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THE SYMBOLIC MEANING
OF THE ACORN – A POSSIBLE
INTERPRETATION

Abstract: *The acorn is a very popular literary and decorative motif in Greek and Roman culture that was used by many ancient authors to symbolise fertility and the possibility of creating new life. It was used as a decoration with this significance on many everyday objects, such as vessels and jewellery. The acorn was also very popular as a shape for the counterweights of Roman balances. On this group of objects, it is possible that the acorn symbolised the gods, who ensured the fairness of transactions between sellers and their customers. The gods used may have been Zeus, Hermes or Athena, with the latter being the most likely to appear.*

Keywords: *Counterweights; acorn; symbols of fairness; Athena*

Introduction

The question of the symbolic meaning of the acorn in antiquity was raised when Professor E. Papuci-Władyka¹ and me were working in preparation for the publication of a small bronze steelyard found during season 2011 of the Paphos Agora Project,² run by the Jagiellonian University of Krakow archaeological expedition in Paphos, Cyprus (Papuci-Władyka and Waclawik forthcoming). A small, acorn-shaped counterweight (illustration

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on the cover) was found with this steelyard. The device and the counterweight can be dated to the 1st century AD through analogies to other examples from the period. During the study of these objects, an anomaly concerning the use of the Roman pound as a weighing unit was discovered; the calculated weight of one operating unit from the Paphos balance was different to that of the Roman pound (*libra*) generally used across the Roman Empire. A few possible explanations have been put forward (Waclawik forthcoming), but that of a new weighing unit, known as the ‘Cypriot pound’, is by far the most probable. Another possibility is that the owner of the steelyard was cheating his customers by using an invalid device. This idea raises the question as to how the fairness of transactions could have been guaranteed, as well as questions concerning the symbolic meaning of the acorn itself.

Steelyard – the rule of use

Ancient Romans called scales *trutina*, a term that was used both for pan scales (*libra*) and the steelyard (*statera*). The functioning of a steelyard, also known as a ‘Roman balance’, is based on the very simple principle of bilateral leverage (counterweight), which was described in antiquity by Aristotle (*Mech.* 853b) and Vitruvius (*De arch.* 10.3.4) among others. The beam of the steelyard is divided into two arms of unequal length which flank the suspension point, called the *fulcrum* (Pl. 1). The point itself is determined by one of the hooks used for mounting the device. On the shorter arm, which ends in an opening, the items being weighed were attached to a chain. The second, longer arm was marked with one or more scales and a weight was attached to it that acted as a counterweight to the load being weighed. The mounting of the counterweight was movable, allowing it to slide along the arm. This solution made it possible to find a point where the balance was in equilibrium. Any scale etched on the beam was related to the hook suspending the device. By shifting the centre of gravity, objects with a mass greater than that of the first scale could be measured without additional complications, such as changing the mass of the counterweight (weight) or other modifications (Hill 1952, 52). In some cases, an additional weight was suspended on an unused hook, which allowed the other scale of the balance to be used. The steelyards may have been used to weigh not only solid objects, but also powders and liquids. Weighing these final two was made possible through the use of vessels that were suspended on the appropriate side and then filled with a non-solid substance (Tarbell 1909, 139; *BM Guide* 1920, 165).

Shapes of the counterweights

As mentioned above, the counterweight is crucial to the functioning of the steelyard. Many such artefacts are stored in museums and most (as is the case with steelyards) have never been studied or published. Sometimes their discovery appears in archaeological reports, purchase lists, documents made by museums (e.g. Bates 1917, 100; Deane 1924, 349; Mellink 1964, 161; Cook and Blackman 1964–1965, 60) and in museum catalogues (Walters 1899, 359–360), but most have not even been published in this way. In many cases, information concerning their discovery context is not available or the artefacts come from private collections of which the context is unknown. A very preliminary typology of steelyards has been proposed by N. Franken (1993), who has also studied Roman and Early Byzantine figural counterweights (Franken 1994).

Counterweights already known to the community of researchers may be grouped into a few types distinguished by shape. The first group could include simple, geometric solids, such as spheres, oblate spheroids and tetrahedrons (Michon 1918, 1229; Papuci-Władyka and Waclawik forthcoming). The second might consist of the shapes of everyday objects such as amphoriskoi and medallions with the head of Medusa (Michon 1918, 1229). The third type could contain busts of gods (Michon 1918, 1229), mythical creatures and humans (Michon 1918, 1229). In terms of humans, it was very popular to portray common people, such as boxers (inv. no. P&EE 1856.7-1.5091; British Museum 2014a), philosophers (inv. no. P&EE 1934 12-10 1; British Museum 2014b), women, youths and rulers, including emperors and empresses (Zahn 1913, 10; Megaw 1956, 13; Franken 1994). The final type may be made up of ‘natural shapes’, such as animal and floral presentations, for example the head of a ram or wolf (Michon 1918, 1229). Interestingly, most specimens of the fourth type are counterweights in the shape of an acorn (Papuci-Władyka and Waclawik forthcoming), which was sometimes also used with a pan scale (Tarbell 1909, 140; Michon 1918, 1226). It seems that this shape was quite popular from the 1st century BC to the 2nd century AD (Papuci-Władyka and Waclawik forthcoming) before it was later replaced by bust-shaped counterweights, with the most common being those of Athena/Minerva, emperors and empresses (Vermule 1960, 14; Franken 1994, 116).

The acorn in ancient culture

Why did the ancients use the acorn as a shape for a counterweight? The acorn itself is no nicer than any other tree fruit, but other tree fruits were not registered. If its aesthetic value was not the key factor, why did the ancients decide to choose this nut?

In ancient sources, the acorn is mentioned only a few times, usually in relation to the oak and the possibility of creating life, as is the case in the poem of Ovidius (*Met.* 12.316), Lucretius (5.925) or Vergilius (*G.* 1.1). Very interesting information pertaining to it can be found in *Description of Greece* by Pausanias (8.42.6), in which he mentions the prophecy of Pythia to the Azanian Arcadians who dwelt in Phigaleia, named by the oracle as *βαλανηφάγοι* – the acorn-eaters – to emphasise their wildness, primitivity and poverty. It is quite possible that Pausanias simply adopted the *Motivgeschichte* created by Diodorus Siculus in *Library* (9.36.2) and Plutarch in *Caius Marcius Coriolanus* (3.3), both of whom used the term in relation to the inhabitants of Arcadia. Plutarch also mentioned the prophecy of Apollo to the Arcadians, as well as the fact that garlands of oak leaves were used as an offering to Jupiter, the guardian of the city. In the following sentence, Plutarch describes the sturdiest of oaks and the beauty of its fruits, as well as its ability to feed people and other properties (Plut. *Cor.* 3.4). This same usage also appears in a few of his philosophical texts, such as *De esu carnum* (1.2), *De communibus notitiis adversus Stoicos* (35) and *Quomodo adolescens poetas audire debeat* (6). A similar point was made by Atheneus in *The Deipnosophistai* (2.35), in which he described the acorn as the fruit of oak trees. Additional information of great interest can be found in the *Athenian Constitution* (Aristot. *Const. Ath.* 64.4), in which we read that acorns were used to choose the jurymen called *δικαστηρίου*.

Ancient Greek authors used three separate terms to refer to the acorn: *ἄκυλος*, *βάλανος*, and *δρύκαρπον*. The first two have already been identified and are undoubtedly related to oak species. Ruxer (1938, 115), following Kuruniotis' suggestions, assigned *βάλανος* to *quercus robur* and *ἄκυλος* to *quercus ilex* and the *quercus robustissima*. *Quercus ilex* was quite popular, especially on Cyprus, as a model for ancient jewellery and metalwork (Ruxer 1938, 115). Horizontal grooves on the cupule and an oval-shaped pericarp are both very common in representations of this species (Ruxer 1938, 115). It seems that the counterweight of the Paphian steelyard is an example of the *ἄκυλος* type. A further reason to make this assumption is that *quercus*

ilex is a species native to the Mediterranean region (Weber and Kendzior 2006, 184).

As mentioned above, acorns were used as a decorative motif in jewellery. Gold, acorn-shaped pendants and beads were very popular in the Orientalising period and from the Archaic to the Classical period (Myres 1899, 35; Monaco 1907, 108; Ciupis 2014, 35, 39–41, 44). It is interesting to note that they do not appear on jewellery from Hellenistic and Roman times (Higgins 1980; Ciupis 2014). An oak wreath dating to approximately the mid-3rd century BC is known from a cist grave at Potidaea in ancient Kassandreia (Ignatiadou 2011). It is made of golden oak leaves and flowers, but acorns are not present. The latest items of jewellery presenting acorns are oak wreaths from the royal tombs at Vergina: the first comes from Tomb II (probably of Philip II) and the second from Tomb III (known as the ‘Prince’ Tomb) (Hammond 1991, 76; Tsigarida 1994, 93, 97).

A collar of cereal fringed with acorns decorates the neck of a statue of the Ephesus Diana in the National Museum of Naples (inv. no. 6278; Monaco 1907, 27; MANdN 2014). It is a Roman copy of an Ephesian polymastic *xoanon* made of alabaster and bronze. On this statue, acorns are once again used to symbolise fertility alongside other symbols, such as breasts and cereal. A similar significance is indicated on an Etruscan tripod-stand that bears an acorn from the British Museum (Walters 1899, 85). On this Archaic period artefact, squatting frogs, lotus flowers, and shells may also be seen, all of which relate to fertility (Cirlot 1971, 114, 193, 293).

As a decorative motif, the acorn has also appeared on vases made from both glass and clay. A cinerary amphora from the National Museum of Naples, discovered in one of the buildings near the Street of Tombs in Pompeii may be included in this category (Monaco 1907, 108). It is made of blue glass covered with a white bas-relief presenting a winery scene with Cupids at play and many natural ornaments. Acorns may be seen in the detailed decoration alongside birds, flowers and fruit. As for ceramic vases decorated with the acorn, the Attic black-figure Panathenaic amphora from the Detroit Institute of Arts must be mentioned (Robinson 1951–1952, 65). It dates from the second quarter of the 4th century BC and is surmounted by an acorn-shaped knob above a raised fillet.

The acorn also appeared on other artefacts, sometimes in connection with oak-leaves or wreaths. One example is the wooden sheath of an iron sword covered with bronze reliefs from the British Museum. Below a scene of Tiberius sitting on his throne welcoming Germanicus is a medallion with

the head of the emperor surrounded by three bands of oak leaves and acorns (Walters 1899, 157). Another medallion, also from the British Museum and plated with silver (probably part of a cuirass), bears the bust of a beardless Germanicus (Walters 1899, 351). Below the medallion is a hinge, which has a flat piece ending in two acorns attached to it, with an oak leaf in between. Acorns were often present in combination with oak wreaths on oil lamps. It seems that this motif first appeared in the 1st century BC in the western part of the Roman Empire (probably Gallia) (Bailey 1988, Q1491, Q1533) and later, in the 1st century AD, spread to the southern provinces of Africa Proconsularis/Byzacena (Bailey 1988, Q1688) and the eastern provinces of Cyprus (Bailey 1988, Q2375, Q2485–Q2492) and Cilicia (Bailey 1988, Q2623), where this motive was used from the mid-3rd century AD onwards (Bailey 1988, 309, 320).

Acorns did not appear in isolation on coins and gems (Imhoof-Blumer and Keller 1899, Taf. IX: 1–X: 43, XXV: 1–27), but they can be seen with oak wreaths on the reverse of coins³ from Kyzikos minted from the 3rd to the 1st century BC (Wroth 1892, cat. nos. 148–158), on Macedonian coins from the time of Philip V to the years following the Roman conquest (Moushmov 1912, cat. nos. 5855, 5958, 7334) and on the autonomous coins of Tomis (Moushmov 1912, cat. nos. 1710, 1733).

The Roman oak wreath, known as the *corona civica*, was also a very important military symbol (Plin. *HN* 16.3). It was presented to any soldier who saved the life of a citizen in battle and was therefore accompanied by the inscription *Ob civem servatum* (Senec. *Clem.* 1.26). It was originally made using the *ilex*, before it was replaced by the *aesculus* and finally the *quercus* was adopted (Plin. *HN* 16.5). Plutarch (*Quaest. Rom.* 93), when considering why the Romans chose this particular chaplet to give to soldiers, referred to Jupiter and Juno, the protectors of Rome, as well as to the Arcadians and their customs. Emperors such as Augustus, Claudius, Nero, Galba, Vitellius and Trajan are all depicted wearing the *corona civica* in marble busts, as well as on coins and gems (Rich 1875, 360).

Hypothetical interpretation

All of the examples presented above show that the acorn was very popular in the 1st century AD as a literary and decorative motif on almost all types of artefacts, most commonly symbolising fertility and the creation

³ I am deeply indebted to Barbara Zając for her bibliographical suggestions related to coins.

of life. Other sources indicate a relation to Zeus, who was sometimes called *Βαγαίος*, or the Oaken-Zeus (Fehrle 1937, 607), symbolised in iconography by oak wreaths (Waser 1937, 732; Andrew 1966, 271). It is worth mentioning that there was a sanctuary of Zeus in Dodona, which contained a holy oak devoted to the king of the gods (Homer *Iliad*, 16.233–16.235; Fehrle 1937, 617–618; Kristensen 1960, 114). This could be an indication of why rulers (e.g. Roman emperors) chose to use a crown of oak leaves like the one discovered in the tombs at Vergina and are thus depicted wearing it (Rich 1875, 360; Waser 1937, 757). It could also be the reason why the oak wreath was struck on Macedonian coins. Finally, it is also possible that the acorn (as the offspring of the oak) may have symbolised one of the offspring of Zeus, especially on items related to trade.

Other common counterweights include those in the shape of busts of Athena/Minerva, Hermes/Mercury, Ares/Mars, Dionysus, Apollo and Artemis/Diana (Franken 1992, 218; Franken 1994, 34–44, 71, 99–101; Corti 2001, 198–203), so the acorn could also be representative of one of these deities. The most probable are Hermes (god of trade and merchants) and Athena (goddess of knowledge), who would have ensured and confirmed the legitimacy of the transaction. However, when later tradition is taken into consideration, it appears that Athena is the more likely answer. In the Byzantine period, when Christianity became the official religion, Athena symbolized Holy Wisdom (Vermule 1960, 14; Franken 1994, 105). At this time, counterweights in the shape of a bust of an emperor or empress were also very popular (Vermule 1960, 14; Franken 1992, 218; Franken 1994, 44, 96–99, 101–104; Karydas 1998, 45; Corti 2001, 204–205; Corti *et al.* 2001, 300 and *passim*). In the ideological makeup of a ruler, Holy Wisdom was conferred upon the emperor to help protect him and to allow him to reign wisely. In this way, he himself began to symbolise Holy Wisdom. Divine justice, as well as the authority of the ruler, therefore confirmed the fairness of deals (Franken 1994, 104–105). It is also worth mentioning that in the 1st century AD, when the acorn-shaped counterweight was the most popular, the beam of the steelyard was sometimes inscribed with information that the device was calibrated by a governing official (eg. Tarbell 1909, 139; Michon 1918, 1228). However, it seems that an inscription on a steelyard never appeared in combination with an acorn-shaped counterweight. This implies that such an inscription was unnecessary when this kind of weight was in use, because the acorn may have already symbolised the legitimacy of the transaction (through Athena) and no additional confirmation was therefore required. This hypothesis could explain why

the ancients used the acorn as a shape for their counterweights, but further study is required to more definitively confirm this notion.

Conclusions

The acorn had a very interesting and rich meaning in ancient culture. It was a highly popular decorative motif used on almost all types of everyday objects, as well as in prose and poems, to express both primeval wilderness, as well as fertility and the creation of life. In the iconography of rulers, it was a reference to their special relationship with powerful gods, who protected them and allowed them to rule using their divine justice. Both divine and imperial images were commonly chosen as shapes for counterweights used with steelyards in everyday trade. The relationship between the concept of a ruler and Athena, between Athena and Zeus, and finally between Zeus and the oak could be proof that the acorn symbolised Athena in iconography. For this very reason, the ancients may have chosen it to be the shape of the counterweight, as it was a guarantor (through divine power) of the fairness of transactions on the agorae and fora.

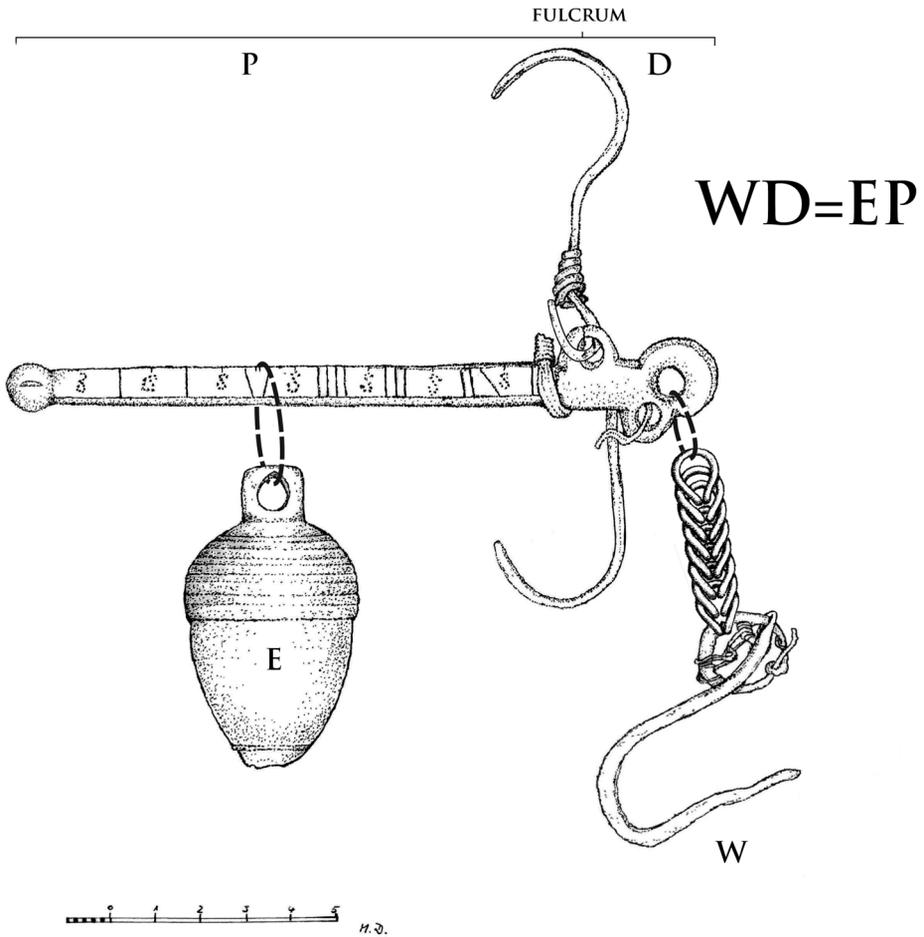
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Pl. 1. Steelyard – the method of use. Diagram based on a drawing by M. Droste with a reconstruction by U. Bąk and alterations by the author