

Precious Metal Turned Precious Heritage

Being an ancient land where kingdoms and rulers changed frequently over time, Macedonia is rich in archaeological findings.

Among the most common findings along roads, in graveyards and house foundations are coins of ancient kings. Gold, silver and bronze coins date back to all the historical periods, from Antiquity through the Roman and Byzantine periods and Middle Ages to the Ottoman rule. The most popular and very often illicitly traded coins are drachmas and tetradrachms from the Hellenistic period when Macedonian, Thracian and Paionian kings ruled this territory. The word *drachma* means "a handful", literally, "a grasp". The first known coins were issued in Lydia in Asia Minor at some time before 600 BC, presumably for the army mercenaries who wanted to be paid in precious metal at the conclusion of their time of service. By the time of Alexander the Great the higher denomination tetradrachm was regularly used to make large payments. The king affirmed his rule over his country and its subjects by minting his own coins. Kings who ruled over Macedonia left their names and traces of their rule on the minted silver and bronze coins. Thus, the name Lycaeios denotes the son of the historically first documented Paeonian king, Agis. While Agis left no traces in silver, his son did. The coins usually carried the image of some deity or of the monarch himself.



Among the gods Apollo and Zeus were the most popular ones. Tetradrachm showed Hercules strangling the Nemean lion on the reverse. The drachmas from the same period showed a lion or grazing bull. The coins of Patraios, Agis's successor, had much greater variety of images including cantharus, bucranium, grapes, trident, wreath, lily, wild boar and eagle. These motives can give us much information on the history and culture of their time. Thus, the image of the wild boar was a frequent motif among the rulers. Wearing strings of boars' teeth on the helmets was proof of warrior's courage since the times of Crete and Mycenae because the usual test of bravery was the wild boar hunt.

Silver tetradrachms of the Macedonian King Philip II show the head of the supreme god Zeus on the obverse, and a horse and rider on the reverse. The principal silver coins of Alexander show on their obverse the head of Hercules



wearing the scalp of the Nemean lion and on their reverse the seated figure of Zeus holding an eagle and a sceptre. Combat motifs found on the coins prove their high symbolic value for the kingdoms. Thus, one coin unearthed near Stip features an armed horseman ramming his lance into the body of a fallen adversary. From historical records we know that such combat happened during Alexander the Great's eastern campaign. Persian officer named Satropates challenged Alexander's warriors to a man to man combat. Ariston, the brother of the Paeonian King Patraios accepted the challenge and won the battle beheading Satropates. The outcome of this battle was seen as a sign of the coming victory of Alexander at Gaugamela. So, for the rule of the king it was important to put this motif on his coins.

Apollo and the trident he took after killing the Python at Delphi can be seen on coins minted by different kings. Another frequent motif is the horseman because horses were valuable and were the best companions of warriors. Other war images

included fallen warriors with shields and helmets rulers uses to carry in battle. Wild bison was another symbolic animal that had also been dwelling across Macedonian and Paeonian land. One of the most frequent motifs found on the coins of many Paeonian and Macedonian kings is the lion. It is a common insignia of rulers, but some scientists claim that in the ancient times the king of the animals could be found in this country. An extraordinary motif on Paeonian coins is the depiction of Athene. Scientists have discovered a historical link behind this imagery. They found evidence that Paeonian rulers had special relations with Athens, hosting colonies and helping each other in a time of need. The rule of the last Paeonian kings Leon and Dropion was continuously disturbed by Gallic and Celtic assaults. Researchers believe that they only minted coins in bronze because of these hostilities. Lions are also present in their coins, but so are the profiles of Dionysus and the Zeus. Zeus is wearing a wreath of oak leaves. His face is depicted in a typical style of the time - with longish crooked nose, prominent cheekbones and framed by long hair. It is believed that this representation of Zeus is symbolic of Paionian ruler's being part of the wider Hellenistic governance. On the reverse side of this coin another characteristic image was represented – the winged streak of lightning. These and many other coins unearthed in Macedonia can be seen in the Numismatic Collection of the Macedonian National Bank that is open to the public by appointment.

