



# THE FIRST PORTRAIT COINS

The kingdom of Lycia might have set a precedent by depicting actual people on its silver issues.

**M**ANY HUNDREDS OF years ago, a numismatic innovation appeared in a totally unexpected place: ancient Lycia. Coins struck there were among the first to depict actual humans—rulers with their own faces, not imaginings based on myth. Two portrait coins (Figures 4 and 5) appeared in the early 4th century B.C. after more than a century of numismatic development and political chaos.

The Lycian civilization was quite old, probably dating back to 1300-1200 B.C. Its foundation is supported by two different accounts. Homer tells the tale of Bellerophon who, mounted on the winged horse Pegasus, killed the fierce Chimera. For this and other deeds, Bellerophon was granted an estate in Lycia (plus the hand of the king's daughter). One of Bellerophon's daughters, Laodameia, impregnated by Zeus,



**FIGURE 1:** This silver coin of Kuprlli (9.7212g) pictures a leaping dolphin bearing a triskele symbol. Within an incuse square on the reverse is a triskele with a griffin's head on one of its legs. Actual Size: 18.3mm

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bore a son, Sarpedon, who as an adult led a contingent of Lycians to fight with the Trojans against the Greeks in the Trojan War. When the Greek Patroclus killed Sarpedon in battle, his father, Zeus, wished to resurrect him, but was overruled by the other gods

who thought it might set a dangerous precedent. Sarpedon was returned to Lycia as a corpse.

The historian Herodotus tells a different story. Highborn Europa's Cretan sons Sarpedon and Minos fought; Sarpedon lost and migrated with settlers to Lycia, which he then founded as a state. In *Dynastic Lycia*, author Antony Keen describes Sarpedon as the Lycian's "King Arthur," their most famous hero. Both he and Bellerophon were revered, and Pegasus made frequent appearances on Lycian coinage. (Numismatist Sydney Noe described 54 of 67 Lycian coins in a small hoard found in 1954, all of which depicted Pegasus facing left.)

Herodotus noted that the Persian general "Harpagus, having subdued Ionia, marched against the Caunians and Lycians, bringing with him, in his own army, the Ionians and Aeolians." Harpagus' army sacked the large town of Xanthus, but the Persians largely left the Lycians alone. Stranger





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▲ A SPECTACULAR ROCK TOMB in Telemessos, one of about 1,000 such structures that survive today, hints at the Lycians' artistic legacy.

still was the freedom granted the Lycians in light of the strategic importance of their sea coast.

According to J.F. Morrison and J.S. Coates in *The Athenian Trireme*, "0.85m from trough to crest, would be about as much as a trieres [a galley with three rows or tiers of oars on each side, one above another] could be expected to survive without being overcome" and "a distance of about

129 sea miles (236 kilometers) was a 'long day's voyage for a trieres under oar.'" Since they were not seaworthy, triremes had to travel close to the coast to be able to run ashore in foul weather, and to beach at night to give the crew rest and sustenance.

Since the 240-kilometer Lycian coastline necessitated this procedure, military travel from Greece or Northern Asia Minor to Syria and Egypt and back was at the mercy of the Lycians. Traders also plied the coast, much to Lycia's advantage. According to Hyla Troxell's *The Coinage of The Lycian League*:

Sea trade and agriculture seem to have been the Lycians' chief sources of livelihood. Timber was a highly important product, but ancient writers also mention wine, fruits, fish, sponges, cattle, and goats—but *no mines* (emphasis added), and nothing exceptional that would explain the rather surprising amount of coin struck in classical times.

Although the Lycian League was Hellenistic, Troxell's trade observations also are applicable to classical Lycia.

To the Greeks, the Lycians were barbarians, since they were not of Greece and had their own language. The written evidence left behind by the Lycians themselves are inscriptions carved into stone monuments and tombs, and coin legends. Aside from these instances, the Lycian language is largely unknown. H. Craig Melchert's *Dictionary of the Lycian Language* contains only about 1,000 words and 400 proper names. Although our understanding of Lycian is limited, the inscriptions and legends give insight into Lycia's system of government.

From coinage, Sir Charles Fellows in *Coins of Ancient Lycia Before the Reign of Alexander* deduced that the Lycians were a "national union of different States." How-

ever, because of the varied, overlapping dynastic coinages and two separate weight standards (eastern and western, occasionally die-linked), it is more likely they were a loose hierarchy of dynasts, each producing its own coinage, at times cooperating or fighting, or both. In *Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum Deutschland* ("Sammlung v. Aulock. Lykien"), more than 30 dynasts or coin-minting locations are listed, and author Antony Keen cites over 60 Lycian settlements or towns.

Even though the Lycians left little trace of their language, their artistic and numismatic legacy is a different story. Lycian coinage, produced from around 540-520 B.C. to 360 B.C. was inventive and fanciful. One prolific coiner, the dynast Kuprlli (r. 480-440 B.C.), produced money depicting boars, lions, winged lions, bulls, winged horses, he-goats, dolphins, eagles, griffins, eyes, sphinxes, youths and the gods Herakles, Hermes, Eros and Zeus Ammon. (By way of comparison, for about 500 years Athenian coinage bore an Athena obverse, owl reverse.)

Aside from the variety of his designs, almost every one of Kuprlli's coins bears one or more examples of a mysterious symbol: the three-sided triskele, a hallmark of Lycian coinage. In *Greek Geometric Art*, Anna Roes firmly maintains that the triskele is a solar symbol. On the obverse of one of Kuprlli's issues (Figure 1), a leaping dolphin sports a triskele; on the reverse in an incuse square is a lone triskele with a griffin's head on one of its legs. A griffin might have been a solar symbol, but a sea creature certainly was not. As such, one can speculate that Kuprlli's triskeles might have been a federation symbol and also signified a solar connection.

To produce their prolific coinage without locally mined silver, Lycians must have used silver obtained in trade. If the metal was in the form of coins, the issues often



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FIGURE 2: This clipped stater (8.5405g) appears to have been overstruck with a legend denoting the dynast of Wexssere.

Actual Size: 15.8 x 23.2mm



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▲ THE LION OF KNIDOS.

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**FIGURE 3:** This late-5th-century silver stater of Kherêi (8.8902g) was minted at Telemessos and clearly shows Greek and Persian influences on the obverse and reverse, respectively.

Actual Size: 19mm

were overstruck. According to Otto Mørholm and Jan Zahle’s article “Coinage of Kuprlli,” “overstrikes are very frequent in Lycian coinage...so well done that the undertype is obliterated beyond recognition.” If necessary, the coin was “cut down to the Lycian weight before striking, a procedure which resulted in irregular flans.” Figure 2 shows a clipped stater, presumably overstruck with the legend  $F\uparrow V\ 5\uparrow P\uparrow$ , representing the dynast Wexssere.

During the period of Kuprlli’s dynasty, which overlapped Wexssere’s and at least 20 other coin-producing dynasts, continuing to about 425 B.C., the Lycians came under the influence of titanic forces. However, they maintained their identity and remained largely independent. In 480 B.C., at the beginning of Kuprlli’s reign, the Lycians once again fought the Greeks. Herodotus reported that as Persian allies and part of Xerxes’ invasion of Greece, “The Lycians furnished 50 ships. They wore breastplates and shin-protectors and had bows of cornel wood and unfeathered arrows, made of reeds, and javelins; and they had a goatskin hung around the shoulders and feathered caps

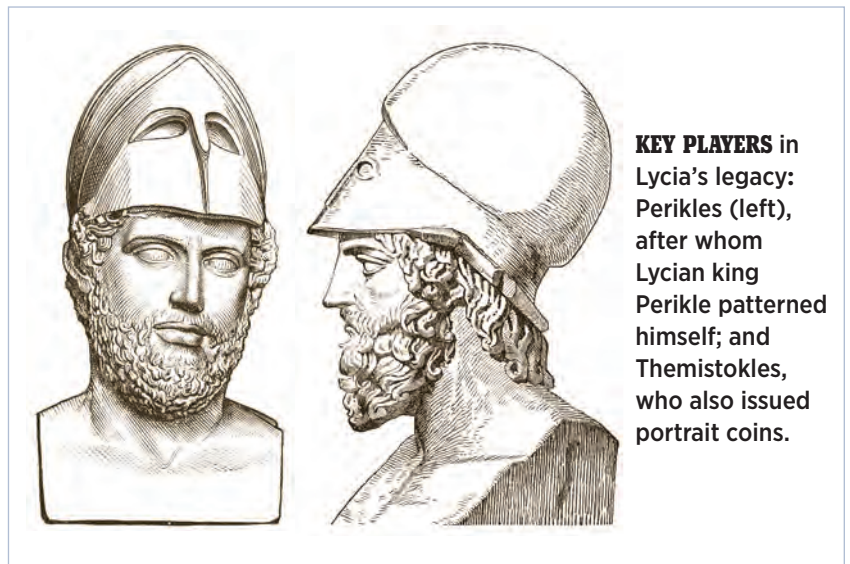
on their heads.”

After Persia’s defeat at the hands of the Greeks, there was a brief period of Spartan influence. However, in the late 470s and early 460s B.C., the Athenian general Kimon marched through Caria and Lycia to “attempt to pre-empt a planned Persian strike against the Aegean,” maintains Keen. Lycia became a protectorate of the Athenians, part of the Delian League, in 446-443 B.C., even paying 10 *talents* tribute to the Athenians, as shown in the tribute lists in Thomas Figueira’s

*The Power of Money.* As the Lycians paid tribute only once, they effectively were more independent than they were under Persian influence.

The historian Thucydides wrote that when Athens attempted to assert its influence in 430 B.C., its forces were brutally dispatched. Figure 3 shows a late-4th-century stater of the dynast Kherêi (410-390 B.C.), minted in Telemessos. The coin’s legend consists of his name,  $[V]\uparrow P\uparrow E$ , and the mint,  $T\uparrow A\uparrow B\uparrow E\uparrow$ . This specimen clearly shows both Greek and Persian elements—Athena with a crested Corinthian helmet on the obverse, and a handsomely executed, Persian-like Herakles wearing a lion skin on the reverse. Lycia was strategically and politically (though not geographically) part of the border between the Greeks and Persians, and its numismatic art reflected the mixture of East and West. Governmentally, the Lycians likely were closer to the Persians due to tradition and proximity, artistically closer to the Greeks, and linguistically independent of both.

Following Kherêi’s coinage, the next two dynasts, Mithrapata (390-370 B.C.) and Perikle (380-360 B.C.), took a further step—coins bearing their own images. Many numismatic scholars, such



**KEY PLAYERS** in Lycia’s legacy: Perikles (left), after whom Lycian king Perikle patterned himself; and Themistokles, who also issued portrait coins.

ILLUSTRATIONS: iSTOCKPHOTO/TRAVELERT16 (PERIKLE) & DUNCAN1890



**FIGURE 4:** The obverse of this Mithrapata stater (10.0357g) bears an image of a lion's scalp, with a triskele below.

Actual Size: 25.5mm

as T.R. Bryce, G.K. Jenkins, W. Schwabacher and K.A. Sheedy, agree that these two coins were indeed portraits.

Figure 4 illustrates the Mithrapata stater. The obverse depicts a lion's scalp similar to that on Samos' coinage, but with a Lycian triskele below; the reverse pictures Mithrapata, bare-headed with his name inscribed around. Similar staters also were produced with a decorative element on the obverse resembling the familiar Knidos lion sculpture, and, in at least one case, the Samos- and Knidos-type obverses shared the same reverse die.

Figure 5 depicts the Perikle stater, which, according to Schwabacher, is one of the greatest Greek coins:

It is significant that such a bold and delicate artistic conception was commissioned here on the outskirts of Greek culture by a completely Hellenized non-Greek ruler and was accomplished by a Greek artist of the highest rank. Doubtless both were conscious of what a unique task they had undertaken; nor did they find a successor in all later Greek coinage.

The three-quarter portrait pictures Perikle with wild hair and soulful, piercing eyes, his visage beaming with emotion. The dolphin on his left symbolizes the

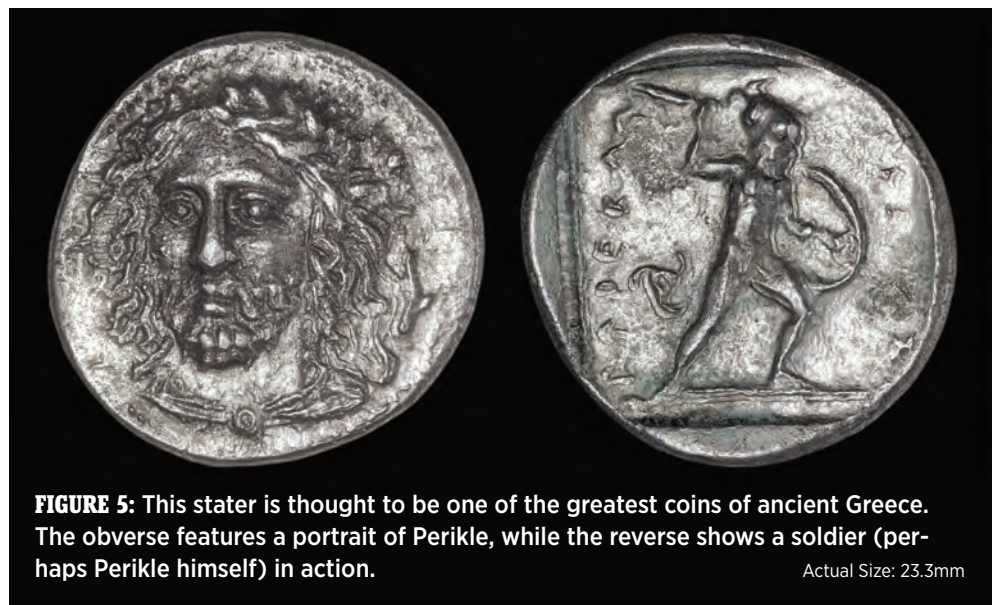
port of Antiphellos, where the coin was minted. Though struck from worn dies, the reverse clearly shows a soldier holding a sword and shield, ready to strike, likely a depiction of Perikle in action. The inscription on the left is Perikle,  $\text{M}\text{P}\text{E}\text{K}\text{A}\text{T}$ , and on the right, Phellos,  $\text{F}\text{T}\text{H}\text{T}\text{I}$ .

Whether the Lycians produced the very first human portraits to appear on coins is difficult to confirm. From the literature, it appears they were first or second. For a long time, it had been assumed that Anatolian satrapal coinage in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. depicted the satraps themselves. A detailed analysis in Elspeth R.M. Dusinberre's "King or God?" argues that the portraits

on the satrapal coinage actually were heroes, not rulers. Colin M. Kraay's *Archaic and Classical Greek Coins* briefly addresses the issue, noting that "the features are not sufficiently individual to be regarded as portraits."

The chief contender for the first portrait coins are Themistokles' issues from Magnesia, his residence after he was given refuge by Persian King Artaxerxes I in c. 460 B.C. Themistokles was sentenced to death in absentia by the Athenians. In Cahn and Gerin's "Themistocles at Magnesia," several fractional issues with an archaic male head are illustrated, a representation rather than a portrait; nevertheless, it could have been intended as Themistokles. In their article "Themistocles Again," Herbert A. Cahn and Dietrich Mannsperger illustrate a *diobol* that is thought to picture Themistokles, but it is quite similar to the portrait of Zeus on a contemporary coin of Calchedon. For his great deeds, Themistokles certainly deserves to be the first person honored with his portrait on a coin. However, I think the prize goes to Lycian coinage—superb and original art from an unlikely source.

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**FIGURE 5:** This stater is thought to be one of the greatest coins of ancient Greece. The obverse features a portrait of Perikle, while the reverse shows a soldier (perhaps Perikle himself) in action.

Actual Size: 23.3mm