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Minting the Sacred: Cult coins and religious identity in ancient Asia Minor

Monnayer le sacré: Médailles de culte et identité religieuse en Asie Mineure antique

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Abstract :

This article examines how coinage functioned as a strategic medium for articulating and sustaining religious identity in Roman Asia Minor. It addresses the problem of how highly localized cult images could operate within the increasingly standardized visual and political systems of the Roman Mediterranean. Focusing on coin images depicting Artemis Pergaea at Perge and Artemis Ephesia at Ephesus, it introduces the concept of the coin-icon: the transformation of cult statues into portable, repeatable visual forms capable of circulating beyond their original ritual contexts. The article addresses a central tension between highly localized cult traditions and the increasingly standardized visual systems that developed under Greek and Roman rule, particularly the widely recognizable panhellenic image of Artemis as a huntress. While literary and monumental traditions stabilized a shared divine type, coinage allowed urban authorities to insert distinctive cult images into broader systems of exchange without sacrificing legibility.

The study adopts an interdisciplinary methodology combining numismatic analysis, art-historical visual analysis, and theoretical frameworks drawn from semiotics, image theory, and cultural memory studies. Coins are examined not only as economic instruments but as visual objects whose authority derived from circulation. Drawing on Alfred Gell's theory of image agency and Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory, the article argues that coin-icons did not replicate cult statues but reorganized their social and religious efficiency under conditions of circulation. Through repeated use, coin imagery stabilized associations between city and deity across time and space, creating durable visual links between sacred identity and local authority.

The analysis demonstrates two distinct civic strategies. At Perge, coinage transformed an aniconic cult object into a recognizable emblem embedded within imperial monetary systems. At Ephesus, coin imagery mediated between a globally legible divine type and a highly distinctive cult statue through layered visual signs, including the bee, huntress imagery, and the frontal cult figure. In both cases, coinage functioned as a medium of visual diplomacy, enabling cities to assert religious continuity and civic distinction while participating in imperial networks.

By embedding sacred imagery into everyday transactions, coinage of cities in Asia Minor extended divine presence beyond the sanctuary and integrated religious identity into the rhythms of exchange. In this way, the coin-icon reveals how local cult traditions operated within the Mediterranean as a zone of cultural convergence, where shared visual systems enabled communication while preserving meaningful regional difference. Coinage emerges not as a passive reflection but as an active mechanism through which cities negotiated religious meaning, communal identity, and imperial belonging within a dynamic and interconnected Mediterranean world.

Key words : Roman provincial coinage; Artemis; cult images; Asia Minor

Résumé :

Cet article examinera comment la monnaie fonctionne comme un médium stratégique par lequel les cités d'Asie Mineure romaine ont articulé, stabilisé et transmis des identités religieuses locales au sein des réseaux interconnectés de la Méditerranée. Se.concentrant sur l'imagerie numismatique représentant Artémis Pergaea à Pergé et Artémis Ephesia à Éphèse, il introduit le concept du « coin-icon », c'est-à-dire la transformation des statues de culte formes visuelles portables et reproductibles capables de circuler au-delà de leur contexte

rituel d'origine. Nous aborderons une tension fondamentale entre des traditions de culte profondément locales et les systèmes visuels de plus en plus standardisés qui s'étaient développés sous les dominations grecque et romaine, notamment l'image panhellénique largement reconnaissable d'Artémis en chasseresse. Tandis que la littérature et l'art monumental stabilisaient un type divin partagé, la production monétaire municipale permettait aux autorités urbaines d'inscrire des images distinctives de culte dans des systèmes d'échange plus larges sans compromettre leur lisibilité.

Nous adopterons une méthodologie interdisciplinaire qui mettra ensemble l'analyse numismatique, l'analyse visuelle issue de l'histoire de l'art, et des cadres théoriques empruntés à la sémiotique, à la théorie des images et aux études de la mémoire culturelle. Les monnaies seront examinées non seulement comme des instruments économiques, mais comme des objets visuels dont l'efficacité repose sur la répétition, la mobilité et la reproduction sérielle. En nous appuyant sur la théorie de l'agentivité des images d'Alfred Gell et sur le concept de mémoire culturelle de Jan Assmann, nous soutiendrons que les coin-icons ne reproduisent pas les statues cultuelles, mais réorganisent leur efficacité sociale et religieuse dans des conditions de circulation. Par leur manipulation répétée et leur rencontre visuelle, les images monétaires stabilisent les associations entre la cité et la divinité à travers le temps et l'espace, créant des liens durables entre l'identité sacrée et l'autorité urbaine.

L'analyse met en évidence deux stratégies distinctes. À Pergé, la monnaie transforme un objet cultuel aniconique—le bétyle d'Artémis Pergaea—en un emblème reconnaissable intégré aux systèmes monétaires impériaux. À Éphèse, l'imagerie numismatique médiatise la relation entre un type divin largement reconnaissable et une statue locale et singulière de culte, grâce à des signes visuels superposés, incluant l'abeille, l'Artémis chasseresse et la figure cultuelle frontale. Dans les deux cas, la monnaie fonctionne comme un médium de diplomatie visuelle, permettant aux communautés d'affirmer leur continuité religieuse et leur identité tout en participant aux réseaux impériaux. Ainsi, la coin-icon révèle comment les traditions locales de culte opérèrent dans une Méditerranée caractérisée par la convergence culturelle, où des systèmes visuels partagés facilitaient la communication tout en préservant des différences régionales significatives.

Mots clefs : monnayage provincial romain; Artémis; images de culte; Asie Mineure

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Introduction:

In the early third century CE, under the reign of Septimius Severus, a new mint was established at Perge in Roman Asia Minor. A bronze coin produced during this time pairs the emperor's portrait on the obverse with an unusual image on the reverse: a small distyle temple with an eagle in the pediment and a cult statue of a deity within it (RPC V.3, unassigned; ID 80875). Struck in bronze rather than precious metal, the coin circulated primarily within local and regional transactions, moving through markets, workshops, and administrative exchanges (Howgego, 1995: 4 - 6; Butcher, 1988: 12 - 20). Its modest size and low relief ensured durability. The image was not designed for prolonged contemplation but for survival under touch.

While the emperor appears ferocious and dominates the obverse of the coin, it is the depiction on the reverse that demands the most attention. Within the temple rests a rock with a half dome on top. A *baetyl*, a sacred stone endowed with life, emerges from the dome, acting as a featureless head. Even though the word *ΠΕΡΓΑΙΩΝ* is written around the temple, confirming the identity of the deity the cult statue represents, the depiction of the unique rock-like cult statue is enough to remind the viewer of the omnipotent goddess Artemis Pergaea.

Handled in daily transactions, such a coin could momentarily activate memories and expectations associated with Artemis Pergaea, collapsing the distance between sanctuary and marketplace. The coin did not claim to contain the goddess, yet its imagery could recall divine presence through visual familiarity. In this sense, the coin operated as currency, civic promotion, and religious medium by embedding local cult identity within the routines of economic exchange.

In the Roman Mediterranean, cities were linked through systems of exchange, imperial administration, and shared visual conventions. Coinage moved across this interconnected sea not only as currency, but as image, carrying civic symbols into unfamiliar territories. Local cult

traditions therefore had to function within a mobile visual economy shaped by recognition across distance.

At the heart of this study lies a tension between highly localized cult traditions and the increasingly standardized visual systems that developed under Greek and Roman rule. From the Archaic period onward, literary sources such as Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns, and later authors contributed to the construction of a broadly recognizable, panhellenic image of Artemis as huntress, virgin, and protector of the wild. This literary codification intensified in periods of political consolidation, when shared mythological frameworks supported broader cultural cohesion. At the same time, many cults—particularly in Asia Minor—maintained distinctive local forms of worship and iconography that did not always align with these universalized representations. Cities therefore faced the challenge of promoting specific cult identities within visual systems shaped by imperial norms and transregional audiences. This raises a central question: how could cities translate highly localized cult images into forms capable of circulating across the interconnected Mediterranean without dissolving their religious specificity?

Previous scholarship has addressed aspects of this tension from multiple perspectives. Studies of Roman and provincial coinage have demonstrated how cities used numismatic imagery to express civic pride, negotiate local identity, and signal loyalty to imperial authority (Butcher, 1988: 90-95, 102-105; Levick, 2004: 189-203). Work on Roman visual culture has further emphasized the communicative power of images within shared cultural systems (Hölscher, 2004: 1-12, 39-45). At the same time, art-historical and religious studies have underscored the central role of cult statues and sanctuaries as focal points of ritual practice, memory, and divine presence (GORDON, 1979: 5–15; Scheid, 2016: 18–30; 65–72).Yet these bodies of scholarship have rarely been brought into sustained dialogue. As a result, while the political and economic functions of coinage have been thoroughly explored, the role of coins as mediators of religious meaning—especially their capacity to translate cult statues into mobile images—remains under-theorized. In particular, the role of urban coinage in transforming spatially fixed cult statues into mobile visual forms capable of sustaining religious identity across distance has not been fully examined.

Recent methodological debates have further sharpened the problem. As Axel Filges has demonstrated in his survey of scholarship on divine figures on provincial coinage, interpretations have long oscillated between two poles: either coin images are seen and treated as faithful representations of cult statues, or they are dismissed as decorative, conventional, or politically coded motifs (Filges, 2023: 236–239). The assumption that numismatic imagery can be equated directly with sculptural prototypes or institutional cult practice has been repeatedly questioned (Brandt, 1988). Such caution is methodologically sound. It leaves open, however, a more fundamental question: not whether coins replicated cult statues, but how they reconfigured sacred imagery within systems of recurring visual exposure and circulation.

Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory provides a useful theoretic framework for understanding this process. Cultural memory does not require physical proximity to an original object; it depends on the stabilization and transmission of "objectified" symbolic forms that reactivate shared knowledge across time and space (Assmann, 2011: 37; 41–43). In this sense, the coin-icon functioned less as a miniature copy and more as a mnemonic trigger: a compressed sign that sustained the memory of a localized cult beyond the sanctuary. Through repeated handling, coin imagery reinforced associations between city and deity.

Roman coins were not merely circulated metal; they were designed as visible communicative media. Their images were selected within shared iconographic conventions that enabled recognition across regions and social strata. As Carlos Noreña has shown, Roman coinage functioned as one of the empire's most pervasive ideological media, relying on serial reproduction to stabilize meaning across audiences (Noreña, 2011: 1–20; 65–78). Olivier Hekster similarly emphasizes that coin imagery presupposed viewer recognition and operated through targeted visual messaging (Hekster, 2003: 25–28). Coin imagery thus functioned not only in markets but within broader visual discourse, projecting civic and religious identity across imperial networks.

To address this gap, I adopt a visual and contextual approach to coinage in this article, grounded in art-historical analysis, numismatics, and theories of images and memory. Central to this study is the concept of the coin-icon, which describes the transformation of cult imagery into visually condensed, portable forms through the medium of coinage. This article examines how cities in Roman Asia Minor used coinage to translate localized cult images into portable forms capable of circulating within regional and imperial networks. Focusing on numismatic imagery related to Artemis Pergaea and Artemis Ephesia, I argue that coins functioned not only as instruments of exchange but as portable religious emblems that shaped civic identity, articulated local religious traditions, and asserted political presence within the interconnected Mediterranean world. In this context, coinage operated as a form of visual diplomacy, allowing communities to project local religious authority while simultaneously participating in imperial systems of exchange. Drawing on theoretical work on image agency and semiotics, particularly Alfred Gell's distinction between indexical and iconic signs (Gell, 1998: IX), the coin-icon is understood as neither a substitute for the cult statue nor a neutral illustration. Unlike cult statues, which were spatially fixed and ritually activated, coin-icons relied on visual resemblance to evoke recognition without claiming to embody the deity. Through repeated encounters, they sustained cultural memory and extended local cult identities beyond their original cult contexts (Noreña, 2011: 1–20, 65–78).

Through a comparative analysis of Perge and Ephesus, it becomes clear that there are two distinct strategies for deploying the coin-icon. In Perge, coinage transformed an aniconic cult object into a civic emblem that asserted local authority and stability under Roman rule. In Ephesus, coins mediated between a globally recognizable image of Artemis and a highly distinctive cult statue, allowing the city to manage its religious identity across multiple scales. Together, these case studies show how coinage operated at the intersection of religion, economy, and politics, enabling cities to preserve, adapt, and actively promote local cults within the dynamic networks of the Roman Mediterranean.

1- 'Universal Artemis'

Before turning to coinage, it is important to establish the visual system within which local cult images and civic minting operated. From the Archaic period onward, Artemis came to be defined through a combination of literary codification and visual repetition that produced a broadly recognizable, panhellenic divine type. Poets such as Hesiod and the composers of the Homeric Hymns positioned Artemis within a standardized Olympian genealogy and consistently emphasized her identity as virgin huntress, archer, and mistress of the wild (Spyridakis and Nystrom, 1997: 156. Evelyn- White, 1914D). Through repeated encounters in epic, hymn, and later drama, these attributes and traits became embedded in collective memory.

Visual culture translated and reinforced this construction. Vase painting and sculpture standardized literary descriptions into stable iconographic forms: a youthful goddess in a short chiton, armed with bow and quiver, often accompanied by a stag or hound. By the Classical and Hellenistic periods, this huntress type had become one of the most recognizable divine images in the Mediterranean. Its recurrence across media, including sculpture, reliefs, and portable objects, produced a shared visual grammar. Artemis could be identified instantly through a limited set of markers.

In the Hellenistic period, sculptural workshops across the Mediterranean were producing multiple versions of the huntress type for sanctuaries, civic spaces, and domestic contexts. This multiplication not only increased the number of images; it standardized their structure. Artemis could be identified through silhouette alone without reliance on inscription: short chiton, drawn arm, and accompanying animal. Such visual repetition established a regime of recognition grounded in form rather than context (Hölscher ,2004: 18–21; Ridgway, 1984: 53–77). This standardization created the conditions under which coin imagery could function effectively. Because the goddess' image had already been stabilized through artistic reproduction, even highly reduced numismatic rendering could remain legible across distance and scale (Van Eck, 2015: 37–45. Gaifman, 2012: 121–129). This recognizability proved powerful but constraining. The universal form did not

necessarily reflect how Artemis was worshipped in specific cult contexts, where local traditions preserved markedly different visual forms. Cult statues as those of Artemis Pergaea and Artemis Ephesia existed within a visual environment already saturated with expectations about what Artemis "should" look like.

The problem facing civic authorities was therefore not whether to resist the universal image, but how to insert local cult images into a visual system structured by repetition and portability. The huntress type had already achieved mobility across the Mediterranean through artistic reproduction. Civic coinage adopted this same logic of visibility but redirected it. Coins allowed cities to exploit the recognizability of universal Artemis while simultaneously promoting distinctive local cult forms. In other words, the universal huntress was not replaced by local coin imagery; she became a semantic bridge. The following section examines how coinage transformed cult statues into portable images, coin-icons, that negotiated between this stabilized panhellenic type and the highly localized religious identities.

2- Coin Icons

If universal Artemis was stabilized through repetition in literature and monumental art, civic coinage redirected that repetition. As mentioned, coins circulated through markets, ports, and administrative networks, placing civic imagery into the hands of both local users and outsiders (Howgego, 1995: 62–66). In Asia Minor, civic bronze coinage occupied a distinct position within the Roman monetary system. Unlike imperial gold or silver issues, which served interprovincial exchange, bronze coins were minted under civic authority and functioned primarily within local and regional economic circuits (Howgego, 1995: 4–6; Butcher, 1988: 90–95). Regional analyses of civic bronze in northern Anatolia show that reverse types overwhelmingly fall into the category of gods, cult, and myth, with some cities– Komana, Pompeiopolis, Nikopolis, Sebastopolis– minting only cultic imagery. (Sauer, 2016). This widespread privileging of sacred themes demonstrates that provincial iconography already functioned as a primary vehicle of religious identity. Simultaneously, the urban control meant that coin imagery was not arbitrary but deliberately selected to represent the community in condensed visual form.

This civic authority over bronze coinage is well documented in the structure of provincial minting itself. Civic issues were produced under local authorization and reflected deliberate choices about how a city presented itself within imperial circulation
(Burnett, Amandry, and Ripollès, 1992: 1–5). Coin types therefore served as official civic statements, stabilizing particular visual associations between city and deity through continuous reproduction. Because coins were struck in large numbers and encountered repeatedly in daily transactions, these choices achieved visibility, embedding civic identity within the material fabric of economic life (HARL, 1987: 19–22).

Although bronze coins were struck and issues locally, they were not isolated. Provincial cities were integrated into broader networks of trade, taxation and administration, and bronze issues regularly moved beyond the immediate urban center. Their circulation was both dense and permeable: concentrated locally while still extending outward. This made civic bronze coinage especially effective for projecting cult identity. Each strike reproduced the same image, reinforcing the association between the city and deity.

At Perge and Ephesus alike, this communicative potential is visible in the repeated selection of Artemis' cult statue as a reverse type. In both cities, a site-bound sacred object was reformulated as a small, serial image. The cult statue was no longer limited to its architectural setting; it entered systems of economic exchange. A bronze issue from Perge illustrates this transformation clearly (RPC I, 3371). The reverse shows a distyle temple enclosing the cult statue of Artemis Pergaea, identified explicitly by the inscription ΑΡΤΕΜΙΔΟΣ ΠΕΡΓΑΙΑΣ. Reduced to a small, repeatable image, the statue retains its essential identifying features while becoming detached from its architectural setting. The coin does not replicate the physical presence of the statue, but it preserves its recognizability. In this way, coinage translated a spatially fixed cult statue into a portable visual form capable of sustained transregional movement.

Semiotic theory helps clarify this transformation. Following Peirce's distinction between index, icon, and symbol, cult statues —particularly those activated through ritual—functioned as indexical objects grounded in material presence. Coins, by contrast, lacked such direct connection. When a coin depicted the baetyl of Artemis Pergaea or the cult statue of Artemis Ephesia, it operated as an icon, relying on visual resemblance rather than physical continuity
(Peirce, 1931: 58; Kiszka, 1996: 30–38; Gell, 1998: IX). The shift relocated sacred reference from presence to recognition.

Yet the coin-icon was not a neutral illustration. Because it referred to a specific cult statue, it retained a trace of its authority and recalled a prototype rooted in place. As van Eck has argued, images derive vitality not only from physical presence but from the conditions of their encounter (Van Eck, 2015: 73–95). In the case of coinage, this encounter occurred through everyday use. Archeological evidence shows that bronze coins circulated intensively within local and regional contexts (Kemmers, 2006: 235–254; Sauer, 2016). Their imagery was rarely the focus of sustained attention; instead, recognition accumulated over time, reinforcing associations between city and deity.

For local users, the coin-icon did not reproduce cult experience, nor can it be assumed to have generated uniform emotional responses. Rather, through repeated circulation, it reinforced shared visual associations between the city and its patron goddess. In Assmann's terms, repetition forms the basis of the "connective structure" through which cultural identity is stabilized across time (Assmann, 2011: 37–41). Coin imagery operated within this logic: not as individual recollection, but as the persistent visibility of collectively recognizable forms. The coin did not recreate ritual presence; it maintained the visibility of cult identity within everyday transactions.

This analysis does not assume that viewers experienced coin imagery in a uniform or devotional way. Its effectiveness lay in accumulated familiarity. As Howgego has shown, civic coin types projected identity through continuous reproduction across local and regional networks
(Howgego, 1995: 62–66). Through repeated encounter, coin imagery established stable visual associations between city and deity, regardless of individual interpretation. In this sense, coin-icons operated within a broader Roman visual environment in which images structured shared frameworks of recognition across distance (Wallace-Hadrill, 2008: 52–58). Coinage did not replace the cult statue or replicate ritual experience; it extended the visibility of cult identity within systems of exchange.

For outsiders unfamiliar with the sanctuary, interpretation required guidance. Here, familiar divine markers (bow, quiver, the figure of the goddess, or the emperor's portrait) functioned as interpretive scaffolding (Wallace-Hadrill, 2008: 52–58). Universal Artemis did not compete with local cult image; she predicates its legibility.

The obverse/ reverse pairing was therefore crucial. Roman provincial coinage was meant to be read as a visual unit. The emperor's portrait guaranteed authority and circulation; the reverse articulated civic identity (Butcher, 1988: 90–95). Together they staged a dialogue between imperial order and local tradition. At Perge, the aniconic baetyl signaled antiquity and rootedness, while imperial imagery framed that rootedness as sanctioned rather than oppositional. At Ephesus, the cult statue and the bee operated within the same logic, embedding distinctiveness within recognized visual systems.

Architecture and inscription reinforced this dynamic. Temple façades on Pergaean coins monumentalized the cult statue in miniature, recasting a local sacred object as a civic institution. Greek words— such as Αρτεμιδοσ Περγαιασ or corresponding Ephesian legends—asserted continuity with local tradition even as coin circulated within imperial networks. (Levick, 2004: 84–92; RPC I, 3371). Prototype reproduction, architectural framing, and linguistic continuity together stabilized cult identity across distance.

Its repetition within exchange networks structured how cult images were encountered. It functioned as an instrument of civic strategy. By condensing cult presence into repeatable, portable form, cities reorganized how sacred images operated within imperial systems of exchange. The following case studies examine two distinct outcomes of this strategy: at Perge, the coin-icon

elevated an aniconic cult object into a defining civic emblem; at Ephesus, coinage mediated between an already authoritative cult image and broader Mediterranean expectations of Artemis.

3- Perge

As established thus far in this article, Perge's civic identity was inseparable from the cult of Artemis Pergaea. Although the city lay inland in Roman Pamphylia, the river Kestros connected it to Mediterranean trade networks, placing Perge within broader systems of regional exchange. The sanctuary– likely located outside of city walls, though not yet securely identified by archeologists– anchored Perge's religious life, while the cult statue of Artemis Pergaea embodied a form of antiquity that was explicitly local and visually distinctive. According to local tradition, the goddess had thrown a stone from the sky with an imprint of her face on it; the cult image was therefore understood as divinely originated and, in its very essence, mobile. This combination of a spatially rooted sanctuary and a mythologically mobile image made coinage a very potent medium through which Perge articulated civic pride and identity.

The baetyl distinguished Artemis Pergaea from more anthropomorphic representations of the goddess that were found in the Graeco-Roman world. Aniconic cult objects of this kind were widely venerated in Asia Minor, where their perceived antiquity and resistance to standardized divine forms reinforced deep local traditions (Cicero, *In Verrem* 2.4: 94–96; Gaifman, 2012: 45–52, 121–129). At Perge, the rock's authority derived specifically from its material: touched by the goddess herself, the object represents a particular place and origin myth rather than a generalized vision of Artemis (Gaifman, 2012: 52–57; Van Eck, 2015: 73–95). When this highly localized cult form was translated onto coinage, the shift was therefore not a move towards abstraction but rather a reframing. The city did not replace its sacred image: it condensed and circulated it, allowing a materially rooted cult to enter networks of exchange without surrendering its claim to uniqueness, but rather highlighting it.

Early civic coinage of Perge already demonstrates an awareness of the communicative power of numismatic imagery. Late Hellenistic issues frequently depict Artemis in anthropomorphic form—shown either as a head or as a standing figure equipped with bow and quiver—accompanied by legends identifying her explicitly as Artemis Pergaea. Several late first century BCE bronze issues further develop this strategy by depicting the temple of Artemis Pergaea with the cult statue inside, paired with the goddess's bow and quiver on the reverse; a coin dated roughly to 50-30 BCE provides a clear example (Fig. 1). Here, localized cult imagery and widely legible attributes are combined, anticipating the later coin-icon strategy. These images participate in a widely shared visual language that rendered Artemis immediately recognizable to viewers across the eastern Mediterranean (Hölscher, 2004: 39–45, 180–187). Universal Artemis functioned here as a visual bridge, ensuring legibility while preserving local identification through inscription. At this stage, coinage aligned Perge with broader Hellenistic conventions of divine representation without yet foregrounding the cult statue itself (Carradice and Price, 1988: 84–92).

Figure 1:
Bronze coin of Perge, ca. 50-30 BCE. (cf. SNG France 373-378).



Note: Obverse shows distyle temple of Artemis Pergaea containing the cult statue. The reverse shows a Bow and Quiver. 17 mm. Source: Author's collection. Picture: by Kyra Rietveld

A decisive shift occurs when the cult statue of Artemis Pergaea becomes a recurring reverse type. Coins depicting a distyle temple housing the aniconic baetyl appear by the late Hellenistic period and proliferate under Roman rule, especially during the early third century CE (TEKIN, 1991: 217–220). A Severan bronze issue from Perge illustrates this numismatic strategy with particular clarity (RPC V.3, ID 80702). Struck under Septimius Severus, the coin pairs the emperor's laureate bust on the obverse with a distyle temple enclosing the cult statue of Artemis Pergaea on the reverse. The statue appears frontally, positioned between architectural supports and framed by an eagle in the pediment, while in the inscription Ἀρτέμιδος Περγαίας explicitly names the goddess. Such architectural miniaturization is characteristic of civic coinages across northern Anatolia where temple façades, often enclosing cult statues, form a major component of reverse types that show local cults. Cities such as Komana, Neokaiareia, Neoklaudiopolis, Sebastopolis, and Zela employ similar architectural frames to monumentalize sacred presence in portable form (Sauer, 2016). Reduced in scale and rendered in schematic form, the image preserves the essential features that are necessary for recognition. The temple façade monumentalizes the statue while simultaneously miniaturizing it, translating a spatially fixed cult object into a portable civic sign (Levick, 2004: 189–195).

Unlike anthropomorphic representations of Artemis, which could be shared by many cities, the baetyl of Artemis Pergaea was unmistakably Pergaean. Its repeated appearance on coinage asserted the antiquity of the cult and emphasized its resistance to full assimilation into Greco-Roman visual norms (Gaifman, 2012: 121–129). The aniconic form, far from being a liability, became a statement of difference and authenticity.

Pergaean coinage must be read as a coherent visual unit, especially under Roman rule. On imperial issues, the obverse portrait of the reigning emperor—most notably Caracalla—asserts imperial authority and guarantees monetary validity, while the reverse articulates local religious identity (Wallace-Hadrill, 2008: 52–58). This pairing was not accidental. In the Roman provincial system, cities retained the right to mint bronze coinage precisely because it allowed them to express civic distinction within an imperial framework (Howgego, 1995: 63–66). The emperor's image solidified its legitimacy; the reverse provided space for local promotion.

By placing the cult statue of Artemis Pergaea opposite the emperor's portrait, Perge positioned its local goddess within the sanctioned framework of imperial rule without subordinating her to it.

The emperor authenticated the coin's circulation and value, while the goddess anchored the city's identity in a pre-Roman past. Especially during the Severan period, when cities across Asia Minor competed for prestige and visibility, the emphasis on ancestral cults became a powerful strategy of differentiation. During the late second and early third centuries CE, cities across Asia Minor actively promoted their antiquity, cult traditions and civic distinctions in order to secure imperial favor, prestige, and recognition (Price, 1984 : 133–165; Ando, 2000: 228–252; Levick, 2004 : 189–203). Coinage became a central instrument in this process. Because bronze issues remained under local control, they provided a sanctioned medium through which communities could assert their historical depth and religious authority while simultaneously affirming loyalty to the emperor. At Perge, the repeated depiction of the baetyl of Artemis Pergaea functioned as a visual claim to ancestral legitimacy. Its aniconic form emphasized continuity with a pre-Roman past and presented the city as the guardian of an ancient and enduring cult. Therefore, within this competitive imperial landscape, the coin-icon did not merely preserve local identity, it actively positioned Perge within hierarchies of civic prestige, structured by antiquity, religious distinction and imperial visibility. Perge negotiated its place within the empire, asserting continuity rather than rupture.

This negotiation was not reduced to symbolism; it depended on sustained visibility. Coins circulated beyond the sanctuary and the city. As serial objects, struck from dies and encountered in daily transactions, they normalized the image of Artemis Pergaea for both local users and across the Mediterranean (Howgego, 1995: 62–66). For inhabitants of Perge, the coin-image could activate memories of cult practice—processions, offerings, and proximity to the cult statue—allowing the goddess's presence to be recalled outside ritual space (Assmann, 2011: 37–41, 109–118). For non-local viewers, the coin often constituted the primary encounter with Artemis Pergaea. Here, the familiar imagery of universal Artemis—bow, quiver, or imperial portrait—functioned as interpretive scaffolding, guiding recognition and lending authority to an otherwise unfamiliar cult object. Through familiarity rather than direct experience, the coin-icon enabled the projection of local religious identity onto a Mediterranean stage.

Perge represents a maximal articulation of the coin-icon strategy. By foregrounding an aniconic cult statue on its coinage while embedding that image within imperial visual conventions, the city succeeded in projecting a deeply local religious identity without sacrificing legibility or legitimacy. The cult statue of Artemis Pergaea did not compete with universal Artemis; it was reinforced by her imagery and framed by imperial authority. In this way, Perge demonstrates how civic coinage could operate simultaneously as economic instrument, political statement, and religious medium.

4- Ephesus

Perge demonstrates how a city could stabilize a local cult object through numismatic repetition. Ephesus confronted a different starting point. Unlike the relatively circumscribed cult of Artemis Pergaea, Artemis Ephesia already possessed transregional visibility rooted in the scale of her sanctuary and the long-standing circulation of her image. Ephesian coinage therefore did not introduce a local cult to wider audiences; it regulated and recalibrated an already authoritative image within shifting political contexts.

From the earliest phases of Ephesian coinage, civic identity was articulated through selective visual condensation rather than full figural representation. Seventh-century BCE issues frequently deploy the stag, a widely legible marker of "universal" Artemis, paired with an incuse reverse (BMC Ionia, Ephesus 1-3; SNG Copenhagen 1-2). Yet alongside this transregional marker appears a distinctly local emblem: the bee. By the mid-sixth century BCE, the bee occupies the obverse almost entirely, transforming the goddess into a condensed civic sign, while the reverse retains a quadripartite incuse square (BMC Ionia, Ephesus 4-16; SNG Copenhagen 18-31). Priestesses at Ephesus were known as *Melissae* ("bees") and the insect carried associations of chastity, discipline, and sacred order (Elderkin, 1939: 203; Rietveld, 2022: 67). Therefore, embedded in cult practice, the bee functioned numismatically as a repeatable marker of locality. Its visual economy is strategic: small, unmistakable, endlessly reproducible.

In this early phase, Ephesian coinage did not yet foreground the cult statue. Instead, it established civic identity through emblematic compression. Authority is concentrated in a symbol. Early Ephesian electrum and silver issues consistently deploy emblematic types, especially the bee and stag, rather than full figural representations, allowing the city to signal divine association through condensed visual markers (Head, 1911: 546–548 ; Elderkin, 1939: 203–206).

By the late Classical and early Hellenistic periods, the strategy shifts. Ephesian issues increasingly adopt the Hellenized bust of Artemis as huntress on the obverse, aligning the city with a transregional visual language (Head, 1911: 548–549). The bee and stag do not disappear; they migrate to the reverse, forming a secondary register of local specificity. A late fourth-century BCE drachm illustrates this dual system: the huntress supplies immediate legibility, while the bee and palm anchor the coin within Ephesian cult geography (Head, 1911: 549; BMC Ionia, Ephesus 56-63; SNG Copenhagen 83). This is not iconographic inconsistency but layered address. Universal Artemis secures intelligibility; emblematic Artemis secures identity.

The cult statue itself enters the numismatic repertoire in the late second century BCE (BRENK, 1998: 160). Its delayed appearance is significant. Ephesian identity did not require initial introduction through coinage; it required modulation. When the statue first appears, it is visually subordinated, often reduced in scale and placed opposite the huntress head. The image is introduced cautiously, within a system already stabilized by universal marks.

Under Roman rule, however, the cult statue crystallizes into a standardized, repeatable type: rigid frontal posture, outstretched arms, columnesque body, and often supporting elements held at the sides (Fleischer, 1973: 12–18, 89–103) Whether introduced in late Attalid or early Roman contexts (Jenkins,1989: 136–137; Brenk, 1998: 160), the numismatic result is the same: the Ephesian cult image becomes a visually saturated formula capable of surviving scale reduction and repeated handling. This standardization is clearly visible in civic bronze issues of the early Roman period. One representative example depicts the cult statue of Artemis Ephesia standing frontally in her rigid, columnar form, flanked symmetrically by two stags (RPC V.3, type 58720). The composition brings together two distinct visual registers. The cult statue itself presents the highly localized Ephesian form, visually unlike the literary huntress, while the stags belong to the broader iconographic repertoire of Artemis as mistress of animals, providing a familiar attribute legible to wider audiences. Their presence does not dilute the cult image but rather anchors the local figure within a recognizable divine vocabulary. The emblem and the icon operate in tandem. The bee condenses; the statue monumentalizes.

Where Perge relied on the authority of a singular aniconic prototype, Ephesus constructed numismatic authority through visual redundancy. Recognition does not depend on one image alone but on saturation across registers. Bee, huntress, and cult statue function as collaborative signs calibrated for different audiences and viewing conditions. Ephesian coinage thus demonstrates the management of an already visible cult within imperial monetary transit.

Conclusion:

Taken together, Perge and Ephesus demonstrate that the coin-icon was not a fixed formula, but a flexible civic instrument shaped by local circumstance. At Perge, coinage stabilized a singular, materially specific cult object as a recognizable emblem under Roman rule. At Ephesus, it regulated an already authoritative image through layered signs (the bee, the huntress, and cult statue) calibrating recognition across audiences. In both cases, coinage did more than reproduce sacred imagery; it shaped how that imagery was encountered within imperial systems of exchange.

Coins did not replace cult statues; they reorganized sacred authority within systems of exchange. Through these small and constantly handled objects, civic communities extended the reach of their gods beyond architectural boundaries and embedded religious identity within everyday life.

In this sense, the coin-icon makes a broader transformation in the Roman Mediterranean visible: divine power was not confined to sacred spaces but operated through networks of exchange. The coin-icon illuminates a broader Mediterranean dynamic: a world in which shared visual systems did not erase difference but structured its communication. Within the sea's interconnected networks of exchange, coinage enabled cities to project distinctive religious identities while participating in common visual and political frameworks.

The goddess did not remain in the temple. She traveled—compressed into metal and made legible across distance—acting not only in ritual contexts but within the shared visual economy of imperial life.

This study also opens pathways for extending the coin-icon framework beyond Asia Minor. For future research I plan to examine how other Artemis cults across mainland Greece and the Black Sea region employed coinage to negotiate similar tensions between localized worship and broader systems of interurban flow. Such comparisons would clarify whether the numismatic strategies observed in Perge and Ephesus represent regional adaptations or were part of a wider Mediterranean pattern in which coinage mediated divine presence across distance. Methodologically, integrating die studies and circulation patterns, while further exploring the role of cultural memory offers particular promise. By tracing not only what images appeared on coins but how, where, and how often they moved, scholars can more precisely reconstruct the role of coinage in stabilizing religious identity across interconnected landscapes. While this study has focused on Artemis as a test case, the approach may ultimately be applied to other divinities, allowing coinage to be understood more fully as a central medium in the visual and religious networks of the Mediterranean.

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