



HILL, GEORGE FRANCIS

HILL, GEORGE FRANCIS noted numismatist, epigraphist, and Director of the British Museum (b. 22 December 1867, d. 18 October 1948; [Figure 1](#)). He was a leading Greek numismatist of his time in England, as well as a foremost scholar of Italian Renaissance medals; and his long career at the British Museum in London culminated in its Directorship, 1931-36. He was one of the most productive scholars of his age, and his mastery of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, coupled with ability to deal with difficult and only partly deciphered scripts, such as Lycian, Aramaic, Phoenician, and Cypriot, give his works such authenticity that they have stood the test of time well and are still used as essential references (Robinson, pp. 241-50; Burnett).

Hill was born at Berhampore, Bengal, the youngest of five children to the missionary Rev. Samuel John Hill and Leonora Josephine, born Müller, of Danish descent (Hill, 1988, pp. 37-39). He came to England at the age of four, attended the School for Sons of Missionaries at Blackheath, and went to University College School and University College, London. Here one of his three teachers, Alfred Goodwin, exerted a profound impact on his career and “introduced me to the wonders of Greek sculpture at the British Museum” (Hill, 1988, p. 38). Goodwin later encouraged Hill to go to Oxford, where he obtained an exhibition at Merton Hall. He worked with Percy Gardner in archaeology, who also taught him “the little numismatics I was to know before entering the British Museum” (Hill, 1988, p. 39). Upon the retirement of Reginald Stuart Poole in 1893, Hill won the vacancy in the Coins and Medals Department of the British Museum and began his long and fruitful career



there. With Barclay V. Head and Warwick Wroth, he was assigned the task of preparing the series *Catalogue of Greek Coins in the British Museum*, which was started by Poole, and “from that time onwards, I steadily produced volume after volume” (Hill, 1988, p. 40). He authored six volumes in the series, and they dealt with the most difficult subjects that required intensive study of little known inscriptions: *Lycia, Pamphylia and Pisidia* (London, 1897), *Lycaonia, Isauria and Cilicia* (London, 1900), *Cyprus* (London, 1904) with a table of the Cypriot syllabary, *Phoenicia* (London, 1910) with a table of the Phoenician alphabet, *Palestine* (London, 1914) and *Arabia, Mesopotamia and Persia* (London, 1922). These are no mere catalogues but outstanding monographs on the history, iconography, economy, and religions of the various ancient regions. Hill combined a deep aesthetic sensibility with a scientific practical sense, and these qualities, together with his extraordinary talent for languages and his ability to use coins as historical sources, resulted in works so comprehensive and well documented that they are still read and trusted to this day. His other works include four more general numismatic books, two compilations of sources and inscriptions (with E. L. Hicks) for students of Greek history, and a mass of articles in the major journals, from the yearly reports on “Greek coins acquired by the British Museum” to more specialized topics (his article on “Ancient Methods of Coining” in *NC* 1922 remains a classic). In his retirement years Hill wrote a four-volume history of Cyprus that still remains the best overview of the island’s tumultuous past.

Hill was one of the major editors of the second edition of B.V. Head, *Historia Numorum* (London, 1911), the editor of the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* from 1898 to 1912, and again during World War I, and of *Numismatic Chronicle* from 1912 to 1930 (Robinson, p. 247, obituary, p. 498). He was the first archeologist to be appointed Director of the British Museum, from 1931 to 1936. Two outstanding acquisitions were secured under his tenure: the *Codex Sinaiticus*, from the Soviet Government in 1933; and, jointly with the Victoria and Albert Museum, the magnificent Eumorfopoulos Collection of Oriental antiquities (Hill, 1988, pp. 44-45; Robinson, p. 244).

Numerous awards were bestowed on him, including a C.B. in 1929, a K.C.B. in 1933, several fellowships at British Colleges, and medals from the major learned societies: the British Academy, the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, the Royal Numismatic Society, and The American Numismatic Society (“A tribute,” pp. 16-17). Hill’s autobiographical notes reveal a surprisingly modest view of himself (Hill, 1988, p. 47), but others agree that he was one of



the best Greek numismatist England has produced.

In the field of Persian antiquity, too, Hill has an honored position as an influential scholar. Two of his works are devoted to ancient Iranian numismatics. The first is his monumental *Arabia, Mesopotamia and Persia* (BMC 28, London, 1922, repr. Bologna, 1965). It presented the newest data on difficult topics lucidly but in a comprehensive, well documented, and superbly illustrated text, qualities which immediately made it a reference book that is still indispensable to any student of Iranian studies. It gave a history of coinage in Achaemenid Persia, starting with the diffusion of Lydian coinage into the Persian Empire, discussed the introduction of Daric (gold) and Siglos (silver) coinage by Darius the Great, on the basis of all data then available, and classified them into four basic types. Although his classification is revised somewhat by now (see [DARIC](#)), all subsequent scholars have started from his groundwork. A very fine quality evident everywhere in this volume is Hill's methodic use of earlier literature: nowhere has a view been cited without credit, and no illustration or reading of a coin legend remains unattributed. This quality makes his volume a source book of literature on ancient Persian coinage. Hill rightly emphasized the importance of the rare daric in the British Museum of a beardless Achaemenid king and showed that it must be attributed to Cyrus the Younger, who rebelled against Artaxerxes and was killed at the age of 20 (see [CUNAXA](#)). With this attribution the identity of the royal figures of the Achaemenid coins became established. Another important contribution of Hill's book was his treatment of the coins of the Persis dynasts (see [FRATARAKA](#)) who ruled in some regions of Fārs between the Achaemenid and Sasanian periods. He sifted through numerous coins bearing extremely obscure legends and presented groundwork for classifying the coins of the minor dynast of Persis, Characene, and Adiabene. Even in 1983, R. N. Frye wrote (p. 271, n. 1), with justification, that "Hill's *Catalogue* is still the best description of the coins." A second work of Hill directly related to Persia was his updated summary of his book in the *Survey of the Persian Art*, whereby the results of his studies were made available to a more general public.



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