

# Beyond the Written Content – the deliberate use and omission of coin inscriptions

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## Abstract

The interplay between text and image is at the core of every numismatic study. Quite surprisingly, this phenomenon, especially for the pre-imperial period, has never been studied systematically before. Our contribution aims to understand in what ways text and image could interact on coins and what role they played in shaping the overall message of the coin as an important public mass medium in antiquity. To illustrate the potential of coins for inter-medial investigations, two case studies will be used: *symmachia* coinage from the Classical period in eight cities on the Mediterranean Sea and the meander pattern on Late Classical/Hellenistic coins from eight cities located in the Maeander Valley (Asia Minor).

## 1. Introduction

### History of research: image and text in different media

‘The man who has heard (the historian) thinks afterwards that he can see what is being said.’ (Lucian. *Hist. Conscr.* 51)

The interplay of image and text as two competing and interacting, yet separate, systems was already known in antiquity—this is especially evident in the Greek word ‘graphein’, which means both ‘to draw’ and ‘to write’. This relationship between image and text as two different systems remains one of the core areas of many research disciplines, such as archaeology, art history,

or media and communication studies. The relevance of the relationship, as well as the hierarchy, of image and text is expressed in two turns named the 'linguistic' and the 'iconic' turn, each of which argued for the primacy of one medium over the other (Bachmann-Medick 2016: 245–278). The linguistic turn focuses on grasping and defining the world through language and words. The limits of language and speech correspond therefore with the limits of reality and thought. The iconic turn can be understood as a counterstrategy to the linguistic turn and focuses on the methodological approach to understand the world through images. The iconic turn postulates therefore the intrinsic power of images in order to gain a new access to visual cultures and perceptions (Bachmann-Medick 2016: 246).

As Michael Squire (2009: 15–17) has already pointed out, particularly in ancient studies, strong logocentrism prevails. As part of the linguistic turn, the logocentric approach is especially focused on analysing written sources, which, in contrast to images, allows for unaltered and direct access to understanding the ancient world. As such, he and other researchers tried to bridge the gap between image studies and textual studies by investigating the multifaceted interaction of image and text in antiquity. Of particular note is the anthology 'Art and Inscriptions in the Ancient World' (Newby and Leader-Newby 2007), which examined this interaction using three methodological approaches: 'looking at the word behind an image, the words an image can provoke, and the parallel, yet separate ways in which word and image communicate' (Newby and Leader-Newby 2007: 5). Numismatics did not play a role in Newby and Leader-Newby's (2007) volume, which focused primarily on archaeological sources. This paper will discuss the coins as additional medium which functions as an important carrier of image and text. Due to the reduced size of a coin, both systems must interact or communicate in a very confined space, which will be explored in depth within the following sections.

### **Coins as a medium of communication**

Coins have a dual function as a means of payment and a medium of visual communication, especially of city-related topics. This means that coins utilise a communication model that assumes a sender-receiver relationship: the

sender, in this case the minting authority, consciously decides on the design of the coin in order to convey selected information and messages (Lorenz 2016: 172–183; Martin 2011: 91–98; 2016: 3–8). This deliberate choice means that the selected messages were expected to be understood by the recipients. Conversely, it must also be assumed that coin images were consciously perceived and interpreted by the viewers according to their own knowledge. In some cases, messages were intentionally designed for their expected audience. The practice of the so-called ‘audience-targeting’ includes restricting images to certain denominations or metals so that gold and silver coins, for example, included different images than bronze coins (Hekster 2003; Noreña 2011).

Coin images only rarely depict reality: they adapted especially image contents from other visual media such as sculptures, statues, reliefs etc., but in simplified or condensed versions of the objects that could be found in real life. Moreover, they were often loaded with additional messages. Thus, the images depicted on the coins are like a code with additional visual semantics that had to be deciphered to understand the different layers of meaning (Schierl 2001: 217). Conversely, however, the complexity of coin images also means that the viewer’s level of information is thus crucial for understanding the image—not only in antiquity but also in modern times. The viewer’s knowledge about the meanings of the image must be preserved in order to fully understand it.

### **Text and images on coins**

Inscriptions and images on coins can serve various purposes. The simplest yet most important function of the inscription was the naming of the minting authority. Particularly in the Archaic period of the ancient Greek world, these minting authorities were cities, which would depict their most important deity. By the Classical period, individuals such as kings, dynasts or emperors could also place their name and image on coins, thus giving it a propagandistic function. In addition to the purpose of guaranteeing value, naming the minting authority, and communicating propaganda, the text on coins can also fulfil a fourth primary function related solely to the coin image: explaining the image by ‘naming’ it. This was especially necessary when the visual language was new or not understandable and therefore had to be translated or

explained by text (Ritter 2002: 154–156). Particularly exciting, but currently underrepresented in numismatic research, is the phenomenon of intermediality — the complementary or contrary interaction of image and text that goes beyond the mere explanation or confirmation of the image by text.

One of the few researchers to discuss this phenomenon, Susanne Muth (2006), using imperial coinage as a case study, argued that text and image can interact through the combination of complementary contents. The coin image can be combined with text that has a non-descriptive connection to the image. For example, a denar under Probus shows the emperor in a military dress receiving a wreath from Victoria (fig. 1). Usually, the depiction is supplemented by an inscription that describes the scene, such as VICTORIA or VIRTVS AVGVSTI. However, in this case, the inscription is CONCORDIA MILITVM, which means that the text alludes to the unity of the army, which forms the backbone of the emperor's victories. This concord is therefore the overarching theme of the depiction, the inscription does not describe the image itself. Only by considering the image and the inscription in tandem is it possible to understand this coin's combined message. Susanne Muth (2006: 9–10) suggests the addition of the inscription leads to a clear narrowing and hierarchization of the coin's multilayered interpretations beyond what the image alone could offer. The viewer's possibilities of understanding the image were thus defined by text.

Not only do text and images function as two separate systems, the boundaries between the two are fluid, which means that texts can function as part of the image, such as an inscription on the temple of the Bithynian *koinon* minted in Nikomedeia (fig. 2). Conversely, images can serve as pictograms: the rose on the coins of Rhodes is a pun on the city's name, which means exactly 'rose' in Greek (fig. 3).

Overall, the interaction of image and text has been presented in the modern research landscape in the form of single case studies for the Imperial period but has not yet been systematically investigated (Watson 2021). The Greek period is especially neglected; missing corpora make any systematic investigation difficult and Greek coins are often underestimated in their complexity.

With this in mind we will exemplify the enormous potential of Pre-Imperial coins in terms of the multi-layered interplay between image and text. For this purpose, two examples will be used in the following section: *symmachia* coinage from the Classical period, which depict the famous snake-wrestling young Herakles on the obverse, in use in eight Greek cities; the depiction of a meander pattern on urban coins from the Maeander Valley issued from the Classical period to the 1st century BCE.

## 2. The case studies: Toddler Herakles and Meandric Bends

### The *symmachia* coins

In the Classical period, coins are still free of additional political messages beyond representing the polis as minting authority by naming the city and, in some cases, the magistrates. The coins mainly showed the most important deity of the city on the obverse while the reverse is thematically bound to the obverse. Coins with the ΣΥΝ inscription are the first coins in the Classical period to transmit a political message linked to a political event. The inscription ΣΥΝ is the abbreviation of the word *symmachia*, which was either a temporary or permanent alliance between two or more poleis. The alliance could be defensive or militarily offensive against common enemies.

These so-called ΣΥΝ-coins were minted in eight cities on the Chian standard: Byzantion, Samos, Kyzikos, Lampsakos, Rhodes, Ephesos, Knidos and Iasos. Most of these coins show the same image on the obverse: a toddler fighting snakes combined with the ΣΥΝ inscription (fig. 4). The winner of the fight cannot be inferred from the scene. The reverse, on the other hand, shows the typical coin image and inscription of the respective cities, such as the head of the goddess Aphrodite with the inscription ΚΝΙΔΙΩΝ in Knidos (fig. 5).

The alliance was then communicated via the obverse, while the reverse verifies the city involved. While these coins obviously testify to an alliance between the cities, it remains unclear to this day in what specific historical context these coins were minted and how inscription and image relate to each other.

The city of Rhodes was founded in 408 BCE, so this date is the *terminus*

*post quem* for the coins. In terms of foreign policy, the late fifth century BCE was marked by struggles between the great powers Athens and the Persian Empire against Sparta. The coins have therefore been interpreted both as an alliance against Sparta (Cawkwell 1956, Delrieux 2000: 185–211), against Athens (Cook 1961: 66–72; Fabiani 1999: 118–123; Karwiese 1980; Meadows 2011, 286–293) and as the result of the liberation of the eight cities from Athens or Sparta. These different interpretations, from a political perspective, show that a close examination of the interaction of image and text is an essential step towards understanding these coins.

The scenic depiction of a boy wrestling with snakes shows the myth of young Herakles, who wrestles with two snakes sent by vengeful Hera because her husband Zeus had fathered Herakles with the queen Alkmene (Woodford 1982). However, the boy was already so strong that he could strangle the snakes with his bare hands (Theoc. *Id.* 24).

The myth was not depicted on the coins in as much detail as, for example, in vase paintings, but was represented only by selected and meaningful pictorial elements such as the snakes and the fighting toddler. The identification of this content with the abbreviated pictorial version of the myth can be expected from the ancient viewer, since myths of gods and heroes were generally an important component of everyday life. This layer of interpretation will henceforth be called the ‘first layer’ in this paper.

The next layer connects the myth and the mythical figure with a real political situation. This connection is made only through the inscription. Out of the above mentioned research positions, the most influential interpretation was made by S. Karwiese (1980: 14–15). In his explanatory hypothesis, the eight cities joined forces with Sparta against Athens. The mythical scene of young Herakles’ liberation from the serpents was interpreted as symbolising the liberation of these cities from membership to the Delian League, and thus from Athenian economic and political oppression, thanks to Lysander’s victory against the Athenian fleet at the Hellespont, near Aigospotamoi, in 405 BCE. The choice of the scene with Herakles is explained not only by the act of liberation associated with this historical event, but also by Lysander’s claim to

be descended from Herakles (Plut. *Lys.* 2, 1.).

The image alone testifies to a coalition but does not reveal the reason behind it. The occasion becomes clear only through the inscription. But the concrete historical occasion remains unclear, which leads to the differing interpretations mentioned above. The text is thus the determining factor in the overall interpretation of the coin. But in contrast to the first layer of interpretation, the second layer for now can only reflect the perspective of modern research, since it is not possible to reconstruct whether the ancient viewer interpreted the connection between image, myth, historical event and text in this way. Unlike the first layer, the second layer is not certain, but is merely an explanatory hypothesis. This explanatory hypothesis is strongly influenced by the logocentric view of the world, in which a superior meaning is attributed to words and, as a result, images are seen as subordinated to texts.

From the ancient perspective (sender-receiver model), the minting authority's intention can be reconstructed to the extent that it politicised the coin image by adding an inscription. Whether the ancient viewer understood any part of the political message, particularly the context of the political alliance, as well as the text itself, depended on their level of knowledge of writing and politics. Finally, the question which arises is whether this logocentric way of thinking and interpreting these coins is also to be assigned to ancient viewers or whether it is simply a modern phenomenon.

To summarise, these particular images with these specific inscriptions were selected solely for the purpose of *symmachia*. The purpose-oriented production of these coins together with the active and conscious choice of this image and the political inscription shows that they must be related and were probably not matched randomly.

Even though the subject of the image is apolitical, the political inscription gives it a second layer of interpretation, which eclipses the first layer from the modern logocentric perspective. However, it is not possible to reconstruct from an ancient perspective whether the second layer of interpretation (alignment of myth with reality) was understood by the recipient.

## Coins from the Maeander Valley

The first example has clearly shown how images can be politicised by texts. The second example will show how a pictorial element can be interpreted not only on a visual level, but also as a substitute for text.

The valley of the river Maeander in present-day western Turkey is characterised by its homonymous river Maeander (today: Büyük Menderes). The river was the longest waterway in Asia Minor (around 329 miles), crossing a huge delta plain before entering the sea between Miletus and Priene. Already in antiquity, the Maeander was preeminently famous for its winding course. The orator Dio of Prusa wrote in the second century AD: 'He is by far the most divine and wisest of all rivers, which, turning through a myriad bends, visits, as it were, the best part of Asia.' (Dio. 35.13)

Due to its great importance for the local urban identity, it is not surprising that many cities within the Maeander Valley depicted this significant landscape marker on their coins. The visualisation of water was somewhat problematic due to its fluid nature and was solved in different ways by ancient die-cutters. The most famous imperial motif is the reclining river god on an urn from which water flows. In the case of the Maeander, the decision was made to emphasize the aforementioned and most significant characteristic of the river: its riverbends. To depict these, an abstract key-pattern was chosen, which is still called 'meander' in numerous modern languages. This 'meander pattern' was struck in various forms on the coins of eight cities from the Late Classical / Hellenistic period to the first century BCE. That the abstract pattern in fact visualizes the river can also be proven by the rarity of its appearance on any coin beyond the Maeander valley (Thonemann 2011: 33).

The earliest issues in silver and bronze showing this pattern were minted in Magnesia on the Maeander and can be dated to the fourth century BCE. Due to the importance of the city and a prolific minting phase, Magnesia will serve as a case study in the following sections. The earliest image type initially shows a copy of a type from Priene: the head of Athena on the obverse, and a trident in a meander circle on the reverse (fig. 6). However, Magnesia quickly



switched to its own image type: a horseman with lance on the obverse and a humped butting bull in a meander circle on the reverse (fig. 7).

On smaller coins, the meander pattern is shown not as a circle, but only as a ground line under the bull. The meander pattern remained nearly universal on all emissions down to the mid-second century BCE. In Hellenistic times, Magnesia minted tetradrachms for Alexander the Great as well as for Lysimachos. On both types, the meander pattern serves as a civic blazon indicating the mint Magnesia (fig. 8). On the Seleucid coinage minted in Magnesia the meander pattern appeared only on the bronze coinage of three kings, namely Seleucus I, Antiochus I and Seleucus II (Houghton and Lorber 2002, types 8, 329, 670). The pattern even survived the introduction of so-called wreathed tetradrachms in the 160s BCE (fig. 9).

The obverse of the new types was decorated with a bust of the main deity of the city, Artemis Leukophyrene. On the reverse, Apollo is depicted standing to the left in a wreath with a meander pattern under his feet. The issue of these coins was already discontinued in the 140s BCE, but the pattern was again depicted in the 1st century BCE—probably for the last time—on bronze and silver coins from Magnesia (fig. 10).

While the obverse with Artemis Leukophyrene is already familiar from older pieces, the reverse of the 1<sup>st</sup> century coin issues allows for a political interpretation. It shows a stag to the left on a meander pattern, its head lowered as if grazing or drinking. In the Hellenistic period, the image of the stag functions as the enigmatic symbol of Mithridates VI, king of Pontus, and was consequently understood as a political statement: Magnesia proclaimed its alliance with the king by depicting his stag drinking from the Maeander river (Kinns 2006). This also means that here the meander pattern was not used as civic blazon, but rather more according to its original meaning: depicting the river Maeander for the last time. The meander pattern disappeared from the coinage of all cities in the Maeander valley during the first century BCE and with it came the end of a long image tradition. The river god Maeander was only seldom depicted on imperial coinages (Schultz 1975: 59, no. 88, 62, no. 110, 90, no. 339).

So how do text and image interplay in this example? The full understanding of the coins of Magnesia on the Maeander, as the lengthy description of the coin images above has shown, required complex prior knowledge from the viewer. First, the viewer had to comprehend the visual metaphor that the meander pattern symbolised the homonymous river. And second, they had to be aware that the mint was located on this river, which means that knowledge about the special geographical situation of Magnesia was required. This requirement was also necessary for the other cities in the Maeander valley, as the river was used as a local reference point in other media. In official media such as inscriptions, for example, the cities were still defined by their position at the Maeander in the Imperial period, as the customs law of Asia (Augustan Age) demonstrates; thus, Priene is further defined as 'Priene by the mouth of the Maeander' (Cottier et al. 2008: line 25) and not Priene in Ionia or otherwise.

Moreover, the meander pattern became a figuratively rendered part of the city's name. This transition from local reference point to epithet can be observed on Hellenistic tetradrachms, on which Magnesia used the meander band as civic blazon. The assumption that the meander pattern became part of the city's name and thus gained a textual connotation can be strengthened further: as was demonstrated above, the coin images were changed and adapted to political circumstances, but the meander pattern remained a constant pictorial element of the different coin types. Especially for Magnesia, the decision to keep the meander pattern was a deliberate one. This pictorial element was important because it allowed the city to distinguish itself from other Magnesiai of the same name – such as the one at the Sipylus. Nevertheless, it is also astonishing that almost all cities in the Maeander Valley used this pattern as a local reference point on their respective coinages, thus sharing a regional visual language.

### 3. Conclusion

The analysis of the two case studies of the *symmachia* coins and the meander pattern have shown that the interplay of image and text could already be complex and multi-layered in the Classical period.

The first case study makes it clear that the understanding of the coin image

was strongly influenced by logocentrism, as only the text enables the viewer to grasp the full spectrum of interpretation and specifically the political reference, as the image itself has no political implications. The second case study, on the other hand, illustrates the dominance of the image, as even text was substituted by pictorial references.

As explained in the introduction, the level of knowledge of the viewer was crucial in correctly interpreting the message of the coin. It is very clear that only one kind of knowledge was not enough to interpret all coins correctly. The *symmachia* coins not only required prior mythological knowledge, which the viewer had to have acquired through texts or oral tradition, but in order to grasp a possible political meaning conveyed by the text, the viewer had to know about the political circumstances. Only in combination with the text could the unpolitical image be read in a political way.

The meander pattern, on the other hand, required a deep local knowledge about the geography of the Maeander Valley. The pattern was not only used as part of a shared regional language. The *longue durée* perspective has shown how especially Magnesia used and reinterpreted the pattern as part of an image, as well as a part of the city's name.

Both case studies were not limited to the urban level. Consequently, the regional use of certain images in combination with texts presupposes a collective acceptance and recognition through shared knowledge.

This paper aimed to observe phenomena of the interplay of text and image on coins. It has become quite clear that neither logocentrism nor the analytic instruments of the iconic turn suffice to understand the complexity and the embedded messages of coin images. This is due to the fact that text and image are deeply intertwined with each other, resulting in a co-dependency of these two communication systems. However, a deeper understanding of the manifold kinds of interaction of these two systems can only be gained through further studies. Further investigations of the interplay between these two systems, particularly as they are displayed on early Greek coinages, will be carried out by the authors in their ongoing project. Thus, it is worthwhile to look

specifically for chronological developments and geographical differences in the use of images and text on coins. This can be done by analysing the existing numismatic corpora, but also by taking into account the documented hoards, as the circulation of the coins can give us more information, for example on their targeted audience. In addition, a comparison with other image media, from archaeology and art history, is worthwhile in order to uncover differences and similarities in the use of image and text in various societies and cultures. In this way, new insights can be expected not only for numismatics, but much more generally on the handling and perception of ancient societies with the two media systems of image and text.

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*Fig. 1.* Kyzikos, Antoninian (AE), 4.25g, 23mm, 276–282 CE, IMP C M AVR PROBVS P F AVG, radiate, draped and cuirassed bust right / CONCORDIA MILITVM / XXIMC, victory, holding wreath and palm branch, and Probus, holding sceptre, standing facing one another; T between them. Numismatik Naumann 78 (02.06.2019) 818.



*Fig. 2.* Nikomedeia, Cistophorus (AR), 11.34g, 28mm, 117/118 AD, IMP CAES TRA - HADRIANO AVG P P, laureate, draped and cuirassed bust right, border of dots / S P - Q R / COMBIT Temple showing eight columns; on frieze, ROM AVG; border of dots. NAC AG 74 (18.11.2013) 307.



*Fig. 3.* Rhodes, Tetradrachm (AR), 15.02g, 25mm, 5<sup>th</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> century BC, frontal head of Helios turned slightly right / POΔ-ION, blooming rose with a smaller rosebud left, in field left Φ, in field right patera. Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, 18216566. <https://ikmk.smb.museum/object?id=18216566>



*Fig. 4.* Samos, Tridrachm (AR) 11.29g, 24mm, 404–394 BC, ΣΥΝ Herakliskos strangling a snake in both hands; ΣΑ lion mask frontal view. Nomos 18 (05.05.2019) 164.



*Fig. 5.* Knidos, Tridrachm (AR) 10.68g, 23mm, 404–394 BC, ΣΥΝ Herakliskos strangling a snake in both hands. ΚΝΙΔΙΩΝ; head of Aphrodite. Historia Numorum Online type no. 695. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Monnaies, médailles et antiques, Fonds général 448.



*Fig. 6.* Priene, Hektobol (AR), 4.92g, 18mm, 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, head of Athena / trident with surrounding meander pattern; ΠΡΙΗ/ΕΥΠΙΟΛ. Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, 18203263. <https://ikmk.smb.museum/object?id=18203263>



*Fig. 7.* Magnesia, Drachm (AR), 3.59g, 16mm, 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Armored cavalryman, holding lance, on horse galloping right / ΜΑΓΝ above, humped bull charging left, head lowered, ΠΙΤΟΙ below; all within circular Maeander pattern. Heritage Auctions 3053 (17.01.2017) 35128.



*Fig. 8.* Magnesia, Tetradrachm (AR), 16.98g, 28–31mm, 282–255 BC, head of young Herakles with lion skin / Zeus sitting on a throne holding eagle and sceptre, under him meander pattern; ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ. Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, 18247460. <https://ikmk.smb.museum/object?id=18247460>





*Fig. 9.* Magnesia, Tetradrachm (AR), 16.05g, 31mm, 177–150 BC, draped bust of Artemis/ ΜΑΓΝΗΤΩΝ. Apollo standing left, behind him tripod, under him meander pattern; in the left field ΠΑΥΣΑΝΙΑΣ / ΠΑΥΣΑΝΙΟΥ; all in a laurel wreath. Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, 18204005. <https://ikmk.smb.museum/object?id=18204005>



*Fig. 10.* Magnesia, Trihemionbol (AR), 11.74g, 22mm 1st century BC, diademed bust of Artemis right / Horse grazing right on meander pattern; monogram behind; ΜΑΓΝΗΤΩΝ; ΠΑΥΣΑΝΙΑΣ ΜΗΤΡΟΔΩΡΟΥ. CNG Electronic Auction 170 (2007) 89.