

Victoria Győri

King's College London/Institute of Classical Studies, London

## GRECO-ROMAN PRECEDENTS ON CONFEDERATE CURRENCY

### Introduction

*"Lines on a Confederate Note"* – Major Sidney A. Jonas<sup>1</sup>

Representing nothing on God's earth now,  
And naught in the waters below it;  
As the pledge of a nation that's dead and gone,  
Keep it, dear friend, and show it.  
Show it to those who will lend an ear,  
To the tale that this trifle can tell,  
Of Liberty born of the patriot's dream,  
Of a storm-cradled nation that fell.  
Too poor to possess the precious ores,  
And too much of a stranger to borrow,  
We issued today our promise to pay,  
And hoped to redeem on the morrow.  
The days rolled by and weeks became years,  
But our coffers were empty still;  
Coin was so rare that the treasury'd quake  
If a dollar should drop in the till.  
But the faith that was in us was strong, indeed,  
And our poverty well we discerned,  
And this little check represented the pay  
That our suffering veterans earned.  
We knew it had hardly a value in gold,  
Yet as gold each soldier received it;  
It gazed in our eyes with a promise to pay,  
And each Southern patriot believed it.  
But our boys thought little of price or of pay,  
Or of bills that were overdue;  
We knew if it bought us our bread today,  
'Twas the best our poor country could do.

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<sup>1</sup> Following General J.E. Johnston's April 1865 surrender of his forces in North Carolina, Major Sidney Alroy Jonas penned these verses on the back of a half-printed \$500 Confederate bill at the request of a young Northern woman who wanted to take the bill home with her as a souvenir.

Keep it, it tells all our history o'er,  
 From the birth of our dream to its last;  
 Modest, and born of the Angel Hope,  
 Like our hope of success, it passed.

The Old South took pride in its knowledge and admiration of classical antiquity. It modelled itself upon the so-called “southern slave states” of Greece and Rome; that is, the Southern Confederacy emulated and glorified all aspects of the Greco-Roman world’s agrarian culture, particularly its institution of slavery. One of the best ways to exemplify these classical influences on the South is to examine the currency issued by the Treasury of the Confederate States of America from 1861 to 1865. The iconographic programme of both Confederate banknotes and coinage promoted a “justified Sothern cause” and specifically employed Greco-Roman themes related to agriculture and allegorical divinities and personifications (especially from 1861 to 1862), such as the figures of Liberty, Ceres, Minerva, Hope, and Justice. In the Roman Republican period, virtues were honored and advertised on behalf of the public of the Roman *res publica* (i.e. commonwealth). From the period of Augustus and Tiberius’ reigns onwards, Rome expressed the interdependence of certain virtues of the Roman *res publica* on the virtues of the Princeps and the imperial family (e.g. the continued health and safety of the imperial family was necessary for the permanence of the Roman commonwealth). In much the same way, the depiction of classical virtues on Confederate currency provides a traditional, and rather divine, approval of the Southern system (e.g. slavery was essential to the prosperity of the South). Thus, I argue that the Southern Confederacy legitimized its “way of life” by adhering to and publicizing a set standard of virtues. This is best reflected in the currency of the early years of the Civil War. The concept of celebrating and promoting a so-called “cult of virtues” clearly had its roots in the Greco-Roman world, and these Confederate banknotes and coins reflect these origins.

### The Old South and the classical tradition

the character of the Southern aristocracy was deeply influenced by classical antiquity – from the curriculum of Southern schools, the ideal of Greek democracy, the justification of slavery, and to the values of Southern politicians and military generals. J.D. B. DeBow, the first editor of DeBow’s Review (a widely circulated magazine in the South from 1846 to 1884), wrote that the “Southern slave states of Greece and Rome had given to the world all the civilization, arts, literature, laws, and government which antiquity offered”<sup>2</sup>. Classical studies was essential to the core educational curriculum

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<sup>2</sup> DeBow 1851: 681.

in the South. For instance, in 1844, Samuel K. Talmage, president of Oglethorpe University in Georgia, believed that the proposed abandonment of teaching Greek and Latin was “one of the most *alarming literary heresies* of the age.”<sup>3</sup> Philip Lindsley, president of the University of Nashville from 1824 to 1850, criticized the lack of good Greek teachers – “Our country is filled to overflowing with adventurous *Greeklings*. But where are our Grecians?”<sup>4</sup> As the sectional controversy (i.e. the division between the Northern and South based on various political, economic, and social issues such as slavery) began to grow in momentum from the 1820s and 1830s onwards, the South supported their institutions (e.g. slavery), governmental policies, and desire for secession through *exempla* from Greco-Roman history.

The South made a geographical comparison between its own climate and that of Greece and Rome – Senator Thomas L. Clingman of North Carolina remarked that “Greece and Rome too, were lands of the olive, vine, and the fig tree... and possessed temperatures as high as our own”<sup>5</sup>. Southerners felt a bond between themselves and the Greco-Romans on account of their pursuit of agriculture as the noblest occupation. They admired how leading figures of the Roman Republic, such as Cincinnatus, “devoted their leisure from cares of the State to the culture of the soil”<sup>6</sup>. Richard observes that Sparta and Rome, in contrast to their commercial adversaries, Athens and Carthage, “produced virtue, the agricultural life by fostering frugality, temperance, independence, the balanced constitution by encouraging moderation, cooperation, and compromise. The plow was both symbol and the cause of Cincinnatus’ Roman virtue”<sup>7</sup>. It should be noted that after the Roman civil wars of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, Virgil encouraged his fellow Romans to return to pastoral life (e.g. *Georgics* 2). George Fitzhugh, a Southern social theorist, concerned about Athens’ commercialism, said that “trade begat private wealth, corruption, and national weakness, and the city fell the easy and unresisting prey of the poor and hardy Macedonians.”<sup>8</sup>

Southerners also turned to Greece as a model for founding their own confederacy. Fitzhugh pointed out that “Grecian history, in its every page, affords instances of the almost miraculous exploits of little states or nations”<sup>9</sup>. Thomas R. Dew, the president of the College of William and Mary and an avid proponent of slavery, said: “It was this system of small independent state governments which so completely identified each citizen of Greece with that little body politic with which his destiny was con-

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<sup>3</sup> Talmage 1844: 16.

<sup>4</sup> Halsey 1886: I.523.

<sup>5</sup> Clingman 1858: 669.

<sup>6</sup> Jamison 1857: 181.

<sup>7</sup> Richard 2009: 85.

<sup>8</sup> Fitzhugh 1858: 53.

<sup>9</sup> Fitzhugh 1860: 652.

nected – which breathed into his soul that ardent patriotism.”<sup>10</sup> Southern politicians especially admired Athens, not only as the center of Hellenic culture, but also for its form of democracy which was in contrast to the type of democracy that was developing in the Northern States. According to Southerners, Athens prospered not only because it protected property and class interests, but because only free citizens – a refined nobility – made up the electorate. In these ways, Southerners especially considered themselves to be latter-day Greeks.

The most common and well-known connection between the South and classical antiquity, however, is the institution of slavery. Southerners particularly justified the “benefits” of slavery through the works of Aristotle. For instance, in *Politics* 1.2, Aristotle writes: “The element which is able, by virtue of its intelligence, to exercise forethought is naturally a ruling and master element; the element which is able, by virtue of its bodily power, to do the physical work is a ruled element, which is naturally in a state of slavery”. In *Politics* 1.5, he writes: “Those whose function is to use the body and from whom physical labor is the most that can be expected are by nature slaves, and it is best for them, as it is for all inferior things I have mentioned, to be ruled.” John C. Calhoun and George Fitzhugh were some of Aristotle’s greatest admirers who viewed Aristotle as the founder of the proslavery cause. Fitzhugh remarked that “all the things which I thought original in me, I find in Aristotle”. Among his many writings, Fitzhugh said: “We need never have white slaves in the South, because we have black ones. Our citizens, like those of Athens and Rome, are a privileged class. We should train and educate them to deserve the privileges and to perform the duties which society confers on them... It is a distinction to be a Southerner, as it once was to be a Roman citizen”. Thomas Dew observed that “In the ancient republics, where the spirit of liberty glowed with the most intensity, the slaves were more numerous than the freedmen. Aristotle and the great men of antiquity believed slavery necessary to keep alive the spirit of freedom”<sup>11</sup>.

### **Greco-Roman virtues on Confederate currency**

at the start of the Civil War, the Confederate States of America did not see itself doomed. As Benarh points out, the Confederates’ “viewpoint was forward looking, even millennial... They expected the Confederacy to survive and thrive, and thus it was incumbent on them, as their nation’s founding generation, to determine the meaning of their independence... in making their case to the southern public, Confederate na-

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<sup>10</sup> Dew 1836: 274.

<sup>11</sup> Richard 2009: 182-193.

tionalists explicitly linked their project to the war itself [...] emphasizing the concrete wartime and future benefits to be gained from escaping northern dominance”<sup>12</sup>. Thus, the Confederacy not only had to defend its cause (i.e. independence from the North and its institution of slavery), but also had to promote it through a widespread iconographic programme. This iconographic programme included the medium of coins and banknotes. The use of the figures of classical virtues implied that the Southern cause was not only moral, but legal. Jules d’ Hemecourt suggests that the “the clever juxtaposition of classical icons and idyllic scenes of modern involuntary servitude serves notice that the government bases its economy on slavery, and that history and heritage validate the system”. He says that the portrayal of these virtues in relation to representations of slavery implies “divine” historical justification of chattel servitude... the imposition of such classical figures suggests that the slave system was not only economically crucial but also in perfect compliance with revered tradition”<sup>13</sup>.

To begin with, let us examine the 1 cent and 50 cent Confederate coins minted in 1861 at the New Orleans mint. The obverse of the 1 cent coin portrays the bust of Liberty wearing a liberty cap with the legend CONFEDERATE STATES OF AMERICA and the year of the coin was issued, 1861, while the reverse depicts a wreath of corn, cotton, maple, tobacco and wheat encircling 1 CENT below which are two barrels and a bale of cotton showing “L” for Lovett (Lovett was the die engraver). The obverse of the 50 cent coin portrays Liberty seated, holding a liberty cap on pole and a shield with banner inscribed LIBERTY with thirteen stars around and 1861 in exergue while the reverse depicts a shield with seven stars with a liberty cap enclosed in a wreath of cotton and wheat with HALF DOL below (figs. 1-2). Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States of America, authorized this coin type – the obverse is the same as that of the standard U.S.A. half dollar (fig. 3) and the reverse replaces the legend and the standard U.S.A. half dollar eagle with this shield bearing seven stars (seven states had joined the C.S.A by 1861). There are only four specimens of this Confederate 50 cent coin. It should be noted that it was common for competing leading figures in the Roman civil wars of the first century BC to issue coins which, which on the face of it advertises their unity, in fact reveals deliberate signs of rivalry. For instance, an Octavianic coin dated to late 43 BC bears an obverse portrait of Octavian with the legend C CAESAR IMP III VIR R P C PONT(IFEX) AVG(VR) and a reverse portrait of Antony with the legend M ANTONIVS IMP III VIR R P C AVG(VR) Octavian’s superiority is subtly implied by the inclusion of both his priestly titles – *pontifex* and *augur* (fig. 4)<sup>14</sup>. Libertas was one of the most popular catchphrases

<sup>12</sup> Bernath 2010: 3 and 27.

<sup>13</sup> d’ Hemecourt 1996: [http://exhibitions.blogs.lib.lsu.edu/?page\\_id=707](http://exhibitions.blogs.lib.lsu.edu/?page_id=707).

<sup>14</sup> RRC 493 and 492/1.

during the period of the Roman civil wars during the first century BC – particularly with Julius Caesar, Brutus and Cassius, and Octavian. The *pileus* was first used in American coinage on the obverse of a 1793 penny which portrays the bust of liberty with the legend LIBERTY (fig. 5). The most famous Roman coin showing the *pileus* during the first century BC is Brutus’ reverse type, minted in 42 BC, which portrays the head of Brutus on the obverse and the *pileus* in between two daggers with the legend EID MAR (EIDIBUS MARTIIS – Ides of March) on the reverse (fig. 6)<sup>15</sup>. The reverse type of course refers to the assassination of Julius Caesar on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 44 BC. Brutus and Cassius considered themselves to be the “Liberators” of Julius Caesar’s “tyranny”. In his *Res Gestae*, Augustus says that he liberated the republic from the tyranny of a faction – referring to his victory over Mark Antony at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC, and an Octavianic coin was minted at Ephesus in 28 BC which depicts the head of Octavian with the legend LIBERTATIS P R VINDEX (Champion of the Liberty of the Roman People) on the obverse and the figure of Pax with the legend PAX on the reverse (fig. 7)<sup>16</sup>. It should be noted that agricultural symbols, such as wreaths and/or ears of barley, corn, and grain as well as cornucopias, representing abundance and prosperity appear throughout all of Greco-Roman coinage (e.g. an Augustan reverse type from Pergamum dated to c.27-26 BC which shows six bunched corn-ears, fig. 8)<sup>17</sup>. Let us now turn to Confederate banknotes, called Greybacks as opposed to the Greenback US dollar. These banknotes ranged in denomination from \$1000, \$500, \$50, \$20, \$10, \$ 5, \$ 2, \$1 to 50 cent. Early Confederate state dollars, from 1861-1862, depicted scenes of slaves working in the fields (images which Southerners considered to be “idyllic” – figs. 9a-c) as well as various classical virtues. After 1862, white heroes and officials began to permeate these banknotes. As mentioned earlier, at the start of the Civil War, the Confederates had hope in their cause. By the autumn of 1862, following the Battle of Antietam, the Confederate public morale was waning. Instead of depicting idealistic, abstract divinities such as Liberty and Hope, the Treasury of the C.S.A. then began to issue banknotes with portraits of white leaders – tangible representations of the South’s leadership and future – e.g. John C. Calhoun, Jefferson Davis, and Stonewall Jackson (figs. 10a-c).

Thus, classical virtues dominate Confederate banknotes from 1861 to 1862. A \$5 Confederate bill, issued from November to May of 1861-2, depicts Navigation, Commerce, Agriculture, Justice, Liberty, and Industry (fig. 11). Liberty also appears, for instance, on the \$20 (with Ceres between Navigation and Commerce), \$10 and \$5 bills (alongside a sailor (i.e. symbolizing navigation) – figs. 12a-c. To begin with,

<sup>15</sup> RRC 508/3.

<sup>16</sup> RIC 1<sup>2</sup> 476.

<sup>17</sup> RIC 1<sup>2</sup> 494.

let us take the mother goddess Ceres (Demeter). Demeter, of course, was known for her motherly devotion in her pursuit to find Proserpina who was kidnapped by Hades. She is a nurturer and provider of fruits of earth. Female members of the Roman imperial family were thus generally associated with Ceres. For instance, Livia, the wife of Augustus and the mother of Tiberius was linked to Ceres. Under Tiberius, she is oftentimes seen seated with corn ears and a sceptre, such as at Thapsus (in Africa) where she is seen seated, holding a sceptre in one hand and two ears of grain over a modius with the legend CERERI AVGVSTAE (fig. 13)<sup>18</sup>. Ceres is also depicted, for instance, on a \$500 bill issued from April to July of 1861, a \$100 bill (with Proserpina) from July to October, and on a \$10 bill (with Commerce and a train) from January to December of 1862 (figs. 14a-c). It should be noted that Tellus, the Roman earth goddess, appears on a \$50 bill issued from July to October of 1861 (fig. 15). Ceres, Proserpina, and Tellus are accordingly all related to the cultivation of the soil. D'Hemecourt says "by choosing a figure representing Plenty or Agriculture the South could successfully advertise the prosperity of local trade (i.e. farming) as well as their ability to sustain themselves with locally grown produce"<sup>19</sup>. A \$10 bill issued from November to December of 1861 depicts John E. Ward, a Georgian statesman, a wagon of cotton, and a corn harvester (fig. 16).

The personifications of Navigation, Commerce and Industry alongside their various attributes (e.g. ship, canal, sailor, bales of cotton, train, railroad, workers (such as slaves picking cotton, corn harvesters, milkmaids, blacksmiths, machinist with hammer) are again all interrelated (figs. 17a-c)<sup>20</sup>. They symbolize the "glorification of the purely agrarian scheme of things"<sup>21</sup>. Industry was, in a sense, a means to an end – i.e. a necessity for the transportation and trade of the South's agricultural produce. For instance, Doty explains that ships "carried goods from one place to another... and they carried them with economy... In time, they would be equated with Commerce itself"<sup>22</sup>.

The prospect of a prospering Southern agrarian economy through a strong Southern leadership thus explains the portrayal of Hope on some of these banknotes. To take one example, Hope is seen on a \$10 bill, issued from May to August 1862, in between two Southern statesmen, Robert M.T. Hunter (C.S.A. Secretary of State from 1861 to 1862) and C.G. Memminger (one of the founding fathers of the C.S.A. and principal author of the Provisional Constitution (1861)) – fig. 18. In a similar manner, the prosperity and *aeternitas* of the Roman people was dependent on the Roman princeps. In his

<sup>18</sup> RPC 1 795. For further associations between Livia and Ceres, see Barrett 2002: 209-210.

<sup>19</sup> d'Hemecourt 1996: [http://exhibitions.blogs.lib.lsu.edu/?page\\_id=707](http://exhibitions.blogs.lib.lsu.edu/?page_id=707).

<sup>20</sup> See also Figs. 9a-c.

<sup>21</sup> Cash 1941: 181.

<sup>22</sup> Doty 1998: 97.



1936 article entitled “Providentia and Aeternitas”, M.P. Charlesworth offers a general definition for providentia: “this human providentia has various aspects, but they can all be conveniently summed up in one formula – the Providentia of the princeps aims at the Aeternitas of the Roman people. This it may do by choosing an heir, by guarding against conspiracies (and so bringing Securitas), or by paternal legislation and activity whether relating to buildings, harbor-works, roads, expenditure, corn-supply, agriculture, the care of the young citizens (alimenta), or the helping of the oppressed. All these are aspects of the ruler’s kindly care for his people, all manifestations of his foresight”<sup>23</sup>. In the Roman Republican period, virtues were celebrated and promoted on behalf of the Roman commonwealth. For instance, Rome venerated Salus Publica as the guarantor of the salvation of the state (Livy 9.43.25, 10.1.9) rather than attributing victories to individual Romans. This changed in 44 BC. The first of such vows were for Julius Caesar. Dio 44.6.1 states that vows for 44 BC were to be taken annually for Caesar’s welfare. Between 19 and 16 BC, a new honorific typology was introduced on Augustan mainstream coinage, at the mints of Rome, Pergamum, and Spain; that is, coins began to show honors voted to or requests granted to Augustus by the Senate and the people of Rome. For instance, the *clipeus virtutis*, the shield inscribed with the virtues “virtus, clementia, iustitia, and pietas” that was given to Augustus also in 27 BC by the Senate and People of Rome was depicted on coins (fig. 19)<sup>24</sup>. One particular group within this new category of Roman coin types is “vota” coinage; that is, coins referring to the public vows made for Augustus’ health and safety as well as his anticipated returns from provincial campaigns. One obverse type, minted at Rome in 16 BC, bears the legend I(ovi) Optimo M(aximo) S(enatus) P(opulus) Q(ue) R(omanus) V(ota) S(uscepta) PR(o) S(alute) IMP(eratoris) CAE(saris) QVOD PER EV(m) R(es) P(ublica) IN AMP(liore) ATQ(ue) TRAN(quilliore) S(tatu) E(st) – the Senate and the Roman people [decree that] vows be undertaken to Jupiter Optimus Maximus for the health of Emperor Caesar Augustus because through him the *res publica* is in a better and more tranquil state – in an oak wreath (fig. 20)<sup>25</sup>. Tiberius reintroduced and reshaped the typological category of “virtues” in Roman coinage. Between c. AD 22 and AD 37 at the mint of Rome, seven “virtues” were represented on Tiberius’ bronze coinage at the Roman mint: Clementia, Moderatio, Iustitia,

<sup>23</sup> Charlesworth 1936: 121-122.

<sup>24</sup> RIC 1<sup>2</sup> 42a.

<sup>25</sup> RIC 1<sup>2</sup> Tiberius 46. For further reference on the associations between Livia and Iustitia, see Barrett 2002: 104.



Salus, Pietas, Providentia, and Concordia<sup>26</sup>. In particular, it can be seen how *salus* (the well-being of the imperial family), *providentia* (foresight of the Princeps to designate successors), and *pietas* (the filial duty of the successors) are interconnected and essential elements for the continued welfare of the Roman *res publica*. Notice also how one of the virtues portrayed is *Iustitia* (fig. 21). Livia is here assimilated to Justice, as a protector of both the imperial family and the Roman state

Justice as we have already seen (fig. 11), appears on some of these Confederate banknotes. Justice appears, for instance, on a \$50 bill from January to May 1862 together with Hope (fig. 22). Minerva, the goddess of war and wisdom – the Roman equivalent of the Greek Athena – is seen, for instance, on a \$10 bill, issued from April to June of 1861, alongside a railroad (fig. 23a) and with C.G. Memminger on a \$5 bill, issued from March to June of 1862 (fig. 23b). As Hall says, Minerva is a “benevolent and civilizing influence” that “fights for the defense of *just* causes, not [...] for the sake of destruction.”<sup>27</sup> Athena (Minerva) of course, is a standard deity found on Greek and Roman coinage – e.g. Athena, as the patroness of the city of Athens (with her symbol, the owl, on the reverse) and Minerva celebrating a military victory on a coin issued for Julius Caesar in 45 BC (with a bust of Victory on the obverse) – figs. 24a-b<sup>28</sup>.

## Conclusions

D’ Hemecourt perfectly summarizes the classical influences on early Confederate currency (1861-1862): “Mixing symbols of the past [i.e. classical virtues] with idealized scenes of the present allowed producers of Confederate currency to offer proud and uninhibited affirmation that national economic vitality depended on slave labor; that slavery guaranteed confidence in the legitimacy of Southern independence; that prosperity without slavery was unimaginable; and that independence without prosperity was impossible”<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> RIC 1<sup>2</sup> Tiberius 38, 39, 46, 47, 43, 80, and 55.

<sup>27</sup> Hall 2008: 216.

<sup>28</sup> RRC 476/1b.

<sup>29</sup> d’Hemecourt 1996: [http://exhibitions.blogs.lib.lsu.edu/?page\\_id=707](http://exhibitions.blogs.lib.lsu.edu/?page_id=707).

1)



2)



3)



4)



5)



6)



7)



8)



9a)



9b)



9c)



10a)



10b)



10c)



11)



12a)



12b)



12c)





13)



14a)



14b)



14c)



15)



16)



17a)



17b)



17c)



18)



19)



20)



21)



22)



23a)



23b)



24a)



24b)



## Select references

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## GRECO-ROMAN PRECEDENTS ON CONFEDERATE CURRENCY

### S u m m a r y

This paper examines why and how, during the period of the American Civil War, the Southern Confederacy modelled itself on the ideals of the Greco-Roman world. One of the best ways to exemplify the link between the Old South and the classical antiquity is to analyze the banknotes and coins of the Treasury of the Confederate States of America. Confederate currency demonstrates the significant impact Greece and Rome had on the values, ideals, and society that the Old South founded itself on.

**Keywords:** American Civil War, Confederate States of America, U.S. banknotes and coins, Greek and Roman coins, virtues

## GRECKO-RZYMSKIE PIERWOWZORY ŚRODKÓW PŁATNICZYCH KONFEDERACJI

### Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł stara się odpowiedzieć na pytania dlaczego i w jaki sposób w okresie wojny secesyjnej Konfederacja wzorowała się na ideałach świata grecko-rzymskiego. Jednym z najlepszych sposobów zilustrowania połączenia między Południem a antykiem jest analiza banknotów i monet Departamentu Skarbu Skonfederowanych Stanów Ameryki. Środki płatnicze Konfederatów wskazują na znaczący wpływ, jaki Grecja i Rzym wywierały na wartości, ideały i społeczeństwo stanowiące fundament Południa. **Słowa kluczowe:** wojna secesyjna, Skonfederowane Stany Ameryki, banknoty i monety Stanów Zjednoczonych, monety greckie i rzymskie, cnoty