

The Coinage of Conquest

From Alexander the Great to Cleopatra

This exhibition explores coinage from across the Hellenistic world. The coinage comes from varying kingdoms which span three modern continents. The range of coinage reflects the vastness of the Macedonian empire and the martial prowess of Alexander the Great. These coins would have been used for exchange in antiquity; the rarer ores such as silver and gold would have been worth more than their bronze counterparts.

Hi I'm Zeus!



Alongside their obvious economic use, coins had additional purposes. Each coin tells a tale of power, trade and contemporary artistic trends. This exhibition aims to uncover the intentions behind coin designs and how these might have been received in antiquity.

This exhibition is created by second year undergraduates studying at University of Warwick.

Join us on this voyage through Hellenistic history!



Alexander the Great

Alexander the Great was one of the most famous conquerors of all time, having laid the groundwork for the Hellenistic World. His coins showed continuity from previous Macedonian kings and started a tradition of merging cultures. These coins were so influential that his successors mimicked them.

1. Before Alexander, horses and horsemen were common on the coins of Macedonian kings. Maintaining this tradition aligned Alexander with his royal ancestry.



2. The bearded deity was carefully chosen to represent different parts of Alexander's empire. To his Macedonian army, the image showed Zeus, but to the Persians, the image was Ba'al (their version of Zeus). In this way, the coin imagery united two different cultures.



3. Later leaders go on to use this image - the head of Heracles - to link themselves to Alexander and his dynasty.



Diadochoi

The Diadochoi were the successors of Alexander the Great. They fought for the right to rule after Alexander's death in 323 BCE.



Bust of King Philetairos



4. On one side of this coin is the head of the Greek hero Heracles wearing a lion-skin headdress. The other side shows Nike, the Greek goddess of victory, holding a wreath and a palm branch. These are both symbols of victory that the goddess is usually shown with.

5. One side of this coin shows the head of a young boy wearing a peaked Phrygian helmet. The other side depicts a military trophy and names King Lysimachus, who ruled Thrace, Asia Minor and Macedon from 306-281 BCE.



6. Coin minted for King Philetairos of Pergamon, founder of the Attalid dynasty. The coin on one side depicts Athena, the goddess of wisdom and strategy, and on the other a bow, and reads (coin) 'of Philetairos'.

Ptolemaic Egypt

Egypt under the rule of the Ptolemies



Coins depicting the head of Zeus Ammon and an eagle standing on a thunderbolt (7, 8)

These bronze coins were made under the Ptolemies, who ruled Egypt from 305-30 BCE. The coins were valued in obols, with no. 9 worth one obol and no. 7 worth eight ('octobol'). They feature Graeco-Egyptian symbolism, including Zeus Ammon, a local Egyptian form of the god shown with curled ram's horns.

These coins only circulated in Ptolemaic territories, in contrast to the silver coinage of Alexander, which circulated all over the Hellenistic world. This was because Alexander's silver coinage was internationally recognised and trusted.



9. Coin depicting the bust of Cleopatra VII, with an eagle shown on the other side.

The image of Zeus Ammon shows the merging of religions between two cultures. The eagle and thunderbolt is Greek imagery. Cleopatra's representation is more Egyptian. It is thought that her appearance on the coin has been altered to make her look more masculine and thus ruler-like, something that Greeks did not tend to do.

Graeco-Bactrian Coinage

The Graeco-Bactrian kingdom was a kingdom in Central Asia, located in modern-day Afghanistan, which existed in the 3rd-2nd century BC.



10. A bronze coin of king Menander from the second century BC with the head of Athena on one side and a round shield on the other.

The uncommon square shape is taken from Indian die punch coinage, also known as Aahat coins, that date from the 6th to 2nd century BCE.

Adopting the symbol of Athena on coinage is a clear sign of Meander wanting to reinforce his Greekness. Scott Blair even argues that the Athena depiction resembles Agathokleia, Meander's wife. If true, Menander would be presenting himself as the husband of a goddess.



11. A silver coin of king Menander from the second century BC showing a draped bust of Menander wearing a crested Boeotian helmet with an animal skin. The other side shows Athena holding a shield and a thunderbolt.

The languages on these coins are Greek and Kharosthi. Kharosthi was widely used by various peoples across what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan from the 4th century BCE until the 3rd century CE.

Menander's coins provide a striking visual representation of the blending of Eastern and Western cultures that occurred as a result of the spread of Hellenism throughout Asia during Alexander the Great's campaign.

Syracuse

The Wild Hellenistic West

Syracuse, situated in East Sicily, was a significant city in the landscape of the ancient world and a cultural centre. Starting as a Greek colony founded by Corinth, Syracuse is often overlooked as scholars tend to focus on the east of the Hellenistic world when studying the cultural implications of this period. Embroiled in Greek tyrannical conflicts in the past, Syracuse already had a prominent Greek culture. This meant that when Hieron II came to power in 275 BCE, the people did not experience a large cultural shift but rather a cultural rebirth of the city. With the rulers of Syracuse, the ancient world saw the formation of another Hellenistic power. The conflicts of this era were almost a cultural metaphor for the battle between older Greek culture and new Hellenistic cultural developments.



The contrasting imagery minted on the coins alludes to this progression from old to new. The older coin (**12**) displays Artemis and a winged thunderbolt, referencing the gods on the side of Agathocles, the Greek tyrant who fought over Syracuse in 317 BCE.



12. Artemis Soteira, facing right / 'King Agathocles' in Greek accompanied by a winged thunderbolt.



Coin **13** (minted after Hieron's victory in battle) shows a portrait of a man wearing a laurel wreath and the image of a man riding into battle on a horse. Hieron II is almost proclaiming himself as the god and saviour of the people of Syracuse in similar fashion to Alexander the great and other Hellenistic kings.



Coins **14** and **15** are issues of other Hellenistic kings connected to Syracuse: Hiketas (**14**, showing an eagle on a thunderbolt) and Pyrrhus (**15**, showing Athena).