



Historically Speaking

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Coins/Precious Metals/Mining



Archilochus the poet, who spent time in Thasos, attests to a goldrush in the area, including the coast across from it and Macedonia in the 7th Century BCE. The mining of silver in Laurium in Attica began in the 6th Century BCE. The silver funded their army as it did a bit later the building of the fleet by Themistocles and the Athenian Empire of the 5th Century BCE along with the Athenian war party's efforts led by Demosthenes against Philip II. The Laurium mine was so important to the different political regimes that took advantage of it that it generated technological innovation in mining, such as ventilation, lighting, water management along with innovations in smelting techniques. The work was largely done by slaves, though it was not forbidden that free people could engage in it. The price of silver increased over time along with the value of slaves who were competent in the process.

After an early period around 4,000 BCE, during which gold nuggets were collected in some Pleistocene wadi (a valley, ravine or channel that is dry except in the rainy season) grounds and perhaps some native copper was also collected in superficial altered copper sulphide-containing quartz veins, real metal mining started in Egypt from around 3,000 BCE. Until that time tools and weapons in early Egyptian culture were generally based on stone tools such as flint knives, arrow and spearheads, scrapers and axes and hammers of hard stone. The few predynastic copper artefacts, like small tools and fishing hooks, may have been made from such copper sheets in altered copper sulphide-containing quartz veins but also from scanty imports.

It is not clear whether copper or gold mining started first in Egypt; most probably both started contemporaneously.

There was also mining for precious stones, such as emeralds, amethyst and other gem stones. Mining for minerals included salt (sodium chloride), Natron, a variant of normal cooking salt, alum, a mineral used for dyeing cloth and Galena, a lead sulphide used in cosmetics.

Athens found a large amount of silver in the mines at Laurium. At its peak, Athens had over 20,000 slaves mining at Laurium. At the request of Themistocles, they used the money from these mines to pay for a large navy. This investment in the navy paid off in their development of a large trade network around the Mediterranean. There were very good mining areas around Greece. The northern mountains of Thrace had large gold and silver deposits. Cyprus was known for its copper, gold, and iron. Laurium was known for the silver and iron ore deposits.

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Though it was possible that free men worked in the gold mines, as Tabid did in ANISSI, Diodorus* wrote: "At the extremity of Egypt and in the contiguous territory of both Arabia and Ethiopia there lies a region which contains many large gold mines, where the gold is secured in great quantities with much suffering and at great expense. For the earth is naturally black and contains seams and veins of a marble which is unusually white and in brilliancy surpasses everything else which shines brightly by its nature, and here the overseers of the labor in the mines recover the gold with the aid of a multitude of workers. For the kings of Egypt gather together and condemn to the mining of the gold such as have been found guilty of some crime and captives of war, as well as those who have been accused unjustly and thrown into prison because of their anger, and not only such persons but occasionally all their relatives as well, by this means not only inflicting punishment upon those found guilty but also securing at the same time great revenues from their labors. And those who have been condemned in this way—and they are a great multitude and are all bound in chains—work at their task unceasingly both by day and throughout the entire night, enjoying no respite and being carefully cut off from any means of escape; since guards of foreign soldiers who speak a language different from theirs stand watch over them, so that not a man, either by conversation or by some contact of a friendly nature, is able to corrupt one of his keepers. [Source: Ancient Egyptian Gold Refining: A Reproduction of Early Techniques, J. H. F. Notton, Johnson Matthey & Co Limited, London, 1974]

*Diodorus of Sicily was an ancient Greek historian. His best known work was Bibliotheca historica, comprised of 40 books

The legendary wealth in gold of ancient Egypt seems to correspond with an unexpected high number of gold production sites in the Eastern Desert of Egypt and Nubia. Carol Meyer of the University of Chicago wrote: "Exploitation of the Eastern Desert extends far back into prehistory, but at Bir Umm Fawakhir, good evidence goes back only to the late New Kingdom period (ca. 1307-1070 B.C.). Middle Kingdom, Old Kingdom, and Predynastic (roughly 3200-ca. 1783 B.C.) In the middle of the fourth millennium BCE, only small nuggets were picked from the wadi grounds. Later, ancient miners used two techniques: open-cast trenches following the quartz veins from the surface and shafts sunk horizontally or diagonally into the mountainsides. A number of the shafts had stone walls reinforcing the entrances or platforms at the edge, presumably to aid in raising and lowering men, boys, baskets, tools, and ore.

This information would support the possibility of Tabid (in ANISSI) finding and bringing home

