

Phoenician, Greek and Roman Coins of Tripoli, Lebanon

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From the earliest times, Tripoli in north Lebanon was an unusual city, as it was not considered one city but “three cities in one”, hence its name Tripolis or the “Tri-city”. Tripolis was a federation of three Phoenician seaports, Aradus, Sidon and Tyre. During the early 4th century BCE, the Mediterranean seaboard was under Persian control, and the Phoenician cities were taxed lightly by the Persians, and consequently their commercial activities prospered. Then conditions changed, and an attempt was made by the Phoenicians to achieve political unity and independence from Persia. Tripolis was probably built on the emplacement of a still earlier Phoenician federal city. It not only became a neutral meeting ground for the Phoenicians but also developed into an important and flourishing commercial center. The variety of coins issued by Tripoli mints is evidence of its prosperity and importance as the financial center and main port of northern Phoenicia. Coins minted in Tripoli usually bear Greek and Latin inscriptions. What distinguishes coins of Tripoli from others minted in the cities of Phoenicia is the frequent appearance of the Dioscuri or the “Heavenly Twins”, believed by the Ancients to be the sons of Zeus and Leda. In Greek legend they were said to be born of Leda who was famous for her great beauty. The Heavenly Twins were referred to patron gods of Tripoli, and their cult had great appeal. They were known to save shipwrecked sailors, and sacrifices were made to them for favorable winds.

During the Roman period, Tripoli held a privileged geographic position midway on the imperial coastal highway which led from Antioch to Ptolemais; therefore, Roman emperors encouraged and financed important building projects in the city. Client princes of Rome, seizing any occasion to gain Imperial Favor, were more than eager to contribute to these public works. Unlike other archeological sites in Lebanon which have yielded priceless treasures, great temples and tombs, Greco–Roman

Tripoli thus far has had little to reveal. Our knowledge of the cults and how the Temples of Tripolis appeared in Antiquity is based solely on an examination of the City's coins. The early types of coins minted in Tripolis are nearly all of maritime significance and are especially connected to the Dioscuri, known as Castor and Pollux in the Roman world or as the Gemini. A coin minted in Tripoli, believed to have been struck during the reign of Emperor Severus Alexander (222-235 CE) and bears a mixed inscription in Latin and Greek, is the only evidence extant that Tripoli was granted the title "Metropolis Phoenicia" by the Emperors of Rome. It is not surprising therefore when Tripoli, under the Emperor Caracalla (211-217 CE) became one of the mints for silver provincial coinage, the mint mark of the city was the helmets of the Dioscuri.