

Continuity of Symbols and Administrative Capacity from Minoan and Mycenaean Seals to Archaic Greek Coins

Although coins and seals are conceptually similar, the one being stamped and the other imprinting a scene or symbol, scholars treat these artifacts in totally separate ways. Coins are organized chronologically and/or regionally, while seals are categorized into typologies. When their symbols and functions are compared, however, connections may be made. This paper specifically compares the symbols on Minoan and Mycenaean seals with the depictions on Archaic Greek coins from the period 650 – 479 BCE (Sayles 1997:111). My expectation is that the coins' symbols are a continuity of the seals' symbols. Such an establishment would show a continuity that spans the so called "Dark Ages" of Greece.

The paper will focus on a few specific but widespread symbols on coins and trace their predecessor symbols back to Minoan and Mycenaean seals. These symbols are likely to be animals, as animals were the most common depictions on early coins and form the largest typology within seals. However, I believe the reemergence of these symbols on coins is more than coincidental. Such categories of symbols include lions, bulls, and other commonly depicted animals (Younger 1988). I will also pay particular attention to incuse designs on coins, where the reverse mirrors the obverse, and the images exactly line up. This seems like an especially close tie to seals, given the negative and positive of the image is like a seal and the wax or clay on which it imprinted. Despite the fact that these coins appear at the end of the Archaic Period in the late 5th century (Sayles 1997: 114), they seem conceptually closer to seals than the average coin and deserve particular notice.

Once this connection has been established as a logical progression, the paper will examine how the similar function of symbols and early coins also contributes to the continuity of

ideas. Both of these items reinforced the authority of their user or issuer, which is cited in numerous sources. Earlier, symbols were used by administrators and officials, claiming ownership and authority over documents and goods. Uninscribed seals provide evidence for some of the earliest administrations on Crete, and later mainland Greece (Shelmerdine 2008:12). Seals from palatial contexts will be particularly relevant. The earliest coins in Greece itself lent political authority to their issuers as well; their economic functions came later (Snodgrass 1980:135). Overall this approach should provide more evidence that there is not such a distinct break in cultures and ideas between the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age as has been previously claimed by scholars.

Works Cited

- Krzyszowska, Olga. 2005. *Aegean Seals: an Introduction*. London: University of London.
- Sayles, Wayne G. 1997. *Ancient Coin Collecting II: Numismatic Art of the Greek World*. Iola: Krause Publications.
- Shelmerdine, Cynthia W. 2008. *The Cambridge Companion to the Aegean Bronze Age*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Snodgrass, Anthony. 1980. *Archaic Greece: The Age of Experiment*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Younger, J. G. 1988. *The Iconography of Late Minoan and Mycenaean Sealstones and Finger Rings*. Bedminster: Bristol Classical Press.