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ARCHAEO PILLS

INTERACTIVE TEACHING GUIDE

NUMISMATICS



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GUIDE INSTRUCTIONS

This interactive teaching guide is part of Archaeopills project, an educational initiative developed to promote the teaching of archaeology through innovative and engaging resources.

Designed for Primary Education, the guide introduces students to the past through numismatics, the study of ancient coins. These objects provide valuable evidence about trade, power, beliefs and everyday life in ancient societies.

The structure of the guide combines clear theoretical explanations with gamified learning activities that encourage observation, interpretation and collaborative work.

Throughout the document, a  marks the moments when students are invited to participate in an interactive challenge or task. This symbol represents learning through exploration and active involvement.

Students are encouraged to think and act as young archaeologists, discovering history through material evidence.

The guide aims to foster curiosity about cultural heritage and develop key competences through meaningful and motivating learning experiences.

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INTRODUCTION TO NUMISMATICS

What is Numismatics?

Numismatics is the science that studies ancient coins and medals, from their economic value to their historical, artistic, and social significance. Through it, we can learn much more than just the value of an object: coins tell us stories about ancient people, kings, wars, religions, and trade exchanges.

Why are coins important for archaeologist?

Coins are one of the most useful finds for archaeologists because they:

- Help date the sites and layers in which they are found.
- Show who was in power at the time: Kings, emperors, and other rulers.
- Bear inscriptions, symbols, and portraits that make it possible to identify periods, historical figures, or events.
- Provide information about trade and commercial exchanges.

The Secret Life of Coins: A Guide to Numismatics

The scientific study of coins and medals as historical, artistic, and economic artifacts.

DECODING THE COIN:

What to Find

Portraits and Power: Ancient coins featured portraits of rulers like Athens owl or the pegasus of Corinth.



Legends and Titles: Inscriptions (Legends) identify magistrates, cities, or titles like "Consul" to provide precise dates.

CURRENCY SYSTEMS:

Ancient Units Compared

System	Major Unit	Sub-units
Greek	Drachma	6 Obolos
Roman (Silver)	Denarius	4 Sestertii or 10 Ases
Roman (Gold)	Aureo	25 Denarii

Dating by Design: When text is missing, historians use weight, artistic style, and technical "punches" to determine age.

THE SCIENCE OF HISTORY:

Unlocking the Past



Coins are essential for dating sites and identifying the specific rulers in power.

Before coins, trade used metal ingots, tripods, and "obelos" (iron meat skewers).

Numismatics studies coins to reveal stories of ancient kings, wars, religions, and trade.

- Sometimes, they may appear in the form of hidden hoards, which can indicate conflicts, flight or insecurity.

Unlike other objects, coins are much easier to interpret. For this reason, numismatics is a fundamental tool for reconstructing history and understanding how societies of the past lived and thought.



Image 2. Treasure of Libertad Street (Valencia). Museum of Prehistory of Valencia

COINAGE IN ANTIQUITY

The origin of coinage (Lydia, Phocaea, Ephesus)

The earliest known coins appeared in the region of Lydia, in present-day Turkey, around 650 BC. These coins were made of electrum, a natural alloy of gold and silver.



Image 3. 610-560 BC.
Electrum coin Lydia.

Cities such as Phocaea and Ephesus, located on the Jonian coast of Asia Minor, also began minting their own coins shortly afterward. These early issues had no inscriptions or portraits, but they often displayed engraved

symbols and were distinguished by their weight and metal.

This invention revolutionized the way exchanges were made. Until then, people relied on direct barter or objects as a means of payment (ingots, grains, animals, etc.).

Numismatic Map



The inventions of coinage represented a major advancement because it:

- Allowed assigning a specific value to products.
- Facilitated trade between different peoples.
- Created trust, as coins were controlled by local or state authorities.



Image 4. Map of Asia Minor with cities marked, Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY 4.0.

The transition from barter to economic value

Before coins, societies used symbols objects with an agreed-upon value to exchange goods. These systems were very limited: What happened if you had a sack of corn and the other person only had sheep?

With the invention of coinage, society moved to a much more practical and efficient system: economic value was represented in a durable and easily transportable object.

Chronological Game



Moreover, coins became an instrument of propaganda: they displayed images of gods or symbols of the city that minted them. This sent the message: “This is valid because a powerful authority stands behind it”. Therefore, ancient coins were not just a means to buy and sell-they were also symbols of power, identity, and relationships between peoples.

The study of ancient coins not only help us to identify places or cultures, but also to place them chronologically. As time went by, coins changed in shape, metal, decoration and use. This allows us to build a timeline of ancient history through coins.



Image 5. Market scene in the Forum of Pompeii. Fresco from the House of Julia Felix, Pompeii. Public domain. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

ELEMENTS OF AN ANCIENT COIN

Ancient coins may seem like simple metal discs, but when examined closely, they reveal a wealth of encoded information. Below, we explain the main elements they usually contain.

Obverse and reverse



Coins have two sides:

Obverse: This is the main side. It often shows the portrait of an authority (a ruler, god or hero) along with an inscription of their name or title.

Reverse: This is the opposite side. It may depict symbols, animals, buildings, ritual objects, or mythical scenes. It can also include the name of the city or the name of the magistrate who had the coin minted. This coin was minted in Caesaraugusta (Hispania) under the rule of Caligula. The reverse depicts the founding ritual of the colony. The inscription C·C·A indicates the mint of Caesaraugusta, and the legend SCIPIONE·ET·MONTANO (Scipio and Montanus) refers to the names of the local magistrates.



Inscriptions, symbols and materials

Inscriptions are texts engraved on the coin. They can include:

- The name of the city.
- In this coin, we can read “AEGYPTO CAPTA”, which means “Egypt conquered”. It refers to the moment when Augustus (Octavian) defeated Egypt and made it part of the Roman Empire.
- The image of the ruler and the inscription together show power and victory.



Symbols can be:

- Religious: Gods, temples, ritual objects.
- Political or historical: The cap of freed slaves and the daggers with which Rome freed itself from its tyrant. The coin refers to the assassination of Julius Caesar on the Ides of March in 44 BC.



- **Animals:** Represent powers, cities or deities. The owl represent wisdom, knowledge, and the divine protection of the city of Athens.

Materials:

Ancient coins were mainly made from:

- **Electrum:** A natural mixture of gold and silver (very ancient).
- **Silver:** Widely used in Greece and Rome.
- **Bronze:** High-value coin for important transactions or reserves.

Suggested Activity

The metals not only indicated value, but also the geographical origin and technological capabilities of each culture.



COINS AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Commercial use

Coins were used in markets, ports, shops or exchanges to acquire:

- Food (grain, oil, wine, fish).
- Materials (wood, metal, ceramics).
- Clothes or slaves.
- Animals or tools.

Depending on its value, it was used in small or large transactions.

Payment to soldiers and tribute

Were coins used

Ancient states used coins to pay their armies. They were also used to collect tribute from other peoples or conquered cities.



Coinage served to consolidate political power and to control territories, since circulating a king's coin meant recognising his authority.

Propaganda and identity

The images on the coins communicated very clear messages:

- A victorious emperor.
- A powerful city.
- A protective god.

Thus, the coins became mobile messages that reached every corner of the Empire.

ACTIVITIES

Pedagogical objectives

- Foster critical thinking and evidence-based reasoning.
- Develop historical empathy and an understanding of past societies through material culture.
- Foster collaborative learning and teamwork.
- Simulate creativity and narrative skills from archaeological remains.
- Introduce students to the basic methods of archaeological interpretation and the value of material sources.

Key Competence

- Linguistic competence.
- Digital competence.
- Personal, Social and Learning to Learning competence.
- Citizenship competence.
- Cultural awareness and Expression competence.

Methodological Approach

The activities are based on active and inquiry-based learning, within the framework of project-based learning and meaningful learning. Students assume the role of young archaeologists, observing, formulating hypotheses and collaboratively reconstructing stories of the past.

The use of real archaeological materials (in image or replica format) provides an authentic and motivating context.



Escape Room for Primary Education



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