

# David MacDonald as a Pioneering Figure in the Study of Overstruck Coins in the Greek World

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With the passing of David MacDonald (June 26, 1943 – March 29, 2025), the numismatic world has lost a significant figure. Modest to the core and rarely traveling abroad—yet endowed with a sharp sense of humour that he directed as much at himself as at others—Mac (as he was affectionately known) was not a widely familiar figure within the numismatic community. All the more reason, then, to pay him the tribute he truly deserves.

Specialists in ancient coinage greatly valued his 1992 monograph on the coinage of Aphrodisias (SILVER ID 15170), published in the prestigious series of the *Royal Numismatic Society* in London. Yet it was undoubtedly his expertise in Greek overstruck coins that marked his greatest contribution. Between 1994 and 2022, Mac authored roughly twenty studies on overstrikes (see his notice in SILVER ID 890).<sup>1</sup> Arranged geographically from west to east, as is customary, his work spans a wide range: the Pegasi with Corinthian types in Sicily and Magna Graecia (ID 883); the Cimmerian Bosphorus (ID 17819); Thrace and Macedonia, including detailed studies of Maroneia (ID 877), Thasos (ID 884 and 886), and late Hellenistic bronze coinage (ID 881 and 882); the coinages of Apollonia and Dyrrhachium, along with imitations of Roman denarii (ID 30435); Athenian coin imitations (ID 1006); Crete and the return of the mercenaries (ID 878); overstrikes of Teos in Asia Minor on coins of Abdera in Thrace (ID 876 and 15457); the Cypriot mint of Citium (ID 30434); and the Indo-Greek coinage of Afghanistan (ID 879, 18788, 18902). Above all, he authored the only comprehensive monograph on the subject: *Overstruck Greek Coins: Studies in Greek Chronology and Monetary Theory* (ID 885). Published in 2009, the book not only showcases the richness of his personal collection but also offers detailed, authoritative studies of specific cases.

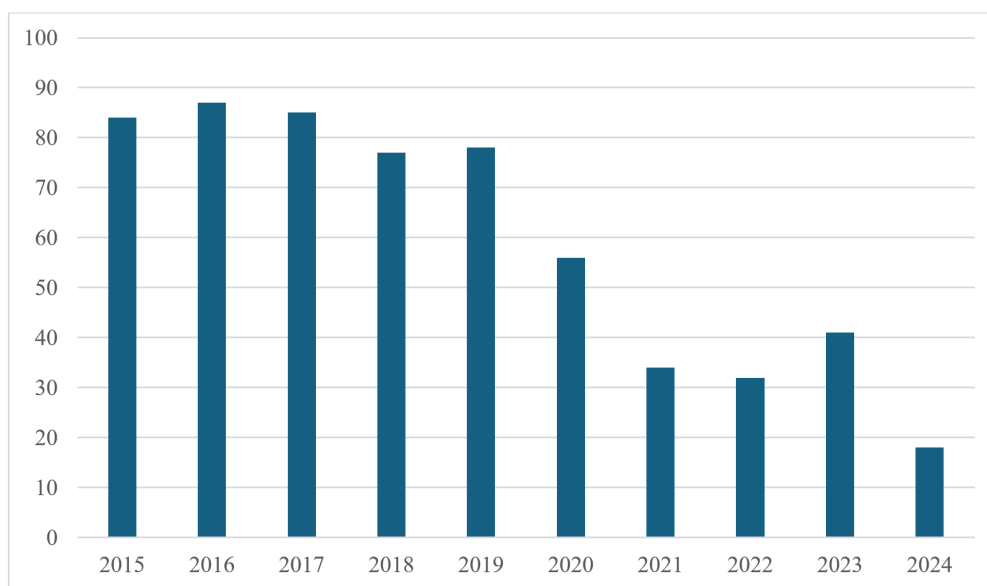
I, too, became deeply interested in Greek coin overstrikes in the latter half of the 1980s (see ID 813), and for a time, we were the only two scholars pursuing such intensive work in this field. Far from fostering rivalry, our relationship was marked by generosity. From our very first exchanges, Mac openly shared the results of his research.

Around 2010, I began compiling all overstrikes recorded either in scholarly literature or on the market. Naturally, I turned to Mac, who immediately offered his full support. This led to an extensive email correspondence, in which he frequently sent me links to newly discovered overstrikes available online. How many emails did I receive from him in this way? Probably around a thousand. Since my computer retains only the past ten years of correspondence, the exact data for the period after March 2015 are presented in the following chart (Graph 1).

With nearly 600 messages in recent years (591 in total) and an average of around 80 messages per year—roughly one every four days—between 2015 and 2019, this correspondence clearly demonstrates the depth of Mac’s commitment and generosity toward what would eventually become GOD, the aptly named Greek Overstrikes Database.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://silver.kbr.be/David\\_MacDonald](https://silver.kbr.be/David_MacDonald).



**Graph 1. Messages received from David MacDonald in between April 2015 and November 2024**

From 2013 onward, I documented these overstrikes in 30 PowerPoint files organized by geographical region. Wanting to make the information publicly accessible but lacking the funds to build a website, I initially turned to Pinterest,<sup>2</sup> a very basic tool that allowed only the posting of images of the overstruck coins. It was in April 2015 that I asked Mac if he would be interested in the project, and his response—so typical of him—was both enthusiastic and modest at the same time:

I have been thinking about the project and I am greatly enthused. I shall offer some suggestions from time to time, but they are only suggestions, and I do not presume to take over your project! (16 April 2015)

Among his suggestions, one still remains to be implemented—and it will be, in his memory: making the project more interactive by allowing users to comment on the entries.

It could be good if one were able to put extended comments as well as queries about specific coins. We ought also to have some sort of back-up in case of failure of the saving site. (2 May 2015)

In the summer of 2015, our discussions touched on, among other things, the illegal trade and his interactions with the Italian and Turkish authorities, as well as the future of his collection of overstruck coins. For a time, he considered donating it to the Cabinet des Médailles in Brussels, but—on my advice—he decided to postpone the decision:

Let us continue to think about this together. My wife and I are childless. I am 72 and she nearly 70. We are both retired from Illinois State University. We have pensions that are

<sup>2</sup> See for example: <https://www.pinterest.com/francoisdecalla/greek-overstrikes-database-late-hellenistic-alexan/>



**Figure 1. Modern forger's die for the Sicilian mint of Herbessus.**

sufficient for our needs, although we are certainly not wealthy. There are no guarantees that any cabinet will have in the foreseeable future someone interested in overstrikes, but in time perhaps someone will come if the coins are there. In the meantime, let us continue to have fun with some overstrikes and what they tell us! (3 August 2015).

And that is exactly what we did over the following decade: exploring overstrikes for fun! Most of the time, Mac would send me the results of his discoveries, sometimes with a comment and sometimes without—and when there was one, it was in his distinctive style: brief, sharp, and often humorous.

Mac closely followed auctions and numismatic forums. Most of the coins he sent came from sales later archived on sites like ACSearch or CoinArchives, but a significant number originated from much harder-to-trace sources. In certain cases, he provided crucial information, such as the illustration of a striking modern forger's die for the Sicilian mint of Herbessus, clearly showing the trace of an overstrike on Syracuse (see ID 4285).

In July 2016, we at the Cabinet des Médailles in Brussels agreed to organize a small international conference on overstrikes in antiquity. Naturally, this was an opportunity to invite him to deliver the keynote lecture. Unfortunately, none of the proposed dates suited Mac, and the conference took place in June 2017 without him (see the proceedings, published in the *Revue belge de Numismatique* 2018, p. 29: 'It is a great pity that Mac, as he likes to be called, cannot be present with us today. This conference was built for him and his absence is much regretted').

In the meantime, the documentation kept growing, sometimes to our mutual astonishment:

I published the first Heliokles II over Hermaios some time ago. Now there are at least five specimens known. Odd how no one noticed such an overstrike for 150 years, and then four more are recognized within a couple of years after the first was published. I could cite a number of parallels. (2 Feb. 2018)

Mac had an excellent understanding of the market. He provided significant assistance to Harlan Berk and kept abreast of both confirmed and speculative reports about new hoards. For example, in the spring of 2019, when the major discovery of Athenian and Cypriot tetradrachms began to appear on the market, he wrote the following:

Yes--I am in shock about it--and every mint in the area seems to be overstriking every other. I think it all has to do with Azbaal of Kition's conquest and occupation of Idalion and consequent domination of the Cypriot copper trade. Azbaal and his successor Baalmelek II seem to have used mercenaries from south-western Anatolia, and I imagine the overstriking has to do with the conversion of their pay to local currency. I am finishing a paper on the overstrikes of Azbaal and Baalmelek II and have located several not in GOD. (21 June 2019)

Mac enjoyed collecting overstrikes and was preparing a supplement to the 2009 publication of his first collection (by January 2021, he already had 135 new coins). However, he did not have unlimited resources for this undertaking. When I asked him about the number of Aspendos overstrike specimens he owned, he replied: 'Alas, as a retired history professor, my budget is very limited. I believe I have three.' (14 Jan. 2020)

Over time, Mac introduced me to other enthusiasts of overstrikes: John Tatman for Crete, Bob Cutler for Sicily, and Nick Molinari for Southern Italy. He also confided in me about his health problems, though always in a reserved way and never with complaints (17 May 2021: 'I do not remember whether I told you this in a previous message, but I had a bit of an accident [sic!]. I am home now after a month in the hospital, but still flat on my back for a month or two more')—except when it interfered with his access to his University library.

Naturally, our correspondence was primarily about curiosities—for example, the frequency of plugged coins among late Hellenistic tetradrachms imitating Thasian types (he provided a full list of 30 specimens) or the rare cases of overstrikes that required the addition of metal:

Concerning adding silver to underweight flans, if I remember correctly that was common at Samos. Barron suggests that scrap silver was added to Aegina turtles to make Samian staters. Also the flans of hexagrams of Heraclius are often bored through the middle and a nail-shaped piece of silver inserted and bent over. The head of the nail is not often visible on the obverse but the bent over tail is often to be seen on the reverse. (May 2022)

In the meantime, the opportunity to fund the creation of a website arose, thanks to the SILVER project (ERC Advanced Grant) and the generosity of its PI, the geophysicist Francis Albarède. In September 2019, we began work on the digital version of GOD, converting the 1,650 overstrikes into an Excel spreadsheet. This delighted Mac, who increased the flow of information he sent. As the site developed, his enthusiasm grew. At the end of 2022, he wrote: 'Your comment is boosting my energy! I can see how much work there is to make even a single entry! This project is even more immense than I had imagined!' (28 Nov. 2022). By June 2023, the site's architecture was complete, and 620 coins had already been fully edited. On March 24, 2024, I informed him: 'GOD now contains

2,787 coins, including 2,000 fully edited. The goal is to fully edit the remaining ones by the end of the year.' And that goal was indeed achieved by the end of 2024. Since then, the site has continued to grow; by August 2025, it recorded more than 3,060 fully edited overstrikes.

Over the last few years, however, our exchanges became less frequent. On October 7, 2024, he wrote:

François, I am just not seeing as many overstrikes as I used to—but be assured when I see something interesting, you will get it! I am working on the Hellenistic coins of Illyria—many rare, all interesting! Strange mixture of Greek and Illyrian types, such as a snake wrapped around a cornucopiae! Mac.

Funny, informative, and passionate as always. I could never have imagined that Mac would soon stop writing to me. Thus ended a long and abundant correspondence that had kept us connected for more than ten years. Thank you, Mac, for this joyful knowledge, this meticulous attention to the seemingly trivial, which is never far from laughter. Indeed, we had great fun with these quirky overstrikes for which you 'paved the way'!