

Synergistic Serendipity

*Coins from all centuries share the ability
to tell stories through their powerful images.*

I ATTENDED A coin show recently, and, as usual, had a wonderful time exploring the various offerings in the numismatic marketplace. When I got home and perused my new acquisitions, I discovered an unexpected bonus: two coins, purchased separately and apparently unrelated, shared a powerful storytelling synergy. These pieces, in both their similarities and differences, illustrate much of what makes numismatics such a compelling hobby.

The first specimen is a Greek 1-euro coin dated 2002. About the size of a U.S. quarter, it has a bimetallic composition with a center of copper-nickel surrounded by an outer ring of nickel-brass. This coin is part of a historic shift: since 2002, 12 European nations have used the same coins and paper money. An expression of their unity appears on the piece, which, like all other 1-euro coins, features a map of European Union member nations on one side; the reverse, however, is unique to each country, and an image of an owl from an ancient Athenian coin adorns the Greek euro.

Its companion is a silver *antoninianus* of the Roman Empire. Created during the reign of Gordian III (A.D. 238-44), the specimen features his portrait on the obverse. On the reverse, an allegorical figure of Liberalitas, representing generosity, appears in the form of a standing female holding a cornucopia. About the same size as the euro, the coin is well preserved, though part of the perimeter is weakly struck. Still, many design details are clearly visible, including Gordian's hair and the folds of Liberalitas' gown.

In some ways, these two coins are

as different as the societies that produced them. The *antoninianus* was hand-struck into an irregular shape, but the euro was mass-produced in a nearly flawless process. The *antoninianus*' worth was determined by its silver content; the euro derives its value from the European Central Bank. And though both pieces circulated throughout much of Europe, Rome's dominion



▲ Although separated by almost 2,000 years, an *antoninianus* (top) struck during the reign of Roman emperor Gordian III (A.D. 238-44) and a 2002 Greek euro both tell a story and portray cultural symbols.

Not Actual Size

was based on military conquests, while the euro's reach is the outcome of peaceful economic integration.

Despite these differences, the coins share an essential characteristic: both present powerful, symbolic messages. The images on the *antoninianus* are

typical of Roman coins, which used portraits to project imperial authority and various reverse designs to proclaim imperial virtues or achievements.

Coins were important messengers in Roman times (when few other forms of mass communication were available), but symbolism is just as evident on modern coins, such as the Greek euro. Its European map identifies Greece as part of a continental community, while the owl motif emphasizes the distinctiveness of Greek history and culture.

These coins offer a variety of collecting possibilities. The *antoninianus* cost about \$35, and many other ancient coins from Greece, Rome and elsewhere are affordable. The 1 euro, with an exchange value of approximately US\$1.30, costs a few dollars, and dozens of other European Union coin types also are easy to obtain. The pre-euro coinage of participating countries now is obsolete, but modern European specimens still are widely available and highly collectable.

As I think about these two pieces, I can't help but be amazed that, within arm's reach, I have one coin that is a part of daily life on the other side of the world and another coin that is an artifact of an ancient civilization. Separated by gulfs of time and culture, they illustrate the many wonderful stories and experiences accessible through numismatics.

Learn more about euro coins and paper money on the European Central Bank's website (euro.ecb.int/en.html). Two useful references are *Handbook of Ancient Greek and Roman Coins* by Zander H. Klawans (ANA Library Catalog No. BA40.K5) and *Ancient Coin Collecting* by Wayne Sales (ANA Library Catalog No. BA50.S2).

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