

My early memories about coins

Society



I was born in the fires of an ancient forge in the hills of the Hindu Kush. Amid the clatter of hammers and the chatter of Greek, I paused on a battered anvil for the final pangs of my creation. Beneath me lay a hardened die bearing the image of my king; atop me pressed another, etched with horsemen and some mirror-image words. Then the hammer struck, hard and heavy, ringing out the news of my nativity. With each blow the dies dug deeper into my flesh, stamping their images as father and mother of a freshly minted coin.

As I look back across two millennia for these earliest memories, I marvel at my long, now legendary, journey from mine to mint to market to museum. I remember Rome as a rising power, a century before the first Caesars; I recall the early days of Emperor Asoka's moral conquests and the building of China's Great Wall. I have outlived six of the seven wonders of the ancient world. (I am told the Great Pyramid still stands) Yet I am no mute ruin: money talks. Mine is the voice of history, recorded by numismatists trained to hear my ancient stories of art, industry, worship, and war.

My eloquence youth, when legends traced my origins to a colony of giant ants. Most gold in ancient times was mined by condemned criminals and slaves whose lives meant little to their taskmasters. In my days, the mines of Egypt were legendary hives of human misery. But it was said that gold in great abundance could be found near India, where giant ants piled gold-bearing dust at the entrances of their tunnels. These ants--nearly the size of dogs, the legend said--defended their burrows fiercely against men who dared to steal the spoils of their digging.

But such danger was trivial given the normal costs of ancient mining, and so the legend spread as far as Greece. When Alexander the Great invaded the <https://assignbuster.com/my-early-memories-about-coins/>

Indus Valley in the fourth century BC, his Greek soldiers eagerly searched for this legendary lode. Local guides displayed for them the dappled skins of the ants themselves, but the invaders could not find a single mound of precious gold. Only a few generations later, however, Greek settlers were gathering large quantities of gold in this very region.

These descendants of Alexander's warriors created a wealthy kingdom called Bactria, famous for its beautiful silver and gold coins like me. (See *Aramco World*, May/June 1994) Where, scholars have long wondered, did the Greek kings of Bactria find so much precious metal? International trade constitutes one obvious source, but giant "ants" might be another. Two thousand years after I was born, explorers discovered that burrowing marmots on the remote Dansar Plateau, near the borders of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and China, do indeed heap mounds of gold-bearing earth at the mouths of their burrows.

These stocky rodents, called "mountain ants" by the Persians who passed the legend on to the Greeks, grow to the size of small dogs and pitch up meter-high hills of auriferous subsoil. Even in modern times, local tribes harvest this gold in an age-old tradition that recalls the legends of my youth. It is possible, after all, that inhuman marmots, rather than inhuman misery, brought my gold to the forges of man. From the moment I left the royal mint of my king Eucratides, eager hands grasped for me. I was a beauty then, the envy of every monarch and merchant from the Indus to the Euphrates.

Great artists had carved my parent dies in mirror-image, etching tiny Greek words and figures backward so that these negative forms would produce positive impressions on my two faces. The result, when smashed into 8.5

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grams (0.3 oz) of gold, is a splendid coin called a stater -- a treasure of art as well as riches. My obverse (the "heads" face produced by the lower, anvil die) boasts a once-brilliant portrait of King Eucratides, framed in a circle of small dots. Behind the king's neck trails the royal diadem, a ribbon tied around his head as the unmistakable emblem of his office.

His cloak, engraved in high relief, is that of a cavalry commander, and his great crested helmet resembles a Boeotian design lauded by the historian Xenophon as the best headgear for cavalrymen. Attached to my king's helmet is a frontlet that sweeps back and ends in bull's horns and ears. Some consider this a symbolic evocation of Alexander the Great's war-horse Bucephalus ("Ox-head"), who had horns according to some accounts, and who had been buried by Alexander near my own birthplace. Like Alexander, my king rode with valor at the head of his elite cavalry and conquered with an aggressive Greek spirit.

In fact, Eucratides called himself "the Great" long before that title was given to Alexander by the Romans. On my reverse (the "tails" side produced by the upper, punch die), you can still read the exalted caption "King Eucratides the Great." No Greek had ever put such words on his coinage before, but modesty was never my king's style. The armed horsemen who gallop within the inscription are Castor and Pollux. In Greek mythology, they were the sons of Zeus who would suddenly appear in a crisis to save the day, much like Eucratides himself, who wrestled the Bactrian throne from a faltering dynasty.

These twins carry palms, brandish spears, and wear felt caps topped with stars. Behind the rear legs of the trailing horse, you can discern a Greek

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monogram, W. This mark identifies either the mint or the magistrate responsible for my creation. Nearly every gold and silver coin minted in Bactria carries such a birthmark, but the exact meaning of the many symbols has long been lost. For example, some scholars think that my monogram indicates the city of Balkh or Aornus; others see only the initials of some unknown Greek official who served a few months as midwife in the delivery of my king's new money.

If you look past the scars of my long life, I am as beautifully Greek as the Parthenon itself, though I was born 5000 kilometers (3000 mi) east of Athens. I am the mind of the West imprinted on the precious metal of the East. The implications haunt me. Am I propaganda etched on plunder, or the product of a peaceful integration? Do I personify apartheid or a partnership? The design and distribution of currency are deliberate, official acts, so money can never be neutral in the struggles of any society.

Look at a nation's coins and you will see the scatter-shot of its cultural canon: even a melting-pot like America has a partisan coinage, its message overwhelmingly white, male, European, and Christian. In ancient Bactria, I was no less biased. My milieu is entirely Mediterranean, and my intrinsic value kept me beyond reach of the marginalized poor of the non-Greek population. Gold circulated over the heads of these farmers and servants, who relied upon small denominations of bronze or silver for their meager purchases.

My king minted for them some square, bilingual issues struck on an Indian weight standard, but I belonged to colonial Greek aristocrats, the ruling elite of Bactria. Unlike small bronze and silver coins which travel swiftly but never

far, my gold brothers and I ranged into territories quite distant from our monarch's own marketplaces. Throughout the Middle East, Hellenistic states were quick to accept gold coins struck on a common Greek standard with recognizable types. I, for example, would be recognized in any market from the Balkans to Bactria.

I had no restrictive local features, as did my square bilingual cousins, and my denomination conformed to the Attic Greek system used nearly everywhere in Alexander's old empire. The range of my travels can be easily documented: In Mesopotamia, for example, another Greek king so admired my design that he shamelessly stole every detail for his own coinage. But globe-trotting gold cannot be too careful, for everywhere, insatiable melting pots stand ready. My parent dies produced as many as 20, 000 siblings identical to me; now, of them all, only I have survived the gauntlet that gold runs.

The most critical moment in any money's life is the day it ceases to be currency. Once a coin can no longer circulate in a given place or time, human hands are quick to convert it into some more useful form. Most of my brothers became bullion again, their identities soon lost in the issues of other, less ancient kings. Some may exist still as a statue's thumb or a goblet's lip, but I would not recognize them. I carry the last known imprint of our shared dies because an unusual circumstance spared my life. Painful and defacing though it was, that occasion added 2000 years to my story and gave me an unexpected career.

A sturdy loop of my metal was fused to my reverse side, right across my galloping horsemen. The attachment was sized to fit a finger, and I became a

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signet ring. This ancient operation changed the whole pattern of my life. My surfaces no longer wore evenly; instead my obverse suffered horribly as it rode that band exposed to daily bumps and bruises, while my reverse design was now shielded from the world. I lived a strange new life on the wrong side of the human hand, banished from the palm where coins enjoy the camaraderie of active currency. Who had done this to me?

The Greeks, as far as I could determine, were gone. Shortly after my king's reign, Bactria fell to successive waves of nomadic invaders. Some of them later settled in the region and created the Kushan empire, astride the famous Silk Roads that linked the empires of Rome and China. One Kushan ruler so exceeded my own king's ambitions that he proclaimed himself not only "the Great", but also "King of Kings, Son of Heaven, Caesar" -- a title that is simultaneously Iranian, Indian, Chinese, and Roman. Although I finally found myself outside the closed world of my Greek makers, I felt welcome among these eclectic Kushans.

They borrowed freely from my past. One of their graves contained a magnificent cameo imitating my design, and signet rings of Greek style were common elements in their elaborate gold-plated costumes. Eventually lost or interred -- I cannot recall which -- I reluctantly returned beneath the soil of Central Asia. For twenty centuries I slept; you cannot imagine the burden of time. My gold kept its luster while all around me the corrosive poisons of earth ate away the baser metals. Above me, kings gave way to caliphs and khans as new realms dawned and died.

Other gold shone for the civilizations of Muslims, Mongols, and Mughals while I lay undiscovered, underground, my fame forgotten. Neither man nor marmot

rescued me -- until modern times. Then, I suddenly awoke and saw myself reflected in the wide dark eyes of a jubilant discoverer. My new guardian considered the expedient of the melting pot, but my unusual appearance gave him pause. Not just another antique coin, I was a warrior's signet, well-suited to his own station. He was an Afghan officer, and I found a new home on his hand. There I was schooled in the long history I had missed.

I learned that Bactria had become Afghanistan, where the weapons were new but the wars unchanged. Great powers still converged upon this rugged and remote bastion in order to control the gateways between Europe, Asia and India. Now, however, this struggle was called " the Great Game. " Intrepid spies from czarist Russia and imperial Britain crept along the snow-filled passes of Central Asia, and tired armies clashed in places called Kabul, Kandahar and the Khyber Pass. Rudyard Kipling and others romanticized the struggle, but brave men did not bleed the less for all this talk of games. I saw the fight firsthand