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*The coins of the Straits: images and symbols of the political identity
of Messana and Rhegion in the Vth century BC.*

From the point of view of Mediterranean history the central position of Sicily gives it an important role as meeting place of economic and commercial interests, interwoven with wide ranging political, religious, ideological and cultural phenomena.

This process of historical reconstruction is linked to my research on a method of interpreting monetary images which is as objective and scientifically valid as possible, and which may lay the foundation for the creation of a Lexicon Iconographic of Numismatics (LIN). I try to identify the meaning of the individual images and the reasons, the places and historical periods in which the sense of each icon originated and was developed or modified.

In ancient times Messana and Rhegion developed strong political and economic links, giving rise in the first half of the 5th century to what Georges Vallet defined as the Kingdom of the Straits. The iconographic comparison between the coins of the two cities and the coins or archaeological finds of other cities on the Mediterranean, reveals the deep cultural affinities and common feeling which has often linked the histories of different towns, within a macrohistory marked by a common Mediterranean experience. Apart from a naturalistic aspect, the coin images also have a symbolic meaning that depends essentially on the sacred and religious nature of the images depicted.

The first issues of Zancle, dated around 525 BC, were characterized by a dolphin within the sickle-shaped harbour and by a variously divided square enclosing a shell. The sickle, called *zanclon* in the language of the Sikels, represented the city's harbour, and was the origin of its ancient name Zancle (**Slide 2**). According to myth Gaia, Mother Earth, forced by Uranus to hold eternally in her womb all the children she conceived, took revenge by giving her son Khronos a huge sickle, with which he castrated his father. The sickle, hidden in the Straits, formed the port of Zancle.

The dolphin evokes the sea and can be compared to issues from other maritime centres, especially on islands and in the eastern Mediterranean. According to myth, Apollo in the form of a dolphin guided the Greeks in the western colonies' foundation, and particularly the Chalcidians in founding Zancle. The image of the dolphin within the harbour perhaps evoked this mythic past and created a strong link between Apollo and the city of the Straits (**Slide 3**).

Also the shell on the reverse of the coinage evokes the aquatic element and the seabed of the

Straits. Apart from this naturalistic function, it has other symbolic meanings. The shell symbolises the fertility of water; its concave form recalls the femal sexual organ. In the Mediterranean culture the shell is closely linked with female divinities that preside over human fertility and births; expression of sexuality, the shell is also the symbol of Aphrodite, the goddess born from the foam of the sea or from a shell (**Slide 4**).

The shell is depicted in the centre of a square divided into nine sections. On the most ancient examples, these divisions area are rather irregular, similar to walls and merlons surrounding an enclosure. This design recalls that of coins from Cnossos, which depict a labyrinth divided into nine sections. One of the issues of the Cretan city shows a star at the centre of this labirinth, in a posisiton similar to that of the shell of Zancle (**Slide 5**). The shell of the coins of Zancle and the star on those of Knossos symbolise something sacred and precious, attainable only with difficulty and after successfully facing many trials with divine help. This symbolic meaning is related to the cultural and religious heritage of the city of the Straits. The type of the obverse and reverse may be read as an allusion to Apollo, the god who “leads to the harbour of salvation” and through whom regeneration and rebirth are possible.

At the end of the 6th century BC also Rhegion used coins depicting a bull with a human face, in an original and dynamic version of the animal preparing to charge (**Slide 6**). The bull with a human face was identified with the personification of streams and rivers, intended as manifestation of the fertilising and regenerating power of the divinity. The force and vehemence of the bull was associated with the vigorous power of the waters and the impetus of the river at full strength. The Rhegion bull can be identified with Apsias, which in past centuries was significantly named Taurocino “little bull”.

Whereas Rhegion was ruled by the oligarchy of the Thousand Tyrants, Zancle was under the control of Scythes, an eastern Lord from Cos, the island close to the region of Caria. In his homeland Scythes was a tyrant and his arrival in Sicily was supported by the King of Persia. The royal power possessed by Scythes in Zancle highlights the interest eastern peoples felt for the area of the Straits and the intensity and nature of the relations existing between the two areas.

In 494 BC, after a coup d'état, Anaxilas became tyrant of Rhegion; the following year a group of rich exiles arrived in Zancle from Samos. Taking advantage of the absence of Scythes, the tyrant of the city, they occupied Zancle. In the six years of their stay, the Samians coined tetradrachms with a lion's scalp on the obverse and the prow of the typical Samian ships, the *samaina*, on the reverse (**Slide 7**). The bow reproduces a boar's head; the ship bows with an animal's head were widespread in the east, as shown in the coins of Phaselis or Cyzicum (**Slide 8**). The form of the bows with a boar's head appears on vase paintings and on some clay cups, due to

the religious and poetic metaphor associating the wine with the sea and the cup with the ship, where the cup is the vehicle in which the Sun completes its journey through the night. In Greek culture in fact the lion was the animal of the Sun god, Helios, and often represented him.

In around 487 BC Anaxilas, the tyrant of Rhegion, after having expelled the Samians, with the help of a group of compatriots from Messene, conquered Zancle and renamed it Messene. Under the government of the Anaxilas dynasty, Rhegion and Messene constituted a single Kingdom, economically flourishing and politically supported by the people, and continued to mint coins in their own name. The tetradrachms are characterized by the same types of the lion's head/protome of a calf, but distinguished by the inscription MESSENION for Messana and RECINON for Rhegion (**Slide 9**).

The lion's head on the obverse is the archetypal symbol of the Sun. In fact, in August, when the Sun is at the height of its power, it is in the constellation of Leo. The animal was associated on coins with Apollo, the god assimilated by the Greeks as Helios (**Slide 10**). Regarding the calf we can remember that in the Odyssey, Ulysses, having escaped the monsters Scylla and Charybdis, reaches Trinacria, dropping anchor in the port of Zancle. His companions disembark and eat the cows sacred to Helios. The Sun god subsequently obtains from Zeus the punishment of those guilty of such impiety. This passage from Homer is the only written source that seems to testify to the cult of Helios and of his sacred herds in the area of the Straits (**Slide 11**).

After 480 BC, the victories of Athens over the Persians and of Syracusans over the Carthaginians changed Mediterranean economic and trading relationships and the political balance of power in the region. The consequences can also be seen in the changes in monetary choices made by the Kingdom of the Straits. Anaxilas adopted the types of the hare and of the mule-drawn biga, driven by a charioteer crouching in the racing position (**Slide 12**).

Aristotle relates the introduction of the mule cart type to Anaxilas' victory at Olympia in 480 BC, in the race with this vehicle. Why did Anaxilas choose a mule biga to participate in the most important games in Greece? The apene was originally a farm cart used in magical rites to pray for the fertility of the earth and to transport newlyweds to their new home, as can be seen in vase paintings (see the lekythos by the painter of Amasis) (**Slide 13**) or in clay friezes from Magna Graecia depicting a divine couple (see the frieze from the sanctuary of Apollo at Metapontum with an husband and his wife). The mule cart was fitted with so called 'primitive' wheels, composed of a diametrical crosspiece and two spokes perpendicular to this, as can be seen also on a coin of Messana of ca. 435 B.C.. The mule cart was used to take the dead to the afterlife, as is shown in wall paintings on tombs in Paestum from the 4th century BC. A group of pinakes from Locri in Southern Italy representing Persephone going to the house of Hades, have a sacred significance,

related to the underworld (**Slide 14**). The mule-cart therefore had a symbolic meaning and a ritual use, linked with the most pregnant events of human life: fertility, marriage, death.

The same meanings emerge from the analysis on the reverse type: the hare. This animal is linked to the idea of abundance, prolific exuberance, and the multiplication of beings and things. Its miraculous fertility makes it a symbol of love, a gift between engaged couples, but also between lovers and therefore closely linked to Aphrodite and Cupid (**Slide 15**). Protagonist in hunting scenes, where it is chased by dogs of huntman, the hare is shown as a defenceless and innocent victim, prey of the eagles that clutch it in their claws. Represented in the form of clay vases in a crouched position or running, but more often dead, the hare is found in funerary contexts (**Slide 16**). The most important fabrics of these clay vases are in Etruria, Corinth but chiefly in Asia Minor, in Rhodos. Just in the western regions of Asia Minor we find the running hare, which inspires numerous objects of art, combined with the image of the crouched hare. The Samians, in particular, introduced on the so-called Fikellura vases the image of a running hare and that of a running man with a hare's head (**Slide 17**). This figure, with an animal's head, demonstrates the Greek assumption of an Egyptian ideology. In fact we find the crouched hare in the hieroglyphic writing of Ancient Egypt, used to express the auxiliary verb 'to be', not in the static sense but in the dynamic sense such as 'something that is jumping', "that is springing forth" and therefore "that is". Egyptian mythology gave the appearance of the hare to the god Osiris, the god of the Universe of the underworld or of the nocturnal Sun. A faience amulet of the 8th-7th century BC, which reproduces the Egyptian model in the form of a crouched hare, has been found in Sicily, in a necropolis of the city of Gela (**Slide 18**). This finding suggests the possibility of a transferral of the Egyptian symbolism of the hare in the western world, a transferral which was probably made easier by the merchants of Asia Minor, above all Samians, Milesians and Rhodians present in Sicily.

In Greek Art we find the hare related to Apollo or Helios, as is shown by vase images (see the Apulian crater with Apollo seated and a hare on his hand). A small bronze, which represents a dead hare, bears a dedication to the god Apollo in ionic lettering. Coherent with the cult of Apollo, as Sun god, a Boeotian *patera* presents a clay protome in the form of a hare's head. This *patera* bears on its interior a representation of the labyrinth, the solar building which symbolizes the difficult trials which must be faced in order to reach the "light" of the god (**Slide 19**).

In conclusion the hare, whose speed evokes the dynamic nature of life, symbolises at the same time the Sun rising and the flourishing of nature. Its running image, linked to the ideas of love and sacrifice, together with the mule-cart, the vehicle representing the most important moments of "passage" in a man's life – marriage and death – expresses the cyclical nature of existence and its perpetual change from life to death, generating at the same time the hope of immortality for man.

The images we have seen so far appear inspired by a daily life founded, in the beginning, on a maritime role and related activities, after on agriculture, sheepfarming and hunting for wild animals. The monetary types express the ability to see beyond the transience of existence, aware that death is merely the beginning of a new life. This certainty comes from the cyclical rebirth of nature and from the faith in a Solar god (Helios/Apollo) who – just as he makes plants be born again – promises life after death. A pre-Hellenistic religious substratum reflowered from this nucleus of beliefs, in which we can see shaded a unitarian vision of the deity, whose roots are to be found in the deepest and most ancient beliefs of Mediterranean antiquity (**Slide 20**).

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