



Mên A Celestial Deity

by
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MÊN was a moon-god who was widely worshiped in Asia Minor during Roman times, and he appears on coins from the 1st to the 3rd century AD. Little is known about him, apart from what we can learn from the coins. He was probably indigenous to Phrygia, which was a region in the central-west of Asia Minor, but he might have had connections with Mesopotamia, where the moon was worshiped in male form from the dawn of civilization. He plays no part in Greek mythology, where the moon is a goddess called Selene. She was not important in Greco-Roman religion, whereas Mên was very important in Asia Minor, judging by his frequent appearance on the coins.

His name is usually written with a circumflex above the 'e'. This indicates that it should not be pronounced like the English word, 'men', but more like 'main'. We know this because his name appears in Greek on some of the coins as MHN, and in English there is no exact equivalent to the sound represented by the Greek letter, H. The Latin word for 'moon' is 'luna', and although in English we use

the adjective, 'lunar', we do not use the noun, 'luna'. The Greek word for 'moon' was MHN, so the name of the moon-god was 'moon' in Greek, which was the language generally understood in Asia Minor at that time.

More than 60 towns issued coins in his honour. They were mostly in Asia Minor but a few were more to the east, such as Laodicea ad Libanum, which was on the

Orontes River in Syria, and Eshbus (Heshbon), which was east of the Jordan River. Also Gaba in Galilee issued coins with his image on the reverse. He was popular with soldiers and is usually shown in military dress. On a coin of Laodicea ad Libanum he holds the bridle of a horse. **(Figure 1)** On a coin of Sillyum in Pamphylia, which was in the south of Asia Minor, he is riding a horse, but he still has a crescent behind his shoulders, indicating that he is the moon-god. **(Figure 2)** On a coin of Gaba he stands in military dress without the crescent behind his shoulders, but there is a crescent in the right upper field and a star in the left upper field. **(Figure 3)** It might seem incredible that a moon-god was worshiped in Galilee, but when this coin was issued in 156 AD the Jewish revolts had been suppressed by the Romans and the area was very much under their influence. On a coin of Eshbus he holds a long sceptre around which a snake is entwined. **(Figure 4)** This indicates that he is a god of healing, because a snake-entwined staff was held by Asklepios, the Greek god of healing. The Jews might have seen it as a reference to the bronze snake that Moses set up on



Figure 1 – Bronze coin of Caracalla (198-217 AD) minted at Laodicea ad Libanum showing Mên holding the bridle of a horse. The god's name MHN is in the exergue. Diameter 23 mms. (Gitbud & Naumann Auction 19, Lot 459)



Figure 2 – Bronze coin of Saloninus as Caesar (258-260 AD) minted at Sillyum showing Mên on a horse. Diameter 34 mms. (Classical Numismatic Group eAuction 349, Lot 284. Website: cngcoins.com)



Figure 3 – Bronze coin of Antoninus Pius (138-161 AD) minted at Gaba showing Mên standing in military dress with a crescent and a star above. Diameter 25 mms. (Heritage Auctions, Sept. 2004, Lot 12098)



Figure 4 – Bronze coin of Elagabalus (218-222 AD) minted at Eshbus showing Mên with a snake-entwined staff. Diameter 21 mms. (Roma Numismatics Ltd, Auction May 2013, Lot 939)



Figure 5 – Bronze coin of Titus (79-81 AD) minted at Pisidian Antioch showing a large crescent above a man ploughing with two oxen. Diameter 22 mms. (Dr Busso Peus Nachf Auction 366, Lot 867)

a pole when they were dying from the bites of poisonous snakes. (Numbers 21:9, cf. John 3:14)

Although only three towns in the Levant issued coins with Mên on the reverse, there would have been other towns in the region where Mên was worshiped. As the cult of Mên must have included a mythology focused on the celestial sphere, it might have influenced those groups of



Figure 6 – Bronze coin of Gordian III (238-244 AD) minted at Pisidian Antioch showing Mên holding a long sceptre. In his left hand Nike (Victory) stands on the stalk of a pine-cone. His left foot is on a bucranium and a rooster stands at his feet. Diameter 34 mms. (Classical Numismatic Group eAuction 135, Lot 49. Website: cngcoins.com)



Figure 7 – Bronze coin of Septimius Severus (193-217 AD) minted at Parlais in Pisidia. It has a bust of Julia Domna on the obverse and Mên holding a large pine-cone on the reverse. (Münzen & Medaillen GmbH Auction 22 Lot 1293)

early Christians who have been labelled 'gnostic' because they claimed to have secret knowledge of heavenly matters.

The crescent, with or without a star, was the symbol of Mên. On a coin of Pisidian Antioch, which was in the south-east of Phrygia, there is simply a large crescent above a man ploughing with two oxen, indicating that the ritual is under the aegis of Mên. (Figure 5) He is often shown standing on a bucranium (bull's skull) with a rooster near his feet and holding a pine-cone. (Figure 6) As the pine tree was associated with Attis, the mythical consort of the Great Mother, Cybele, the pine-cone probably indicates that he is assuming the role of Attis, perhaps in his resurrected form since Attis was a god of death and resurrection, as Persephone was in Greek mythology. In Rome and Ostia, inscriptions in honour of *Attis Menotyrannos* (Attis Lord Mên) have been discovered. Mên holds a large pine-cone on a coin of Parlais in Pisidia, which was south-east of Phrygia. (Figure 7)

The significance of the rooster is unknown. It was probably an animal sacrificed to Mên but it might have symbolized the division between the realm of the moon and that of the sun, because



Figure 9 – Bronze coin of Caracalla (198-217 AD) minted at Timbriada in Pisidia showing Mên standing with a hump-backed bull. The horns of the bull look like the crescent moon. Mên holds a patera. (Gorny & Mosch Auction 126, Lot 2027)



Figure 8 – A cylinder seal showing the king of Ur, Ur-Nammu (2112-2095 BC), deified as the moon-god, Sin. Ur-Nammu is credited with the first law code in history. (Photocopy of a picture in Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology, Paul Hamlyn, London, 1959)

the crowing of a rooster heralds the dawn. In Sumerian religion the moon-god, Sin, was the father of the sun-god, Shamash, and Ishtar, who was represented by the morning star. Abraham, the traditional ancestor of Jews and Muslims, came from the Sumerian city of Ur, where Sin was worshiped, and moved to Haran in northern Mesopotamia, where Sin was also worshipped. The symbol of Sin was the crescent, as shown on a cylinder seal from Ur. (Figure 8)

The bucranium might simply indicate that bulls were sacrificed to Mên, but more likely it had a cosmic significance. On a coin of Timbriada in Pisidia, Mên stands with a small bull. (Figure 9) The horns of the bull form an obvious crescent and this is probably why the bucranium was one of Mên's attributes. On a coin of Pisidian Antioch there is a bull on the reverse and a bust of Mên on the obverse, but on Mên's helmet two small horns can be seen. (Figure 10) This means that Mên was represented not only by the crescent of a bull's horns but by the bull.

On a coin of Silandus in Lydia there is a crescent and two stars (Figure 11) and it has been suggested that these stars represent the divine twins, Castor and Pollux. They were the sons of Zeus who put them in the firmament as the con-



Figure 10 – Bronze coin of Pisidian Antioch from the 1st or 2nd centuries AD showing Mên with horns on his helmet. On the reverse there is a hump-back bull whose horns (off the flan) form a crescent. Below the bull is the name of a magistrate, Herilochos. Diameter 19 mms. (Auktionhaus H.D. Rauch GmbH eAuction 15, lot 86)

stellation, Gemini (Twins). In the sun's course through the signs of the Zodiac, it moves from the constellation, Taurus, the bull, into the constellation, Gemini. (Figure 12) The moon does the same, and this might explain why the crescent appears with two stars on the coin of Silandus. Two stars above a bull appear on coins of the apostate emperor, Julian II (360-363 AD). They were minted at 11 cities in the Roman Empire, including Constantinople, Nicomedia and Antioch in Syria. (Figure 13) Julian might have been trying to restore the cult of Mên, and

as it had a healing function as well as the promise of resurrection it would have been an alternative to Christianity.

Stars, of course, are associated with the moon, and they appear on Mên's hel-

met on some of the coins. They are most clearly seen on a coin of Pisidian Antioch. (Figure 14) Men's head-covering is often incorrectly called a Phrygian cap, which was a floppy cap of soft material with



Figure 11 – Bronze coin minted at Silandus in Lydiá in the early 3rd century AD. It shows a crescent and two stars. Tyche, the city goddess, appears on the obverse. (Forum Ancient Coins, Web Shop)



Figure 12 – A celestial globe showing Taurus and Gemini. The horns of the bull point towards the twins. The stars are the green dots.



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its top folded forward. Mên's clothing is distinctive and like that worn by a Parthian warrior. He wears a loose-fitting tunic but his arms and legs are covered with what looks like bandages, but must have been tight-fitting sleeves and trousers. The similarity is obvious when a Mên coin is compared with a Parthian coin. (Figures 3 and 15) This suggests that the cult of Mên was influenced by cultures to the east of Asia Minor.

Some of the towns in Asia Minor issued coins with a bust of the wife of the current Roman emperor on the obverse, and she



Figure 13 – Bronze coin of Julian II (360-363 AD) minted at Antioch in Syria showing 2 stars above a bull. Diameter 29 mms. (Roma Numismatics Ltd Auction 4, Lot 683)



Figure 14 – A bronze coin of Gordian III (238-244 AD) minted at Pisidian Antioch showing the stars on Mên's helmet. (Gorny & Mosch Auction 216, Lot 2742)



Figure 15 – A silver drachm of the Parthian king, Mithradates I (171-138 BC) showing an archer holding a bow. (Ira & Larry Goldberg Auction 84, Lot 3084)



Figure 16 – A bronze coin of Trajan Decius (249-251 AD) minted at Sagalassus in Pisidia. It shows a bust of his wife on the obverse with a crescent behind her shoulders, and Helios on the reverse. Diameter 28 mms. (Heidelberger Münzhandlung Herbert Auction 64, Lot 2117)

is sometimes shown with a crescent behind her shoulders indicating that she represents or is a manifestation of the moon. Herennia Etruscilla, the wife of Trajan Decius (249-251 AD) appears in this way on a coin of Sagalassus in Pisidia, and the sun-god is shown on the reverse. (Figure 16) How she relates to Mên is unknown, but the inspiration for this coin might simply have come from classical Greek mythology. But the matter becomes confusing when one considers another coin of Sagalassus which has Tranquillina, the wife of Gordian III (238-244 AD), on the obverse. She has a crescent behind her shoulders, but on the reverse there is a star in a crescent on top of a large pine-cone on an altar. (Figure 17) Presumably the star in the crescent represents Mên and the pine-cone is one of his attributes as the manifestation of Attis.

If a town issued a coin with an image of Mên on it, it can be assumed that there was a temple to him in the town. On the coins of some towns he is shown in the temple, as on a coin of Prostanna in Pisidia, where there are two roosters on shelves near his head and two lions at his feet. (Figure 18) Lions were associated with Cybele, and their appearance here probably indicates a relationship with



Figure 17 – A bronze coin of Gordian III (238-244 AD) minted at Sagalassus in Pisidia showing a star in a crescent on top of a pine cone on an altar. Diameter 19 mms. (Photocopy of the reverse of Coin 5186 in SNG Deutschland, Sammlung von Auloch)

her. When he is shown on a coin being supported in some way, as in Figure 6, where there is a column under his left elbow, it can be assumed that this is exactly what he looked like in his temple. There were major temples for the worship of Mên at Ancyra (modern Ankara) and at Pisidian Antioch in Phrygia. In Ancyra the temple was on a hill in the centre of the city and part of it still exists. (Figure 19) According to Professor Akurgal, the author of *Ancient Civilizations and Ruins of Turkey*, the temple was originally built for the worship of Mên and Cybele, but to honour the emperor Augustus (27 BC-14 AD) it was dedicated to Augustus and Roma. The temple is not shown on any of the coins of the city although Mên is shown holding an anchor on some of the coins. (Figure 20) The Greek word, 'ancyra' means an anchor, and the coin might simply have indicated his connection with the city. Today Ankara is the capital of Turkey and it is interesting to think that at its centre there is a reminder of the moon-god, Mên, and that the star and crescent on the flag of Turkey (Figure 21) was originally his symbol.

Pisidian Antioch is of particular interest to Christians because Saint Paul visited it on his first missionary journey and it was there that he first preached to the



Figure 18 – A bronze coin of Septimius Severus (193-211 AD) minted at Prostanna in Pisidia showing Mên in his temple with roosters on shelves and lions at his feet. He holds a pine-cone and a scroll. (Dr Busso Peus Nachf Auction 366, Lot 907)

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Figure 19 – Ruins of the temple of Augustus and Roma at Ankara. It was previously a temple of Mên and Cybele. (Wikimedia Commons)

Gentiles. The town had a large Gentile population, mostly veterans from the Roman army. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD a lot of coins with Mên on the reverse were minted there, and they mostly show him standing. Some have his head or bust on a crescent and some have a rooster on the reverse. (Figure 22) Today Christian tourists can visit the ruins of the town, which is about half a mile north-east of the modern town of Yalvaç. The temple of Mên was not actually in Pisidian Antioch but on a hill about 3 miles south-east

of Yalvaç. It dates from the 2nd century BC and was in use until the 4th century AD when it was destroyed. The paving and part of the wall of the temple can still be seen and nearby there are the ruins of a stadium where games in honour of Mên would have been held. The sanctuary would have been a place of healing because a coin of Pisidian Antioch (Lindgren 1242) shows him feeding a snake.

With the growth of Christianity the popularity of Mên declined. In the 4th century the emperor Constantine promoted Christianity throughout the empire, and during the reign of Theodosius I (379-395 AD) pagan religions were suppressed. The old temples were demolished or converted into churches. When the Roman Empire was succeeded by the Byzantine Empire in about 500 AD, Christianity was generally established in Asia Minor.



Figure 20 – A bronze coin minted at Ancyra between about 130 and 138 AD showing Mên with an anchor. The deified Antinoüs, favourite of Hadrian, is on the obverse. Diameter 34 mms. (Numismatica Ars Classica Auction 45, lot 121)



Figure 21 – Flag of Turkey. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 22 – Bronze coin of Antoninus Pius (138-161 AD) minted at Pisidian Antioch showing Mên on the obverse and a rooster on the reverse. Diameter 14 mms. (Münzen & Medaillen GmbH Auction 16, Lot 719)



Figure 23 – A silver drachm of Yazdgird I (399 – 420 AD) minted at Herat. On the obverse Yazdgird has a crescent on the front of his crown, and on the reverse the fire on the altar is between two crescents. (Triton XIV, Lot 503)

When the Parthian Empire was succeeded by the Sasanian Empire in about 224 AD large silver coins were minted, and on coins of Yazdgird I (399-420 AD) a crescent appears on the front of the

king's crown. (Figure 23) Subsequently crescents and stars become more common. The religion of the Sasanians was Zoroastrianism, and as far as we know, moon-worship was not part of it, but the frequent appearance of the crescent on these later coins suggests that it did play a part in Sasanian religion at this time. An important part was certainly played by an ancient Iranian fertility goddess called Anahita. She appears on the reverse of a coin of Khosrau II (591-628 AD). Her head is engulfed in flames, and the



Figure 24 – A silver drachm of Khosrau II (591-628 AD). It shows Khosrau on the obverse and Anahita on the reverse. (Triton XIV, Lot 530)

star and crescent symbol appears on both sides of the coin. (Figure 24) She was apparently conflated with Ishtar, the morning star, but how she related to the moon is unknown. The moon would not have represented, Mithra, another ancient Iranian deity, because he was associated with the sun. Perhaps the star and crescent were simply the symbol of Anahita.

Islam arose in the 7th century and the Sasanian Empire fell to the Muslims, as did Egypt, the Levant and eventually the whole of Asia Minor. According to *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the Ottoman Turks adopted the crescent sign in about 1250 AD, and either with or without a star it has become the symbol of Islam. It appears on the flags of a number of Islamic countries and is frequently placed on the top of mosques. (Figure 25) The Ottoman Turks had established themselves in the western part of Asia Minor by about 1300 AD but it is unlikely that their crescent symbol was derived from Mên. It seems more likely that it was inherited from the Sasanians or from their Turkish ancestors in central Asia, but why the Ottoman Turks adopted this symbol is unclear. In the book, *Signs & Symbols: an illustrated guide to their origins and meanings*, edited by Miranda Bruce-Mitford, it is stated that “the crescent emblem of Islam signifies divine authority and resurrection and, in conjunction with a five-pointed star, Paradise.”

The numerous coins issued by the ancient cities of Asia Minor in honour of Mên tell us a lot about the religious life of the people at that time. In recent decades, with the widespread use of metal detectors, many new types have been discovered, adding greatly to our knowledge of the moon-god, Mên. It is a fascinating subject and there is still much more to be learnt.

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Figure 25 – Dome and minaret of the mosque at Uppsala in Sweden. (Wikimedia Commons)