

# NOAH'S ARK ON A ROMAN COIN

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**Philip Robinson**

**T**HE FIRST known coins were produced in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>1</sup> Ever since, images on coins have represented various items valued by the nation for which they were minted—for instance, its religion, politics, head of state, and various symbols or historical events thought to be important.

Imperial Rome produced a series of now-rare bronze coins depicting Noah's Ark—the first known coins depicting a biblical scene. These coins, averaging about 3 cm in diameter, were produced during the reigns of five Roman Emperors: Septimius

Severus, Macrinus, Gordian III, Philip, and Trebonianus Gallus, covering a period of 61 years (AD 192–253).

The coins were all minted in the Roman city of Apameia Kibotos (or Cibotos in its Latinized spelling) in Asia Minor. It was originally a Phrygian city established by Antiochus I (280–261 BC), and is now the modern-day town of Dinar in Turkey. The original Phrygian city was named Apameia, and sometime before the turn of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC appears to have had a nickname, Kibōtos, added to it.<sup>2</sup> This word, meaning chest or box, is thought to be a reference to its coffers, as it had become a very wealthy city as it rose to prominence. The word *kibōtos* (κιβωτός) is also the Greek word

used to describe Noah's Ark in the New Testament and the Septuagint.<sup>3</sup>

Genesis 8 describes how, when the Flood waters were receding, Noah's Ark came to rest on the Mountains of Ararat that are thought to be in the east of modern-day Turkey. While Apameia Kibōtos is in the west of Turkey, a tradition<sup>4</sup> was formed by the Jewish population living there that a nearby mountain was the actual Mountain of Ararat on which Noah's Ark landed. Antiquity was looked upon favourably in the Roman world, so this would also have given the city more prominence. This obvious link may have been latched onto by whoever put forward the idea for Noah's Ark (Noah's *kibōtos*) to be placed on the reverse of the coin. It

## THE ARK IN THE CATACOMBS?

There is only one other image known from antiquity of (possibly) Noah and his wife together in the Ark by themselves—from the Christian catacombs in Rome.<sup>1</sup> The fourth-century Christian Via Latina Catacombs<sup>2</sup> was rediscovered in 1955 and the (highly degraded) image is on one of the ceilings therein. Noah and his wife are in the box together in the bottom left of the picture. The person above, possibly a personification of the weather, is thought to be pouring water on them from the 'windows of heaven' above. The picture on the right is an image of Noah in the Ark from the same catacomb.<sup>3</sup> The early box/chest shaped depictions, while true to the word *kibōtos* (κιβωτός), do not reflect the true size and proportions of the Ark as given in Scripture, which CMI always seeks to represent accurately.

1. Kötzsche-Breitenbruch, L., *Die neue katakombe an der Via Latina in Rom*, Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, Münster Westfalen, pp. 51–54, 1976.
2. Tronzo, W., *The Via Latina Catacomb*, Penn State University Press, Pennsylvania, USA, 1986.
3. The Catacombs (digitized) are viewable on Google Maps.



Images from Google Maps

## THE ARK ON OTHER COINS

Since the Roman coin, Noah's Ark has featured on a number of modern coins and medals such as:

1. 1649 golden ducat, commemorating the end of the Thirty Years' War, by the city of Regensburg (Germany)
2. 1742 French Royal Token
3. 1970 Franklin Mint, Thomason Medallion Bible
4. 1975 Vatican City 10-lire coin
5. 1998 Israel commemorative two-shekel coin
6. Silver bullion 500-dram Armenian coin



may have also played on a local Phrygian flood legend (*sans ark*) which referred to the same nearby hill.

### Jews, Christians, or Romans?

The Jewish community in Apameia Kibotos is almost as old as the city itself; shortly after its founding, a contingent of Jewish soldiers and city administrators were brought into Phrygia from Babylon.<sup>5</sup> Over the next few centuries more Jews were either brought to, or immigrated to, Apameia Kibotos. As an indication of their number and wealth at the time, Roman politician and writer Cicero noted that in 62 BC the Roman Governor of Asia, Lucius Flaccus, seized around 50 kilograms of gold from the city's Jews who were sending it as tribute to the Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> Their direct influence over the image on the coin is unknown.

There was also a Christian community in the Phrygian region from as early as the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Jews from Phrygia were mentioned amongst those present at the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10). It is likely that due to the importance of Apameia Kibotos in the region that a Christian community would have been founded here early in the life of the Church. Paul also spent time in the region of Phrygia "strengthening all the disciples" (Acts 18:23), and the first recorded Christian Bishop for the city was Julianus of Apameia (AD 253).

As the coins weren't minted until AD 192, some have considered that the primary influence responsible for their minting may have been a Christian one.<sup>7,8</sup> One reason is that for Jews, "A strict interpretation of the numerous prohibitions against idolatry in Scripture precluded the depiction of 'graven images' and thus any human or animal form on coins."<sup>9</sup> Adding to this possibility of a Christian influence is the fact that the only other similar image known from antiquity, i.e. depicting only Noah and his wife in the Ark, was produced by Christians in Roman catacombs (see box p. 47).

Apameia Kibotos seemed to have enjoyed putting a range of historical images on the reverse of its coins, so

perhaps using Noah's Ark could have been a way for this Roman city to acknowledge or honour its Jewish and/or Christian citizens.<sup>10</sup> Given the city's mixture of Romans, Jews, Christians, and many others, the history of Noah's Ark and how humanity descended from the eight who exited it after the Flood seems appropriate. It is actually the ideal historical point from which to stress the unity of such diverse people groups.

### What's on the coin?

The obverse of the coin (see images, main heading) carries the image and name of the Emperor, which obviously changes depending on the time of minting, but the core features remain essentially the same. On the reverse side it depicts Noah and his wife inside the box-shaped Ark with waves lapping at the bottom of it. Noah's name in Greek, ΝΩΕ (Nōē), can be clearly read in the middle of the Ark. On top of the Ark on the right is the raven, and on the top left is the dove with an olive branch in its mouth. On the left side of the coin Noah and his wife are again shown, standing outside the Ark on solid ground with their hands raised upwards to God in

praise. This important feature shows that they recognized that God remembered them (Genesis 8:1), bringing them safely through the global Flood.

Of particular interest is the shape used for Noah's Ark on the coin, which is clearly that of a chest—exactly what the Greek word *kibōtos* (κιβωτός) means. There is no element of the typical hydrodynamic boat shape or any tailfin added to the design that is so often seen now. The box/chest shape is very distinct in all the earliest representations of Noah's Ark (see box p. 47).

### Real history

Noah's Flood was an important historical event, not only for the Jews and Christians who lived in the city, but for the Romans as well, whether they understood this or not. It shows their common heritage and history, for they are all descended from Noah and his family, just as is everyone else today.

The history depicted on the coin speaks of a fallen humanity descended from Adam, God judging the world for its sin by flooding it, and God remembering Noah and keeping him safe throughout the Flood, for which He received His

due praise. The New Testament indicates that the Ark is a 'type' of Jesus (1 Peter 3:20–21); coming to Him in faith and repentance ensures salvation from God's judgment on sin. So the story on the coin can be used by Christians to point people to Jesus, the Saviour of the world. ■

### References and notes

1. The British Museum, The origins of coinage; britishmuseum.org. The first coins were produced in the Kingdom of Lydia (modern-day western Turkey), and were minted in electrum, a naturally occurring mixture of gold and silver.
2. Trebilco, P., *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 90, 1991.
3. The primary Greek translation of the Old Testament, c. 250 BC.
4. This is recorded in book 1:320 of the Sibylline Oracles, a collection of Greek books thought to have been written in the 2nd or 3rd centuries AD.
5. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 12.3.4.
6. Cicero, *Pro Flacco* (In Defense of Lucius Valerius Flaccus for extortion). The relevant information can be found in section 68.
7. Collier, S., Noah's ark in Roman Apamaea, blogs.warwick.ac.uk, 3 August 2016.
8. Thonemann, P. and Price, S., *The Birth of Classical Europe: A History from Troy to Augustine*, Allen Lane, London, chapter 8, 2010.
9. Friedberg, A., *Coins of the Bible*, Whitman Publishing, Atlanta, p. 44, 2004.
10. Trebilco, ref. 2, p. 87.