

The Coins of Pythagoras

by [Michael E. Marotta](#)

When you were in school, you probably learned the Pythagorean Theorem about right triangles. But did you know that Pythagoras is credited with the invention of a remarkable series of coins from southern Italy?

From the 700s BC, Greeks colonized southern Italy. The modern cities of Taranto, Reggio, and Naples were founded at this time. The toe and heel of Italy's boot came to be called "Magna Graecia" -- Greater Greece.

Pythagoras lived about 100 years later in what is now the Greek island of Samos off the western coast of Turkey. In 550 BC, Samos came under the rule of the tyrant Polycrates. According to ancient sources, Pythagoras was opposed to tyranny, so he packed up and left Samos, travelling first to Egypt and then teaching in the towns of Magna Graecia in southern Italy.

At about this time, a fascinating series of coins was created. The front of the coin was raised, as on our modern coins. The backs, however, were "incuse" or cut in to the coin. The fronts and backs of the coins were a perfect match. They had to be or the thin fabric of the coin would have torn. Most scholars today believe that this was the work of Pythagoras. Interestingly, at least one town continued to strike these unusual coins long after Pythagoras could have lived, but the style was not so well executed and the workmanship was not so fine.

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