INTRODUCTION

These 20 Greek and Roman coins are a selection from the Sweet Briar College Art Collection and Galleries’ holdings. Though their exact provenance is uncertain, all these examples are thought to have been collected by and given to the College decades ago by professors in the fields of classics, ancient history, and Greek and Latin language and literature.

This selection spans nine centuries—from 480 BCE to the year 311 CE. In these small pieces of precious as well as base metals one witnesses the rise of city states, republics, kingdoms, and empires all around the Mediterranean as societies consolidated political power, established trade routes, exchanged goods, and influenced each other’s language, religion, and government. Some are lively works of art, while others are more pedestrian artifacts bearing witness to the routine commerce of the ancient world.

The display has benefitted from behind-the-scenes inventory work of Arts Management intern Sloane Victor ’14 and the research of curatorial assistant Bailey Allen ’17. Mariah Miller ’16, Samantha Cochran ’16, and Abby Schutte ’17 assisted with installation. Associate Professor of Classical Studies Eric Casey generously provided background information and patiently helped translate. Associate Professor Tracy Hamilton offered commentary from an art history perspective and suggested helpful resources. The photographs were taken by Art Collection and Galleries registrar Nancy McDearmon.

Karol A. Lawson
Director
Art Collection and Galleries, Sweet Briar Museum
SUGGESTED READING


GREEK COINS

1. *Litra with a Hare and an Olive Wreath* (Messana [Messina], Sicily, Italy)
   ca. 480-395 BCE
   ½ inch diameter, silver
   CL.N.004

   Coins minted at Messina commonly show a hare, a motif closely associated with the ruler Anaxilas of Rhegium, a city located across the strait on the Italian mainland. He conquered the Sicilian town of Zankle in the fifth century BCE and renamed it Messana (for new Greek settlers from Messene). The inscription on the reverse of this small coin spells out the Greek letters mu epsilon sigma—or MES, presumably an abbreviation of the city’s name.

2. *Stater with a Profile of Athena in a Corinthian Helmet and Pegasos* (Corinth, Greece)
   ca. 400-338 BCE
   7/8 inch diameter, silver
   CL.N.005

   The winged horse Pegasos (or Pegasus), offspring of the sea god Poseidon and the gorgon Medusa, is often found on Corinthian coins. In Greek mythology, one of the city’s heroic kings, Bellerophon, tamed Pegasus and rode him to confront and kill the dreadful Chimera. Pegasus was also associated with the ancient Muses, and is therefore often linked symbolically with wisdom and creativity. The Corinthian
style helmet seen here on the female head (pushed back on the crown of the head, away from the face) was used by warriors throughout the ancient world.

3. **Stater with a Head of Helios and a Rose with Two Buds** (Rhodes, Greece)
   ca. 400-300 BCE
   ¾ inch diameter, silver
   CL.N.006

The island of Rhodes was closely associated with the sun god, Helios (indeed, the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the famous seven wonders of the ancient world, was dedicated to Helios), and his consort, the sea nymph Rhode. As in this example, Rhodian coins typically show a three-quarter view of the head of Helios on the obverse. On the reverse Rhodian coins typically bear a stylized flower commonly interpreted as a rose—as does this example—namesake of the nymph Rhode and therefore emblematic of the island and city of Rhodes.

4. **Drachm with a Profile of the Nymph Chalkis and an Eagle Grasping a Snake** (Chalkis [Chalcis], Euboea, Greece)
   ca. 330 BCE
   5/8 inch diameter, silver
   CL.N.008
5. **Stater with the Figure of Taras on a Dolphin and a Youth on a Horse** (Taras [Taranto], Italy)
   ca. 300 BCE
   ¾ inch diameter, silver
   CL.N.009

Taras was the son of the sea god Poseidon and the nymph Satyrion. He was considered the founder of the Greek colonial outpost of Taras (now Taranto), located on the southern coast of the modern region of Apulia. The city’s ancient coins commonly feature Taras riding a dolphin, which stories say was sent by Poseidon to rescue him from a shipwreck.

6. **Didrachm with Melqart on a Hippocamp and an Owl, Crook, and Flail** (Tyre, Lebanon)
   293 BCE
   ¾ inch diameter, silver
   CL.N.014

Melqart was the patron god of Tyre, a Phoenician city located in what is now Lebanon. He is commonly depicted riding a hippocamp—or seahorse—a creature with the forequarters of a horse, wings, and the hind part of a fish. The reverse of this coin, also typical of Tyre, features figures—an owl, a crook, and a flail—borrowed from both Greece and Egypt. This is perhaps indicative of the Phoenician traders’ pragmatism or the city leaders’ desire to forge symbolic ties. The owl, a symbol of the goddess Athena, was strongly associated with the powerful Greek city of Athens. The owl is also the Egyptian hieroglyph corresponding to the letter M—a possible connection to Melqart. The crook and flail were indicative of royal authority in Egypt.
7. 
*Tetradrachm of Antiochus II Theos with a Profile of Antiochus II Theos and Apollo Seated on an Omphalos* (Seleucia [Syria])
ca. 261-256 BCE
1 ¼ inch diameter, silver
CL.N.015

Antiochus II Theos was a king of the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire, encompassing what is now the modern nation of Syria. The writing on the reverse reads “of the king Antiochos”. The coin’s reverse shows Apollo, Greek god of light, truth, and prophecy, seated on the omphalos—essentially a large rock—considered by the Greeks to symbolize the navel of the world. The symbolic omphalos at Delphi, a locale sacred to Apollo, was considered particularly significant.

8. 
*Drachm with a Profile of Artemis and a Tripod* (Knidos, Caria [western Anatolia], Turkey)
ca. 200 BCE
9/16 inch diameter, silver
CL.N.017

The writing on the reverse of this coin reads in part “of the Cnidians”. A tripod was a three-legged structure used in religious ceremonies—for example, for sacrifices to the gods—and the oracle at Delphi used a tripod as a seat when delivering prophecies. The figures on this coin may refer to the particular tripod at Delphi, a site sacred to Apollo, which Heracles tried to steal. He was foiled by Apollo and the god’s twin sister, Artemis.
9. Tetradrachm of Ptolemy IX with a Profile of a Man and an Eagle Perched on Fulmen (Paphos, Cyprus) ca. 107-106 BCE
15/16 inch diameter, silver
CL.N.021

Ancient Greeks considered the eagle to be the messenger and companion, and thus the symbol, of Zeus—ruler of the Olympian gods. Fulmina are stylized representations of Zeus’s thunderbolts. The reverse of this coin bears a date mark, LI, on the left. The “L” simply signifies “year” and the character following denotes the year of a ruler’s reign. On the right are the Greek letters pi alpha, an abbreviation for Paphos, on the island of Cyprus. The same mint mark appears on the following coin.

10. Tetradrachm of a Ptolemaic Ruler with a Profile of a Man and an Eagle Perched on Fulmen (Paphos, Cyprus) ca. 120-80 BCE
1 inch diameter, silver
CL.N.022

While not cast from the same die—there are small differences—this and the preceding coin bear the same imagery and seem to have been cast in the same period. The writing on the reverse reads “of Ptolemy the king”. From an art historical standpoint this and the preceding example refer in an aesthetic sense to portraits of Alexander the Great, whom Ptolemaic rulers saw as their ancestor. Ptolemaic coins such as these are a landmark of sorts in the history of coinage, since they consistently incorporate a ruler’s likeness instead of a god or mythical figure and they are stamped with a date.
11. *Quadrigatus with a Profile of Janus and Jupiter Driven by Victoria in a Quadriga* (Rome)
ca. 225-215 BCE
7/8 inch diameter, silver
CL.N. 024

Janus, looking both backwards and forwards, was the two-faced Roman god of beginnings and endings. (Romans gave his name to the month of January.) He is shown on the obverse of this coin. The reverse of this very early coin bears an image of Jupiter (the Roman equivalent of Zeus) driven by the winged personification of victory (the equivalent of the Greek goddess Nike) in a chariot drawn by four horses harnessed abreast. Both Greeks and Romans saw the quadriga as the chariot of the gods and of larger-than-life heroes.

12. *Denarius of Manius Fonteius Capito with a Profile of Vejovis and the Genius of Vejovis Riding a Goat* (Rome)
85 BCE
13/16 inch diameter, silver
CL.N. 025

Wreathed with laurel, the profile on the obverse of this coin may be interpreted as the god Vejovis, a mysterious, uncertain figure whom the Romans may have associated with healing. He was sometimes
identified with the Greek god Apollo, or with Jupiter as a youth, or as the anti-Jupiter. In fact, numismatic scholars and collectors commenting on coins of this type occasionally identify the image as Apollo instead of Vejovis. Vejovis was commonly depicted with a *pilum*—a javelin—and that can be seen here below the head. Vejovis was also commonly associated with the sacrifice of a she-goat. The reverse of this coin bears an image of a winged Genius, a general personification of the spirit of a particular place or person (alternatively, this figure is sometimes identified on coins of this sort as Cupid), riding a horned goat. Hanging from a circle of laurel leaves above the figure’s head are the conical “caps of the Dioscuri,” commonly used as a symbol of the twin heroes Castor and Pollux but here probably also meant as a reference to Rome’s founders, the twins Romulus and Remus. Below the goat is a *thyrsus*—a staff of fennel and ivy tendrils topped by a pine cone—an attribute of the god Bacchus and emblematic of prosperity and fertility.

13. *Denarius of Gaius Antistius Vetus with a Profile of Augustus and Implements for Sacrifice* (Rome)

ca. 18 or 16 BCE

¾ inch diameter, silver

CL.N. 029

Gaius Antistius Vetus was a military officer, politician, and consul of the Roman Republic. In the mid 20s BCE he was appointed legate of Hispania Citerior, a Roman province on the northeastern Mediterranean coast of modern Spain. The inscription on the reverse of this coin reads “C Antistius Reginus” and “III VIR”. The latter is an abbreviation for the *tresviri monetalies*, a group of three magistrates in charge of minting coins on behalf of the *vigintisexviri*, a larger body of magistrates responsible for regulating aspects of Roman civic life such as currency, road maintenance, and criminal justice. The small images at the center represent tools used by Roman priests during the rites of sacrifice: (clockwise from upper left) *simpulum* (ladle); *lituus* (the augur’s staff, a crooked wand used to delineate a sacred space in the heavens); *patera* (libation bowl); and tripod (three-legged stool or small table).
14. *Denarius of Augustus with a Profile of Augustus and Two Figures with Implements for Sacrifice* (Rome)
ca. 2-1 BCE
13/16 inch diameter, silver
CL.N. 030

The obverse face of this coin reads: CAESAR AUGUSTUS PATER PATRIAE. The Roman senate conferred the official title “father of the country” on the emperor Augustus (Octavian) in 2 BCE. The reverse of this coin, like several others in this selection, features implements used in religious rites. Above the two small figures are a jug and a *lituus* (the augur’s staff) and each figure appears to hold upright a *patera* (libation bowl; these shallow, wide, handle-less bowls are typically pictured so that the concave knob on the bottom, used instead of a handle, is visible).

15. *Denarius of Augustus with Profile of Augustus and Augustus Driving a Quadriga* (Rome)
ca. 27 BCE-14 CE
¾ inch diameter, silver
CL.N. 032

The emperor Augustus (Octavian) is shown on the reverse in a quadriga, a chariot pulled by four horses abreast and typically considered the chariot of the gods and of victorious heroes, posed atop a triumphal arch, perhaps meant to evoke the actual Arch of Augustus at the forum in Rome.
The Roman senate elected Marcus Cocceius Nerva as emperor of Rome following the assassination of Domitian. Nerva reigned for two years, 96-98, and was peacefully succeeded by his chosen heir, Trajan. Nerva is known to history as the first of the “five good emperors” whose combined reigns, 96-180, encompassed what could be considered a golden age of peace and prosperity. The figure on the reverse is identified as Aequitas, a personification of the concept of fairness or equity. She is shown holding scales and a cornucopia (horn of plenty).

Marcus Aurelius Commodus Antonius, the son of the emperor Marcus Aurelius, served as emperor of Rome 180-192, an unhappy reign that was marked by civil war and that ended with his assassination. The reverse of this coin, like several others in this selection, features implements used in religious rites.
At the center is a jug. To the left are the *simpulum* (ladle) and *lituus* (the augur’s staff). To the right are the *aspergillum* (a whisk used to sprinkle liquid) and an unidentified object.

18. *Denarius of Bruttia Crispina with a Profile of Bruttia Crispina and a Figure of Concordia* (Rome)
cia. 180-183 CE
¾ inch diameter, silver
CL.N. 037

The figure shown on the reverse is the goddess Concordia, the personification of agreement and harmony, especially martial harmony. To the present-day scholar this motif might seem an ironic choice since the imperial couple had no children and the empress was banished to the island of Capri by her husband Commodus in 188 on an unsubstantiated charge of adultery. She was killed in about 191-193, though the murderer and motive remain unidentified.

19. *Denarius of Julia Avita Mamaea with a Profile of Julia Avita Mamaea and a Figure of Venus* (Rome)
cia. 222-235 CE
¾ inch diameter, silver
CL.N. 040

Julia Avita Mamaea served as regent for her son, the Roman emperor Severus Alexander. They were murdered together by their own disaffected troops while on campaign in Germany in 235. Their deaths ushered in decades of turmoil and violence. The obverse appears to bear the figure of the goddess Venus, holding a staff in one hand and an infant, possibly meant to be her offspring Cupid, in the other.
20.  
*Nummus of Gaius Galerius Maximianus with a Profile of Galerius and a Figure of a Youth* (Rome)  
ca. 305-311 CE  
1 inch diameter, bronze  
CL.N. 045

Galerius served with and then succeeded Diocletian as senior emperor of the eastern Roman Empire. He is remembered for his fierce intolerance of Christianity, a stance he abandoned on his deathbed. The reverse features the figure of a nude youth who appears to be holding a cornucopia, or horn of plenty.