

# The Third Side of the Coin: Mintmarks on Coins

by [Michael E. Marotta](#)

*(C) Copyright 1997 by Michael E. Marotta*

As early as 400 BC, Greek moneyers -- who were often elected by the civic assembly for annual terms of office -- signed their work. Some of these were the actual die cutters. Some were the officials who oversaw the cutting of dies and striking of coins. Sometimes they engraved their whole name, or just the first letters of their name. Sometimes they made a "monogram" out of several letters co-joined or superimposed. Sometimes other symbols were used. The purpose was at once to identify the culprit as well as to allow credit to the artist or magistrate.

Alexander the Great (356 - 323 BCE) ruled a wide empire based on nearly-independent Greek cities with strong local traditions. Mints that struck coins in his image (Heracles on one side; Zeus enthroned on the other), used mintmarks for the reasons cited above. Also, his generals placed their personal symbols on coins which they struck with his devices even long after his death. A snarling lion was the symbol of Lysimachus; Seleukis used naval devices, typically an anchor.

During the hellenistic era, coins acquired a lot of writing and symbology. The "new style" tetradrachma of Athens had the names of two (later three) moneyers as well as a mark showing the month of issue.

The Romans also used mintmarks once the empire was so large that troops were paid from epicenters distant from Rome. Among these marks were London (MLM), Lyon (LG), and Trier (TRE). In all, there were perhaps 25 different mints and over 50 different mintmarks for a period of 300 years. Also, the officials placed alphabet numbers to identify their work: TS B was the 2nd Officina of Thessalonica, for instance. A recent article in *The Celator* suggested that the way the emperor's hairband was knotted identified the die-cutter. We also can identify some die-cutters by their handiwork because they were illiterates who blundered inscriptions.

In modern times, most nations have only one mint. Larger countries typically assign alphabet letters, starting with the capital city. On French coins "A" stands for Paris while an "A" on a German coin usually means "Berlin." In America, the Philadelphia mint, being the primary facility, typically did not use the P mark until the 1980s. (Silver "nickels" of the 1940s were an exception.) The US Mint Marks are C, CC, D, O, P, S, and W for Charlotte, Carson City, Dahlonega and then Denver, New Orleans, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and West Point. Also, in modern times, nations will contract out the production of their coinage. Therefore, on British and Canadian coins, for example, the H stands for the Heaton company.