

# THE COINAGE OF ANCIENT SICILY:



## Exploring Gela, Syracuse, Akragas, & Carthaginian settlements on the Mediterranean island

Maria Lo Presti, Fall 2024

Honors Independent Study in the Madison Art Collection (MAC)

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Upper Left: "Trinacria" symbol of Sicily, features a gorgon head with 3 points to represent 3 corners/peoples of the island.<sup>4</sup>  
 Left: Photo by me in the Valle dei Templi.<sup>4</sup>  
 Right: MAC Carthagin coin.<sup>5</sup>



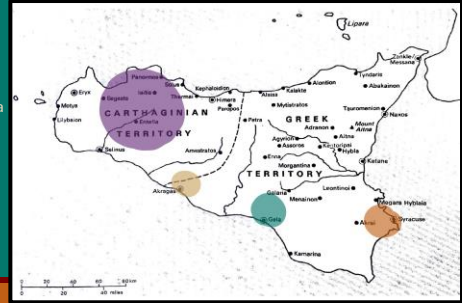
Coinage began around 600 – 500 BCE and was civic or propagandistic in nature, meaning denominations were either for practical circulation or to assert the influence of certain cities, for who else could produce something so valuable, rare, and artistic?<sup>3</sup> Sicily, which was comprised of many Greek colonies at this time, is widely regarded as having produced some of the most exquisite coins of the ancient world.<sup>1</sup>

**Gela**, a city on the river Gelas, was one of the wealthiest Greek colonies in Sicily and therefore important in its numismatic history.<sup>1</sup> In general, coinage began with value marks, then evolved to depict plants/animals/objects that ancient peoples were familiar with, then their deities, and eventually, specific living people (likely not common until the mid-Roman Empire).<sup>1</sup> Ancient rivers were regarded as gods, and since different cities sought unique ways to identify their coinage, Geloan coins mainly feature a horned, man-faced bull that was believed to be their river personified.<sup>4</sup> Often deities were given horns to show they were divine, as an influence from the Egyptian god Ammon, synonymous with Zeus.<sup>2</sup> The MAC has two Geloan coins in their collection that feature this horned river deity on the reverse and a charging cavalryman on the obverse.<sup>5</sup> The example below is a similar artifact.<sup>10</sup> The creature was later copied by Neapolis (modern-day Naples) for their own river deity coinage series, as the symbol had become recognizable.<sup>1</sup>



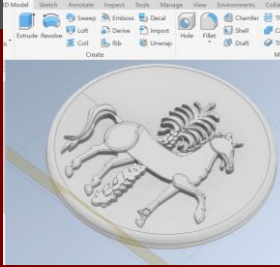
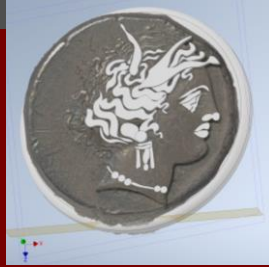
**Akragas**, or modern-day Agrigento, was the second largest Greek city on the island and an expansion of Gela that grew to be powerful in its own right.<sup>1</sup> It is the location of the Valle dei Templi (Valley of Temples), a national park with Greek temples that you can still visit (I got to go on my JMU Hillcrest study abroad trip! See more at <https://american-palermitan.github.io>).<sup>4</sup> The MAC has two coins from this city (pictured left); both are typical of the "civic" style produced.<sup>5</sup> The reverse features a detailed crab and the obverse an eagle, a common type on the island.<sup>2</sup> Many examples of civic coinage show more wear from the constant circulation.<sup>1</sup> After 430 BCE, Akragas began producing larger, more artistic tetradrachms like Syracuse.<sup>1</sup>

It should be noted that ancient coins can come in hundreds of seemingly alike variants, sometimes only distinguishable by a different letter marking or symbol behind the figure, or the presence/absence of a sartorial article like a helmet.<sup>2</sup> The Geloan cavalrymen are often bearded and not helmeted, but they do brandish spears. From this, scholars have said that they may be signets of the tyrants who controlled the city, who wanted to show power but not a need to be warriors.<sup>6</sup>

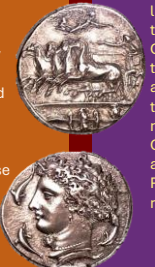


Left: Map of Ancient Sicily.<sup>2</sup>  
 Above: Photo of Roger's Bedchamber.<sup>4</sup>  
 Right: 3D Modeling in Autodesk Inventor

**Production:** Ancient coins were made by hand in a painstaking process.<sup>2</sup> Dies were chiseled by the artist, then a weighed, softer metal was heated and sandwiched between the obverse and reverse.<sup>2</sup> The entire assembly was then struck to produce a single coin.<sup>2</sup> The process could only be repeated so many times before the dies were too badly worn.<sup>2</sup> I sought to make a modern replica of the MAC's beautiful Carthaginian coin with Autodesk's Inventor 3D modeling software. Details in the photograph were traced, "extruded" to three dimensions, and then sharp edges were "filleted" to mimic the wear of centuries. These models can now be 3D printed, an additive manufacturing technique. They can also be inverted: a CNC machine allows subtractive manufacturing, similar to chiseling dies. Then a softer, heated metal can be inserted and coins struck how they were in ancient times.



**Syracuse** was the largest Greek colony on the island and is known for its stunning tetradrachms and decadrachms.<sup>9</sup> "Drachm" was one unit of weight for this type of silver Greek coinage, so a tetradrachm was 4 times that and a decadrachm was 10 times — this coinage was not accessible to the common man for common transactions, but rather was produced to posit the prosperity of the city.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, one source claimed Syracuse "late in establishing an independent coinage."<sup>9</sup> These large coins had more "field" space with which to be decorated by complex art.<sup>2</sup> They feature the nymph Arethusa, an attendant of Artemis; with flowing hair, detailed jewelry, and surrounded by four dolphins.<sup>1</sup> The obverse would often depict "quadrigas" or chariots with four horses—horses were common on ancient coinage, as with the Geloan examples, but to fit so many in fine detail is remarkable.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this is why these coins were often signed by their artists, notably KIMON and EVAENETOS.<sup>5</sup> It was rare for ancient coins to be signed because they were property of the state; if anything, they sometimes had the name or mark of a magistrate.<sup>1</sup>



**Carthage** was a North African city-state founded in 814 BCE by Queen Dido, a legendary princess who fled her kingdom of Tyre when her brother murdered her husband and became king.<sup>1</sup> By about 400 BCE, a Carthaginian settlement spanned the eastern half of Sicily, including Panormos or modern-day Palermo.<sup>1</sup> Carthaginians likely did not produce coinage prior, so to assert their legitimacy on the island where the natives were used to currency, they began to mint their own.<sup>1</sup> The MAC has one Carthaginian coin (pictured upper right) that features Arethusa on the obverse, similar to the Syracusan examples, and a horse with palm tree on the reverse.<sup>5</sup> Quadrigas, as depicted in the Syracusan decadrachm to the left, were also very common.<sup>7</sup> The trees may reference the Phoenician origin of the Carthaginians, while the single horse may have been associated with Tanit, a Carthaginian goddess similar to Persephone.<sup>2</sup> Other Punic coins can feature Dido, a rooster, or a lion.<sup>7</sup> Similar animals and palms are visible in the bedchamber of King Roger II of Sicily, who ruled around 1100 CE in a Palermitan palace, demonstrating how the iconography lasted and became representative of the region.<sup>4</sup>

### Sources

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