

Ivan Butkevych

# THE LION AND THE BULL



**History and Philosophy  
of Western Civilization's  
Earliest Coins**

## Ivan Butkevych. The Lion and the Bull

Translated from the Russian by Vladimir Zakharov,  
[translation.russianist.com](http://translation.russianist.com)

Edited by Susan Welsh,  
[www.ssw-translation.com](http://www.ssw-translation.com)

This book focuses on the first coins in world history, including the lion-headed Lydian *trites* and the famous Croeseid *staters* with opposing lion and bull protomes. In a study that revolves around the metrology of Lydian coins, the author strives to determine the precise ratios of history's earliest electrum, gold, and silver coin issues. This includes an attempt to calculate the nominal weights of such coins in the measurement units of the traditional weight systems of their respective periods. This approach required using information from an extensive range of heterogeneous disciplines, which makes this book attractive for a wide range of readers interested in the history of coinage.

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<sup>1</sup> Yuri Pokrass; Harlan J. Berk, Ltd. (<http://www.hjbltd.com/>); Heritage Auctions, Inc (<http://coins.ha.com/>); Ira & Larry Goldberg Coins & Collectibles, Inc. (<http://www.goldbergcoins.com/>); The New York Sale (<http://www.thenewyorksale.com/>); Nomos AG (<http://www.nomosag.com/>); Roma Numismatics Limited (<http://romanumismatics.com/>); Numismatica Ars Classica NAC AG (<http://www.arsclassicacoins.com/>); Numismatica Genevensis SA (<http://www.ngsa.ch/>); Holy Land Auction (<http://holylandauction.com/>).

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# Foreword

*“We must consider the entirety of ancient coins, which is akin to a giant metal mirror reflecting the whole ancient world, with its masterpieces and gradually evolving art.”*

A. Butkovsky<sup>2</sup>

Encountering your first ancient coin is an unforgettable experience for any numismatist or history lover. Holding it in your hands, looking at the luster of its metal, touching the uneven relief of its surface feels like traveling back in time, into an ocean filled with the lives of generations and epochs long gone. It is also a glimpse beyond the maelstrom of history, at something infinitely grander.

Ancient coins are strikingly straightforward. They may seem to us simple and schematic, but this imagery is no testament to a primitivist craze at the time of their minting. A coin made during the Classical or the early Hellenistic period, depicting a deity or a hero, is a penetrating revelation of the intensity, the inspiration, and the tenacity with which an abstract notion of the Divine has created an image of Perfection impressed in metal. Today, thousands of years later, these coins still pulse with life, seemingly oblivious to the passage of time, as if harboring sparks of the immortal souls of their creators, who put all their faith and love into imprinting their being, as they understood and perceived it, on the tiny planchets.

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<sup>2</sup> (Butkovsky, 1861)

This book focuses on the first coins in world history, including the lion-headed Lydian trites and the famous Croeseid staters with opposing lion and bull protomes. In Part I, we will attempt to look at them through the eyes of their contemporaries. The narrative here is at times emotional, with analogies reaching beyond the ostensibly relevant limits in time and space. But since our key quest here is to access the human values that we call eternal, it is only in this way that we can lift the veil of time and try to grasp the thought that materialized in the ancient metal.

But this book is not only about history and philosophy. It is also a true detective story. By studying a wide variety of mathematical, physical, economical, geological, and historical records, using methods ranging from precise calculations to speculation, we try to render a holistic view of the development of coinage from its very source. Parts II and III provide a detailed account of this study. Lastly, appendices contain rather extended digressions into specific areas of knowledge, at times of no less interest than the central story.

Of course, this interpretation is just one of a myriad possible ones, so I will be delighted if my arguments are convincing enough to inspire you, the reader, to embark on your own quest for the meaning of the ancient coin.

*The author would like to express his gratitude to Oleg Melnikov and Viktor Yatskov for their invaluable contributions to this book.*

Yours truly,  
Ivan Butkevych



**PART I**

**PHILOSOPHY  
AND  
COINS**



*“A reward for the boundless passion with which it is being sought, something animate, something regaining its life, detaches itself from the ancient world and enters the numismatist’s soul, awakening the spirit of ancient man there by semi-zoological and semi-historical atavism.*

*“Just as the ancestral Scot Lerma spoke through [the Russian poet] Lermontov, so a ragman from Athens, a trader from Alexandria, or a citizen (or even a senator!) from the Eternal City comes to life through the numismatist. And it is this ‘awakening of the ancient man through the modern one’ that is the living nerve of numismatics.”*

V. Rozanov<sup>3</sup>

Traveling to other countries is always an important milestone in our lives: a different language, different fashions, architecture, cuisine, music, a different way of life—diving into a foreign culture makes us rediscover the world, looking at it from the perspective of another society, touching its yet-unknown facets. It feels as though you are being given a chance to add another life to your own, soaking up the heritage of a different mindset. This explains why so many people have such a passion for traveling—it is actually a passion for life!

Inside the weighty chest of memories, photographs, and souvenirs that every traveler brings home, there will almost always be a coin—a small memento of a big journey. And then one day, as you are shuffling through such treasures brought from distant parts of the planet, visions of the feelings

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<sup>3</sup> (Rozanov, 1968)

experienced there come to mind: the magnificent temples, the enchanting melodies, the delicious smells, and the colorful garments.

This is no surprise: For many centuries, coins were one of the ways in which people conveyed the story of their land to the rest of the world. Traveling in hands and pockets across miles and years, the little heralds trumpeted what their creators considered to be the most important: their gods and heroes, rulers and victories, grandiose undertakings and landmark events.



*Fig. 1.1. Collage depicting ordinary coins of Ukraine and a Srebrenik (silver coin) of Vladimir Sviatoslavich, the grand prince of Kiev (late 10<sup>th</sup>–early 11<sup>th</sup> century).*

The journey goes on today: A tiny planchet becomes the canvas where every nation depicts what it considers to be its most precious heritage and what it wants other cultures to know. The message is conveyed through symbols, signs, images of personalities, animals, and artefacts—to name a few—in forms that, however manifold, will almost always make reference to the fundamentals of spirituality or nationality that the people themselves believe to underpin their community at any given point. It is not surprising that such messages embrace the experience of whole millennia of national history. And all this can be seen on the little piece of metal that you brought back from the faraway journey.

The world map is like a quilt sewn from variegated scraps of cloth, and in this kaleidoscopic diversity, some pieces are continually being torn off and other pieces sewn together. But there is always something that remains unchanged, something that underlies the rest. This is *we ourselves*.

Loving, rejoicing, grieving, seeking the essence of being—there are things that people do the same way in all countries and on all continents. Things that remained unchanged for thousands of years, coming from the unfathomable abyss of a past that verges on oblivion. And so they will remain across the future millennia, which we fill with our hopes and aspirations.

*“Gilgamesh, fill your belly.  
Day and night make merry.  
Let days be full of joy,  
Dance and make music day and night.  
And wear fresh clothes.  
And wash your head and bathe.  
Look at the child that is holding your hand,  
And let your wife delight in your embrace.”*

Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet X, probably not later than 8<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> century BC. English translation by Thorkild Jacobsen (Frankfort, Frankfort, Jacobsen, & Wilson, 1949)

These words from the ancient Sumero-Akkadian epic sound as relevant today as they did thousands of years ago, when they were retold by word of mouth and written down on clay tablets. Such “eternal” truths defy borders and engender common cultural identity whose dissemination is only limited by the human aptitude to assimilate information and apply it in everyday life. Unsurprisingly, the above fragment of the epic was found not at the walls of Uruk, the city it glorifies, but more than eight hundred miles away, in the ancient city of Hattusa (modern-day Boğazkale), the capital of the Hittite Empire.<sup>4</sup>

It is here, in the center of Hittite monarchical and religious power and its related symbolism, that we find our first clue to the meaning of the first electrum coins of the Lydian kingdom. Of course, the fall of the Hittites (12<sup>th</sup> century BC) and the rise of the Lydians (8<sup>th</sup> century BC) was separated by the so-called Dark Ages, making it extremely hard to find historical links between them. But we are only talking about the continuity of *certain cultural and traditional elements*, so even a timespan of several hundred years cannot stop us.

To fully explain the point, we will have to take an imaginary journey, and our final destination is not so much the depths of the millennia as the bedrock of the human psyche; for it is here, in human perception and awareness of surrounding reality, that the source of the most ancient religious worldview lies. Its symbols in turn become part of the cultural traditions associated

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<sup>4</sup> Primary source of information about the Hittites: Gurney (1952)

with its religion. Such symbols bear a complex of meanings that were once readily understandable by the bearers of that culture. But for us to comprehend the signs coming from civilizations long gone requires much more than their direct interpretation based on our present-day knowledge and perspective on the world. To extend a bridge from *Homo modernus*, having the whole globe at his feet, back to *Homo antiquus*, slowly trudging across a flat Earth, we must all but forget our 21<sup>st</sup>-century experiences and try to look at the world with the eyes of unencumbered consciousness, as if born anew.

But before we embark on our journey, **let us look briefly at the Hittites.**

The Hittites were a people of Indo-European descent who migrated to Asia Minor between 2200 and 1900 BC. Their self-designation is unknown; it was the Hattians, a more ancient indigenous people, who gave their name to what eventually became a powerful empire. The newly arrived Indo-European tribes took power, leading to the formation of the Hittite state by as early as the time of Labarna I (ca. 1680–1650 BC). Hittite civilization was well developed in all areas directly related to the ruling class, such as military and political organization, legislation, and judicature. Its literature and religion, however, even though they had many interesting features, remained at a generally primitive level and abounded with borrowed Hattic and Hurrian elements, thus assuming some features of Mesopotamian religious cults. The Hittite Empire collapsed in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century BC during the great migrations including those of the “people of the sea.” Another factor that changed the regional balance of power and contributed to the weakening and the ensuing fall of the empire was an onslaught of invaders from the west who had seized the “land of Arzawa,” which some researchers identify as the future home of the prosperous city

of Sardis. According to the annals of the last Hittite monarchs, the name of the aggressors' commander was Madduwatta, whose Hellenized version—Madyattes—is highly reminiscent of the names of the ancient Lydian kings, Alyattes and Sadyattes.

According to researchers, one of the biggest challenges in studying the history of the Hittite kingdom is pinpointing its borders (Fig. 2.8 shows one of the many possibilities). However, this is not critical to our narrative, for there is no doubt that the influence of Hittite culture transcended its parent state's borders, both in space and in time. In southeastern regions of the former kingdom, where the migrations caused little damage, archaeological methods allow us to trace the impact of the Hittites for at least five centuries after the fall of the empire. Thus we can infer that the pall of the Dark Ages that enshrouds the history of western Asia Minor could not obliterate the Hittite culture at one stroke, leaving some of its elements to survive through the millennia.

*Thus, our final destination is clear. So let the journey begin!*

Sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations—a raging waterfall bursting into the consciousness of a child born thousands of years ago instantly splits that newborn's perception of the world into two distinct parts. One of them will now be associated with everything pleasant and desirable, the other will be feared and avoided, and the thin line of indifference will be dividing them. With time, the relationship between a given object of the outside world and its sensory perception and subsequent apprehension will acquire a stable, repetitive form, embodied in a single word, a single name, the very sound of which will now evoke the whole cognitive complex of that object and its related aspects.