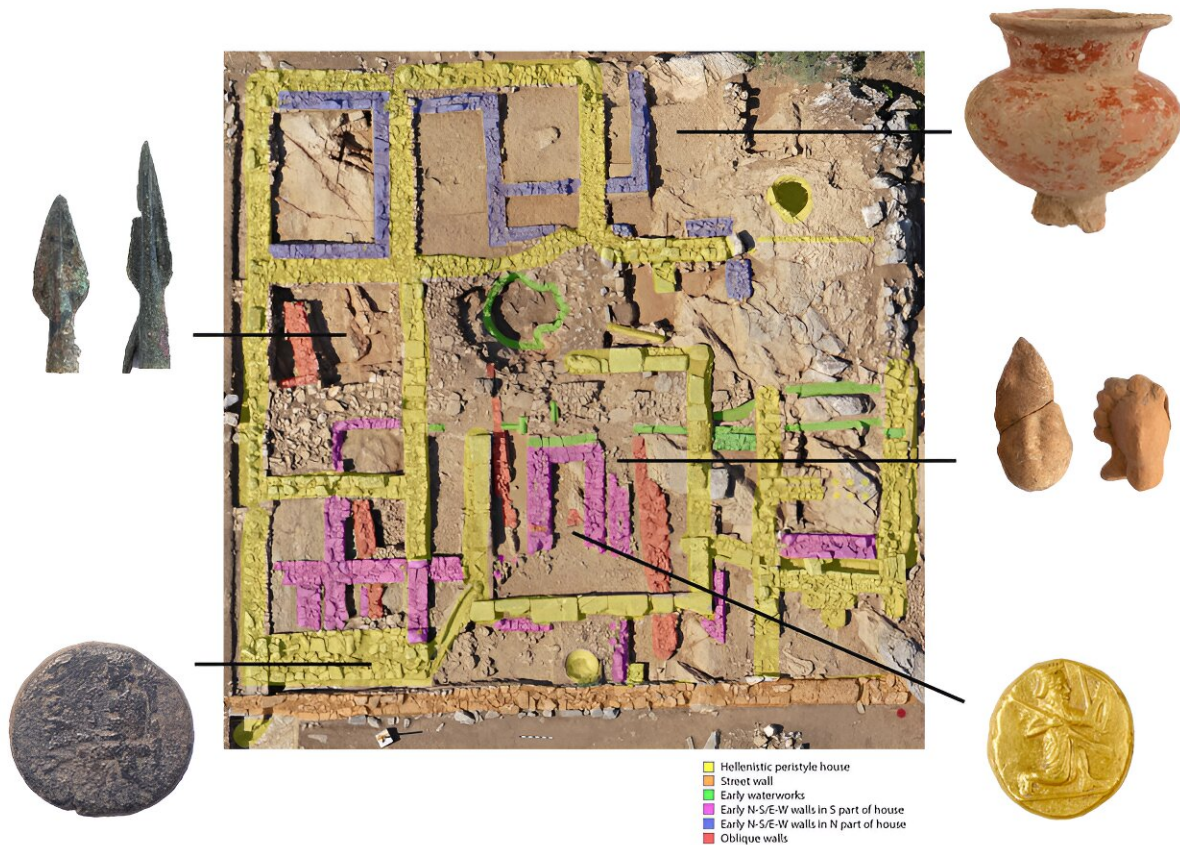
According to Andrew Meadows of Oxford University, formerly curator of coins at the British Museum and the American Numismatic Society, the archaeological context for the hoard is likely, "if it can be established accurately by other means, to allow us to fine-tune the chronology of the Achaemenid gold coinage. This is a spectacular find ... of the highest importance."

Researchers launched the excavations in Notion in 2022. Archaeologists with the project discovered the coins in 2023, and the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism has now given permission for the discovery of the coins, which remain in Turkey, to become public.

The best-preserved remains of the city date to the Hellenistic period, between 3rd and 1st centuries B.C., but excavation of a large courtyard house in the center of the city has shown the city was likely inhabited even earlier. Researchers found fragments of pottery likely from the 5th century B.C., in earlier walls incorporated into the foundations of the house. In July 2023, excavation beneath one area of the courtyard revealed the hoard of coins, buried in a small pot.

"The hoard was found in the corner of a room in a structure buried beneath the Hellenistic house. Presumably, it was stored there for safekeeping and for some reason never recovered," Ratté said.

"According to the Greek historian Xenophon, a single daric was equivalent to a soldier's pay for one month."



An aerial view of the house shows the different phases and the findspot of the coins as well as other artifacts. Credit: Notion Archaeological Project

Researchers believe that one of the primary uses of the daric was to pay mercenary troops, and it is possible that this hoard was associated with military operations in the area around Notion.

Ratté also notes that most hoards of darics have been found not by archaeologists in scientific excavations, but by looters who have "no concern for history."

"An archaeological find without contextual information is like a person suffering from amnesia—a person without memories," Ratté said. "It is

still interesting and important, but the loss of knowledge is incalculable. In the case of this hoard, we know precisely where it was found, and we have a great deal of circumstantial evidence for when it was deposited, probably in the late 5th century B.C."

Notion was incorporated into the Persian Empire together with the other Greek cities on the west coast of Turkey in the mid-6th century B.C. It was freed from Persian rule in the early 5th century B.C., but then reintegrated into the Persian empire in the early 4th century B.C. It remained a Persian possession until the conquest of Alexander the Great in 334 B.C.

Ancient historians frequently mention military operations around Notion. During much of the 5th century B.C., Notion, while freed from the Persians, lay under Athenian domination. The conflicting loyalties of the inhabitants of Notion and nearby cities, which occupied a border region between the Persian and Athenian spheres of influence, are illustrated by a dramatic episode related by the Greek historian Thucydides.

Between 430 B.C. and 427 B.C., a group of Persian sympathizers from the nearby city of Colophon had occupied part of Notion with the help of Greek and "barbarian" mercenaries. In 427 B.C., an Athenian general called Paches attacked and killed the pro-Persian mercenaries, after luring their commander into a trap. The Persian sympathizers were then expelled, and Notion was reorganized under Athenian supervision.

This is exactly the kind of sequence of events that could have led to both the deposition and the loss of this hoard, but it is not the only possibility, according to Ratté. Later, in 406 B.C., a decisive naval battle in the conflict between Athens and Sparta was fought off the coast of Notion, which the Athenians were using as a naval base. Western Anatolia erupted into renewed conflict in the 360s B.C., when several of the

Persian governors of western Anatolia rebelled against the central authorities (the so-called Great Satraps' Revolt).

The harbor of Notion, an important military asset, was likely reinforced during this period. The conventional chronology of Persian coins would favor a 4th century B.C. date for the hoard from Notion.

The project is sponsored by the University of Michigan in cooperation with Sinop University and is authorized by the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The associate director is Hazar Kaba, associate professor of archaeology at Sinop University.

The new field season at Notion has just begun, and researchers hope that continued excavation will clarify the archaeological context of the hoard, while study of the coins, now in the care of the Ephesus Archaeological Museum in Turkey, will provide further evidence for the date, function and historical implications of this remarkable archaeological find.

Provided by University of Michigan

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