



Silver in Antiquity

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

Human beings are said to be inherently drawn to shiny objects, but the gods themselves were not immune to the lustrous allure of precious metals. Certainly gold was coveted above all, by god and mortal alike, but there is no deficit of silver references in ancient literature. Apollo wielded an infamous silver bow known for its deadly precision and “terrible twang,” while the golden arrows of Artemis were tipped in silver. The Elder Pliny bristled at the profligate use of silver among Romans, deriding it as another “madness of mankind.” The greedy Judas Iscariot was famously bribed by thirty pieces of it, unwittingly setting into motion events that would lead to his own shameful end. Silver’s entanglement in the human record is thus long, complex, and often dark. Though it fueled ancient economies, its acquisition came with a frightening cost to human life.

During the pivotal period known as the Chalcolithic (ca. 4,000–3,000 BCE), the mining of metal ores was already underway in the Mediterranean basin, but copper mining probably began even earlier in Mesopotamia. “Slag heaps” (refuse from lead and silver mining) remain in the Aegean and Asia Minor, and geologists suggest some of these may date as early as 4,000 BCE. An unusual silver finial in the Museum’s collection from ancient Palestine was previously dated to that early period until an Israeli archaeologist challenged the idea that silver was used so early in the Levant. We have since re-dated the object to the Late Bronze Age, but the early use of silver elsewhere may indicate that the object was imported to Palestine during the earlier period. Regardless, the finial must have been an extremely precious object that once adorned a staff, crown, or some other costly accessory. The bird and horse appliqué perhaps indicate religious significance.

If the tomb of Tutankhamun is any indicator, gold was far more popular in Egypt, but luxurious silver objects are known from the young pharaoh’s tomb and other Egyptian contexts. It would be the Greeks, however, that would exploit silver as never before through the first coinage. Classical

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Finial with Bird and Horses
Ca. 1550–1200 BCE
From Palestine
Silver
Weinberg Fund (84.23)



Egyptian Cup with Lotus Design
Example from antiquities market.
Authenticity not verified.



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE



Tetradrachm with Head of Athena (obv) and Owl (rev)
Greek, 5th century BCE
Minted in Athens
Silver
Museum purchase and partial gift of Mrs. Mary Frances Osborne Davis and Mrs. Susan Ann Davis Aulgur in memory of John H. Townsend (69.121)



Kylix (drinking cup)
Greek, Hellenistic, 3rd–2nd century BCE
Silver
Museum purchase (77.182)



Mastos (drinking cup)
Greek, Hellenistic, 2nd or 1st century BCE
Silver with traces of gilding
Weinberg Fund (82.325)

Athens was bankrolled by silver from the nearby Laurion Mines and the city allegedly had three metric tons (ca. 6,600 lbs) of silver at its disposal in the early fifth century BCE. While silver coinage continued to be manufactured, exquisite objects of silver also became commonplace among the wealthy. The Museum’s elegant silver *kylix* and *mastos* may have been part of sets, which were certainly being created by the Hellenistic age, but probably earlier too. One astounding set of silver vessels from royal Macedonian tombs was discovered intact and is on display today in the Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai at Vergina (Greece). Romans followed suit, and many fabulous vessels are known from the Roman Empire, in addition to silver utensils, figurines, boxes, and furniture attachments. A number of famous Roman hoards* of silver have been discovered over time and can only hint at the wealth of some of the empire’s elite. One of the Museum’s more unusual objects is a Roman silver spoon inscribed with a dedication to the goddess Hekate from a walnut dealer called Eutyches. Roman silver spoons came in sets, and it is likely that Eutyches parted with one of his precious spoons for a specific reason related to the goddess. Unfortunately, the reason remains tantalizingly

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[Silver Vessels from Royal Macedonian Tomb at Aigai](#)



Spoon with a Dedicatory Inscription to Hekate
Roman, 2nd–3rd century CE
Silver
Museum purchase (74.147)

Inscription: “*Eutyches, the walnut dealer, gave (this) as an offering to Hekate for the patē.*”
The meaning of “patē” in Greek remains unclear.



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

unclear because part of the pricked inscription on the spoon eludes translation into English. Like more recent traditions, silver from antiquity was also monogrammed, probably to designate owners. A dish from the Museum's collection features a Greek cruciform monogram that may indicate an owner named Palladios. Gold seems to have been preferred for Roman and Byzantine jewelry, but silver is not unknown. The Museum's pair of silver bracelets inset with gilded medallions are a *tour de force* of filigree work and were unquestionably treasured possessions.

Today museum patrons marvel at objects of astounding beauty crafted from silver and other mined materials in antiquity. But we should not leave this topic without mention of the human toll exacted to produce such objects. Greek and Roman mines were manned by tens of thousands of slaves, including children, who were forced to tunnel through solid rock with nothing more than pickaxes and sputtering oil lamps for lighting. Often chained and naked, slaves worked grueling hours with no protection from toxic elements such as lead, which is often embedded in veins with silver. Equally deadly were the smelting furnaces that dotted mining sites. These continuously belched out deadly fumes laden with both lead and arsenic. Anyone assigned to the silver mines also received a death sentence. Untold numbers met slow and agonizing deaths from exposure to toxic materials. ■

*These collections of valuable objects contained hundreds of pieces of Roman silver including vessels, figurines, and other objects.

The most notable are:

[Esquiline Treasure](#)

[Berthouville Treasure](#)

[Hildesheim Treasure](#)

[Mildenhall Treasure](#)

[Kaiseraugst Treasure](#)



Dish with Monogram
Byzantine, 6th-7th century CE
From Palestine
Silver and niello
Weinberg Fund (84.56)



Bracelets with Medallions
Byzantine, 5th-6th century CE
From Palestine, near Hebron
Silver with gilding
Chorn Memorial Fund (68.175 a & b)