

Special exhibit

Athenian owls – ancient Greek motifs in the euro area

Cities in the Aegean region and mainland Greece started to mint coins during the 6th century BC. One of the most important Greek city-states was Athens, whose identity was closely linked to its patron goddess, Athena. It is therefore hardly surprising that an image of Athena, together with her sacred owl, soon began to appear on its coins. This quickly became a typical motif for coins minted in Attica and, within a short period of time, ancient Greek tetradrachm coins began to be known as *glaukes*, or owls.

Because Athens had a leading position in the 5th century BC, its coins dominated the eastern Mediterranean region and far beyond. Tetradrachms and their imitations have been discovered as part of treasure finds even in Yemen and Afghanistan. The Athenians mined the silver for their coins from the mountains in Laurium. It was only with Alexander the Great's coins that "owls" lost their role as the most commonly used trading currency in the eastern Mediterranean.

In the first half of the second century BC, the motif was updated, although the basic design was retained. The owl was portrayed sitting on an amphora, framed by a wreath. The width of the blank and the names of officials and the mint marks are particularly striking. These coins were minted in large quantities and circulated throughout mainland Greece and the Aegean. Athens finally stopped minting silver coins in the middle of the first century BC.

Although the tetradrachm was extremely important for long-distance trade, it was unsuitable for making everyday payments considering that four litres of barley flour cost one obol (one-sixth of a drachma) in around 430 BC and a pair of shoes cost two obols in around 405 BC. They were therefore just one part of a tiered system of denominations.

Athenian denominations (sample)



Drachma, 5th c. BC
4.28 g; 13.5 mm



Triobol, 5th c. BC
½ dr; 2.06 g; 12.2 mm



Hemiobol, 5th c. BC
1/12 dr; 0.32 g; 6.2 mm



Tetartemorion, 5th c. BC
1/24 dr; 0.16 g; 5.3 mm



AE, 2/1th c. BC
2.80 g; 12.5 mm

When Athens ceased to mint its own coins, the “Athenian owls” faded into obscurity. Local motifs had no place in the standardised monetary systems of the late Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman empires. Only when Greece freed itself from Ottoman rule (between 1821 and 1829) was it able to express its own identity again. Notable in this respect is a series of coins minted in 1912: the artist Charles Pillet modelled his motif for the 10 and 5 lepta coins directly on the Athenian coins minted in the second and first centuries BC. Images of ancient coins have been used on banknote designs repeatedly since the early 1920s. An image of the classic tetradrachm, featuring a Little Owl, appeared on the 100,000 drachma notes issued in 1944 and, slightly less prominently, on the 20,000 and 20 drachma notes issued after the war.

The *glaukes* have also featured in Greece's recent past, appearing on the 1 and 2 drachma coins minted in 1973, with the Little Owl standing on the right.

The latest version of the motif emerged when the euro was introduced in 2002. The member states were free to choose their own national design on one side. Greece chose the classical owl as the motif for “its” series of €1 coins.

The owl motif through history



Tetradrachm, 5th c. BC



100,000 drachma, 1944 Bank of Greece
(scale of 1: 2)



1 euro, Greece, 2002



Tetradrachm, 2th c. BC



10 lepta, 1912

Further reading

C Flament, *Le monnayage en argent d’Athènes. De l’époque archaïque à l’époque hellénistique* (c. 550 – c. 40 av. J.-C.) (Louvain-la-Neuve 2007).

P G v Alfen, *The Coinage of Athens, Sixth to First Century B.C.*, in: W E Metcalf, *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Coinage* (2012 Oxford), 88–104.

B Prokisch – H Emmerig – M Heintz – M Zavadil – S Heinz, *Repertorium zur neuzeitlichen Münzprägung Europas XVIII. Südosteuropa*, Veröffentlichungen des Institutes für Numismatik Wien 5 (Vienna 1999).