A Silver Stater from Metapontum, Italy, in the Kelsey Museum

Metapontum, Italy, mid–late sixth century BCE
Silver stater
Silver, Diam. 28.8 mm
Kelsey Museum 1991.2.27

Ancient coins were more than just money. They carried messages that unadorned weights of metal never could, announcing the origin of the coin and the identity of the people who made it. Adopted in mainland Greece in the early sixth century BCE from the Near East, coinage spread quickly westward, where the cities of Magna Graecia, in southern Italy and Sicily, began producing their own coins sometime in the mid-sixth century BCE. This silver coin from Metapontum is one of the earliest such coins, and it has a number of unusual features, reflecting the complex identity of the city that produced it.

The early coins of Magna Graecia were not like those of mainland Greece, which had two different relief images on the obverse and reverse. Instead, the first coins minted around the same time by the cities of Metapontum, Croton, and Sybaris, all on the Ionian Coast of Italy, were made with the unique incuse technique (Rutter 1997, 17). This technique places the same central image in relief on the obverse and aligned in negative on the reverse, creating an effect that looks almost as if the coin were stamped with an embossed seal. This is, however, clearly not how the coins were made. Upon close examination, what appear to be identical images on the obverse and reverse reveal their differences in the small details: on our coin, the size and shape of the dots in the circular border, the shapes of the individual kernels, and the legend MET on the obverse, to the left of the ear of grain. These indicate that both sides were fashioned separately, but with great attention to detail, to keep them looking like the same image.

The origin of this unusual design is difficult to pinpoint (Rutter 1997, 18–19). It served no practical purpose in facilitating the stacking of coins, since even with matching images in relief and negative, irregularities would have hindered this method of storage. It has been suggested that Pythagoras, who lived in all three of the cities that pioneered incuse coins and died in Metapontum itself, introduced the technique in “an
attempt to realize in concrete form a confrontation of oppos-ites that was characteristic of the Pythagorean system of thought” (Rutter 1997, 18). Despite the poetic appeal of this suggestion, it seems highly unlikely, considering that the incuse technique appears to have been adopted about twenty years before Pythagoras made it to southern Italy (19). It also cannot have been borrowed from anywhere else, as the technique is unique to these cities (19).

A local explanation for the use of this unusual technique must surely be found, but perhaps the explanation need not be too complicated. Since the use of coins generally was at such an early stage at this point, the idea of making them all according to a uniform pattern—with a profile head of a ruler on one side and a scene or other symbol on the reverse—had not yet been developed. Thus, this incuse technique can be seen as simply a local style, rather than an active and pointed rejection of a model, since such a model did not yet exist.

This view also removes the need to explain the unique standard employed by these cities (a stater is just over 8 g, unlike the Corinthian standard of 8.6 g), and the choice of types that we find in southern Italy and Sicily generally, which are “unique in the Greek world for the richness and variety of their depictions of elements of the natural world” (Rutter 2000, 73). Without a model to reject, these features require less explanation. The cities of Magna Graecia, generally described as Greek colonies, show their independence from the trends of mainland Greece in numerous ways,¹ and their unusual coin types fit into this pattern.

The distinctive types on coins serve to identify the city of origin (Rutter 1997, 22). Why did Metapontum choose to represent itself with an ear of grain? The ear of grain on this and all coins of Metapontum has been variously identified as barley or wheat, and on the basis of visual evidence alone, it is impossible to narrow the definition down further.² Both types of grain were grown in the territory of Metapontum (Carter 1990, 419–421), as well as in the surrounding areas, though the choice of an ear of grain as the symbol of the city is unique among nearby cities. Though it may seem easy to explain this choice as “symbolic of the wealth that the city derived from arable farming on the plains of the lower Bradano and Basento rivers, and of the goddess Demeter who presided over the production of such wealth” (Rutter 1997, 28), it is hard to see

¹ See, for example, Sheppard 1995 on burial practices in Sicily.
² BMC and SNG refer to it as an ear of barley, as does Rutter (1997; 2000). Holloway (1978; 1998) avoids labeling it as either but refers to it simply as “grain” throughout his work. The accession cards for Metapontine coins in the Kelsey are also inconsistent, calling it barley (KM 79131, 91.2.27, 91.2.28) or wheat (KM 91.2.29).
why similar symbols were not chosen by the surrounding cities, which had comparable agricultural potential.

When considered in context, there may be another way of explaining this choice of coin type. Many of Metapontum’s neighbors used coin types that were linked to their names: Poseidon with his trident (Rutter 1997, 31), Heraclea using the head of Hercules (46), while Selinum took the celery plant (selina) as its symbol (102), and Himera, symbolized by a cock, was likely playing on the word for dawn (hemera) (106). Similarly, the aural similarity between “Metapontion” and the Greek word for autumnal (metoporinos) may suggest this coin type is another name play, making the link between the harvest and the city’s name, especially as both words could be represented by the common abbreviation MET, which is inscribed on this coin. Whatever the origin, the ear of grain maintained its status as the symbol of the city for centuries, down through the end of coin production at Metapontum around 280 BCE.

This beautifully simple coin embodies some of the interesting problems raised by south Italian manifestations of Greek culture. Though it deviates from “norms” with respect to design, weight, and choice of symbol, these differences may all make sense in the context of the coin’s limited circulation in Magna Graecia and can help illuminate the economic and symbolic worlds to which the inhabitants of Metapontum belonged.

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Works Cited


