

# CELESTOR

*The* as *Artist*

The inspiring designs and sculptural excellence of 10 noteworthy Greek coins leave little doubt that the die-engravers were true craftsmen.

**T**HE COMPLIMENTARY STATEMENT that someone is an “artist” is made so often that it practically has no meaning. However, numismatic scholars agree that the art of coinage—not all of it, but certain ancient issues—is enough to make one stop and take a second look. Wrote Charles Seltman in *Masterpieces of Greek Coinage* (1949):

Many a book will talk to its readers of the *major* art of sculpture and the *minor* arts of engraving, carving, and chasing. For any ancient Greek, these two comparative adjectives imperatively changed places.

Author G.K. Jenkins noted in *Ancient Greek Coinage* (1972) that it was quickly apparent to the Greeks that

the nuggets of metal which were to serve as coins could be brought alive with truly sculptural forms. It was in fact the opportunity to create an entirely new class of object which had not existed in the older Near Eastern civilizations of Egypt, Babylon, and elsewhere.

In *Roman Imperial Coinage* (Volume 1, 1943), authors Harold Mattingly and Edward A. Sydenham commented on the impact of Greek coinage:

For its technique and mode of expression, Roman art was unquestionably largely dependent on the Greek, and it will scarcely be maintained that in these respects the art of Rome ever reached the high standard of her predecessor.

Coins exhibiting great beauty and attention to detail were produced throughout the ancient Greek world; however, the greatest concentration of numismatic art was in southern Italy, starting around 535 B.C. Over the course of a couple generations, the art form declined, but blossomed in Sicily about a century later and for a similar duration.

The creation of art—and beautiful coinage—clearly requires artists. Unlike the vast majority of ancient Greek coinage designers, some great Sicilian craftsmen signed their works. Among them were Euainetos, Eukleidas, Eumenes, Herakleidas, Kimon and Polycrates. Beyond those whose artists are known, a few unsigned works—the Naxos *tetradrachm*, with its single die, and the unique, incuse coinage of southern Italy—invite speculation about their conception.

Here, I would like to present 10 striking examples of the ancient coiner’s art: two incuse specimens from southern Italy attributed to Pythagoras; the Naxos tetradrachm by the “Aitna Master”; and seven coins (or closely related issues) signed by their engravers.

PHOTO: JOHN NEBEL/ROBERT B. KELLEY

*Pythagoras' father, Mnesarchos, was a gem carver. Pythagoras likely was trained as such, and could have designed the coins and cut the dies.*

### Pythagoras: Engraver or Overseer?

Incuse coinage sprang up in the Greek city-states of Kroton, Metapontum, Poseidonia, Sirinian Pyxus, Sybaris and Tarentum slightly after the mid-6th century B.C. It was unlike any coinage made before. Although some previous issues were struck with incuse reverse punches, such as those produced in Asia Minor 50 to 100 years earlier, they did not have the spread flan or an incuse reverse that closely followed the obverse. As an approximate mirror of the obverse, the reverse punch accentuated the relief of the opposite side. Thanks to the effectively corrugated surface, the coins were rigid, despite that the flans were very thin.

Perhaps the coins were designed in this manner so that cities might overstrike them to keep them from leaving the local area or to make the issues more interesting, beautiful and unique. Some coinage was overstruck because native silver was not readily available for the production of money.

Making coins in this form required great deliberation, as a good deal of metal had to be cut away from the reverse die, and the dies had to be carefully aligned during striking, as a clash might break one or both.

Undoubtedly, an inventive mind was responsible for this coinage. The pieces are as unusual and beautiful as they are arresting, practical and long-lasting. The candidate proposed by some scholars is Pythagoras, who certainly was inventive and coincidentally moved from Samos to southern Italy about the time the incuse coinage appeared. Interestingly enough, Seltman proposed that a small coinage in Calymna with incuse design elements could have given Pythagoras the idea, crediting an unknown celerator with the origin of the practice; however, Ute Wartenberg's 1998 research revealed that the Calymna coins post-dated Pythagoras' product.

Seltman wrote that Pythagoras' father, Mnesarchos, was a gem carver. Pythagoras likely was trained as such, and could have designed the coins and cut the dies. Seltman developed a chronology (abbreviated below) to support his proposition:



**PYTHAGORAS**  
Sybaris, AR nomos (c. 540-519 B.C.),  
8.46g, 29.3mm.

sarchos, was a gem carver. Pythagoras likely was trained as such, and could have designed the coins and cut the dies. Seltman developed a chronology (abbreviated below) to support his proposition:

- 558 B.C.** Pythagoras is 50 years old.
- 550 B.C.** The City of Siris is destroyed before issuing coins.
- 538 B.C.** Pythagoras is in Amasis, Egypt.
- 536 B.C.** Pythagoras returns to Samos.
- 535 B.C.** Pythagoras, age 73, leaves Samos for Kroton; Kroton, Sybaris and Metapontum strike their first coins.
- 530 B.C.** Sirinian Pyxus produces its first coinage.
- 520 B.C.** Poseidonia releases its first coins.



▲ **PYTHAGORAS AT THE SCHOOL** of Athens, as depicted in a 1509 fresco by Stanza della Segnatura.

ILLUSTRATION: WIKIPEDIA.ORG

COIN PHOTOS: JOHN NEBEL

*The coins are simple, geometrically balanced, structurally strong and perplexing. The bull seems to be looking at itself and its other self.*

N.K. Rutter, author of *Greek Coinages of Southern Italy and Sicily* (1977), disagrees, believing the coinage was produced earlier and predates Pythagoras' arrival in Kroton. "This theory of Pythagoras' personal influence on the introduction of the technique has its attractions, but cannot overcome a fundamental chronological difficulty. ... the introduction of the technique by the Achean cities seems to predate the arrival by Pythagoras in southern Italy by a matter of twenty years." But, Rutter's argument is not necessarily stronger than Seltman's, as making a small miscalculation in a 2,500-year-old date would not be terribly difficult. Author Leonid Zhmud also was critical, writing in *Pythagoras and the Early Pythagoreans* (2012) that "the story of Mnesarchus being an engraver of stones or seals (δακτυλιογλύφους) was invented by Hermippus." If true, this also does not support Seltman's hypothesis.

Seltman does not address how a 70-year-old Pythagoras, with his eyesight likely deteriorating, could possibly cut dies. Indeed, perhaps the mathematician was not personally involved in their creation. However, an innovative person conceptualized this coinage, which had never been seen before nor after in ancient Greece. That an associate or student performed the engraving, guided by the master's ideas, is a possibility.

The two illustrated examples of "Pythagorean" coinage feature a bull. Rutter writes, "Bulls on Greek coins, and there are many such among the coinages of Italy and Sicily, often represent a

river-god in tauriform guise." A bull is like a river—docile at times, but when it rages, it is dangerous to life and property. Historically, the City of Sybaris was situated between two rivers, the Crathis and the Sybaris. The location of Sirinian Pyxus is a mystery, and Seltman thought that survivors from the destruction of Siris in 550 B.C. could have founded that town.

The coins are simple, geometrically balanced, structurally strong, and perplexing. As illustrated here, the bull seems to be looking at itself and its other self. An ancient Greek with two coins in hand, flipping one or the other, would soon recognize this. Each of the cities in Magna Graecia that produced mirror-like incuse coinages had its own type, every one reflecting the mystery behind the town's founding.

### **The "Aitna Master"**

The idea that the famous tetradrachms struck at Aitna and Naxos shared a creator was proposed in 1883 by Baron L. de Hirsch de Gereuth in *The Numismatic Chronicle and Journal of the Numismatic Society*: "The style and workmanship of the head on our coin bears a striking likeness to that of the head of Dionysos on the tetradrachms of Naxos figured in the *Numismatic Chronicle*." This premise survives today, and the opinion among many numismatists is that the artist who engraved the die for the unique Aitna tetradrachm, the "Aitna Master," also produced the single known die for the Naxos tetradrachm.

Rutter concurred, stating, "The same artist

at work in both? It seems likely." R. Ross Holloway, in *The Archaeology of Ancient Sicily* (1991), agrees, noting, "The second masterpiece of the Aetna Master belongs to the next decade and was created for the Naxians." Writes Colin M. Kraay in *Archaic and Classical Greek Coins* (1976), "The type of the obverse, a head of Dionysus, was traditional at this center of viticulture, and



**PYTHAGORAS**  
Sirinian Pyxus, AR nomos (c. 530 B.C.), 7.84g, 29.5mm.



**THE "AITNA MASTER"**

Naxos, AR tetradrachm (461 B.C.),  
16.33g, 26.2mm.



*Dionysus' subtle expression is intriguing: not a smile, not neutral. He is not to be trifled with, and yet his image suggests a sense of wonderment.*

here is splendidly rendered by a hand, which some have thought to be the same as that of the later Aetna tetradrachm.”

Finally, François de Callataÿ, in his 2010 article “Brussels tetradrachm of Aitna: possibly the most precious ancient coin of the world,” says, “The ‘Master of Aitna’ does not escape this statement..., even if he has been credited with two of the most spectacular issues of Greek coinages (Aitna and Naxos).” His well-reasoned analysis establishes the generally observed similarities between the two coins: a striated beard invading a perfectly circular border; a well-defined muscular structure on the reverse figure; the image of Silenus, an unlikely subject on a Greek coin; unusually good workmanship; and a similar, overall feel.

However, two differences bothered de Callataÿ: 1) the eye on the Aitna coin has an inscribed iris, while that on the Naxos coin is simply a blob; and 2) the legend on the former has dotted intersections between the strokes in the letters (the latter does not), and the form of the letter *nu* (N) is different. He resolves this with the theory that the two coins had a common designer, but not engraver, and that the “Aitna Master” was the designer of the two dies.

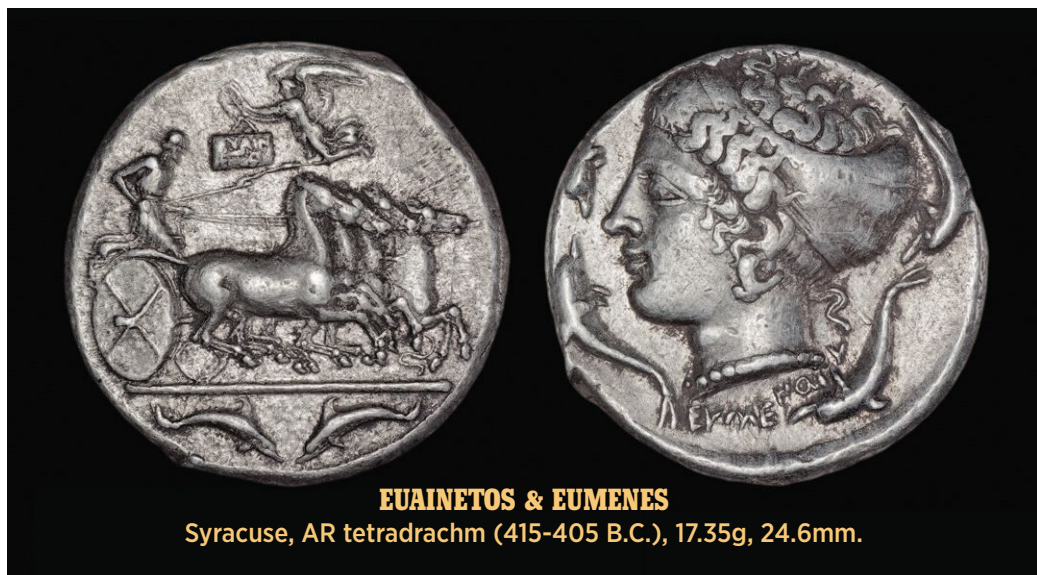
The Naxos tetradrachm depicts the head of a bearded and mustachioed Dionysus facing right, wearing an ivy wreath and with his hair tied in back. The coin’s border of dots is unconventionally pierced by his beard and hair. Dionysus’ subtle expression is intriguing: not a smile, not neutral. He is not to be trifled with, and yet his image suggests a sense of wonderment.

The reverse is an ithyphallic figure of Silenus sitting, leaning slightly, braced by his left arm and gazing drunkenly, even longingly, at the cup of wine he holds. This accurate and dramatic portrayal of the human form in a complex position, clearly executed on a small scale, is quite striking.

That any examples of this coin exist today indicates what the ancient Greeks and later finders must have thought of it. By way of comparison, about 1 in 40,000 Athenian “owl” tetradrachms survive. Using that figure as an average survival rate for an ancient Greek coin, and knowing that the number of Naxos dies probably is one and that the reverse die broke in the early stages of use, the 80+ Naxos survivors represent an extreme event that could only have occurred with a coin that was highly regarded and thereby protected.

### **Euainetos & Eumenes: Breakthroughs in Chariot Racing**

From very late in the 6th century to early in the 5th century B.C., images of chariot racing, a sport favored by the aristocracy, were fixtures on Syracusan silver tetradrachms and *dekadrachms*. Some of the earlier coins bore experimental images of



horses rearing in unison (as might be seen at the circus) before the designs became more static, depicting chariot “walking” more than “racing.”

Then, rather abruptly, engravers appear to have discovered a more realistic and artistic approach. One coin stands out because of the bold way in which it was signed: Nike, the winged goddess of Victory, carries a tablet with the engraver’s name, Euainetos, as if declaring him the champion. One can conclude that the artist was proclaiming he spearheaded the stylistic change. It is not surprising that other engravers followed suit. At times, they must have competed for jobs, and those producing the best coins



**KIMON**

Syracuse, AR tetradrachm (405-400 B.C.), 17.17g, 25.2mm.



**KIMON & POLYCRATES**

Akragas, AR tetradrachm (407 B.C.), 17.20g, 26.5mm.

remained employed. “Although it is very likely that die-cutters were skilled artisans, much in demand and thus working for different employers at a time when mints were not active on a regular basis, modern scholars have generally preferred to ignore this basic assumption,” writes de Callataÿ in his 2004 article “On the Style of the ‘Aitna Master.’” Author Lauri O. Th. Tudeer lists Soison, Eumenos, Eukleidas, EV, Eumenes and Euainetos as signing dies before this coin’s issue, with others continuing thereafter. Based on de Callataÿ’s die-production chart, there would have been more die-cutters than work.

The coin’s reverse also is signed, this time by Eumenes. For this side, he created a portrait of the water nymph Arethusa, a subject commonly paired with the racing-chariot obverse. Eumenes’ design is good, but the next coin, by Kimon, represents true artistic excellence.

**Kimon’s Disastrous Wreck**

With 60 light, wooden chariots thundering around an oval track, each pulled by four charging horses, the charioteer risked his life. He wore no protection, and wrecks were common. Many coins portray these races. Syracuse alone produced more than 20 dies a year, but the Kimon die is the only one known to depict a wreck. The obverse portrays Nike crowning a victorious charioteer, who is reining in his horses as they trample the wheel of an opponent’s chariot, whose driver likely was severely injured or crushed to death. Contrapuntally, the exergue below pictures a barley ear, representing Syracuse’s placid, rich fields of grain. (One can imagine a warm breeze rippling the stalks.)

The reverse tells a different story. It depicts a beautiful Arethusa as if she is underwater. Dolphins swim alongside and behind, and her hair wafts in the current above. (The artist’s signature

*Unfortunately for Akragas, it was not victorious. Its fate more closely resembled that of the hapless rabbit.*

“K” appears below Arethusa’s sphenone.)

The attendant of the goddess Artemis, Arethusa sought relief from the hot sun in Elis (near the site of Olympic chariot racing) and removed her garments to bathe in a clear, cool stream. The stream, Alpheus, struck with desire for the maiden, took human form and pursued her. Arethusa ran frantically, calling out in distress to Artemis. The goddess enveloped her in a dense fog so Alpheus could not see her. The panicked Arethusa started to sweat and transformed into a stream, which Artemis directed through the earth, under the sea and to Syracuse, where Arethusa bubbled to the surface as a fountain on the small island of Ortygia.

### **Kimon & Polycrates: A Coin & Its Big Brother**

Illustrated on the adjacent page is a tetradrachm whose engravers also produced and signed dekadrachms, thereby allowing identification of the artists. Seltman obtained and arranged enlarged photographs of tetradrachms struck from all the known Akragas dies, and compared them to photos of signed dekadrachms. He found one of the latter in the historic Lloyd Collection, with a reverse eagle’s wing feather signed ΠΟΛΥΚΡ, and another with an obverse chariot signed ΚΙΜΟΝ that match the two sides of this tetradrachm.

The City of Akragas was preparing for war in 407 B.C. (the probable date of this coin) and anticipating victory. On the obverse, Nike drives a war chariot; and the city’s name is proclaimed as victor on a tablet above, hanging on a “peg” imaginatively worked into the coin’s design. The reverse also has a warfare theme: Agamemnon and Menelaus, symbolized by two eagles, are killing a pregnant rabbit, Iphigenia, hoping the sacrifice will bring a favorable wind.

Unfortunately for Akragas, it was not victorious. Its fate more closely resembled that of the hapless rabbit, for the city was destroyed by the Carthaginians in 406 B.C. Nevertheless, the martial nature of the obverse and literary analogy of the reverse present an optimistic and unforgettable prelude to a disaster.

### **Eukleidas’ Ambitious Design**

An unsigned *drachm* by Eukleidas also modeled on a higher denomination—a tetradrachm—is signed EYK ΛΕΙΑ Α on the bowl of Athena’s helmet. The tetradrachm has a three-quarter-facing head of

Athena (in a treatment similar to the drachm’s obverse image), with a triple-crested helmet and palm decoration on the bowl. Convincingly, the drachm, with the signature “EY,” is die-linked by the reverse image of the warrior Leukaspis, an Athena drachm type.

The tetradrachm followed the Syracusan tradition, with a quadriga on the obverse and the deity on the reverse. The high-relief reverse die could not stand the stress and soon broke; examples of these coins survive, evidently struck with a fresh, but broken, die.

The drachm, and a later Arethusa tetradrachm by Kimon, bear the facing head on the obverse, whose die is more protected. Catalogs and lit-



**EUKLEIDAS**  
Syracuse, AR drachm (405-400 B.C.),  
4.10g, 17mm.



**HERAKLEIDAS**

Katane, AR tetradrachm (405-403/2 B.C),  
16.93g, 24.6mm.



*The god peers out with a mysterious and penetrating gaze,  
his thoughts nothing a mere mortal could comprehend.*

erature refer to this head as Athena, but it probably is not. The dolphins swimming around and floating curls are characteristic of a water nymph, and Arethusa was the traditional deity on Syracusan coins. It is troublesome to refer to her as Athena, and others agree. In her 1979 book, *The Development of the Facing Head Motif on Greek Coins and Its*

*Relation to Classical Art*, Katherine Patricia Erhart wrote, "Contrary to honoring the tutelary goddess of the defeated Athenians, Eukleidas may have put Athena Parthenos' triple-crested helmet on Arethusa as a sign of Athens' defeat by Syracuse." In *Greek Coins* (1933), Charles Seltman reached a similar conclusion, stating, "Eukleidas, greatly daring, offered an affront to Athena herself." One could fantasize that Athena intervened and caused the tetradrachm dies to break, but chose not to bother with the small, insignificant drachm.

The Eukleidas drachm and tetradrachm were the first Syracusan coins on which the artist attempted a facing or three-quarter-facing head, and it was both interesting and irreligious to mock Athens in this manner. The face shows great sensitivity, and the decoration on the helmet is very finely executed; however, the helmet is cocked somewhat to the left, as if Eukleidas had trouble fitting it into such a small space. On the reverse, the naked warrior lunges forward with his spear, shield and sword, a crested helmet upon his head. Overall, it is an ambitious design for a small coin.

### **Herakleidas & His Terrifying Apollo**

The engraver Herakleidas was more astute than Eukleidas in his treatment of a city's tutelary deity. With marvelous artistry, he honored Apollo on the obverse of a tetradrachm, but unlike Eukleidas' dies, his remained intact. The god peers out with a mysterious and penetrating gaze, his thoughts nothing a mere mortal could comprehend. Indeed, Apollo's beauty is almost terrifying.

The reverse is merely excellent; it is both



dynamic and chaotic as Nike (portrayed almost as a Renaissance angel would be in the far distant future) crowns the victor. Herakleidas' signature is on the obverse at the right, mostly off the flan. Gulio Emanuele Rizzo, in his extraordinary 1946 work on Sicilian coinage, was so struck by Herakleidas' coin that he used its image on the frontispiece of his book.

### **Euainetos at the Finish Line**

This tetradrachm likely was struck earlier than Herakleidas' Apollo coin; both were issued by the City of Katane. With this issue, Euainetos again proclaimed himself a winner in the chariot-race design competition. The windblown driver and the angle of the wheel as the chariot rounds the final turn imparts a dynamic sense of movement that other racing scenes lack. Even more amazing is that he fit his design into such a small space. The Apollo portrait on the reverse is impressive, but formal, and lacks the mystery and godliness of Herakleidas' facing head. Dynamic chariot scenes were Euainetos' specialty; he was far more conservative in his renderings of deities.

### **Euainetos' Dekadrachms: Large & Famous**

Several issues of large dekadrachms were produced. In his 1930 reference, *Syracusan Dekadrachms of the Euainetos Type*, Albert Gallatin cataloged 47 obverse dies, both signed and unsigned. The original issue in 412 B.C. commemorated the Syracusan victory over the Athenians in 414 B.C.; coins commemorating the 10th anniversary of the



**EUAINETOS**  
Syracuse, AR dekadrachm (405-400 B.C.),  
42.46g, 34mm.

victory bear a delta ( $\Delta$ ) beneath Arethusa's chin.

To meet popular demand, assistants in Euainetos' workshop produced unsigned dies for the 10th and probably 20th anniversary celebrations. The dekadrachms were too large in size and value for ordinary transactions, so they likely were saved rather than spent, accounting for the many examples known today.

The design of these dekadrachms is conservative when compared to the chariot-race scene on Euainetos' Katane tetradrachm, giving the impression that the engraver's creative energy had subsided and that emphasis was being placed on production. De Callataj estimates a minimum of two weeks was needed to produce a die, although he noted one could be prepared in less. These large dies required a good deal of cutting, and Euainetos' eyesight might have been giving him problems. (Assuming he started engraving at age 18 in 425 B.C., he would have been near 40 in 405 B.C., the upper limit for an engraver, according to Gallatin.) Nevertheless, despite production quotas and diminishing sight, the engraver pro-

duced fine dies; on some, Arethusa is extraordinarily beautiful.

## Conclusion

Animals, fish, gods, goddesses, food, sport, religion, war and the human form—all are captured sculpturally on Greek coinage with great finesse in a very small space. Available to everyone and having a practical use as money, these coins have stood the test of time, surviving millennia and sometimes remaining as pristine as the day they were struck. In a 1905 letter to President Theodore Roosevelt, American sculptor and numismatic artist Augustus Saint-Gaudens described ancient Greek issues as “the great coins (and, you might almost say, the only coins).” Roosevelt heartily agreed.

Why these engravers were inspired to create such coins speaks to the nature of an artist. Plato, their contemporary, provided the answer in his *Symposium*: to make people happy. He described how, over wine, Socrates related to his friends what Diotima, a Mantineaean woman, had told him long before:

Come Socrates, he who loves, loves good things.  
Why does he love them?  
To possess them for himself.  
And what will he have who possesses good things?  
This I can answer more easily, I said. He will  
be happy.

Socrates later revealed a more thought-provoking reason—to achieve immortality through artistry:

Since indeed if you will look to the love of honor among men, you'd be surprised by the unreasonableness of which I've spoken, unless you keep in mind and reflect how strangely disposed men are by Eros to make a name and “lay in store of glory for everlasting time.”

These metallic creations were not accidental. They were deliberate, and some of the artists/celators were proud and certain enough of their talent to let us know who they were. Those who did not—Pythagoras and the “Aitna Master”—were capable and desired the same, but they used other means to achieve immortality. We are familiar with Pythagoras, but the “Aitna Master” remains a tantalizing mystery.

With these coins, today's numismatists and scholars can experience the enjoyment and sense of wonder the ancient Greeks intended 2,500 years ago. And, yes, they make their collectors happy. ■

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