

# The Vases Depicted on the Coins of Ancient Italy

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## Abstract

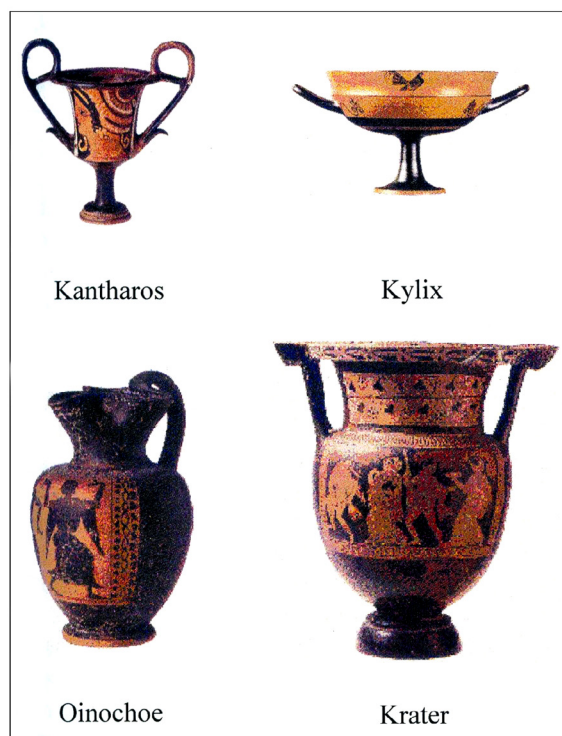
*Towards the middle of the 5th and in the first half of the 4th century BC in South Italy Tarentum, Herakleia and Metapontum stand out for the quantity of coins issued with types representing vases, above all kantharoi and oinochoai. In the first half of the 3rd century BC in Apulia also Canusium and Caelia represented characteristic containers of the Messapian civilization; in Lucania Metapontum and Herakleia presented on their coins kantharoi, oinochoai, kotylai, amphorae and chalice craters. These vases give the impression to be a modern 'catalogue' of all the drinking vessels that these cities were able to offer to their customers. Such great and meticulous attention was determined by the will to promote to the general public the different qualities and the multiplicity of vases that the local workshops produced.*

The examination of coin collections brings to light how, since the first half of the 5th century BC, various centres in southern Italy have paid close attention to the representation of numerous vases linked to the consumption of wine on their coins, favouring those which could glorify and celebrate their city such as the *kantharos* and the *oinochoe* (See Fig. 1).

In general, we observe how isolated vase representations occur on the smallest nominals, the obols, silver coins whose weight was often less than one gram. On the larger denominations the characters who best embody the role of the *polis* usually carry vases in their hands or are accompanied by them on the coin field. In particular we find heroes such as Heracles, female figures who personify the city issuing the coin, and also warrior divinities such as Athena<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The coins cited in this contribution are the result of the examination of the coin catalogues published to document collections by the American Numismatic Society of New York, the Ashmolean Museum of Oxford, the British Museum of London, the Fitzwilliam Museum of Cambridge, and the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris (Collection Jean and Marie Delepierre), to which the examination of catalogues and sales lists published by the main antiquarian companies in the Numismatics sector has been added.



**Fig. 1.** Images of Vases in use during the *symposia*.

The cities of Tarentum in **Apulia** and Herakleia and Metapontum in **Lucania** are undoubtedly the *poleis* that stand out above all for the quantity of coins issued with types representing vases. Their specimens are made with great care and a realism that relied both on the technical expertise and artistic skill of work of the engravers of the relevant coinage, and at the same time the high quality and variety of local ceramic production.

**Tarentum** had already initiated its monetary experience towards the end of the 6th century BC, minting incuse silver staters (approximately 8 g) which bore on both sides the image of Taras on Poseidon's dolphin. Around 470 BC the city renews its monetary types and to the young 'dolphineer' on the Rev. combines the ecist sitting on a *diphros*, holding a spindle in his left hand and holding a large *kantharos* with his outstretched right hand. The upper nominal is flanked by two silver coins (approximately 0.33 g) which on the Obverse depict both a rounded jar with a handle, an *olpe*: one has a smooth body and a handle attached between the shoulder and the neck, rising partially above it; the other shows a body divided into lozenges with a handle attached directly between the

robust neck and shoulder. In subsequent decades, even when the image of the ecist underwent a progressive rejuvenation, the attributes of the spindle and the *kantharos* remained constant in the dolphineer's hands.

Towards the middle of the 5th century BC, on the Rev. of the silver stater, Tarentum depicts a naked knight with a small *kantharos* between the hooves of his galloping horse. Immediately afterwards, the vase reappears in the right hand of the ecist sitting on the *diphros*, represented in the act of conceptually offering it to the young helmeted dolphineer who, on the Rev., carries a shield and spear and holds the palm of victory in his right hand. In the same period Tarentum also minted silver obols (approximately 0.70 g) which bear on the Obv., a small female head inside a garland – a probable personification of the polis – and on the Rev. a *kantharos* with a small foot and a wide neck on a body which tapers downwards, equipped with curved handles that attach to the edges of the mouth of the container.

In the first half of the 4th century BC the Taras 'dolphineer' will continue to characterize his city's staters, depicted in the act of extending his arm to hold either the *kantharos* or an *oinochoe*.

Subsequently, the gold series (approx. 0.80 g), minted at the time of Alexander the Molossian's expedition to Magna Graecia (325-20 BC), also presents the head of the city's divinity on the Obv. and on the Rev. a *kantharos* with a raised foot decorated with small globes and large curved handles decorated at the base with tiny racemes. Contemporarily, small silver fractions show *kantharoi* on both sides, distinguished from each other by the different shapes of the body (inverted bell, wide or tapered, or with a globular swelling above the foot). The jars are also equipped with different handle profiles: simple or double, high and arched, rising freely above the neck or attached to the same level, or with handles left free at the height of the mouth of the glass and decorated with small racemes.

Considered as a whole, these *kantharoi* give the impression of a modern 'catalogue' of all the drinking vessels that the 'Tarentum factory' was able to propose to its customers, even perhaps seeming to indicate the relative costs through the different number of small globes/signs of value that characterised the smaller coins.

Coinciding with the presence of Pyrrhus in southern Italy (280-72 BC) the staters of Tarentum maintain the image of Taras on the dolphin with the *kantharos* in his hand on the Rev, and on the Obv represent a young naked knight who – advancing to the parade step – crowns his horse. Under the animal's belly, two *amphorae* are depicted – with a narrow foot and a long neck – which certainly allude to the victory achieved by the city thanks to the 'brotherly' help of the Epirot sovereign, a meaning more precisely illustrated by the presence of the symbol of the two *amphorae*, traditionally connected with the Dioscuri brothers.

The *kantharos* will again appear in the field of subsequent staters (272-35 BC), which bear on the Obv. a galloping naked knight with torch in hand, and on the Rev. a robust naked dolphineer with chlamys on his shoulders, holding the trident in his left hand and raising a weapon with his right hand, while a small *kantharos* rises below the scene. Naked, armed, or holding the '*lemniscata*' palm of triumph, the knight will continue to characterize the Obverse of the staters of Tarentum even in the years of Hannibal's presence in Italy (212-09 BC). On the Rev. the dolphineer, holding the trident in his left hand will hold a *kantharos* with a tall and thin foot in his right hand. It is to note how over time thanks to the different position of the *kantharos* (isolated and positioned low in the first case, held in the hand and raised in the second) the two scenes have underlined two different temporal contexts: the first relating to a longed-for victory, the second representing the achieved victory.

Again in **APULIA**, in the first half of the 3rd century BC, flanked on the sides by a cornucopia and a small *oinochoe*, the *kantharos* also appears on the silver obols of **Canusium**, which bear a trichord lyre on the Reverse. On the same small denomination the city of Caelia represents a helmeted male head on the Obverse and on the Reverse the famous '*trozzella*', the characteristic container of the Messapian civilization, with an ovoid body more or less tapered at the foot, with straight, high ribbon-like handles that end with four small wheels, two at the top of the mouth and two at the join with the belly.

At the same time, in nearby **LUCANIA Metapontum and Herakleia** are the cities that seem to have learned the artistic and monetary 'lesson' of the near Tarentum more than the others, with the former in particular managing to equal the 'Maestra' in terms of number and variety of vases represented on their coins.

Starting from 380/70 BC with the head of Demeter present on the Obverse of the staters, **Metapontum** associates a small *kantharos* resting on the edge of the lanceolate leaf of the ear, its connoting type on the Reverse. It will be followed by *oinochoai* characterized by handles of different heights, an *amphora*, and two *kantharoi* of different morphology. One has a wide and thick mouth, a short neck attached to a small globular body divided into lozenges and handles left free, instead the other - of similar shape - features handles that attach directly to the neck. The afore mentioned vases will be followed - in the same position and in association with the ear - by a *kytyle* (the slender and capacious cup with two horizontal handles attached at the height of the neck), by an *oinochoe* (designed as a diametrically expanded globular jug, with a beak-shaped mouth and a very short neck from which a small handle extends and attaches to the shoulder), two twin *amphorae* with ovoid bodies on very high feet, and finally a tapered wine *amphora*. Even on the contemporary staters, which show the helmeted head of Leukippos on the Obverse, on the leaf of the ear *kantharos* and chalice craters are sometimes associated. Similarly, on the contemporary

staters which bear the head of a victorious Heracles on the Obverse, diademed and with a club partially visible behind the neck, *kantharoi* with tapered bodies and large shaped handles will appear, attached to the mouth of the vase or left free to curve at its sides.

Once again in Metapontum in the same time period (second twenty-five years of the 4th century BC), a bronze coin of about 2 grams, with the head of Artemis on the Obverse, bears on the Reverse an elegant *kantharos* with a thin and high foot on which a rounded basin rests, ending in a high neck – flared at the top – onto which large handles are attached. Later (around 300 BC), when the head of Demeter with hair styled on the nape of the neck was replaced by a female head with long hair surrounded by a crown of ears in which it is possible to recognize Kore, on the leaf of the ear is present: a cup with two handles attached horizontally below the mouth of the vase (*kotyle*); a small jug with a flattened ovoid body and with a narrow neck shaped like a terminal spout and a small handle that attaches between the lip and its shoulder (*oinochoe*); two *amphorae* with very high feet overlooked by a star; a wine *amphora* without feet; a *kantharos* and then also craters with a wide neck and small handles that attach to the base of goblet-shaped bodies. On the contemporary staters – which bear the bearded and helmeted head of Leukippos on the obverse – it is represented on the reverse an ear, whose leaf is surmounted by a *kantharos* (see Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** Silver stater of Metapontum (Metaponto, Matera) with head of Leukippos on the obverse and corn ear with a little *kantharos* on the reverse.

Then are also represented two chalice craters alternated by two high-footed wine *amphorae* overlooked by a star, subsequently replaced by a rounded *amphora* with short handles that attach below the neck. Later again *kantharoi* with ‘free’ handles curving above the mouth of the vase which attach to it, or *kantharoi* which show handles detached from the neck and bodies with ‘melon-like’ ribs are represented. Following, the *oinochoe* and then a rounded *amphora* on a thin foot, *kotylai* with small handles close to the neck, a small swollen pitcher with a

very small handle on the shoulder and a slightly flared mouth are also represented. Finally, two 'sister' *amphorae* – which rest on high feet – and which will give way to a single wine *amphora* can be observed.

These coins are followed by other staters which are characterized on the Obverse by the bearded head of a strategist with a Corinthian helmet and with an ear of corn on the Reverse as the ever-present emblem of the city. On the curved leaf of the corn there are small *kantharoi* with triangular or curved handles, attached or detached from their mouths. Finally, also on a gold nominal (one third of a stater of approximately 2.60 grams), with the head of Demeter seen in three-quarters on the Reverse, a *kantharos* is present resting on the edge of the leaf of the Metapontine ear.

Such meticulous attention from the part of the master engravers to create with great precision – alongside the main types – perfect small symbols (of only a few millimetres) was certainly not correlated to a simple desire for artistic variation, but rather determined by the will – and perhaps also the need – to make known, and therefore 'promote' to the general public, the different qualities of vases and the multiplicity of forms that the Metapontum workshops were able to create for their customers.

Since the issues at the end of the 5th century BC, in **LUCANIA**, it is the city of **Herakleia** which represents on the silver staters (bearing on the Obv. the head of Athena with a Corinthian helmet decorated by Scylla in the act of throwing a stone), a Heracles initially fighting with the Nemean lion and then depicted at rest, sitting on a rock covered with the skin of the lion that he himself killed. The hero carries in his hand a small *oinochoe* (the jug for pouring wine into cups, which has the function of 'celebrating' his feat). Herakleia will continue to associate this rounded vase with its eponymous hero also on the silver staters which combine on the Rev., to the head of Athena *Skilletia*, a standing Heracles, who holds the club in his right hand which he rests on the ground and with his left arm raises the lion while holding the bow. The 'heroic' symbolism of the scene is underlined by the presence of a small rounded *oinochoe* depicted above, to the left of the hero, while in the initial type – the one with Heracles fighting with the wild beast – the vase still occupies the space between his legs, consequently highlighting the two different times of action of Heracles.

The staters that Herakleia emits during the course of the 4th century BC, still represent the head of Athena *Skilletia* on the Obverse and on the Reverse Heracles standing holding a lion folded over itself in his powerful arms, lifting it entirely off the ground. A rounded vase with two handles will accompany the hero when – with a 'standing' posture – he celebrates his victory by holding the lion and the bow in his left hand, and placing his right hand on the club towards the ground. Finally, a rounded cup – with a wide neck and the body divided into lozenges (a *kyphos*?) – will be held in the hand by a Heracles depicted as standing, in the act of making a sacrifice above a small altar. At the same time

as these silver staters, it is probable that Herakleia had also minted small bronze coins (less than 3 grams), which bear the bow and quiver on the Reverse and on the Obverse a *kyathos*, the 'ladle' with a wide mouth, a short neck tapering downwards, and a single tall handle attached between the mouth and foot of the container.

Already in **BRUTTIUM** in the final decades of the 5th century BC, **Croton** had represented a *kantharos* with a small foot and high curved handles attached to the mouth of the chalice, as a secondary symbol placed next to the tripod which was the main type of the city. Later, at the beginning of the 4th century B.C., the frontal head of Hera Lacinia was combined on the Reverse with a naked Heracles, sitting resting above the *leonté*, depicted in the act of holding a rounded vase above a small tripod. In the jar it is possible to recognize the *oinochoe* with which wine was drawn from the crater and then mixed with water before pouring it into the cups.

In the second half of the 4th century BC **Medma** also represented on its bronze coins the frontal head of Kore/Persephone, crowned with ears of corn and bejewelled with a necklace and earrings like a 'bride', accompanied on the left by a hydria or an oinochoe.

Of **Rhegion** we know only of staters with the frontal head of a lion on the Obv. and on the Rev. *Iokastos* sitting on a backless seat, portrayed in the act of holding a *kantharos* out before him, while raising the long command staff with his left arm (see Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** Silver stater of Rhegion (Reggio Calabria).

The exceptional nature and celebratory purpose of the issue, dating back to the years 435-25 BC, which coincides with the relationships and alliance that the City had established with Athens, was also underlined by the olive wreath that surrounded the entire scene.

In the final decades of the 4th century B.C. in **CAMPANIA**, only the city of **Neapolis** associates the head of the Nymph Parthenope present on the Obverse to a small *kantharos* with high curved handles hooked onto the mouth of the vase on the Reverse.

In **APULIA** – between the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 3rd century BC – a single series of silver staters, minted by the city of Arpi, accompanies the head of Demeter crowned with ears of corn with the symbol of a wine amphora. In the same period, **Canusium**, in the northern area of the same region, represents on silver obols a large *kantharos* with high handles and an ovoid body. The vase appears joined to its foot by a globular link that tapers downwards and widens around the base. On its sides a ‘cornucopia’ appears on the left and a small *oinochoe* on the right. On the Reverse the presence of a three-stringed lyre recalls the cheerful context of the banquet. Regarding this example, it should be noted that the accurate precision that characterises both the depiction of the vases and that of the musical instrument concerned a very small and light silver denomination (the surviving specimens have weights below 1 g) which, in addition to testifying to the undoubted expertise of the master engraver, contribute to shedding light on the profound knowledge and attention that was had in that area for the production of valuable vases which the small coins certainly had the task of also making known externally.

Compared to the southern Italian cities mentioned so far, coins depicting vases in other Italian areas (**ETRURIA, UMBRIA and PICENUM**) are rare. Here the monetary phenomenon developed rather late and in different ways compared to that which had previously transpired in the cities of Magna Graecia. On a bronze series made with the casting technique, of uncertain mint but generally attributed to **ETRURIA**, a crater is represented on the Rev. of a ‘heavy’ ounce (17 g), which bears a wheel on the Obverse. The issue dates back to the last quarter of the 3rd century BC, therefore far from the affirmation of the monetary phenomenon in southern Italy where it had already manifested itself starting from the end of the 6th century B.C., influenced in addition by the monetary experiences present in Sicily.

In **PICENUM**, the city of **Hatria**, in the initial decades of the 3rd century BC, also distinguishes the Rev. of a heavy cast bronze trient (which bears a male head with long hair on the Obv.), with a *kantharos* with a slender body. The vase appears to be equipped with high curved handles attached to the shoulders, in the centre of which – in correspondence with the mouth – an ivy leaf stands out, a symbol mainly connected to Dionysos (also called *Kίςσος* from the Greek name for ivy), the Greek divinity connected more than any other to wine, parties and cheerful banquets.

Finally, in the years of the Second Punic War (218-02 BC), the city of **Teate** minted bronze dials bearing the bearded and diademed head of Poseidon on the Obverse, recognizable thanks to the presence of his son Taras riding the



dolphin on the Reverse. The hero holds the trident in his left hand and in his right hand an elegant *kantharos* with a slender body and tapered foot.

In the second half of the 3rd century BC, in **UMBRIA**, the city of **Tuder** also combined the spearhead – on cast ounces of heavy bronze – with a short, rounded *kantharos* resting on a flattened foot present on the opposite side.

Going back north at the end of the 3rd century BC, the symbolism of the *kantharos* – related to the concept of victory, success and heroism, also celebrated with the joy of the symposium – seems to have now established itself throughout the Italian Peninsula, giving life many centuries later – and beyond – to the Holy Grail, the cup in which Joseph of Arimathea would have collected the blood of Christ, to then reappear in the hand of the Christian Empresses, and still today in the cups awarded as prizes to the worthy winners of competitions who deserve recognition and reward from all the communities of which these new ‘heroes’ are also part.

In conclusion: I too would like to raise my glass to celebrate and thank Lucia Travaini, a colleague and friend who has made the Numismatics of the Italian School known and appreciated throughout the world, and to whom I am particularly grateful for the numerous scientific stimuli and for the support of ideas, suggestions and help on the occasion of the organisation of the XV International Numismatic Congress Taormina 2015 and in particular in the pursuit of the idea of the need to systematically study the iconographic lexicon of money.

## Final note

Following the work of G.M.A Richter and M.J. Milne, *Shapes and Names of Athenian Vases*, published in New York in 1935, only R. Plant, in a chapter of his *Greek Coin Types and their identification*, published in London in 1979 paid attention to the identification of the vases represented on the coins. Subsequently, Andrew J. Clark, Maya Elston and Mary Louise Hart, in the work *Understanding Greek vases: a guide to terms, styles, and techniques*, published in 2002 in Los Angeles by the J. Paul Getty Museum, returned to addressing onomastics relating to vases. However, already in the early ‘90s of the last century, Paola Radici Colace, philologist at the University of Messina, started the *Lexicon Vasorum Graecorum* with several of her students, which – due to the amount of data and sources collected (6 volumes!) – only saw its conclusion in 2005. Furthermore, two BA theses in Greek Numismatics, for which I was supervisor at the University of Messina in the academic year 2007/2008, carried out by Giuseppina Pangallo (*Real object and symbolic object: the amphora on Greek coins*), and by Cristina Gerace (*Drinking vessels: objects of the symposium and symbols of success*), highlighted how the vases most represented on coins had been the *amphorae*, the *crateres*, the *kantharoi*, the *oinochoai*, the *kylikes* and the *skyphoi*, that is both the vases used

to draw water and those suitable for serving and drinking wine, in total six different types of vases inside an onomastic which has handed down no less than eighteen different names for the ‘containers’ of liquids.