

The Most Beautiful Greek Coins in the MoneyMuseum

No other people has influenced European culture so significantly and so lastingly as the Greeks. Coming from the north, they penetrated the Greek mainland and the islands from about 1500 BC, by and by subjecting the local population. From this early period, the so-called Dark Ages, we have barely any knowledge – only the Homeric epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey, give legendary account from that time.

During the archaic period, from about 800 to 480 BC, the polis system established, the organization of Greek city-states, and the Mediterranean was colonized. At some point in that time, namely around 600 BC, the first actual coins appeared. The classical period, from 480 to 336 BC, was the time of great cultural achievements, with Athens playing an important part. And finally, in 336 BC, began the time of Hellenism, the export of Greek culture to the east, and at the same time the amalgamation with Occidental culture. This epoch ended in 146 BC with the Roman annexation of the Greek peninsula and islands.

Ionia, Stater, c. 560-540 BC



Denomination:	Stater
Mint Authority:	Undefined
Mint:	Undefined in Ionia
Year of Issue:	-560
Weight (g):	14.03
Diameter (mm):	21.0
Material:	Electrum
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

The reasons that led to the development of coins are not yet fully understood today. There are strong indications that the Lydians earn the merit of having been the first to use a standardized coinage. They lived in the 6th century BC in Asia Minor, today's western Turkey.

The coinage of the Lydians was quickly taken up in the neighboring regions: soon the Ionian Greeks in Asia Minor started to issue their own money. Their early coins were strongly influenced by Lydian archetypes, as indicate the coin motifs. The Lydian coins bore an attacking lion, the emblem of the Lydian royal dynasty. However, the lion was also the emblem of the Ionian city of Miletus, whose coins thus depicted the lion as well.

Kingdom of Lydia, Croesus (560?-546 BC), Heavy Stater



Denomination:	Heavy Gold Stater
Mint Authority:	King Croesus of Lydia
Mint:	Sardis
Year of Issue:	-561
Weight (g):	10.46
Diameter (mm):	17.0
Material:	Gold
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

Croesus was the last king of Lydia. He was known for his enormous wealth and in addition was the inventor of an ingenious currency system. Since the proportion of gold and silver in electrum was not constant, the early coins could not be assigned with a specific value. This is why Croesus around the mid-6th century decided to henceforth mint his money either from gold or silver.

This gold stater of Croesus is very important for the history of coinage. The coin is a prototype, a forerunner of Croesus' later currency. This is recognizable by pellet between the lion's nose and forehead, which is referred to as a wart; the lions on earlier Lydian electrum coins had warted noses too. This coin thus marks the transition between the earlier electrum-based and the later bimetallic currency.

Lesbos, Mytilene, Hecte (1/6 Stater), c. 450 BC



Denomination:	Hecte (1/6 Stater)
Mint Authority:	City of Mytilene
Mint:	Mytilene
Year of Issue:	-450
Weight (g):	2.55
Diameter (mm):	11.0
Material:	Electrum
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

This hecte from the city of Mytilene on Lesbos Island bears a running goat with its head reverted on the obverse, while the reverse depicts a little owl with outstretched wings.

At the time when the coin was minted, Lesbos was a member of the Delian League, an union founded for the defense against the attacks of the Persian empire. Leader of the allies was the city of Athens. To finance the war against the Persians, all the allies had to pay proportional contributions to Athens, either in the form of war ships and armament, or as fees – which most members preferred. Hence it is probable that this coin was minted just for that purpose; the little owl leads to this assumption, since the owl was symbolic for the coins of Athens.

Thrace, City of Abdera, Stater, c. 362 BC



Denomination:	Stater
Mint Authority:	City of Abdera
Mint:	Abdera
Year of Issue:	-362
Weight (g):	12.82
Diameter (mm):	25.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

This extraordinarily beautiful stater was minted in the city of Abdera in Thrace, in northern Greece. The griffon, a winged lion with an eagle's head, was the typical motif on the coins of Abdera. The reverse features the Greek hero Heracles sitting on a rock. He is holding his club and wearing the skin of the slain Nemean lion.

An illustrious artist must have cut the die for this coin – the way Heracles is turning his head shows great skill. Besides, the name of Philados is given in Greek letters, indicating the official under whose supervision the coin was struck. This enables us to date it to about 362 BC.

Peloponnesus, City of Elis, Stater, 363-343 BC, Olympia



Denomination:	Stater
Mint Authority:	City of Elis
Mint:	Olympia
Year of Issue:	-363
Weight (g):	12.24
Diameter (mm):	23.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	

Olympia was not a city, but a sacred area with some temples, sports grounds and a few accommodations for the athletes. The site was situated near the city of Elis, whose inhabitants organized the Olympic Games every four years. The Games were among the most significant events of Antiquity; even wars were suspended for their duration.

From the 5th to the 3rd century BC the Eleians issued a series of magnificent silver coins on the occasion of the Olympic Games. This stater shows on the obverse the head of Zeus and on the reverse an eagle, Zeus' sacred animal that he kept by his side at all times. Like Zeus himself, the King of the Skies was a symbol of strength, courage, and justice.

The artwork for the head on this coin was a statue by Phidias, the most significant artist of the 5th century BC. The head had great influence on the following coinage. Philip II for instance, King of Macedon, and his son Alexander the Great had themselves depicted in just this style. Moreover, the Christian image of Godfather was modeled after the statue of Phidias as well.

Southern Italy, Campania, Neapolis, Stater, 395-385 BC



Denomination:	Stater
Mint Authority:	City of Neapolis
Mint:	Neapolis (Napels)
Year of Issue:	-395
Weight (g):	7.27
Diameter (mm):	20.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

The wonderful head on this coin belongs to Parthenope, the unfortunate siren whose song could not seduce Ulysses – the cunning hero had ordered his men to tie him to the mainmast of his ship, and was thus able to resist the chant of the beauty. After that, Parthenope drowned herself in the waters; her body was washed ashore at the foot of Mount Vesuvius, where she was buried and a tomb was built in her honor.

When the Greek colonization of southern Italy started in the 8th century BC, a settlement was founded around the tomb, which was named Parthenope. A couple of hundred years later, a new town was built, not far from old Parthenope. It was called Neapolis – i.e. the Greek word for "new town." The figure of Parthenope, however, has become a symbol of Naples and, up to this day, remains one of the most important icons for Naples and its harbor.

Southern Italy, Calabria, City of Taras, Stater, c. 333-330 BC, Signed KAL



Denomination:	Stater
Mint Authority:	City of Taras
Mint:	Taras (Taranto)
Year of Issue:	-333
Weight (g):	7.81
Diameter (mm):	22.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

Taras, today's Taranto, was founded at the end of the 8th century BC. About 200 years later, the city had become the most important Greek settlement in southern Italy. Coinage started around that time. The recurrent motto on the coins of Taras was a rider – on the obverse he rode a horse, on the reverse a dolphin.

Despite the repeated types, the coins of Taras are never monotonous. The horseman is depicted a multitude of representations. On this stater, he rides his horse in full gallop while throwing a lance. The dolphin rider was Taras, the eponymous founder of the city. He too appeared in a rich variety on his dolphin; here, he is holding a crested helmet.

The coin is signed, which suggests that it was created by a renowned artist. To whom the signature KAL on the obverse can be assigned is unknown, however.

Southern Italy, Calabria, Taras, Stater, c. 302 BC



Denomination:	Stater
Mint Authority:	City of Taras
Mint:	Taras (Taranto)
Year of Issue:	-302
Weight (g):	8.61
Diameter (mm):	18.0
Material:	Gold
Owner:	

In 315 BC, the rich city of Taras was threatened by neighboring peoples. To pay the mercenaries hired for the defense of the city, Taras minted coins that bore the nymph Persephone on the obverse, while the reverse showed the Dioscuri Castor and Pollux; they were on horseback and holding a palm leaf and a laurel wreath in anticipation of victory.

Persephone was depicted in all her beauty. She is adorned with an amphix – a tiara –, earrings and a necklace; a delicate veil falls from the back of her head. In Greek mythology, Persephone was the queen of the underworld. Four months of the year, she lived with Hades in the underworld. The rest of the time, she spent on earth with her mother Demeter. During that time, the earth flourished with vegetation and color, but when Persephone returned to the underworld, it became a barren realm of darkness ...

Southern Italy, Bruttium, City of Croton, Stater, c. 480 BC



Denomination:	Stater
Mint Authority:	City of Croton
Mint:	Croton
Year of Issue:	-480
Weight (g):	8.04
Diameter (mm):	23.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

The Greek colony of Croton was founded about 720 BC in southern Italy and soon developed into a rich and wealthy city. The perhaps best known citizen of Croton was the philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras, who founded an esoteric confraternity in Croton around 530 BC. He soon acquired considerable influence with the inhabitants, not only as a thinker, but also as a politician.

Besides, Croton minted wonderful coins. This stater was struck during the first half of the 6th century BC. Its obverse bears Croton symbol, a tripod ending in a lion's paws; such tripods were used as a support for bronze cauldrons. On the reverse flies an eagle.

Southern Italy, Bruttium, City of Rhegion, Tetradrachm, c. 410 BC



Denomination:	Tetradrachm
Mint Authority:	City of Rhegion
Mint:	Rhegion (Reggio di Calabria)
Year of Issue:	-410
Weight (g):	17.35
Diameter (mm):	26.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

During the last decades of the 5th century BC, the southern Italian city of Rhegion introduced new coins. As on earlier coins, they showed a lion's scalp. On the reverse, the head of the Greek light and sun god Apollo was depicted. This was nothing special. Extraordinary, however, was the new style, in which the coins of Rhegion were made. For the lion's scalp and Apollo's head appeared in the highest relief ever minted on Greek coins until that time. The face of the lion was deeply engraved in the die, and his mane blazed like flames of fire. Apollo, on the other hand, was depicted in a fine, ethereal style – as befits a god.

Sicily, Syracuse, Tetradrachm, c. 466 BC



Denomination:	Tetradrachm
Mint Authority:	City of Syracuse
Mint:	Syracuse
Year of Issue:	-466
Weight (g):	17.51
Diameter (mm):	26.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	

This is perhaps the most famous coin of antiquity. It is called Demareteion, after Demarete, the wife of the Tyrant Gelon of Syracuse. In 480 BC, Syracuse defeated the Carthaginians in the Battle at Himera and made them tributary. With the help of those Carthaginian payments Syracuse was for the first time able to mint large silver coins. Legend has it that the new coins were called Demareteion in honor of Demarete, who had asked her husband to treat the Carthaginian prisoners mildly.

The obverse of the Demareteion shows the traditional Syracusean coin design, a quadriga driven by Nike, the goddess of victory. The little lion in the exergue has been interpreted either as a symbol for the defeated Carthaginians, or as an emblem of Leontinoi, the allied lion city near Syracuse. The reverse depicts the nymph Arethusa circled by four dolphins. This coin is a true masterpiece of the early classical times.

Sicily, Dionysius I (405-367 BC), 100 Litres (Double Decadrachm) c. 400 BC, signed Kimon, Syracuse



Denomination:	100 Litrae (Double Decadrachm)
Mint Authority:	Tyrant Dionysius I
Mint:	Syracuse
Year of Issue:	-406
Weight (g):	5.74
Diameter (mm):	15.0
Material:	Gold
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

This magnificent coin was created for Syracuse by the engraver Kimon towards the end of the 5th century. It features the head of the nymph Arethusa. She displays her hair as was the fashion in the Golden Age of ancient Greece: parted, wavy and put up in an elaborate knot, which was held in place by a star-studded slide. This hairstyle gives the impression of carefully restrained nature. The bright reflections might result from the hair having been made lighter with saffron. This was popular with Greek women, who were dark haired by nature, as blond was regarded as the colour of the gods' hair.

Behind Arethusa's head, an ear of barley is depicted, and next to it the signature KI for Kimon. The reverse shows the young, naked Heracles struggling with a lion. Beneath the knees of the hero, another ear can be seen. The ear of barley was the symbol of one of the two principal workshops operating in parallel for the Syracuse mint at the turn of the 5th to the 4th century BC.

Sicily, Dionysius I (405-367 BC), Decadrachm, 405-400 BC, signed Kimon, Syracuse



Denomination:	Decadrachm
Mint Authority:	Tyrant Dionysius I of Syracuse
Mint:	Syracuse
Year of Issue:	-405
Weight (g):	43.31
Diameter (mm):	33.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

The die for this decadrachm (piece of 10 drachms) was cut by the master-engraver Kimon, as the signature on the dolphin below the head of Arethusa on the reverse shows. Kimon, who worked approximately between 420 and 400 BC for the Syracusian mint, was one of the most famous engravers of his time. Kimon's decadrachms are considered to be among the most beautiful coins of antiquity along with those of the engraver Euainetos.

One of Kimon's specialties was his ability to bring all elements into harmony. On the reverse, the mass of Arethusa's hair takes up the movement of the dolphins swimming around her head. The illustration of the racing chariot on the obverse is remarkable as well – the straining charioteer urges his galloping horses even more. Unfortunately the obverse image is hardly recognizable on this coin, supposedly due to a rusty die.

Sicily, Messana (Zancle), Drachm, c. 510-495 BC



Denomination:	Drachm
Mint Authority:	City of Messana (Zancle)
Mint:	Messana (Messina)
Year of Issue:	-510
Weight (g):	5.7
Diameter (mm):	20.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	

The harbor of the city of Zancle (today's Messina) was important in ancient times already. The city was considered as "gate to Sicily," where a large part of the trade between the Magna Graecia – the Greek cities of southern Italy and Sicily – and Greece took place.

The name of "Zancle" originated from a word of the indigenous population meaning "scythe," and referred to the sickle-shaped tongue of land enclosing the natural harbor of the city. The coins of Zancle thus always bore a scythe, here in the form of a thin line around the dolphin. The animal itself stood for the city's close relation to the sea, as the dolphin was the attribute of Poseidon, the god of the sea. The reverse shows an incuse square with the small pictorial design of a cockleshell in the centre.

Sicily, Gelon (491-485 v. Chr.), Didrachm, c. 485 BC, Gela



Denomination:	Didrachm
Mint Authority:	City of Gela
Mint:	Gela
Year of Issue:	-485
Weight (g):	8.58
Diameter (mm):	20.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

Gela was founded around 668 BC on the delta of the Gelas River on the southwest coast of Sicily. It soon became one of the wealthiest Sicilian cities. In the early 5th century BC, it was the leading city in Sicily, if only for a short time. During that time, this didrachm was minted. It depicts a naked rider with a raised lance on its obverse, while the reverse bears the upper body of the river god Gelas: torso and neck of a bull with a human face. This coin shows late archaic art at its best.

Kingdom of Macedon, Alexander III the Great (336-323 BC) in the Name of Philip II, Stater, c. 324 BC, Colophon



Denomination:	Stater
Mint Authority:	King Alexander III of Macedon
Mint:	Colophon
Year of Issue:	-324
Weight (g):	8.6
Diameter (mm):	19.0
Material:	Gold
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

This coin is a so-called Philip's stater, even though it was minted during the reign of Philip's son Alexander the Great. Philip II issued such coins in great numbers. The mercenaries whom he paid with them then brought the Philip's staters into circulation in their homelands. Thus these coins became a wide spread, "international" currency. They were minted until long after Philip's death, not only by his son Alexander and his successors, but also by diverse Celtic tribes.

Kingdom of Egypt, Ptolemy I Soter as Administrator (323-318 BC), Tetradrachm, c. 320 BC, Alexandria



Denomination:	Tetradrachm
Mint Authority:	Satrap Ptolemy I Soter
Mint:	Alexandria
Year of Issue:	-320
Weight (g):	17.7
Diameter (mm):	29.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	

This tetradrachm was issued under Ptolemy I after the death of Alexander the Great (323 BC). It depicts one of the most beautiful, actually realistic portraits of Alexander, and thus marks an important turning point, in coinage as well as the history of art and in politics: until then, a real portrait with individual traits had been unthinkable in the Western world. Only gods, or kings with the attributes of deities – like Alexander in the guise of Heracles –, had hitherto been possible as motifs on coins. Here, however, we see Alexander drawn from life as conqueror of India – the symbol for that the elephant scalp with tusks and a craning trunk on his head. The reverse bears Zeus, the father of the gods, with his eagle.

Kingdom of Egypt, Ptolemy I Soter (305-283 BC), Tetradrachm, Alexandria



Denomination:	Tetradrachm
Mint Authority:	King Ptolemy I Soter of Egypt
Mint:	Alexandria
Year of Issue:	-305
Weight (g):	14.32
Diameter (mm):	27.0
Material:	Silver
Owner:	Sunflower Foundation

The Ptolemies were Macedonians on the Egyptian throne. The founder of the dynasty was Ptolemy I Soter, of whom see a wonderful portrait of old age in Hellenistic style on this tetradrachm. The reverse depicts the eagle of the Greek godfather Zeus on a thunderbolt.

Ptolemy was one of the diadochs, one of the commanders of Alexander the Great who divided Alexander's empire after his sudden death in 323 BC. Ptolemy became satrap of Egypt, which he turned into a kingdom in 305 BC. Since then he called himself king and had himself depicted on his coins. The style of his portrait was to dominate Ptolemaic coinage – with variations – until the end of the dynasty in the year 30 BC.