

URSA MAJOR

Greek coins tell the tragic tale of a philandering god, his vengeful wife, and an innocent nymph.

In Greek mythology, Callisto was an innocent nymph of great beauty, the favorite member of the retinue of Artemis, a huntress, virgin goddess, and sister of Apollo. Even from far away, Callisto attracted the attention of Zeus, the forever concupiscent and often scheming king of the gods. For this conquest, the randy deceiver transformed himself to look like Artemis to gain access to Callisto and shower her with kisses. When the seduction proceeded beyond the expected affection, Callisto realized she was not in the presence of gentle Artemis, and certainly not when Zeus continued to force himself upon her. Afterwards,

Callisto was so traumatized by the encounter that she fearfully ran from Artemis when she saw her, thinking the goddess was an impostor. Callisto cautiously approached Artemis only when she was surrounded by other nymphs.

It took some time for the formerly virginal nymph to recognize she was pregnant. When Artemis found out, Callisto was barred from bathing with the others and fled from her dear companions. Un-

aware of Zeus's deception, Artemis thought she had been betrayed by her cherished maiden. Ovid, one of the chroniclers of this myth, commented sagely in his *Metamorphoses* that "no favor is of long duration." Although Callisto's misfortune was hard, the nymph would soon face even more serious difficulties.

Callisto bore a son and named him Arcas. Meanwhile, Zeus's perennially jealous wife Hera learned of her husband's infidelity and was bent on revenge. The immortal Zeus was supernaturally strong, and Callisto was a young, inexperienced girl with a newborn. When Hera took revenge, she attacked the weaker of

the two parties, dragging Callisto off by her hair. When the delicate nymph pleaded for mercy, Hera transformed her into a bear with human consciousness so she would remain continuously aware of her plight. Without the ability to speak, the bear could only communicate through grunts, and it was impossible for her to call to Zeus or Artemis.

Coinage shows how the ancients perceived Zeus, Hera, and Artemis. Innumerable portraits of Zeus exist, and he is uniformly portrayed respectfully and nobly. Figure 1 is a portrait of Zeus on a 4th-century B.C. *tetradrachm* of Macedonian King Philip II, Alexander the Great's father. Artemis is another favorite; Figure 2 shows her portrait on a 3rd-century Syracusan 12 *litrae* with her bow ready and loyal dog pointing on the reverse. Unsurprisingly, fewer portraits of



◀ **FIGURE 1.** This *tetradrachm* of Philip II of Macedonia (r. 359-36 B.C.) depicts the laureate head of Zeus on the obverse.

Not Actual Size

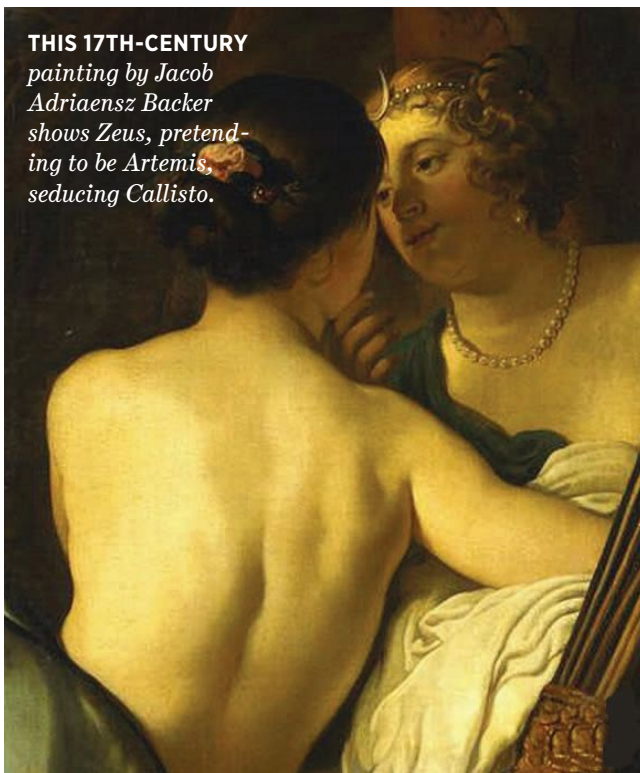


◀ **FIGURE 2.** The reverse of this 5th Republic (214-12 B.C.) 12 *litrae* from Syracuse shows Artemis shooting an arrow with a dog at her feet.

Not Actual Size

THIS 17TH-CENTURY

painting by Jacob Adriaensz Backer shows Zeus, pretending to be Artemis, seducing Callisto.

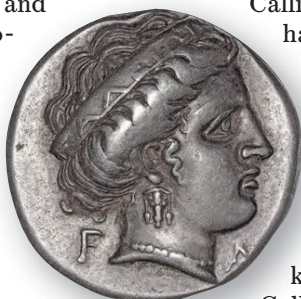


IMAGES: WIKIPEDIA.ORG (PAINTING) & JOHN NEBEL (COINS)

Hera exist; nevertheless, those that do are respectful—after all, she was queen of the gods. Figure 3 shows the mythological matriarch on a *stater* from 4th-century Elis, home of the Olympics.

Callisto's life as a bear was terrifying. Although the nymph was trapped in the body of a beast, she was not a wild animal in spirit, and she feared the fierce creatures of the day and night, including other bears. Hers was a tortured life—Callisto was blessed with beauty that turned out to be a curse, and her loyalty to and love for her goddess provided no help.

Callisto's son, Arcas, fared better. Zeus sent



► **FIGURE 3.** The head of Hera appears on the obverse of this *stater* of Elis, Olympia, struck for the 111th Olympiad in 336 B.C.

Not Actual Size

► **FIGURE 4.** The messenger god Hermes is shown rescuing Arcas on the reverse of this c. 360-50 B.C. *stater* of Arcadia, Pheneos.

Not Actual Size



the messenger god, Hermes, to rescue the abandoned infant. (The rescue is depicted in Figure 4, an extraordinary 4th-century *stater* from Pheneos.) Hermes took the baby to his mother, Maia, another nymph. Ironically, this kept Arcas in the extended family. Unknown to Hera, Zeus had secretly impregnated Maia in the dead of night. Hermes was Zeus and Maia's son and Arcas's half brother.

Two horrifying stories relate the beginning of the end of Callisto's misery. Some say that years later, Callisto's life ended by Arcas's hand. Then a teenage hunter tracking a bear, he did not realize the creature was his own mother crying out to him and stretching out a paw in greeting. Arcas felt threatened and threw his spear, killing Callisto. Others say Callisto met her demise when Arcas was still an infant.

Figure 5 illustrates this version of the myth—the obverse of a 4th-century bronze *dichalkon* from Orchomenos shows the huntress Artemis with a bow from which an arrow has just been released, an alert dog at her side. The re-

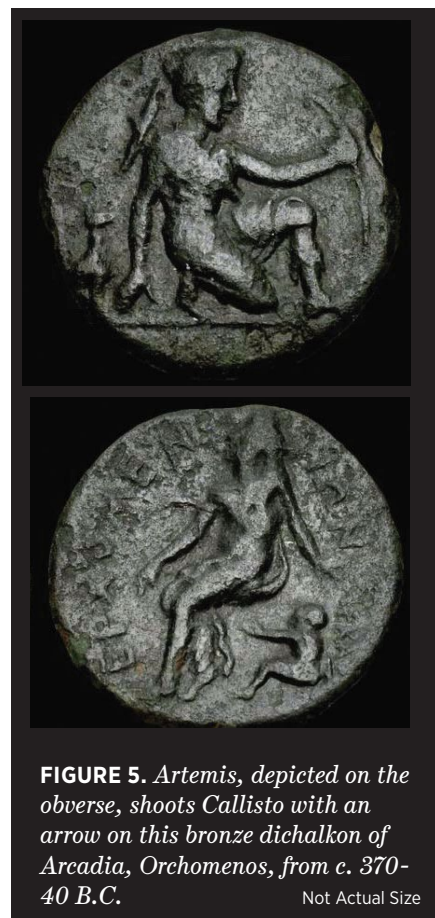


FIGURE 5. Artemis, depicted on the obverse, shoots Callisto with an arrow on this bronze *dichalkon* of Arcadia, Orchomenos, from c. 370-40 B.C.

Not Actual Size

verse shows Callisto with an arrow in her chest and arms outstretched, falling backward. A young Arcas is depicted at her side, stretching out his arms toward his mother in an attempt to save her.

Ultimately, Zeus intervened and transformed Callisto into the constellation Ursa Major, the Great Bear (Figure 6). Hera was enraged that Callisto was now immortalized and that her failed revenge would be visible to mortals for eternity. In an ultimate attempt at revenge, Hera appealed for an intervention by primordial goddess Tethys, one of the Titans. Tethys moved the constellation over the pole so that it would never dip below the horizon as the seasons progressed, preventing Ursa Major from ever bathing in the ocean. It was a Pyrrhic victory for Hera, as the constellation never disappeared from the nighttime view from her home on Mt. Olympus.

ancients@money.org

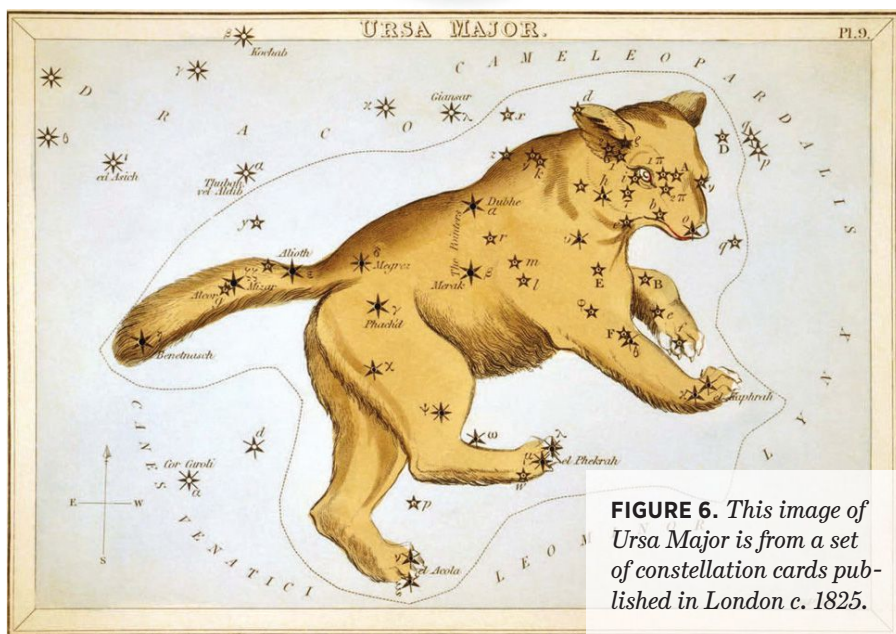


FIGURE 6. This image of Ursa Major is from a set of constellation cards published in London c. 1825.

PHOTOS: JOHN NEBEL (STATERS), WIKIPEDIA.ORG (URSA MAJOR) & CLASSICAL NUMISMATIC GROUP