

Hands On Learning *with Reading Museum Service*

GREEK COINS AND TRADE

AH 14

Perhaps because the ancient Greeks lived among so many islands in the sheltered Aegean Sea, they became expert sailors early on in their history. The older palace cultures of the Mycenaean Period and the Minoan culture on the large island of Crete often came into contact with peoples from different cultures and foreign lands. This was partly because of trade. This map shows Greece as it is today, with the many islands that lie around its coast.



Trade happens because one group of people want something that another group have. The most basic form of trade is called bartering. This is a simple swapping of goods. For example, the countryside of Greece was extremely good for producing olives from which oil was made. It was not very good for growing grain. In Egypt, the land was very fertile and excellent for producing huge amounts of grain. The Egyptians bartered their grain with the Greeks. Greeks required grain to eat and Egyptians used olive oil for various things, such as the production of make-up and perfume and also for burning in lamps. Bartering took place with many different cities and countries, inside and outside of Greece. People also bartered on a much smaller scale, in the local marketplace or with a neighbour.

The big step from bartering to trading was made by the invention of money. The world's first actual coinage appeared in Lydia (part of what is now western Turkey), around 600 BC. The Greek historian Herodotus said that it was the Lydian King Croesus who invented the coins, which were thin circular pieces of electrum (an alloy of silver and gold), stamped on one side only, and later on both sides. The coins were largely used for state accounting at first, but were used in everyday life from late 400 BC onwards.

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The idea of using coins soon spread to other Aegean cultures, including Greece. The advantage of money was that it was small and easily transported or hidden away. It meant that you could buy lots of different goods more easily or that you could save it until you needed to buy something.

Greek coins were in many ways similar to ours. They usually had a head or an animal on one side (the *obverse*) and an image of a deity or symbol on the 'tails' side (the *reverse*). However the head was not a portrait of the king or queen but of one of the many gods. The animal or symbol on the *reverse* showed which city had made the coin, while a picture of a god represented a patron deity or commemorated a particular event.

In Athens they used an owl, the symbol of the goddess Athena, on all of the coins. In Corinth it was the legendary winged horse Pegasus, who was supposed to have drunk from the main spring of the city. On the island of Aegina, the first Greek state to produce coins, they used a picture of a sea tortoise to show that they had great skill as sailors. Coinage reached Aegina in about 595 BC and was being used in Athens by 575 BC.

Although different cities made their own coins, two systems of standard weights were used - the Athenian and the Aeginian. This meant that you could spend money from one city in the markets and shops of another. Coins were at first made out of gold, silver or electrum. Later, bronze coins were introduced for smaller amounts. Different metals and sizes had different values, just like the coins we use today.

Later coins, from after the time of Alexander the Great often feature portraits of kings and these include the coins in this box.

The silver coin shows an image of Herakles on the *obverse* and a seated Zeus on the *reverse*. Herakles is wearing a lion skin over his head. Zeus has a staff in one hand and his eagle perched on the other. Behind the throne can be seen the Greek letters '..AND..', the remains of the name Alexander. This coin was made after 334 BC.



The central coin is a bronze one from the reign of Antigonus Monophthalmus ('one-eyed'), struck around 305 BC. It shows the god Apollo on the *reverse*. He is sitting on the prow of a ship, symbolising the naval power of Antigonus. The king's name is written on the ship. The *obverse* is either a portrait of Antigonus or, more likely, the god of the seas, Poseidon.

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The third coin is again made of bronze but is later still, minted around 280 BC by king Prusias of Bithynia (northern Turkey). The obverse shows a portrait of the king himself and the reverse shows Zeus crowning the king's name. If you turn the coin so that the head of Zeus is to the left, you can clearly read the inscription;

ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ

ΠΡΟΥΣΙΟΥ

Basileus

Prousiou

(Of) King

Prusias



Greek Trade and Pottery

When archaeologists find coins today they can get some idea of the trade routes used by the ancient Greeks. Greek colonies (cities of Greek people in different countries), grew up all around the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. At *Emporia* in Spain, *Massilia* in France (Marseilles), *Tripolis* in Libya (Tripoli) and *Olbia* (Odessa) in Ukraine and in the many Greek cities of Sicily and *Magna Graecia* (southern Italy) the Greeks traded with the native populations for locally produced materials. *Emporia* means 'market', *Olbia* means 'prosperity' and *Massilia* was ruled by its rich merchants, showing how successful these trading posts were.

Different localities specialised in providing different materials and in return took different products from Greece. One of the most important exports from Greek cities such as Athens and Corinth was pottery. Like coins, pottery turns up in many locations across the Greek world and allows us to trace the old trade routes. Sometimes pottery was traded for its own sake, sometimes it was used as containers for other goods. Pottery included in this box was traded for both reasons.

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The tall jar is a Lekythos, an item traditionally placed in graves. It is a slim and graceful jug with a small handle at the top. It was a container for olive oil, which had many uses in the ancient world, such as anointing the body, food preparation and fuel for lamps. This lekythos has simple decoration, a typical black section at the bottom and traces of white above that. On the top can be seen a 'radiate' pattern impressed into the clay itself. This vase is typical of those produced in Attica (the land around Athens) in the early fifth century BC.



The small round vessel with the tiny mouth is an early form of Aryballos. This was a popular form of perfume container manufactured in huge quantities and traded by Corinthian potters. This particular pot is undecorated and its sides have been flattened slightly by rough handling when the clay was still wet. It is rather poor quality and would not have cost much to buy. Corinthian perfumes were famous all over the Greek world and aryballoi are very common finds. Pliny (a writer of the time) talks about the fame of Corinthian perfumes, which probably came, by trade, from Egypt or the Middle East and then were bottled and sold on from Corinth.

The small phial with the long neck and rounded base was found at a Greek cemetery site but is probably not of Greek manufacture. It is most likely a piece of Cypriote or Roman redware, designed to hold perfume. It is a good example of foreign goods being traded into Greece.

