

Civic Identity and the Coinage of the Peloponnese under Septimius Severus

The most deliberate and explicit symbols of a city's identity were its coins (Millar 1993, 230, 257). Roman provincial coinage, also known as Greek imperial coinage, provides us with a rare window onto self-defined and overt demonstrations of local civic identity. From this evidence we can gather information on collective *polis*-level religious self definition, local cults, and the mythical and historical events used to construct collective narratives. We may also use these coins to learn more about the interplay between civic and imperial ideology.

This paper examines the coinage of the Peloponnese minted during the reign of the emperor Septimius Severus. In this period, forty cities of the Peloponnese struck a few limited series of coins. These issues have long been of interest to numismatists and art historians because they depict what seem to be a number of lost sculptures, shrines, and other works described by Pausanias (Imhoof-Blumer and Gardner 1887). In this paper, I will focus instead on the fact that the majority of these forty cities had not struck coins previously in the Roman period, and that an even greater number would not again strike after the reign of Severus. I will thus show how this material offers us a unique glimpse into the mindset of the late second and early third century Peloponnesian *polis*.

While many reverses of these coins feature standard Greek types that are not easy to associate with any one city (e.g. Tyche holding a phiale and cornucopia), many cities do employ distinctly local images on their coins. For example, coins from Troizen show Theseus raising the rock at Troizen to retrieve his father's sword and sandals. The choice of this image not only references an event important to the imagined history of the city but also establishes a position for the city within the wider Greek world by referencing a shared past. Much of the same can be said of the coins from Gytheion that show a distinctive rendition of the Temple of Asklepios.

Pausanias tells us that the Temple of Asklepios at Gytheion was roofless, and the unique composite view of the temple shown on these coins seems to be intended to represent that feature (Pausanias 3.21.8). While temples of Asklepios and other deities commonly appear on the reverses of coins throughout the Greek world, they are typically shown from the front and without any noticeable local characteristics. By choosing to depict the unusual design of its temple, Gytheion has placed itself within the broader context of Greek religion while also distinguishing its local temple and thus its local cult. Finally, it is worth noting that it was not only “Greekness” that was displayed on these coins. The relationships of these Peloponnesian cities with Rome and the imperial administration are also referenced by the imagery chosen for these coins. This can best be seen in the depiction of Severus on horseback riding down and spearing a fallen foe on coins of Pellene, Troizen, Pagai, Aigion, Sicyon, and Thouria and the frequent use of the Dioskouroi on the reverses of coins from Kleitor, Argos, Gytheion, and Lakonia.

Select Bibliography

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