

SCULPTURE HALL  
GREEK COINS

## DENOMINATIONS OF GREEK COINS

While the **drachma** was the basic unit of coinage throughout the Greek world, the precise weight (and, therefore, the value) of a drachma varied from place to place. Greek mints issued coins in various denominations worth multiple drachms. The **silver stater** was worth two drachms (equivalent in value to the **didrachm**, which eventually replaced it). The **tetradrachm**, or four-drachm piece, became the standard denomination of silver coinage in the fifth century B.C. The largest Greek coin was the **decadrachm**, worth ten drachms.



LEFT CASE

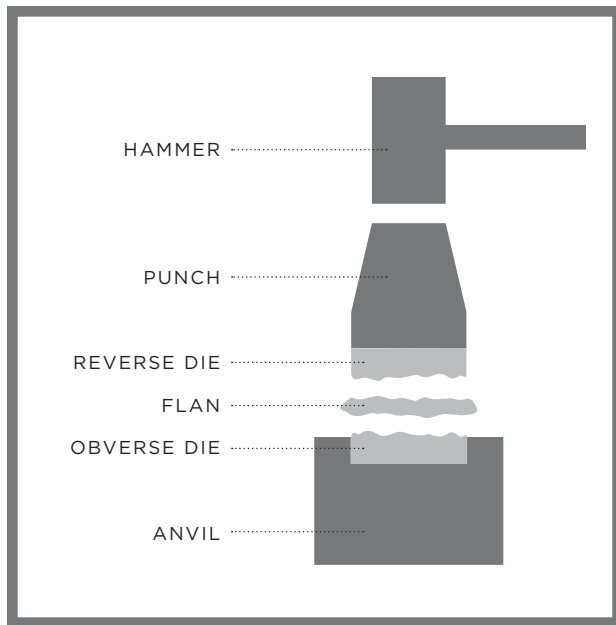
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# GREEK COINS

## INTRODUCTION

The coins we use today are direct descendants of the coins created by the Greeks and the Romans. In antiquity, as today, coins were minted in a variety of metals—chiefly, gold, silver, and various alloys of copper—each with a particular material worth; gold was far more valuable than silver, which, in turn, greatly surpassed copper. A broad assortment of denominations could be achieved by creating coins from specific quantities of the different metals. Ordinarily, the monetary value of a given coin was guaranteed by whoever issued it, usually a city or a ruler, and that guarantee was signified by official markings on the coin itself. These markings could be as simple as a geometric punch or as complex as a portrait head, a statue of a deity, or an architectural tableau in raised relief. The efficacy of coins as information-bearing media was quickly recognized. Images provided a means of visual communication with largely illiterate audiences; for the literate, abbreviated texts, known as legends, often identified the issuing authority (ruler and/or mint), as well as the deity depicted or event commemorated.

## PRODUCTION



Obverse: lion and bull design



Reverse: two decorated punches

Most ancient coins were produced by striking blanks of metal between two incised dies. Each die left a relief copy of its engraved design on the face of the coin with which it had come into contact. This imprinted image, along with its accompanying legend, is known as a coin type. The dies were meant to be re-used, and the same type sometimes appears on thousands of coins. The mass production of coinage permitted rapid distribution of large sums of money for use in a variety of situations—as pay for government and military service, as cash for the purchase of goods, as taxes collected by cities and states, or as savings hoarded away.

The use of coinage likely originated sometime before 560 B.C. along the coast of Asia Minor. By the middle of the sixth century, both Lydian and Greek cities in the area were minting small coins of locally mined electrum (an alloy of gold and silver). The design on the obverse of this coin ①—opposing heads of a lion and a bull—identifies the type as Lydian. The two decorated punches sunk into the reverse offered visual proof that the coin was electrum all the way through, assuring its value. These early coins are often called “Croesids,” after Croesus, a Lydian king of the mid-sixth century B.C.

② Silver stater of Metapontum  
Metapontum, 540–510 B.C.

29 mm  
2001.87.456



Obverse: ear of barley



Reverse: ear of barley

③ Silver stater of Caulonia  
Caulonia, 525–500 B.C.

30.5 mm  
ILE2002.11.10



Obverse: Apollo



Reverse: Apollo

Greek cities throughout Asia Minor, the Greek mainland, South Italy, and Sicily soon began to produce coins of their own. These usually featured a symbol of civic significance, as well as an abbreviation of the city's name. Metapontum, a leading city of South Italy, chose an ear of barley ②, an important agricultural product, while neighboring Caulonia decided to represent the city's patron deity, Apollo ③. Both of these cities, along with several others in South Italy, adopted a technique for striking their coins that resulted in an "incuse" style »

image. This experiment, which required the die-cutter to engrave one die and to sculpt the same design in relief on the other, was soon abandoned, perhaps because it limited the number of images that could be displayed on each coin.

④ Silver tetradrachm of Syracuse  
Syracuse, 485–465 B.C.

26 mm  
2001.87.576



Obverse: quadriga



Reverse: head of Arethusa

⑤ Silver tetradrachm of Syracuse  
Syracuse, 485–479 B.C.

24 mm  
2001.87.734



Obverse: quadriga



Reverse: head of Arethusa

For well over a century, Syracuse, the principal city of Sicily, minted silver coins ④–⑧ of various denominations with essentially the same designs.



The obverse type depicts a victorious charioteer in a quadriga (four-horse chariot)—perhaps conceived as a reference to the chariot-racing victory of the Syracusan tyrant Hieron I at the Olympic games of 476 B.C.; the





6 Silver dekadrachm of Syracuse  
Syracuse, 425–400 B.C.

35 mm  
2001.87.121



Obverse: quadriga



Reverse: head of Arethusa

reverse features the head of the local sea-nymph Arethusa, framed by a ring of dolphins (the underworld goddess Persephone replaces Arethusa on some coins late in the series, e.g. ⑨). A survey of several of these »

7 Silver tetradrachm of Syracuse,  
signed by Eumenes  
Syracuse, 425–413 B.C.

24 mm  
2001.87.744



Obverse: quadriga



Reverse: head of Arethusa

coins, ranging in date from the early fifth through the late fourth centuries B.C., shows how treatments of the same basic motifs might vary, as artistic trends shifted and different engravers worked at the mint. Some engravers' names are known from signatures cut into their dies, like that of Eumenes on ⑦. »

8 Silver tetradrachm  
of Agathokles of Syracuse  
Syracuse, 317–310 B.C.

25 mm  
ILE2002.11.22



Obverse: head of Persephone



Reverse: quadriga

The representations of the female deities on these coins diverge, among other points, in the forms of the facial features, the modeling and arrangement of the hair, and the incorporation of jewelry and other accessories.

9 Posthumous silver tetradrachm  
of Alexander the Great  
Babylon, 323–317 B.C.

26.5 mm  
2001.87.574



Obverse: head of Herakles



Reverse: Zeus enthroned

One of the longest-lived of all ancient coin types depicts the head of Herakles wearing a lion-skin cap on the obverse. The reverse shows Zeus, chief of the gods, seated on a throne, holding an eagle and a scepter, familiar symbols of his power. This coin type, first minted during the lifetime of Alexander the Great in his native Macedonia, publicized the king's claim of an ancestral bond with Herakles, as well as his enjoyment of Zeus's favor. For nearly two centuries after Alexander's death in 323 B.C., the type was reproduced throughout Greece and the eastern Mediterranean. This particular tetradrachm ⑨ was minted at Babylon, the city in which Alexander died.



Obverse: head of Antiochos IV



Reverse: Zeus enthroned

Idealized portraits of living sovereigns began to appear on coins minted by the successors of Alexander the Great. Antiochos IV led the Seleucid Empire from 175 to 164 B.C., at which time it encompassed much of Asia Minor and the Near East. The diadem (band) tied around Antiochos's head on the obverse of this tetradrachm <sup>⑩</sup> identifies him as royalty. An inscription on the reverse declares the king a "god made manifest." The reverse image of Zeus, seated on a throne and holding a personification of victory, recalls a similar motif found on coins of Alexander the Great (e.g., <sup>⑨</sup>).

<sup>①</sup> Lent by the James and Mary Ottaway Collection

<sup>②</sup> Numismatic Collection Transfer 2001, purchased 1963

<sup>③</sup> Lent by the James and Mary Ottaway Collection

<sup>④</sup> Numismatic Collection Transfer 2001, Gift of Frederick M. Watkins, 1961

<sup>⑤</sup> Numismatic Collection Transfer 2001

<sup>⑥</sup> Numismatic Collection Transfer 2001, purchased 1938

<sup>⑦</sup> Numismatic Collection Transfer 2001, Gift of Jonathan P. Rosen

<sup>⑧</sup> Lent by the James and Mary Ottaway Collection

<sup>⑨</sup> Numismatic Collection Transfer 2001

<sup>⑩</sup> Lent by the James and Mary Ottaway Collection