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.

Valerian
Publius Licinius Valeriananus 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 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.

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 Murex sea snail from obverse image zoomed). 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 was often used as 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.

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 was often used as 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 Tyrans 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 Tyrans 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.

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 to a statue of her dog in 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.

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.

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.

Sources
Lloyd B. Benson (1963) Journal of Near Eastern Studies, retrieved from JSTOR.org

Obverse Image of Coin, Bust of Emperor Valerian
Reverse Image depicting Dido making a sacrifice at the temple of Hercules
Image of goddess dido zoomed in from reverse
The Murex shell from obverse image zoomed

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

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