

Ancient Hearts

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Heart symbols are everywhere on Valentine's Day. The first heart symbols appeared on ancient coins struck 2500 years ago in North Africa.

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The town of Cyrene (or "Kue-ray-neh", as it was known) was founded in 631 BC by Dorian Greeks from the island of Thera near Crete. Their town was eventually destroyed but it was near what is today the city of Benghazi along the Mediterranean coast of Libya.

The city prospered modestly -- until the inhabitants discovered the silphium plant. Silphium was used as an herb. Its stalk was edible. Its pungent sap was the basis for cough syrups and gave food an interesting flavor. The plant is extinct now, but its closest living relative is a key ingredient in Worcestershire sauce. However, the most important use for silphium, was a contraceptive.

Modern research suggests that silphium actually worked. The plant was in great demand but attempts to cultivate it in Syria and Greece were unsuccessful. It only grew near Cyrene. The town found it a steady source of income, from about 500 BC until about 250 AD. By Roman times, silphium was harvested to extinction.

Cyrene put the plant on its coins, starting in about 500 BC. The Cyrenians and their colony towns would occasionally commemorate some other event or person, but over the centuries, the silphium was usually the considered the badge of the town and it was featured on gold, silver, and bronze coins. Often, the full plant was shown. Sometimes, the seeds were depicted. The silphium's seeds were heart-shaped and these little love symbols first appeared on the coins of Cyrene.

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