

## Numismatics, Semiotics, and Political Ambitions in Ancient Syracuse

Arethusa, the patron nymph of Syracuse, was depicted on the coins of the city from the archaic types at the end of the sixth century B.C., through the masterpieces of Kimon and Euainetos at the end of the fifth century, and into those of the fourth century BC. According to her myth, she traveled from Greece to escape an undesired lover and emerged from the sea as a freshwater spring on the island of Ortygia, the future site of Syracuse. Her depiction on the city's coins must have been a continuous reminder to Syracuse's Greek inhabitants of their own departure from Greece, their arrival from the sea and their founding of the city (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 5.710).

During the fourth and third centuries however, Arethusa's image slowly acquired some of the characteristics of Persephone, daughter of Demeter and queen of the underworld. Appearing first as small hints — grain and grain ears under Arethusa's own portraits, Persephone soon acquired her own full portraits, and by the second century she had fully replaced Arethusa's image on Syracuse's coins (Maltese 2015).

The religious syncretism of the two deities and Persephone's numismatic images were signs that the city had evolved from an early Greek settlement into an urban center marked by different types of politics, agriculture, and market systems. While Arethusa's numismatic depiction was illustrating Syracuse's etiological myth, Persephone's depiction was a reminder of the repetitive rhythm of the four seasons, of the cyclical birth and death of crops, of her double function as chthonic and vegetation goddess whose protection assured the inhabitants' welfare. More importantly, however, the numismatic image of a transnational goddess revered throughout the Greek world gave semantic

dimensions to Syracuse's political aspirations of unifying the whole island under a Hellenistic type monarchy.

The artistic renditions of the myths of Arethusa and Persephone on Syracuse's coins endowed the city's coins with semantic qualities relating to the expression of a shifting civic identity. According to Lévi-Strauss, myths negotiate the binary opposition between nature and culture by playing with these categories and their metaphorical analogues in narrative form (Lévi-Strauss 1979). The progression of Arethusa into a Persephone analogue fits this definition, in that maritime aspects of the water symbolism of a local water nymph now give way to an agrarian ideology fitting the success of agricultural practices in the region and the political ambitions of its rulers. The Arethusa narrative that was evidently meaningful for the public artisans of early Syracuse was shifting from connections with host city to the rhythms of the harvest in field-rich Sicily and to Syracuse's own political aspiration to rule the whole island.

#### Bibliography

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Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. Book V.