

# Ancient coins

## Heads and tales from antique lands

Amanda Burritt and Andrew Jamieson

### Introduction

According to the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, the Lydians 'were the first people we know of to strike coins of gold and of silver'. Coinage seems to have begun around 610 BCE in Lydia (south-west Turkey) with coins made of electrum, an alloy of silver and gold. Coinage then spread to other parts of Asia Minor and then to Greece during the 6th century BCE. Many cities across the Greek world issued their own distinctive coinage. After the conquests of Alexander the Great, images of gods were replaced by those of Hellenistic kings. As Rome absorbed the Hellenistic kingdoms, portraits of emperors appeared on imperial coins. During the Byzantine period imperial portraits were replaced by depictions of Christ and the saints. Persia, meanwhile, evolved a unique numismatic style; the thick silver flan of the Classical world was replaced by a thin flat disc that was later to be used throughout the world.



### The University of Melbourne's coin collection

Most of the coins now held in the Classics and Archaeology Collection in the Ian Potter Museum of Art were acquired by the University in two main stages: firstly in the 1920s, guided by Jessie Webb, and then in the 1970s and 1980s through the efforts of Peter Connor. In 1926 a bequest honouring John Hugh Sutton, a student who had died tragically, provided £500 specifically to establish a classics museum at the University for teaching purposes. Most of the bequest was spent purchasing 37 Greek vases but part of it was spent on coins. By 1924, Jessie Webb, lecturer in ancient history from 1909 to 1943, had secured annual grants from the University to purchase coins for a teaching collection. Between 1924 and 1928 Webb acquired 167 Greek and 89 Roman coins, assisted by Charles Seltman, a fellow of Queen's College Cambridge, and an expert on classical coins.

The collection remained largely static until Peter Connor became curator in 1968. He added to the collection until his premature death in 1996. Peter's main contribution was the acquisition of 49 Greek vases but he received a special grant in 1974 which enabled him to buy

43 imperial Roman coins. Today there are approximately 450 coins of high quality in the University of Melbourne's collection.

### Ancient coins: Heads and tales from antique lands

The current exhibition at the Ian Potter Museum of Art features selected coins from the Greco-Roman world and the regions beyond. Symbols and standards, Greek gods and goddesses, Roman emperors, Parthian kings and Sassanian rulers, heroes and mythological creatures dominate the iconography of ancient *drachmas*, *denarii* and *darics*. The heads of Athena and Apollo, Alexander and Augustus, Christ and Constantine, Diocletian and Domitian, Herakles and Hadrian, Juno and Jupiter, Minerva and Mercury, Pegasus and Pan, Venus and Vespasian, and Trajan and Zeus feature on many of the ancient coins in this exhibition, revealing fascinating tales from antique lands. Some Kushan and Islamic coins are also displayed.

The exhibition is enhanced by the inclusion of 15 prints from the Baillieu Library Print Collection, including works by Piranesi, Marcantonio Raimondi and Stevan van Hollander. These prints provide aesthetic richness to the exhibition

**Previous page:** Guests at the official opening of the exhibition *Ancient coins: Heads and tales from antique lands*, Classics and Archaeology Gallery, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, Tuesday 26 October 2010.

**Right:** Examples of exhibition cabinets and prints in the exhibition *Ancient coins: Heads and tales from antique lands*, Classics and Archaeology Gallery, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne.



design but they also highlight the ongoing significance of classical imagery in western art.

### Selected highlights of the exhibition

The Classical period saw Greek coinage reach a high level of technical and aesthetic quality. Larger cities now produced a range of fine silver and gold coins, most bearing a portrait of their patron god or goddess or a legendary hero on one side, and a symbol of the city on the other. The use of inscriptions on coins also began, usually the name of the issuing city.



Silver tetradrachm with head of Athena; and owl, Attica (Athens), c.393–339 BCE. Reg. no. 1949.0009, purchased 1949, Classics and Archaeology Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

Attica was one of the most important regions in the ancient Greek world. The Athenian tetradrachm was stamped with the head of Athena on the obverse, and on the reverse, the image of an owl, the iconographic symbol of the Athenian polis, with

a sprig of olive and a crescent moon. Athena, goddess of wisdom, was the patron deity of Athens. Athens was bestowed upon Athena by Zeus following a competition to determine who would be the protector of the city. Athena and Poseidon competed for the affections of the Greeks, each providing one gift: Poseidon gave a horse and Athena bestowed the olive tree. The Greeks preferred her gift and named the city after her. The olive spray represents the economic prosperity of Athens and was symbolic of victory. Athena's symbol was the owl, a creature associated with wisdom.



Silver stater with head of Athena wearing Corinthian helmet; and flying Pegasus, Acarnania, c.250–167 BCE. Sylloge Graecorum ΓΣΚΣΒ, Melbourne.

In antiquity Corinthia was an important city-state, located on the Isthmus of Corinth, the narrow stretch of land that joins the Peloponnesus to the mainland of Greece. According to mythology, the city was founded by Corinthos,

a descendant of the god Helios (the sun). A feature of Corinthian coinage is the depiction of Pegasus. In Greek mythology, Pegasus was a winged horse born from the severed head of the gorgon Medusa when she was pregnant by Poseidon. Pegasus was captured and tamed at Corinth by Bellerophon. Athena in Corinthian helmet also appears on the coinage of Corinth.



Bronze denarius with head of Trajan; and figure of Justice with scales, Roman, 98–117 CE. Reg. no. 2009.0291, David and Marion Adams Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

Roman coins appeared in about 280 BCE. Roman mints were distributed widely across the empire, and coins were sometimes used for propaganda purposes and the propagation of myths. The populace often learned of a new Roman emperor when coins appeared with the new emperor's portrait. Trajan, a powerful military emperor of the early 2nd century, was depicted on many coins. The example illustrated features the personification of Justice on the reverse.



Example of coin installation in the exhibition *Ancient coins: Heads and tales from antique lands*, Classics and Archaeology Gallery, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne.



Gold histamenon with head of Christ; and head of Constantine IX, Byzantine, 1042–1055 CE. Reg. no. 2009.0308, David and Marion Adams Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

Byzantine coins are notable for their fine aesthetic quality. The gold coin in the exhibition featuring the head of Christ also exemplifies technical developments which enabled the production of very thin coins with intricate detail. The head of Christ is identified by the halo, cross and Gospel book on the obverse, and on the reverse is a representation of the emperor Constantine IX.

### Ancient coins and the University curriculum

A key aim of academic programs at the Ian Potter Museum of Art is to increase awareness of the richness of the University's cultural collections. The exhibition *Ancient coins: Heads and tales from antique lands* provides rich material for the exploration of issues around the question of why the past matters and enables the development of innovative ways

of making the coins, and the ideas and imagery represented on them, relevant to contemporary tertiary students. Curriculum engagement activities are being developed in areas such as classics, archaeology, education, history and art history. It is envisaged that the coin exhibition will provide opportunities for rich learning in semester 1, 2011.

### Acknowledgements

Many of the University of Melbourne's coins have never been publicly exhibited before. Without customised fixtures the diminutive scale of coins can lead to a situation where they become comparatively 'lost' within large showcases. For this reason the Ian Potter Museum of Art engaged the services of Thylacine, a leading exhibition design firm, to create a dynamic exhibition that gives the visitor a direct and intimate experience of the coins on display. The use of focussed lighting, specialised object mounts and magnifiers facilitates close examination of the coins, allowing visitors to experience the ancient coinage in a clear and accessible manner.

The exhibition has been made possible through the generous support of exhibition patrons and lenders:

**Patrons:** *Hippeis*: Michael Bartlett, Peter Lovell, and Mark Nelson. *Archontes*: Peter and Sarah Acton, Tom Bostock, Chris Bulford, Janet and Michael Buxton, John Dowling, Peter Griffin, Andrew Guy, Frank Macindoe, Richard Morgan AM, Rupert Myer AM, Justin O'Day, Ian and Diana Renard, Ross Robson, and Harrison and Kirsty Young. We also warmly thank those donors who have continued to support activities in our Classics and Archaeology Gallery, including Geoffrey and Hilary Mottershead. **Exhibition lenders:** David Adams, Eric Willis and several Melbourne private coin collectors, including the collection of Sylloge Graecorum ΓΣΚΣΒ; Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

The exhibition *Ancient coins: Heads and tales from antique lands*, curated by Dr Andrew Jamieson, opened at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, on 26 October 2010, and will be on display until 10 April 2011.

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