

## Money Talks: Roman Stories in Silver and Bronze

The Romans were very good at adopting foreign inventions and customizing them to suit their own needs. Students often learn, for example, that the Romans recognized the value of the Greek arch, adopted it into their own architecture and improved upon the design. By adding multiple arches together, they created vaults; by rotating them around a central axis, they created a dome.

This paper presents a similar Roman adoption and customization. Historians, both ancient and modern, credit the Lydians with minting the first ancient coins around 600 B.C. The Greeks, Persians, and other eastern cultures quickly followed. By the end of the 4th century, most ancient civilizations—including the Romans—were minting their own bronze, silver and gold coins.

Throughout the ancient world, the imagery pressed onto these early coins was fairly similar. The obverse displayed the bust of ruler during the minting; the reverse held an image of a divinity or symbol of the city or, occasionally, some type of memorial from a battle. The images were static and focused upon stability, the community leaders or on a relevant event. Typically, these images were repeated for many issues of the coins. The Athenian owl is perhaps one of our best examples of this repetition.

Roman advances in minting, however, stood apart. The variety of imagery on Roman coinage is widely known, “The repertoire of Roman coin design was generally characterized by constant change and an ever-increasing variety.” (Williams-2007) By the early 3rd century BC and until at least the reign of Constantine, Romans frequently used the field on the reverse of coins to depict an action or story. The Romans, this paper argues, transformed a static into something verbal. Instead of seeing the aftermath of an event or a symbol of the city on the reverse of their money, the coin holders saw the goddess Roma patiently waiting for Romulus

and Remus to become adults as an eagle flies overhead. (Crawford 287/1; RSC 176) They saw the interpretation of a future event in which the primary figure, Roma, shows emotion. Instead of seeing a static portrait Athena or the full figure of Aphrodite standing tall, the Roman coin holder would see Venus and Mars contemplating their illicit love affair. (RIC III Marcus Aurelius 1680) And, perhaps the clearest example of Roman customization of coin artistry, instead of the icon or symbol of a city on a tiny bronze coin from the provinces, we find the tragic love story of Hero and Leander replete with towers, cupid, torch and sword left on the shore. (M. Price, NC 1971, 129, no. 15) The Romans encouraged the provinces to create identities for themselves and to disseminate this identity publicly through coin minting.

After providing a description and examples of how Roman coins differ from those from other ancient cultures, this paper focuses upon possible reasons for conveying these types narratives on silver and bronze. While not all Roman coins are so distinctive from coins minted elsewhere, this sense of narrative on the reverse of coins is closely associated to Roman and Roman provincial mints. Similar to Vergil's description of Cloanthus' cloak or or Daedalus' sculptures in the Aeneid, in Roman coins we often find stories that compel the viewer to visualize more. In many ways, this paper also suggests, Roman artistic use of coins may parallel Greek use of pottery. Sosias' "Achilles Binding Patroclus" serves as a good example of the similarities.

What should we conclude from the Roman use of these mini-narratives on Roman coins? Coins transmitted stories, and those stories would be associated either with a city or the leader who minted the coin. Recognizing this customization may help us to understand which historical and religious details the Romans considered significant, and why, as this paper will demonstrate, certain relatively minor stories and events resonated with Roman audiences both in the city and

in the provinces.

### Bibliography

Williams, Jonathon. "Pliny, Antiquarianism, and Roman Imperial Coinage." *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*. Supplement, no. 100 (2007): 171-82.