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## History through a Coin: Valerian, Dido, and the Founding of Carthage

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# History Through a Coin

## Valerian, Dido, and the Founding of Carthage

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### Abstract

The coin dating from 270 AD depicts on its obverse side the Roman Emperor Valerian, the first Emperor to be captured as a prisoner of war. On the reverse side is a unique scene of the goddess Dido sacrificing at the Temple of Hercules before setting off to found Carthage from Tyre, the city in which the coin was minted. Like all individually minted coins, this piece is very unique and may be a restrike of a previously issued coin.



Obverse Image of Coin, Bust of Emperor Valerian

### Metadata

Size: 11.89 grams, 28mm radius  
Inscriptions: Obverse  
IMP: Emperor, Ruler, General, Commander  
P: Publius  
LIC: Licinius  
VALERIANNUS: Valeriannus  
AUG: Augustus  
Inscriptions: Reverse  
COL TUR: Colony of Tyre  
ETRO: Year

### Potential Restrike

This coin could be a restrike for several reasons: First, the inconsistent thickness of the coin. Second, the coin was struck relatively far off center (as can be seen especially in the reverse image). Third, the excessive amount of metal (what was cast looks more than the die required).

### The Founding of Carthage

The founding of Carthage is surrounded by mythologies, with the primary source of knowledge being Virgil's novel-length poem, Aeneid. According to the poem, Dido (a Phoenician princess) fled her home after her brother murdered her husband and founded Carthage. Prior to leaving to found Carthage, Dido makes a sacrifice at the temple of Hercules which is in the city of Tyre, as depicted on the obverse of this coin.

### Dido

Dido is historically known as the Queen of Carthage and the daughter of the King of Tyre, to which Carthage originally belonged as a colony. Dido is depicted on the reverse side of the coin as sacrificing on a lit altar and making an offering to the temple of Hercules in Tyre before leaving to found Carthage. The Aeneid tells of a romance between Dido and Aeneas, the Trojan prince. Dido is said to have committed suicide in distress when Aeneas had to leave to found Rome.



Image of goddess dido zoomed in from reverse



The Murex shell from obverse image zoomed



Reverse Image depicting Dido making a sacrifice at the temple of Hercules

### Valerian

Publius Licinius Valerianus Augustus was the Roman Emperor from 235-259AD. In 257AD, he commanded Christians to either perform sacrifices to Roman gods or be banished. The following year, he increased his severity when he mandated the execution of Christian leaders and ordered Christian senators and knights to perform acts of worship to Roman gods in order to retain their titles. Those who disobeyed were sent into slavery. Perhaps most famous for his downfall, Valerian was the only Roman Emperor to be captured as a prisoner of war, detained in confinement and publicly humiliated until he was eventually killed in captivity.

### The Crown

Valerian is depicted as wearing two types of crowns throughout his reign: the corona crown and the laurel wreath crown. The bust of this coin portrays Valerian in a corona crown which was designed to reflect the corona of the sun (the outer layers of the flames that spike out like a crown). The corona crown was significant because it was a display of power and authority and is only worn by emperors in Roman coinage. On the other hand, the laurel wreath is seen on many Roman figures (emperors and otherwise) including Valerian and was viewed as more of an accolade than a signification of power. It was given as a trophy for extreme valor in war to distinguished warriors for their accomplishments; it could be compared to today's Medal of Honor.

### Murex Shell

The Murex shell depicted in the middle of the reverse side of the coin represents the purple dye for which the city of Tyre was known. Anciently, the Phoenicians harvested a type of sea snail living in Murex shells and used them to create a vibrant purple dye. Although the demand for the dye never exceeded the supply, the process was labor intensive so the dye was very expensive. Only people with extreme riches could afford this royal purple which led to it becoming a symbol of status and wealth. Roman law even dictated that only the high ruling class and people of position were allowed to wear purple garments. The purple dye made from the Murex sea snails became the Tyrian trademark and esteemed product of trade which made the placement of the Murex shell on coins a boastful reminder of their Tyrian purple. The Tyrians credited their god Hercules with the discovery of the precious dye. Their legend tells of Hercules' sheepdog biting into shellfish which left a bright crimson stain in the dog's mouth. Hercules then ordered his gown to be dyed with the new-found color. The Tyrians honored Hercules for giving them this desirable product by building a temple in his honor. The temple of Hercules is depicted on the top of the reverse side of the coin and is identifiable by Hercules' club in the doorway. The Hercules of Greek mythology was the original god of the Tyrians, so naturally he would be included on a coin minted in Tyre.

### Conclusion

Throughout the process of researching, we were amazed at the plethora of information that became evident on the coin. Though there was much to explore, we chose to focus on certain aspects that we could find significant information on including the people, crown type, murex shell, and temple. We were able to interpret the meaning of all the legible images and symbols depicted on this ancient coin. Similar to modern day coins, there is a reason for every detail about the coin which provides glimpses into the culture, government, economy, and beliefs. In the end we discovered that this small, seemingly insignificant token from history can have a massive impact on building our knowledge of the past.

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