Il simbolismo del polpo

The Symbolism of the Octopus*

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The octopus type on ancient coins

On monetary documents the octopus as principal type and also as symbol has a limited diffusion, and perhaps for this reason it has received little attention until now from numismatic literature, at least on the part of systematic numismatics, with the exception of some contribution by Denyse Bérend[1].

The figure of the octopus – like every other element present on the coin – can appeal beyond the concrete aspect of its nature also to a symbolic value, evoking other subjects linked to it or abstract concepts, precisely like a signifier with more than one signified. And, precisely as for the word, the individualization of its meaning is given by the context, by the associations with other subjects that rather than being "linguistic" are "figurative"[2].

Starting from the monetary document representing the octopus – as type or as symbol –, analyzing it in connection with the other elements that compose the monetary coin and extending the investigation to archaeological and epigraphic documentation or other references that develop on different supports from the coin, we have tried to follow the development and diffusion of this "icon" in time and space, also taking account of literary testimonies. This has led us to note some contextual analogies and therefore to be able to propose some interpretative hypotheses and to suggest some points of research that often belong to other exegetical fields.

*This text, presented as a poster during the Primo Incontro di Studio del Lexicon Iconographicum Numismaticae, among the exhibitions from research conducted on the occasion of the Exhibition "Myths and cults of the Strait in ancient coins. Encounters of peoples and cultures in the Mediterranean" (Messina 1999) on the iconography of the octopus as a monetary type present on the coinage of Messana. We propose to continue elaborating in another research, presenting further data that we are currently elaborating, above all taking into account important indications and suggestions proposed by Prof. C. Gillis and Prof. P. Militello, who we thank in this venue. With an asterisk are marked the bibliographic references relative to the monetary exemplars or to the archaeological documents reproduced in the plates.

[1] Bérend 1989; Bérend 1992. Cf. also Manganaro 1999.

[2] Cf. Caccamo Caltabiano 1993b; Caccamo Caltabiano 2000.



Diachronic and diatopic distribution of the octopus monetary type

Principal type:

It is not frequent to find the figure of the octopus as protagonist of the monetary round. Geographically the octopus as principal type does not present a uniform distribution, but is localized only in some areas and its chronology is somewhat late, generally of the end of the 6th, 5th and beginning of the 4th century B.C., while in Etruria its presence is later.

We find it present between the end of the 6th and 5th century B.C. in *Magna Grecia* at Poseidonia on a silver obol together with Poseidon[3] (fig. 1); at Kroton on the R/ of triobols[4] (fig. 2) and of small bronzes associated with the D/ with the tripod[5] or with the shell[6], a combination that recurs, inverted, in the 3rd century B.C., on bronzes of Taras[7] (fig. 3).

In *Sicily*, between the 5th and 4th century B.C., the octopus type has a certain success in the coinage of Syracuse: it appears on R/ of numerous issues in silver[8] (fig. 4) and in bronze[9] (fig. 5-6) and sometimes coupled with the D/ with a feminine head (Arethusa), a combination taken up later on electrum issues[10] (fig. 7); rare times it is coupled with a head of river divinity[11] (fig. 8) or with a bearded divinity[12] (fig. 9).

Of Sicilian mint of western area is the silver fraction with octopus on the D/ and crab on the R/, recently published by G. Manganaro[13].

Towards the end of the 5th century B.C., the image of the octopus is present on bronzes of Adranon[14] (fig. 10), in connection with the head of Athena with Corinthian helmet on the D/ and of Alontion[15], paired with a helmeted head.

On a bronze series of Messana between the 5th and 4th century B.C. it is found on the R/, paired with a hare[16] (fig. 11).

Between the end of the 6th century B.C. and the first twenty years of the 5th century B.C. this type is also encountered in the *Greek and oriental area*: at Dicaea[17] paired with the D/ with a satyr (fig. 12); we find it on the R/ of various nominal values having on the D/ the head of a bull[18] or a young cow[19] (fig. 13); in this environment the type – together with the D/ with bull's head – is recovered much later, in the second half of the 2nd century B.C., in the bronze coinage of the Euboean League[20]. At Cyprus it represents the R/ of a didrachm with a lion's head on the

[3] SNG ANS 2, 632; Rutter 2001, 1111*.
[4] SNG ANS 3, 330-331; 414*-415.
[5] Rutter 2001, 2202, 2206.
[6] Rutter 2001, 2240; SNG ANS 3, 447.
[7] Rutter 2001, 1095; SNG Cop. Italy, 1039*.
[8] SNG Cop. Sicily, 636-638, 641; SNG ANS 5, 138*.
[9] SNG Cop. Sicily, 653-655; Bérend 1989, tav. VI, 11*; SNG Cop. Sicily, 679-680; Bérend 1989, tav. VI, 13*.
[10] SNG Lloyd 7-8, 1436*.
[11] SNG ANS 4, 393*.
[12] Bérend 1989, tav. VI, 22.
[13] Manganaro, 2003, 583.
[14] CNS III, 160, n. 7; Bérend 1989, tav. VI, 25*.
[15] CNS I, 67, n. 1.
[16] Caccamo Caltabiano 1993, nn. 686*-708; CNS I, 49, nn. 1-4.
[17] SNG Lockett 3, 1317; Kraay 1976, 473*.
[18] SNG Delepierre, 1385, 1386
[19] SNG Delepierre, 1383-1384; Jenkins 1972, 47, nn. 78-79*.
[20] www.coinarchives.com/img/lanz/111/00170q00; Head 1884, tav. XVII.11.

D/[21].

Recently an exemplar has been found, perhaps attributable to the Lycian mint of Gagae and datable between 430 and 420 B.C., in which the octopus is paired on the D/ with the head of Athena[22].

In *Etruria* it appears only in the 3rd century B.C. on the R/ of some large nominals paired with the Gorgoneion[23] (fig. 14), or more rarely with masculine or feminine heads[24], on silver of Populonia[25], with an eagle on bronzes of an unidentified mint[26] or drawn with only six tentacles and smooth on silver fractions always of Etruscan mint not to be determined[27]. On coins dubiously attributed to the mint of Pisa it appears while emerging from an amphora[28].

Symbol:

The octopus as symbol recurs equally in very ancient times, already from the archaic period, and in connection with divinities and mythical figures in roughly the same areas where it has been used as principal type.

In *Magna Grecia* on the staters still with incuse technique of the allied Kroton and Laos (510-500 B.C.) it is placed next to the type of the tripod (R/ bull looking back)[29] (fig. 15); an analogous position it occupies together with a dolphin on the incuse coins of Kroton (510-480 B.C.) on whose D/ there also appears with the same type a crab[30].

At Kaulonia it is placed next to the type of the stag of Apollo, divinity present on the D/ of a series of silver staters (480-450 B.C.)[31] (fig. 16).

What connotation of gods or mythical figures can be interpreted the octopus held in hand by Poseidon at Poseidonia (530-500 B.C.)[32] (fig. 17), or by the oecist Taras who rides the dolphin on various series of staters of Taranto during the course of the 5th century B.C. (490-430 B.C.; paired with sea monster on the R/[33]; 425-415 B.C.; with helmeted feminine head[34], 425-415 B.C.); indeed, an analogous connotation is found represented on the prow of a ship – in a sea monster or in a trident – on a series of staters of Thurii, where a sea monster is represented on the helmet of Athena (end 5th – beginning 4th century B.C.; R/ charging bull)[35].

In *Sicily* the octopus is found only at Akragas: together with the shell it accompanies the crab on the *hemilitra* of heavy bronze (D/ Eagle on hare, 425-400 B.C.)[36] (fig. 19).

The first attestation from the *oriental area* is very ancient, already from the end of the 7th century B.C., and is represented by an electrum stater – known in a single exemplar – of the Ionian

[21] SNG Delepierre, 2924.
[22] Carruba – Vismara 2002, 76.
[23] Rutter 2001, 146; SNG ANS I, 86; Serafin Petrillo 1977, tav. XVI, 36*; Rutter 2001, 148: flanked by a trident; Rutter 2001, 147: the octopi are two.
[24] Rutter 2001, 172; 166.
[25] Serafin Petrillo 1977, 105-130.
[26] Rutter 2001, 361.
[27] Rutter 2001, 226-227; SNG ANS I, 19, 20: these issues present on the R/ the smooth tondo.
[28] Rutter 2001, 104 e 105; SNG ANS I, 16.
[29] Gorini 1975, 26, n. 2*.
[30] Gorini 1975, 23, n. 18.
[31] SNG Cop. Italy, 1725; Attianese 1974, 213*.
[32] Rutter 2001, 1107; SNG ANS 2, 618*.
[33] Fischer-Bossert 1999, 21.
[34] Fischer-Bossert 1999, 142*.
[35] Medagliere del Museo di Siracusa, s.i.
[36] Westermark 1979, tav. II, 5*.

city of Phocaea representing on the D/ the speaking type of the city, the seal, with precisely an octopus in its mouth, while on the R/ a punch mark is present[37].

As regards the *Greek area*, the symbol of the octopus is present on some "Corinthian" pegasi struck by the Acarnanian mints of Argos Amphilochikon[38] and Leukas[39], behind the head of Athena (4th century B.C.).

The octopus as decorative motif in Minoan, Mycenaean and Greek civilization

The chronological horizon of the octopus symbol is very ancient. As a vascular motif it has its origin in the Cretan ceramic production of *"naturalistic style"* where it is very frequent especially at the end of the Protopalatial period[40] (fig. 20). It appears accompanied by fish and aquatic vegetation and continues to be used abundantly in the *"marine style"*[41] and in the *"style of Palazzo"*[42]; it shows evidence also in the Helladic period, as is revealed also from the places of discovery (palaces, necropolises), on sarcophagi, *larnakes*[43] (fig. 21) and pavements[44]. Due to its frequency it has been explained as an aesthetic decorative choice within a naturalistic panorama[45] or as a symbolic representation of the marine element[46], or sometimes as metaphor of the afterlife[47] or its presence has been justified within a preference for marine subjects subordinated to the desire to ensure a continuity of abundance of food from the sea[48].

During the Late Helladic, a period in which Minoan influence is very evident even in the Mycenaean world, in Greece the representation of the octopus is quite common.

Burials within Mycenaean sepultures belonging to the tomb circle of the acropolis of the gold plaques representing the mollusk have been found[49] (figs. 22-23), which consequently could have had a funerary implication[50], perhaps with an apotropaic value or of guarantee of access to a new life, since the capacity for regeneration of the tentacles of the animal was probably seen by contemporaries as a sort of "survival after death"[51]. Moreover it begins to appear on pavements,

[37] www.coinarchives.com/img/erug/062.

[38] Calciati 1990, 50.

[39] Calciati 1990, 13-14, 15.

[40] Rocchetti 1991, 98-99. Determinant motif for example in the flask notes of Gournia and Paleokastro (Marinatos – Hirmer 1960, fig. 87*). From Aegina comes an askos decorated with an octopus (Hiller 1975, 28, tav. 18, fig. 196) which recalls it very closely. For the moment we have not taken into consideration the representation of the mollusk on Minoan and Mycenaean seals, a representation which nevertheless results attested.

[41] Mountjoy – Jones – Cherry 1978; Mountjoy 1984.

[42] Niemeier 1985, 13-22.

[43] In general Watrous 1991. For example the larnax from Episkopi (TM IIIC), in which the octopus stands under a funeral cart (Kanta 1980, 156, fig. 63, 1-5) or the sarcophagus from Pachyammos (TM IIIC) decorated with marine silhouettes (Marinatos – Hirmer 1960, fig. 126*).

[44] Hirsch 1977, 10, 11 nota 22, tav. 1: pavement with marine scene from Sacello II of the villa of Haghia Triada, dated to TM III A1/A2 by P. Militello (cfr. Militello 1998, 321-355, 331).

[45] Betancourt 1985, 143-145; Gill 1985, 63.

[46] Rocchetti 1991, 109.

[47] Marinatos 1993, 156-157.

[48] Gill 1985, 81; Karali 1997, 413; Brandt 2003, passim.

[49] Lafffineur 1985, figg. 10*, 11*. From tombs III and IV of Funerary Circle A.

[50] Lafffineur 1985, 259.

[51] Lafffineur 1985, 259-260; Marinatos 1993, 195-196; Nickgorski 1999, 541.



for example in the palace of Pylos[52] and in the *megaron* of Tiryns (fig. 24)[53], also in this case therefore in *elite* environments. Besides the naturalistic version of the octopus, as in the golden cup of Dendra[54], there exists a more stylized representation which appears sometimes also on ceramics, particularly in the *stirrup jars*[55]: the animal is represented as a dark central mass with the tentacles arranged in rays[56] (fig. 25).

In time it will tend to assume an increasingly more schematic form, in the decoration defined *"Close Style"* – particularly widespread in the insular environment and also on forms of smaller dimensions –, in which the eyes become the starting point of two opposed spirals divided by a central band which represents the body (already from Late Helladic III B and throughout Late Helladic III C)[57] (fig. 26). In the late phase of Mycenaean culture it becomes one of the most common themes[58].

This decorative motif seems to disappear from the figurative vascular repertoire of the geometric and orientalizing age[59]. In the 6th century B.C. rare examples are recorded in the "Siana cups", where an octopus, placed in the tondo inside the vases, appears accompanied by small dolphins[60] (fig. 27).

Always on Greek ceramics with black or red figures it recurs often in more complex figurative squares[61] (fig. 28), frequently as episemon of shields (sometimes in hand to Gerione[62]); in some case the mollusk seems to constitute an erotic gift between lovers[63], in close analogy with the hare which often appears as gift between lovers[64].

Later between the 4th and 3rd century B.C., frequent is its representation, on italic pottery in general, on so-called Gnathia plates ornamented usually with various examples of ichthyic fauna[65].

The metaphor of the octopus in Greek literature

The literary contexts in which the octopus appears, if one excludes those more properly zoological, seem to converge for the most part, thanks to the metaphorical use that is made of it, to the sphere of *metis* 'wisdom, cunning'.

In some sources it is mentioned for its cunning that derives from its mimetic capacities[66], which lead it to adapt to the environment that surrounds it making itself ungraspable, invisible. It is in

[52] Blegen – Rawson 1966, figg. 163, 164.

[53] Hirsch 1977, 36, tav. 12, fig. 24*.

[54] Marinatos – Hirmer 1960, figg. 218-219.

[55] Cfr. in generale Mountjoy 1993.

[56] Furumark 1972, 302. Cfr. Mycenaean amphora from the Metropolitan Museum, New York, inv. 53.11.1 (1300 B.C.), in Furumark 1972, 305-9*.

[57] Cfr. Cup with high foot of the Rodi, Copenhagen National Museum, inv. 6412 (TE III C); Furumark 1972, 305-9*. Cfr. in generale Mountjoy 1993.

[58] Rocchetti 1991, 102-103; Powell 1996, 65.

[59] Exceptions for the geometric style are for example a lid of an urn (Coldstream 1994, 119-121, fig. 14) and for the orientalizing age the mitra of Axos (Hoffmann 1972, 23-24, tavv. 44-45).

[60] Bruder 1983, 150, tav. 20 c (in relation with the painter of Cassandra); 158, tav. 36 l* (painter of Taranto).

[61] Lubtchansky 1998, 126, fig. 10* (kylix attica a figure rosse di Ambrosios, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, inv. 01.3024; Beazley 1963, 173, n. 9).

[62] Chase 1979, 28 (polyp), 31 (cuttle-fish), 47 XC (cuttle-fish).

[63] Lubtchansky 1998, 126, fig. 11 (alabastron a figure rosse del gruppo di Paidikos del Museo Nazionale di Atene, inv. 1239; Beazley 1963, 101, 3, cc. 1204); cfr. anche Cerchiai 1987, 129 e nota 37.

[64] Caccamo Caltabiano 1998 a, 33-40.

[65] Cfr. CVA U.S.A. 20, tav. 118.

[66] Cfr. Oppian., Hal., II 232-233, 236, 239; Plut., De Sol. Anim., 979a etc.



fact associated with the fox and considered, like it, for its cleverness and capacity for deception[67].

Even in the most intricate and involved situations, which are vividly evoked by its tentacles, the octopus distinguished from the adjective *polyplokos*[68] 'complicated', 'cunning' – which also connotes the brain, thought, discourse, the labyrinth and however much else evokes an image of intricacy – recalls a type of human behavior of "polymorphy". In this it is comparable to Odysseus[69], to Eustathios[70] defined precisely πολύπους – with which he also shares the attribute of *polytropos* ('of many ways', 'versatile', 'cunning') – as well as to sophists and to politicians and in general to men capable of adapting to all situations[71]. It is in fact proposed as a model of behavior for its adaptability by Theognides[72] in a cultural context that refers to a vision of fishing connoted in an educational sense and to the octopus as example of *sophie*.

Interesting is its connection with darkness and the confrontation with other nocturnal animals: it knows how to hide in the night, that it itself can create by secreting its ink to deceive like a thief its prey[73]. In this profound darkness only this animal succeeds in finding the path and opening a passage, making itself ungraspable[74].

Significant for the purposes of its reading in a positive sense is moreover the fact that it is mentioned as a sacred animal to Troezen, where in fact its hunting was forbidden[75] and where the principal cults were those of Poseidon and Athena[76], divinities to which the octopus as monetary type is sometimes paired, but also that of Aphrodite[77], so much so that the city had the epithet of Aphrodisias[78].

This connection[79] would deserve further investigation both because the octopus as food was considered aphrodisiac[80], and because it results that it was a gift that appeared in the Aphrodisia feasts (the fifth day after the birth of a child) or as sacrifice for puerperal women[81], and above all because on coins it is often in pairing with feminine heads that could be traced back to the sphere of the goddess[82].

In some cases to the image of the octopus is associated a negative meaning as example of

[67] Detienne – Vernant 1969, 291-317, passim.

[68] Theogn., 215.

[69] Already in Od. V 432-435 there exists a similitude between Odysseus and the octopus relatively to the tenacity with which the mollusk remains attached with its suckers to the rock and with which the hero was clinging to the reef.

[70] Eustath., ad Hom. Od. V, p. 1581, 36 s.

[71] Detienne – Vernant 1974, 47-48. It is used also as example of the citizen who is able to adapt to the political changes of his city: Eupolis, fr. 117 Kassel-Austin; cfr. A&Xv. 2001, 767, nota 2.

[72] Theogn., 215-218: exhortation to Cirno; cfr. Cannata Fera 1992, 69-71; Longo – Ghiretti 1995, 51-30. After him also Pindar (fr. 43 S.-M. = Athen. XII 513c): admonishment of Antiarco to his son Antilocos, analogue to an epic fragment (Anon. ap. Clearch., De prov. β^3 = Athen. VII 317a); also in Eupolis (fr. 117 Kassel-Austin): citizen who has customs similar to the octopus.

[73] Oppian., Hal., II 408.

[74] Detienne – Vernant 1974, 46-47.

[75] Athen., Deipn., VII 317 b: citation of Clearchos, fr. 102 Wehrli.

[76] Paus., II 30, 6.

[77] Eur. Ipp., 29-33, 1425-1426; Paus. II 32, 3; Diod. Sic. IV 62, 2; Licophr., Aless., 610.

[78] Steph. Byz., s.v. Troizen.

[79] Perhaps sacred to Aphrodite according to A&Xv. 2001, 769, nota 3.

[80] A&Xv. 2001, 767, nota 3; Diocle di Caristo, fr. 222 van der Eijk = 132 Wellmann; Senario, fr. I 8 Kassel-Austin; Athen., II 63f; Difilo di Sifno in Athen. VIII, 356c; Mnesiteo in Athen. VIII 357c-d; Plat. com., fr. 189 Kassel-Austin in Athen., 15b-d; Alessi, fr. 281 Kassel-Austin in Athen. II 63c; c. 175, 3 Kassel-Austin in Athen. VIII 356f.

[81] A&Xv. 2001, 769, nota 3.

[82] For example in the coinage of Syracuse, in which the feminine figure of the D/ could be the local nymph Arethusa assimilated to Aphrodite.

foolishness[83] or of changeability understood as ambiguity[84].

Moreover the octopus monetary type adopted by the Etruscans[85] – who having chosen it as emblem of their coinage of archaic age should not certainly consider it negatively – has been put in relation with the insult brought to them by the discourse of Themistocles who defined them in a derogatory sense teuthides (mollusks) underlining their cowardice[86].

Symbolic meaning

The interpretation of the octopus in a naturalistic sense, almost metonymic of the sea, does not seem to be the only possible one, nor the most significant.

Its presence in fact can assume other meanings if the image of the animal is read in association with other figurative elements present on the coins, within a broader symbolic language such as was that of the Greek iconographic panorama.

The frequency of this motif in Minoan civilization has been explained simplistically as a decorative motif evocative of abundance that comes from the sea.

In light of its permanence in the Mycenaean environment in funerary contexts and often now deprived of naturalistic connotations, and in the archaic-classical environment on coins where it always appears in connection with divinities, mythical figures or other elements traceable to the religious sphere, one is led to search for a deeper meaning.

Its positive value, which was probably the reason for the choice of its representation on so many ancient figurative documents as an emblem of human capacity to overcome adversities and as "companion" in the otherworldly journey, seems however to have been, if not lost, at least weakened over time, so much so that it is always less used – even in ceramography – as a relic of a more ancient culture, made explicit by various literary sources that associate with the animal the μῆτις, cunning, wisdom, so much so that it can appear as an "adjective" qualifying the contexts in which it appears.

Its pairing with Poseidon, with the founding hero Taras, with Scylla, with the Gorgoneion, with the local nymph Arethusa, figures that belong to a very ancient substrate, could be justified in this perspective and recall the idea of journey, of passage, of transformations that recur in human existence.

Significant is that it is found, when it is used as principal type, more often on the reverse of the coin, therefore in subordinate position to the type of the obverse, of which it seems to be the complement, referable to different personages and subjects (Poseidon, Athena, the Apolline tripod, the shell), becoming the connoted element.

These relations surely connote it in a favorable sense, as in a positive sense various literary sources intend it that seem to refer to a more archaic reality, of Homeric derivation, since in the Greek imagination it is associated with Odysseus, the wise and astute man par excellence, the man who knows how to extricate himself thanks to his intelligence and his "polymorphy".

[83] Alceo com., fr. 1 Kassel-Austin: noted also for its stammering; Arist., Ricerche sugli animali IX, 622, 3-4: foolish in how easy a prey; Clearch., fr. 102 Wehrli. in Athen., VII 317b.

[84] As underlined also by Longo e Ghiretti (1995, 54) it is not always a positive model: cfr. Ione di Chio (fr. 36 S.): animal hated for its changeability, e Focilide (Phocyl., 49) who admonishes against the behavior of the octopus again for its changeability contrasted to a simple and sincere conduct; Plutarco (Aet. phys., 19 = Mor., 916 C) compares it to those who through cunning and trickery accomplish actions of concealment.

[85] SNG Delepierre, 1383 (didrachm), 1384 (diobol), 1385-1386 (obol).

[86] Plut., Themist., XI 6. Cfr. Head 1911², 262; MacDonald 1969, 61-62; Flacelière 1948, 211-217; Parise 1997, 240.

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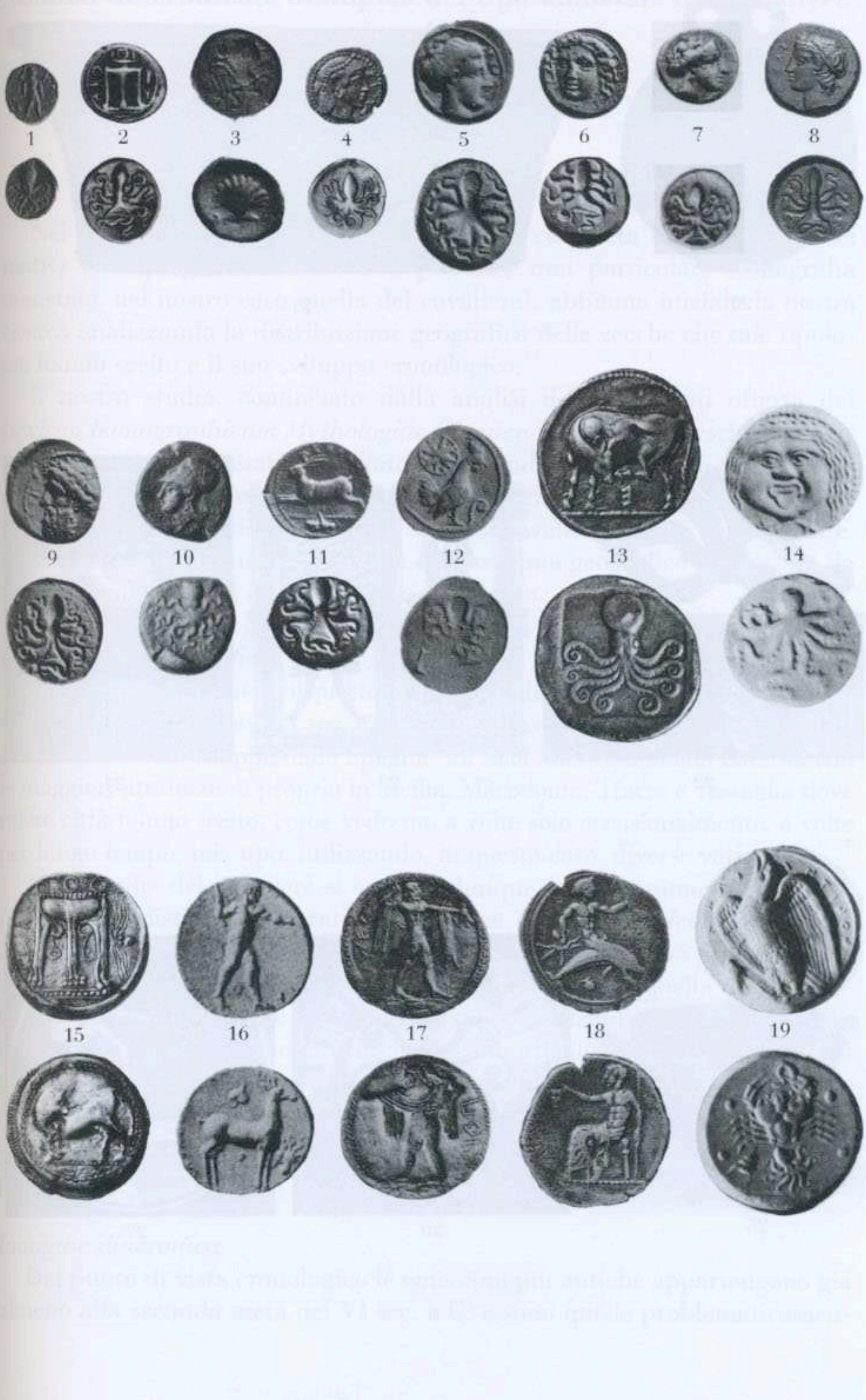
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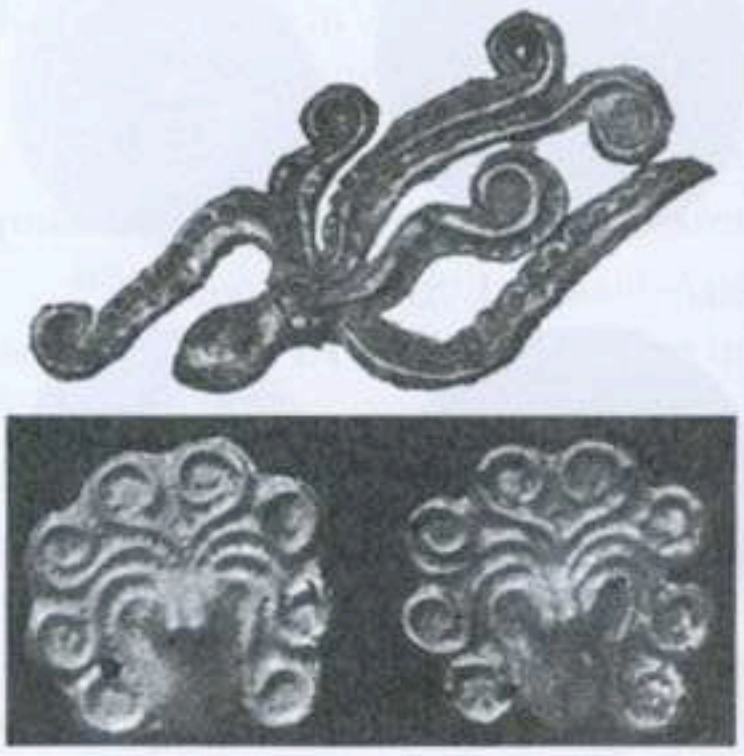

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