A Bronze Coin from Eleusis in the Kelsey Museum

Eleusis, Greece, second half of the fourth century BCE
Coin
Bronze with dark greenish and brown patina, Diam. 1 cm;
Thickness 0.2 cm; Weight 3.32 g
Gift from the family of Dr. Abram Richards (after 1884),
Kelsey Museum 26837

A group of 1,205 ancient coins from the collection of Dr. Abram Richards (1822–1884) was donated to the University of Michigan in 1884 (typescript catalogue 1897); 856 of them eventually became part of the Kelsey Museum collection (typescript catalogue 1974).¹ This essay focuses on a single coin from Eleusis from that collection. One side of the coin depicts a male seated on a winged car drawn by two serpents; in his right hand he holds two ears of grain. The other side shows a pig standing on some thin lines, most likely a bundle of twigs, to judge from better preserved parallels. Above the pig, barely legible, can be read Λ, Υ, Σ—part of ΕΛΕΥΣ (Eleusis). Below the bundle of twigs is a bull’s head. What is the meaning behind these images, and what were such coins used for?

Eleusis, some 21 kilometers west of Athens and close to the sea, is now mainly known for the remains of a major sanctuary of Demeter and Kore. The sanctuary was excavated continuously between 1882 and the 1950s. On the basis of unpublished material from these excavations, Michael Cosmopoulos (2003) argues that the earliest ritual activities at the site can be attested as early as the Late Bronze Age. Few facts about the Eleusinian rituals mentioned in ancient literary sources are known for certain. Some ancient authors refer to nocturnal rituals, watched only by initiates, while fragments of inscriptions and a sacrificial calendar found at the site illuminate specific activities at certain points in its history. The festival of the mysteria took place once a year in the autumn month Boedromium. According to the later Roman writer Plutarch, the mystes (participant in the festival) bathed in the nearby sea together with a piglet before sacrificing the animal in honor of Demeter and Kore in their sanctuary. One of the better preserved marble reliefs from Eleusis, dating to the second half of the fourth century BCE (thus almost contemporary with the Kelsey Museum

¹ I thank Robin Meador-Woodruff and Sebastián Encina of the Kelsey registry for information and access to the typescript catalogues.
show Demeter with a scepter and a phiale and Kore holding a torch and an ear of wheat, while three servants lead a sacrificial piglet to an altar (van Straten 1995, 78 and fig. 81).

The sacrifice was followed by a purification ceremony. Bundles of branches, perhaps like the ones seen on the Kelsey Museum coin, were swung to the rhythm of music (Burkert 1985, 287). Each mystes was escorted by a mystagogos, who led him into the sanctuary. Clinton (1993, 113 and fig. 114) argues that pits in front of a large architectural structure, supported by a roof held up by interior columns, were used as megara, into which the piglets were thrown; when excavated, two of the pits were found to contain animal bones. In a second festival called the Thesmophoria, at the same place but held months later, women called bailers went down into these pits, fetched up the rotten remains of the piglets, and piled them onto altars. After these ceremonies, local inhabitants took the remains to mix with their grain seed before sowing, in order to render it more fertile.

Aside from the obvious visual parallels, what was the relation of coins like the Kelsey Museum example to these rituals? Eleusis was the only deme (township) of Attica that apparently had the right to coin money, but its coinage has never been studied thoroughly. Eleusis occupied a favored status with respect to Athens, which may relate to its rights to coinage. All Eleusian coins were made of bronze and of comparatively small value. The largest number of these coins were found in the sanctuary itself (Cavaignac 1908). Head believed that the coins were issued only to meet the requirements of the festival of the Thesmophoria; Babelon (1901–1932, 3:127–141) further argued that the coins were to be thrown by the initiates to the crowd lining the bridge of the river Cephisos. Mylonas (1961, 222–223), in the most detailed study of Eleusis based on the archaeological evidence, treated the coins as part of a general survey of the art of Eleusis but did not further explain their use.

The strong link with Athens suggests that the Eleusinian mysteria became so popular largely because of the unique

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2 Cavaignac (1908, esp. 79–80) distinguished five series of coins struck at Eleusis starting in 403 BCE, when the city became independent of Athens. According to his theory, the coins were issued with brief interruptions until the first century BCE. In contrast, Head (1911, 391; 1963, ix) argued that the privilege of coinage was given only by the Athenians, because of the sacred character of the sanctuary of Demeter and Kore, but that it was limited to only a short period in the second half of the fourth century BCE. This date relies on stylistic comparisons with contemporary bronze coins from Athens itself.

3 If the dates for the minting suggested by Babelon and Head are correct, the coins were highly valued in much later periods, since one has been found in coin hoards in Attic burials dating from ca. 140–130 BCE (Thompson et al. 1973, 44–45, nos. 280, 282).
position of Athens in Greek literature and philosophy (Burkert 1985, 285). As Burkert points out, the celebration of the festivals for Demeter and Kore was at one time in the hands of two local families, the Eumolpidai, who provided the hierophant, and the Kerykes, who provided a torch-bearer and sacred herald.

The seated male figure in the winged chariot on the obverse of the coin has been interpreted as Triptolemos, a local deity known from inscriptions at Eleusis and in various cities of Asia Minor (Schwarz 1987). A temple of Triptolemos at Eleusis is mentioned by the second-century CE traveler Pausanias (Paus. 1.38.6). But images of Triptolemos had already appeared on vase paintings in the middle of the sixth century BCE and on a relief from Eleusis dating to the fourth century BCE.

The Eleusinian fertility cults continued to be celebrated until the late fourth century CE, when the sanctuary was overrun by the Goths. The coins from Eleusis, found in museums all over the world, hold great potential for future studies since the fact that sanctuaries in ancient Greece had the right to mint their own coinage has never been studied systematically.

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Works Cited


