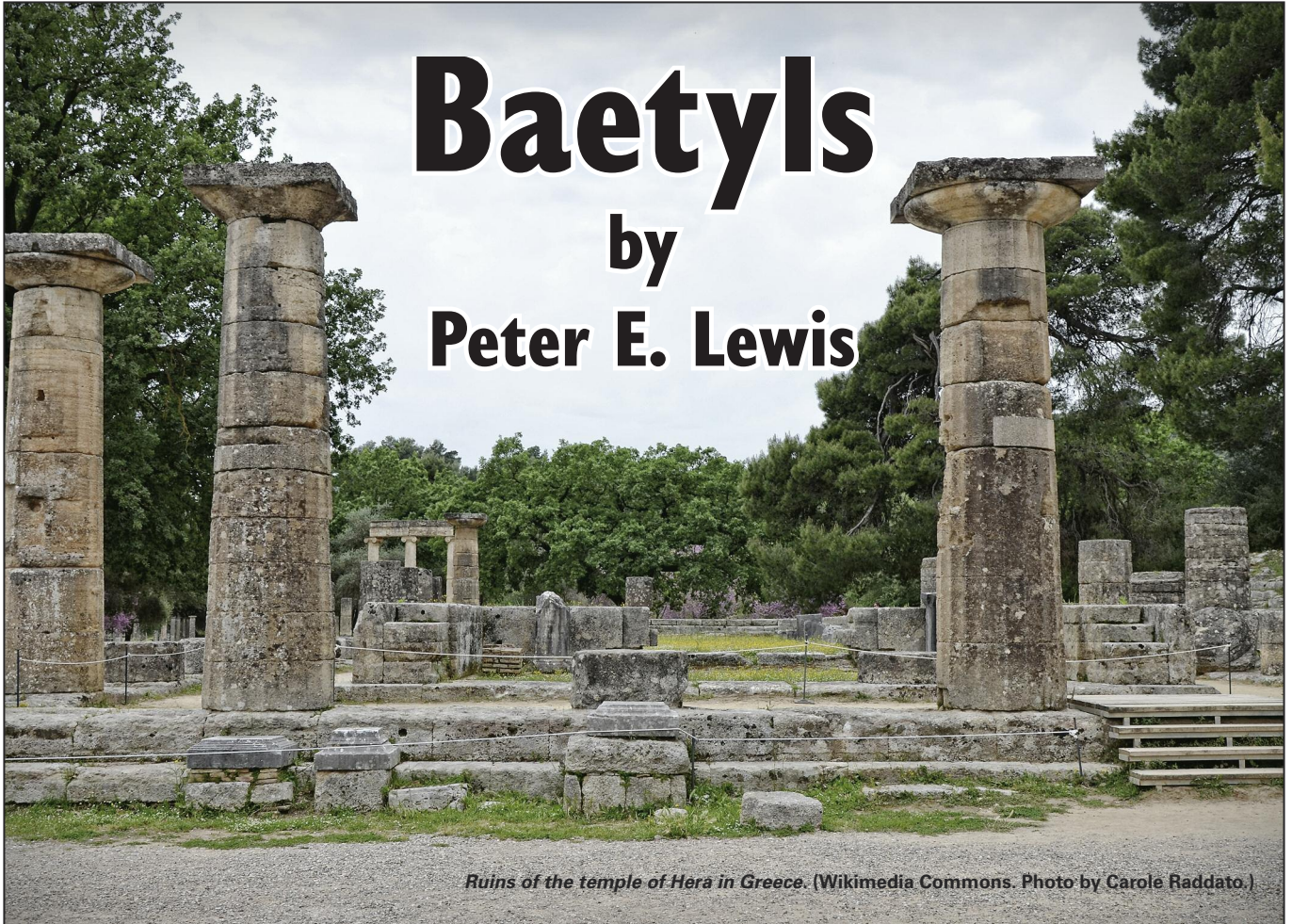


Baetyls

by
Peter E. Lewis



Ruins of the temple of Hera in Greece. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Carole Raddato.)

THIS article is about baetyls, not beetles. The word is pronounced 'by-til' and it is derived from a Semitic word 'bet el' meaning 'house of god'. It generally refers to a stone not in human form that represents a god and in which the power of the god resides. In many cases it might originally have been a meteorite thought to be sent to earth by the

god. Baetyls were worshiped or revered as the gods themselves. They take various shapes and sizes and occasionally appear on coins.

There was a famous baetyl of the sun-god Elagabal at Emesa (modern Homs) in Syria. On a coin of the Roman emperor Caracalla (198-217) the sacred stone is cone-shaped and stands on a rectangular

base in a temple. (**Figure 1**) It is flanked by objects which could be umbrellas or standards. In the pediment above there is a window which suggests that the god made an appearance in a different form when sacrifices were made to him by the worshipers. Perhaps he appeared in human form wearing a radiate crown as he appears on an aureus



Figure 1 – Bronze coin of Caracalla (198-217) minted at Emesa. Diameter 29 mms.

The reverse shows the stone of Elagabal on a rectangular base in the temple at Emesa. (Gemini, LLC, Auction VI, Lot 638)



Figure 2 – Aureus of Hadrian (117-138) showing the sun-god on the reverse. In Latin 'oriens' means the rising sun. (Numismatica Ars Classica NAC AG, Auction 119 with Jesus Vico, Lot 52)

of the Roman emperor Hadrian (117-138). (Figure 2) On the stone of Elagabal there was the image of an eagle, an appropriate symbol for a sun-god, but it is not clear on the example in Figure 1. It is more clearly shown on a coin of Uranius Antonius who ruled Emesa from 253 to 254. (Figure 3) On this coin the rectangular base is not shown. On another coin of Caracalla the whole temple is shown. (Figure 4)

At Emesa the position of high-priest of the sun-god was hereditary. It had been passed down from one generation to the next for centuries. In the early 3rd century it was the family of Julia Soaemias who provided the high-priests of the sun-god, Baal, at Emesa. There the god was worshiped under the name Elah-Gabal, which in Latin became Elagabalus. When Caracalla was murdered in 217 the high-priest was the son

of Julia Soaemias. His name was Varius Avitus Bassianus, but he became generally known as Elagabalus. He was only a boy of 14 when the Roman troops in the east made him the emperor in 218. His mother was the niece of Julia Domna, the wife of the emperor Septimius Severus (193-211). Septimius was the father of Caracalla who had been popular with the troops, and Julia Soaemias spread the rumour that Elagabalus was the illegitimate son of Caracalla.



Figure 3 – Bronze coin of Uranius Antonius (253-254). Diameter 32 mms. The reverse shows the outline of the eagle on the stone of Elagabal. (Classical Numismatic Group, Triton V, Lot 1767)



Figure 4 – Bronze coin of Caracalla minted at Emesa showing the whole temple of Elagabal at Emesa. (Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 73, Lot 740)



Figure 5 – Denarius of Elagabalus (218-222) showing the stone of Elagabal being pulled by four horses. Diameter 19 mms. (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 264, Lot 453)

When the new emperor Elagabalus moved to Rome he took the baetyl of the sun-god with him, and his coins show it on a cart being pulled by four horses. **(Figure 5)** A coin minted at Aelia Capitolina (Jerusalem) shows the horses from



Figure 6 – Bronze coin of Elagabalus showing the stone of Elagabal and the horses from the front. Diameter 24 mms. It was minted at Aelia Capitolina. (Heritage Auctions, Auction 61160, Lot 97126)



Figure 7 – Bronze coin of Hadrian showing the baetyl of Artemis in the temple at Perge. (Fritz Rudolf Künker GmbH & Co. KG, Auction 133, Lot 8829)

the front. **(Figure 6)** Elagabalus was an unusual teenager, and although he is generally thought to have been homosexual he was probably a transsexual person. Transsexuals are people who experience a gender identity that is inconsistent with their assigned sex, and desire to permanently transition to the sex or gender with which they identify. They are also known today as transgender people or just as “trans” and they are represented by the T in the name “LGBTQ+ Community”. Elagabalus does not look masculine on his coins. He wanted to be female and dressed in

women’s clothes. According to the historian Dio Cassius, who was alive at the time, Elagabalus wanted the surgeons to change his body. Today many transsexual people do undergo surgical procedures to make those changes.

Another famous baetyl was the sacred stone of Artemis at Perge in the south of Anatolia (modern Turkey) and it appears on the coins of a number of Roman emperors. **(Figure 7)** Perge, also known as Perga, is significant for Christians because it was visited by St Paul in 48 AD on his first missionary journey. In his book, *Monumental Coins*, Marvin



Figure 8 – Bronze coin minted at Perge in about 50 BC. Diameter 18 mms. The baetyl of Artemis is on the obverse and her bow and quiver are on the reverse. She was usually shown on coins as a huntress holding a bow. (Themis Numismatics, Auction 5, Lot 173)



Figure 9 – Bronze coin minted at Perge in about 50 BC. Diameter 18 mms. The baetyl of Artemis is on the obverse and her bow and quiver are on the reverse. (Demos Auctions, Auction 5, Lot 251)



Figure 10 – Bronze coin of Elagabalus showing the baetyl monument of Artemis in the temple at Perge. Diameter 24 mms. (Nomos, Obolos Web Auction 15, Lot 644)



Figure 11 – Orichalcum coin of Maximinus I (235-238) showing the baetyl monument of Artemis in the temple at Perge. The face of Artemis can be seen on this EF coin. Diameter 25 mms. (Leu Numismatik, Auction 3, Lot 177)

Tameanko discussed the nature of the baetyl monument at Perge. He thought that there were little squares at the bottom and that they were receptacles for votive offerings such as oil, incense or money. As more coins have come to light in recent years it is apparent that what looked like squares were actually lines of human figures. It seems that the structure changed over time, probably as it was enlarged and more elaborately

decorated, but at its core there would have been a meteorite or some other object of stone or wood considered to be sacred.

On early coins of Perge from about 50 BC (Figures 8 and 9) the structure consists of a human head surmounted by a polos, which was a large cylindrical object worn as a head-dress by goddesses. Ribbons stream down from the polos and the objects on either side of the head

look like ear ornaments. The head is attached to a square body on which there seems to be a large necklace. The prominence given to the head in this and all subsequent images of the structure suggests that it was the sacred object.

On some later coins of Perge the structure is clearly shown, but it has a different appearance being dome-shaped at the



Figure 12 – Bronze coin of Tacitus (275- 276) showing the baetyl monument of Artemis in the temple at Perge. Diameter 34 mms. (Classical Numismatic Group, Triton V, Lot 1742)



Figure 13 – Tetradrachm of Antiochus I (280-261 BC) minted at Smyrna. His head is on the obverse, and Apollo is seated on the Omphalos on the reverse. The Omphalos was at Delphi in Greece and thought to be at the centre of the world. (Roma Numismatics Ltd, Auction 7, Lot 818)



Figure 14 – Drachm minted at Ambrakia from 238 to 168 BC. Diameter 20 mms. On the obverse there is the veiled head of a woman probably a goddess. On the reverse there is a pillar with ribbons, all within a laurel wreath, a symbol of Apollo. (Roma Numismatics Ltd, Auction 5, Lot 163)

top. On a coin of Elagabalus (**Figure 10**) the polos is larger and there are two lines of dancing figures at the bottom. On either side there is a sphinx (a creature associated with Artemis) standing on a column. Above the structure there is a crescent moon representing Artemis who was the goddess of the moon, and a star (the sun) representing Apollo, the god of light and the sun in Greek mythology. Artemis and Apollo were twins, and the eagle on the pediment of the temple represented their father, Zeus, the chief of the gods.

On a large coin of Maximinus I (235-238) the structure is more clearly shown. (**Figure 11**) The polos is even larger and there are three lines of figures. Under the dome and around the head there are additional objects so that the whole appearance is more abstract. The last appearance of the baetyl monument of Artemis is on a coin of Tacitus (275-276). (**Figure 12**) There seems to be a fenced barrier and the structures on either side of the monument are different, which indicates that changes were being made all the time. No doubt the priests wanted pilgrims to the temple to be impressed by what they saw. Incidentally this coin of Tacitus has the distinction of being the last Roman provincial coin to be minted outside Alexandria in Egypt.

Apollo, the brother of Artemis, was also represented by a baetyl in some of the cities where he was worshiped. Often

on coins he is a slim naked young man, as on coins of the Seleucid empire (**Figure 13**) but on coins of Ambrakia in Epirus (in modern Greece) he is represented by a pillar or obelisk. (**Figure 14**) According to Barclay Head in his *Historia Numorum*, the obelisk on the coins of Ambrakia is the sacred conical stone (baetyl) of Apollo Aguieus. This name was applied to Apollo in his role as guardian of roads and public places. In Greek 'aguia' is a road, street or public

place. Setting up one of these pillars would have ensured that Apollo was there in his protective role.

Some baetyls were portable and on occasion were carried on carts in religious processions. An example is the baetyl of the goddess Astarte at Sidon in Phoenicia. Coins of Sidon show the baetyl in a shrine on a wagon. (**Figure 15**) A man stands on either side of the sacred stone and compared to his size the whole structure must have been



Figure 16 – Silver stater minted at Kaunos from 450 to 430 BC. Iris, the goddess of the rainbow, is on the obverse. On the reverse there is a triangular object between what might be stylized birds. (Roma Numismatics Ltd, Electronic Sale 79, Lot 299)



Figure 17 – Bronze coin of Caracalla minted at Bostra. On the reverse there is a baetyl between two smaller baetyls. (Heritage Auctions, Auction 3003, Lot 20576)



Figure 15 – Bronze coin of Elagabalus minted at Sidon showing the cart of Astarte. (Auktionshaus H. D. Rauch GmbH, Summer Auction 2007, Lot 784)



Figure 18 – Bronze coin of Herennius Etruscus and Hostilian as Caesars (250-251) minted at Bostra. (Gemini, LLC, Auction VI, Lot 692)

huge. As no horses or cattle are shown pulling the cart it might have been pulled by long lines of worshippers, as the enormous shrines of some Hindu gods are still pulled in India today.

Some objects that appear on coins have puzzled scholars. On a silver stater of Kaunos in Caria (in south-west Anatolia) there is a triangular object with handles near the top. (Figure 16) What is it? In 1991 archaeologists excavating at ancient Kaunos found it and realized that it was the baetyl worshiped in that city. According to the numismatists at Roma Numismatics, "Beginning as a crude triangular punch mark, then shown as a central device with horn-like tags,

and eventually evolving into a depiction with handles at the top, it was originally thought that the reverse type seen here was possibly a relief map similar to those found on some issues of Ionia, or simply a patterned incuse design. However, as explained by Konuk ('The Early Coinage of Kaunos', in Price Essays, pp. 197-223) it is now known to be the triangular baetyl, or sacred stone, that was venerated in the city. During excavation of an unusual round building near the harbour of Kaunos in 1991, a conical piece of limestone broken into two parts was discovered. Standing at the very centre of this building and dug into the ground to about half of its full height, it

appears that this sacred stone was the sole object of worship for a cult established in the fifth century, and thus is very likely the exact baetyl depicted on the coinage of the city."

Some baetyls are very strange. On coins of Bostra in what was the Roman province of Arabia there is a baetyl between two smaller baetyls. (Figure 17) Numismatists think that the larger baetyl represents Dusares, the chief god of the Nabataeans. On his baetyl there are four flat objects (? Stones, ? loaves of bread) but only one on the smaller baetyls. On another coin of Bostra there are seven flat objects on the central baetyl. (Figure 18) Who can explain it?

Some baetyls are weird. What is the "thing" that appears on coins of Edessa (modern Urfa in south-east Turkey)? (Figure 19) It is said to be a baetyl but its exact nature is unknown. At the top there is a large crescent, and just below it there are bull's horns. On its mummy-form body there are bands that look like ribs. It is scary and could feature in a *Ghostbusters* film. Coin collectors are fortunate to have these coins which help them to understand how religious people thought in ancient times. For them the material world could also incorporate the spiritual.

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Figure 19 – Bronze coin of Caracalla minted at Edessa showing a baetyl on the reverse. Diameter 15 mms. (Numismatik Naumann, Auction 112, Lot 1440)

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