CHAPTER ONE
THE EXPORTERS OF GOLD AND SILVER

The rarity of gold and silver in the Mediterranean and peripheral regions, along with the low cost of labour, made the exploitation of even the smallest deposit economically viable, while the limited technology available made exploitation less productive and, consequently, the product more valuable. Since not all deposits known to modern geology in the Mediterranean and peripheral regions were exploited in the archaic and classical periods, the selection of deposits examined is based on three alternative criteria: first, mention in the sources, second, evidence of ancient workings and, third, probability, which applies only to specific gold alluvial deposits that were easier to exploit. The deposits are examined from west to east.

The Iberian Peninsula has both gold and silver deposits, of which those in the Huelva region were particularly important in the ancient world. In the beginning of the eighth century, the Phoenicians established colonies and trading posts in the region, while, traditionally, the mines were known to the Greeks from the late seventh century. Iberian metals are at the centre of the debate on the interaction between Greeks and Phoenicians in the western Mediterranean, which relates mostly to early colonisation but also expands to later eras and encompasses diverse

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1 Gold is less rare today due to the discovery of massive gold deposits in the Americas, South Africa and Australia in the early modern period and the advances in mining technology in the last century. Out of an estimated 116,000 tons of gold produced in the world since prehistoric times, only 10,000 were produced before the Middle Ages: Bache (1987: 3).

2 The gold deposits exploited by the Greeks were either alluvial, which were the most productive quantitatively, or veins, which were underground and, thus, harder to exploit. Vein deposits harder to exploit: Bache (1987: 27); Yannopoulos (1991: 3–4); Williams & Ogden (1994: 14); Forbes (1971: 159, 161). Even as recently as 1989 CE, 58 % of world production came from alluvial deposits: Eliopoulos & Konstantinides (1989: 69). Note that the quality of alluvial deposits is generally less than that of vein deposits: Yannopoulos (1991: 25).

themes, from Phokaian settlement abroad to Herodotos’ credibility, with the aim of establishing which of the two cultures was the dominant power in the western Mediterranean.

Aubet argued convincingly for the eighth century that Phoenician expansion was peacefully connected to Euboian activity in the western Mediterranean. In the late archaic and classical periods, the intermittent conflicts between the Greeks, mainly of Sicily, and Carthage certainly created periods of strained relations. However, the many finds of Greek pottery in Iberia throughout the classical period show considerable contact between Greeks, Phoenicians and natives, particularly relating to the metal trade, since many of the finds were discovered in the Huelva. Cabrera argued that the finds do not prove Greek trade with Iberia but can be explained by Phoenician trade with the area. However, Greek pottery is generally accepted to be evidence of direct trading contacts with Greeks, except in cases of isolated finds. The Phoenician presence in Iberia does not exclude a Greek presence either there or in other areas of the Mediterranean.

For the classical period, Cabrera argued that the development of Laurion negated any need for Iberian silver in the eastern Mediterranean. This argument is very difficult to substantiate at present without an extensive study of the metallic provenance of silver artefacts. More importantly, Laurion had a major competitor in the eastern Mediterranean, the Thracomacedonian region, which should have been more directly affected by the development of Laurion, yet apparently suffered no adverse effects. Additionally, the western Greeks would still need metals, of which the most likely supplier remained Iberia. The imports of Greek pottery in Iberia testify to Greek trading contacts with the region, while the large number of finds in the Huelva points directly towards metals being the main reason for such contact. Further, the Greek settlements on the east Iberian coast, such as Ampurias, show the considerable interest of the Greeks, especially the Massaliotes, in the region.

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6 Cabrera (1998: 193). Cabrera specifically considers Greek pottery to have been Phoenician gifts to the native elite but the context of many finds in industrial settings precludes this.