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MIGLENA DIMOVA

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A few Notes on the Iconography of the Idalion Coins

Miglena DIMOVA

Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"
miglenasd78@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0004-0902-6829

Abstract: The topic of the present paper is the iconography of the coins of the kingdom of Idalion, one of the Cypriot city-kingdoms from the 1st millennium BC. Some of the signs have already been debated separately in the course of broader studies and more general topics. In the present paper the iconographic symbols and their parallels are under discussion, as well as their possible meaning in the context of the royal ideology.

Keywords: Cyprus, Numismatics, Phoenicia, Near East, Asia Minor.



The island of Cyprus and its numerous kingdoms from the 1st millennium BC provide abundant numismatic information, as every state had its own monetary production. The beginning of the coinage is dated to the middle of the 6th century BC. The local Cypriot coinage first was struck in silver, with a standard based on a siglos of circa 11 grams, divided into thirds, sixths, twelfths, and so on. It differs from the Persian monetary system, and this obstacle gives an argument to some scholars to conclude the Cypriot kingdoms were partly independent from the imperial authority. Most of the coins have been inscribed with the local Cypro-Syllabic script and some with Phoenician alphabet, as Phoenicians also inhabited the island from the 9th century BC. From the 4th century BC onwards, the issues began to be inscribed with the Greek alphabet when the process of conscious rapprochement with Athens was in its height. Thus, the coinage provides information about the ethno-cultural diversity on the island (Markou 2015), as well as the political and economical interests of the kingdoms. Apart from the legends, the other prominent source of information is iconography. Every Cypriot kingdom has its own iconographical set, and sometimes it even differs from king to king in one and the same state (Markou 2015).

In the present paper, the focus is on some of the symbols of the kingdom of Idalion. The state was located inland, not far away from the copper deposits of the foothills of the Troodos Mountain. The earliest known coins are dated to the 500s BC. The monetary production did not last long, as the kingdom was subdued by the neighbouring kingdom of Kition, ca. 450 BC, which was populated exclusively with Phoenicians.

The Sphinx

The main symbol of the short-lived Idalion coin production was the sphinx. The fantastical creature is represented seated on a hypothetical line, turned to the left, with its paw resting most likely on a flower. The body of the sphinx is leonine; the head is of a woman wearing an Egyptian wig, but without an apron; and the tail is S-shaped (Hill 1904, 100; Markou 2014, 403; Markou 2015).

The image of the sphinx does not appear as a main or secondary type among the monetary production of the other Cypriot kingdoms, but it can be found on the coins of Eastern Mediterranean poleis such as Chios, Kyzikos, Gergis, the Thraco-Macedonian region, Samothrace, and the Near Eastern Phoenician city-kingdoms of Byblos (Gabal), Samaria, and Philistia (Elayi, J., Elayi, A. 2014, 35–36; Markou 2025, 214–215). The closest parallel is the sphinx depicted on electrum and silver coins from Chios, shown even in the same posture (Markou 2025, 215). However, the iconography of a sphinx or a winged griffin with a paw resting on a flower also appears in Phoenico-Punic art—for example, on an ivory plaque from Nimrud, dating to the 8th century BC in the Metropolitan Museum (inv. no. 64.37.9), and on a plaque from Ibiza dating to the 6th century BC in the Museo Arqueológico Nacional (inv. no. 36196). The significance of the sphinx for every state is not clear. In the Phoenician city-kingdom of Byblos, J. Elayi and A. G. Elayi (2014, 34–35) suppose a decorative function but do not exclude representation of the concept of kingship and the royal power.

The sphinx is strongly connected with Egyptian culture, where it is a guardian of the pharaohs and is one of their statuary representations (Lopez-Ruiz 2021, 218). The body of the sphinx is leonine, and the head is of the king with an Egyptian wig, symbolising his superior political power (Müseler 2021). The human-headed sphinx appeared in the Near East during the 3rd millennium BC. Its image developed in the 2nd and reached its apogee during the 1st millennium BC, but in leaving Egypt and crossing “borders” the creature underwent some changes: once male and flightless, it became female, winged and with an S-shaped tail (Hassan 1949, 105; Petit 2011, 21, 44; Lopez-Ruiz 2021, 218). The fantastic creature became very popular in Syria and Canaan, and especially in the Phoenician city-kingdoms, where it was so widespread that even some scholars consider it as a “Phoenician emblem” (Petit 2011, 21; Lopez-Ruiz 2021, 219). Rather than depicting the “king” himself as in Egypt, the sphinx became a symbol of the Near Eastern goddess Ashtoreth (Hassan 1949, 110). Over time, the creature started to flank the thrones of Astarte and Baal-Hammon as well as the royal ones, most likely symbolising kings’ power (Elayi, J., Elayi, A. 2014, 34–35; Müseler 2021, 82; Lopez-Ruiz 2021, 220) or the divine origin of their authority.

The image of the sphinx is in use in Cypriot art from the Late Bronze Age onwards and could be seen on vessels, ivory plaques, glyptics, funerary stelae, etc. (Petit 2011, 64). During the 6th century BC, the fantastic creature got its curved wings most likely from its Aegean counterpart (Petit 2011, 58), which by itself is of Near Eastern inspiration (Bosana-Kourou 1979; e.g. the type with curved wings could be seen in the relief from Arwad, 9th century BC, Paris, Musée du Louvre, cat. 130). The “Cypriot” sphinx synthesises local, Near Eastern and Western artistic traditions (Markou 2025, 216).

The lotus flower

The lotus flower, which appears on the reverse of the Idalion coins, is represented on two spiral tendrils (Hill 1904, 100; Petit 2011, fig. 24; Markou 2014, 403; 2015). The flower is attested in the iconographic set of the other Cypriot kingdoms (Markou 2014, 403) as well as on the coins of the neighbouring Phoenician city-kingdom of Byblos (Elayi, J., Elayi, A. 2014, 27).

The lotus is closely associated with Egyptian culture. It is the flower from which the god Re was born and was sacred to the god Nefertum. The lotus is a symbol of rebirth and eternal life. Its iconography and symbolism spread throughout Mesopotamia, Syria, and the Phoenician city-kingdoms (Lurker 1980, 76–77). The Egyptian representation of the flower is with three petals and was often depicted in a funerary context, representing the concept of regeneration. Sometimes, the flower is shown being sniffed by the deceased and their family, “a symbolic act

intended to ensure the rebirth of the soul in the afterlife" (Woolmer 2022, 133).

The iconography and symbolism of the lotus was used also in the Phoenician city-kingdoms. It adorned tombs and sarcophagi and most likely represents "the Phoenician concept of rebirth and afterlife" (Woolmer 2022, 133-4). The flower became a common symbol in Phoenician and Punic art, and its representation was a simplification of the Assyrian type, which has a nine-part corolla. The "Phoenician lotus" is represented with two lateral and a few inner petals on a schematic calyx. This type became common in Cyprus as well (Gjerstad 1948, 290–291, 302).

In Cypriot art, the lotus flower appears as a common motif in the so-called lotus columns associated with the Phoenician art, on ivory plaques, as a decoration on bronze and ceramic bowl handles, as pendants on silver and gold jewellery, as a representation on pottery, etc. (Coldstream 1990, 56, 58). The flower is depicted in the hands and sniffed by the Great Goddess like on the Cypro-Phoenician bronze bowl from Idalion (Metropolitan Museum, no. 74.51.5700). Similarly, it is held and smelled by a sphinx as on the "Hubbard" amphora, or simply placed next to the creature (Coldstream 1990, 56, 58). It is therefore associated with the Cypriot goddess, known to the Greeks as Aphrodite (Markou 2025, 218).

The astragalus

On the right side of the lotus flower on the coins appears an astragalus (Hill 1904, 100; Petit 2011, fig. 24; Markou 2014, 403; 2015). The knucklebone is attested on some of the issues of the kingdom of Chytroi (Kagan, forthcoming)¹ and the kingdom of Salamis.² The symbol appears as a primary or a secondary type in numerous cities in Asia Minor, on coins of Antandros in Troade, Chalcedon on the Bosphorus, etc.

The knucklebones are common in the cultures of the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean in general. They were used in many ways as a game, weights, dice for oracles, votives, and even as a royal insignia (amulet). Playing with astragaloi is attested in various sources, both written and visual (Hom. Il. 23.88; Affanni 2008, 83-4). According to Herodotus (1.94), the game with knucklebones was invented by the Lydians in a time of a great famine and was used as a lottery for those who would remain or leave the kingdom.

Used as a symbol of luck, the astragalus could refer to dice oracles found in various areas in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Near East, and Asia Minor (Markou 2014, 403; Müseler 2021, 105). The throwing of knucklebones was a less complex and much cheaper method to know the future. According to Pausanias (7.25.10) the astragalomancy is a typical practice for sanctuaries dedicated to Heracles, but also to Apollo (Delphi), Aphrodite, and Dionysos (Marazov 2007, 73; Doyen 2021). The astragaloi were most likely also used in rituals of selection of a ruler and could be a symbol of divine protection over the chosen one (Marazov 2007, 73, 97). Thus, the appearance of knucklebones on the Idalion coins may represent royal insignia of the king Gra-, on whose coins the symbol appears.

The ankh

The symbol of the ankh, the Egyptian symbol of life, is represented on the reverse of the earliest coins of the kingdom of Idalion. The sign became one of the most preferred representations in Cypriot kingdoms from the Cypro-Archaic II period (600–475 BC) and the Cypro-Classical period (475–310 BC). The ankh appears as the main reverse type on the early coins of Salamis as well as an additional symbol on the coins of Paphos, Marion, and Kition. The sign was used on coinages of the neighbouring areas of Caria, Cilicia, Pamphylia, and the Phoenician kingdoms of Arados and Byblos. The symbol of the ankh has been associated with the short lasting Egyptian submission of the island of Cyprus or with the Persian rule (Markou 2014, 397, 404).

¹ I would like to express my sincere thanks to J. Kagan for sharing his upcoming article with me.

² <https://www.coinarchives.com/a/lotviewer.php?LotID=2201048&AucID=5291&Lot=262&Val=78cd95738bfe5cae4bfec71c03ddb5b1>

The symbols and their possible meaning

It is most likely that the preferred iconographic symbols were related to the royal ideology accepted as a system of ideas in which certain mytho-ritualistic concepts, epic themes, and symbols are adapted to motivate, explain, and represent the royal power and authority. The languages used to express it were verbal, visual-iconographic, and architectural-burial (Christodoulou 2016; Marazov 2018).

Since no comprehensive description of the royal ideology of the Cypriot kings has been preserved, some information could be obtained from ancient Greek authors, as well as from Cypriot epigraphy. Blessed by the gods with wealth was Kinyras of Cyprus (Pind. N. 8), the autochthonous ruler (Hom. Il. 11.20–25), to whom are attributed the foundation of the temple of Aphrodite in Paphos and the kingdom of Amathus (St. Byz. 82.9). He is the beloved one of Apollo's and Aphrodite's obedient priest (Pind. P. 2.4), who in some legendary traditions is related to Byblos (Strab. 16.2.18), and in another text to Syria and Cilicia (Apollod. Bibl. 3.14). In the inscriptions, found exclusively in Paphos, the kings declared themselves as priests of the Great Goddess/Wasnassa as well as descendants of the god-like Kinyras (Mitford 1961, 137; Egetmeyer 2010, T. II, 732f., 735f.).

It could be concluded from these sources that kingship in Cyprus was sacred in nature, as it was in most of the Near Eastern and Eastern Mediterranean royal states. Both literary sources and the epigraphy attest that the kings were sacred servants of the Great Goddess, a concept closely related to the sacred origin of the kingship. Although there is no direct evidence of a priestly function of the kings in the other Cypriot kingdoms apart from Paphos, one may be assumed (Counts 2001, 158). For Idalion it could be concluded from the famous bronze tablet of Idalion, in which the goddess Athena is the one "who embraces Idalion" (Cabinet des Médailles, N° 2297, Masson 1961, 239–244, lines 27–28). According to Papantoniou (2016), the sacralisation of the royal power could also be "seen" in the organisation of Idalion's sacred and secular spaces – the royal palace and above it the sanctuary of the goddess – as it is attested in Amathus and Vouni. This is a characteristic specific to the Near East (Hermayr 2013, 95).

In Cyprus the sphinx was strongly related to the Great Goddess/Wanassa, like in the Levant, and became her symbol (Petit 2011, 79; Papantoniou 2013, 169), which could be accepted as a sign of her epiphany. Its appearance on the Idalion coins could suggest the idea of divine protection above the kings and kingdom or could represent a moment of some foundational myth. Thus, the appearance of the sphinx on the Idalion coins most likely expresses the royal ideology of the Idalion kings, the sacred servants beloved and protected by the Great Goddess "who surrounds Idalion". The lotus flower, which is usually depicted in the hands or sniffed by the goddess or by her symbolic creature – the sphinx – could be accepted as sacred to her. Its appearance on the coins may underline the sacred relation between the kings and the Wanassa.

The sign of the astragalus could be interpreted in two ways: as a royal insignia of the chosen one by the Great Goddess, or as a received oracle for the king's or kingdom's fate. As the coins on which the sign of the knucklebone appears are dated to 470–450 BC, one could speculate that it was during the turbulent times of the siege of Idalion by the Kitians and Persians, an event mentioned in the bronze tablet from Idalion (Cabinet des Médailles, N° 2297; Masson 1961, 239–244). Both interpretations could be accepted as evidence of divine protection over the Idalion kings and a symbol of the sacred relation between them and the Great Goddess.

The significance of the ankh in Cypriot culture remains unclear, but as the sign refers to the royal power in Egypt, the same meaning could be assumed (Markou 2014, 404; Markou 2015) and thus related with the royal ideology – of course without knowing its exact meaning and function in Idalion.

Conclusion

The iconographic repertoire of the coins of the kings of Idalion most likely communicate the sacred origin of their power, the divine protection over them, or some moment of their mythical

past. The symbols are the medium through which the royal authority propagated and legitimised their power and expressed their royal ideology. As the form of government in Idalion was similar to many of the kingdoms and empires in the Near East and Asia Minor, it is highly probable that their royal ideologies were identical or very akin to one another (Coldstream 1990: 59) and that borrowing iconographic symbols or being influenced by them is highly probable. Moreover, the geographical proximity of the island of Cyprus to the Near East and Asia Minor –as well as the island's submission to a few Near Eastern imperial powers like Assyria, Egypt, and Persia – facilitated the movement of people, concepts, and ideas. Thus, the iconography of the kingdom of Idalion once again mirrors the important role of Cyprus as a “middle ground”, a melting pot of different cultures, religious beliefs, and artistic traditions, their adaptation and interpretation in the local culture, and even their diffusion in the Eastern Mediterranean with the mediation of the island.

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