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### *Bicorporates on Coins.*

### *Reflections on their Occurrence and Use*

**Abstract:** This paper focuses on coins with bicorporates – composite animals with one head and two bodies – a fascinating but rather neglected category of numismatic objects. The first known bicorporates appeared on Mesopotamian cylinder seals around the third millennium BC. They subsequently appeared in Aegean, Greek, Etruscan and Roman art as well as that of pre-Islamic Syria and Iran. In medieval Europe, they flourished in Romanesque churches in Southern Europe and Scandinavia, in particular Denmark. Furthermore, they also emerged in India, China and Southeast Asia. Bicorporates exist across a remarkably wide geographical and chronological range. However, art historians and archaeologists alike mostly disregard them. Only a few scholars have carried out serious research into bicorporates and then focussed almost exclusively on their presence in Romanesque sculpture. Nevertheless, they are almost ubiquitous in Eurasian visual culture. Bicorporates are also found on coins, even though these are extremely rare. This paper will explore how, when and where bicorporates emerged on coins, and – since this question is raised whenever bicorporates are the issue – discuss whether bicorporates really depict two bodies or one. Finally, the meaning and significance of bicorporates will be discussed in the context of different scholarly interpretations.

**Keywords:** Bicorporate, Composite creature, Double bodied animal, Double bodied sphinx, Therianthrope, Hybrid, Apotropaic symbol, Ancient coin, Unusual coin, Rare coin, Vilhelm Slomann

# Bicorporates on Coins

## Reflections on their Occurrence and Use

*Etsuko Zakoji*

### *What is a Bicorporate?*

*Bicorporates* are composite animals with one head and two bodies. Unlike other famous composite creatures, such as gorgons, sphinxes, sirens, chimaeras etc., there either never was a single myth about how bicorporates came about, or it has been forgotten over the centuries and millennia. The term bicorporate is simply descriptive and derives from the vocabulary of heraldry.<sup>1</sup> The first known bicorporate appears on a Mesopotamian cylinder seal from the first half of the third millennium BC.<sup>2</sup> They subsequently entered Aegean Greek, Etruscan and Roman art as well as that of pre-Islamic Syria, Iran and various other regions. Sporadically, they are found in Celtic and North European art from the Iron Age.<sup>3</sup> In the mediaeval period, bicorporates appeared in almost all Christian countries from Sicily to Scandinavia (where they flourished especially in Denmark), from Russia to Great Britain.<sup>4</sup> Also, they have been found in India, China (especially in the Bronze Age) and in Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Burma). Bicorporates thus exist, although in a somewhat inconspicuous manner, across a remarkably wide geographical and chronological range.

By and large, these enigmatic creatures have been rather neglected by art historians and archaeologists alike and still remain rather under-researched. Only a few scholars have carried out research on them, and then mainly focussing on their appearance in Romanesque sculpture. In the 1950s, the Danish art historian Vilhelm Slomann (1885–1962) tried to find the origin and migration routes of the strange, double-bodied animals which appeared in great numbers



*Some of the coins with bicorporate animals mentioned and reproduced in the text.*

on 12th century baptismal fonts in Danish Jutland. He made an impressive and adventurous global study, which crosses the boundary between art history and archaeology; the results were published in *Bicorporates. Studies in Revivals and Migrations of Art Motifs* in 1967 (completed and edited by Ulla Hastrup). The most recent study involving a close reading of the double-bodied creatures on the Danish baptismal fonts is Søren Kaspersen's essay "Døbefonte og 'statsdannelse'. Refleksioner over de jyske dobbeltløvefonte" (Baptismal fonts and 'state-building'. Reflexions on the double-lion-fonts on Jutland, 2018).

Coins are highly symbolic artifacts, loaded with possibilities of use far beyond the economic sphere. This article will neither deal with coins as "money", as instruments of exchange or measure of value, nor as a symbol of the wealth it represents, but with what they meant in the relationships between men and their divinities before the modern age. To better understand the symbolism of coins it is important to remember the three elements that constitute a coin. According to the definition given by Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636) in his *Etymologies*: 'In numismate tria quaerentur: metallum, figura et pondus. Si ex his aliquid defuerit nomisma non erit' ('in the coin there are three elements: metal, image and weight; if one of these is missing it is not coin'). Consequently, if images are missing or inadequate, there is no money. These elements are all important, but for the religious, magical and ritual aspects, iconography – and sometimes metal – was the most important.<sup>5</sup>

Inspired by Slomann's ground-breaking work – and Ulla Hastrup's encouragement – the author has collected images and information about coins with bicorporates that is now available on numismatic catalogues, literature and online – thereby hopefully broadening the interest in these peculiar creatures. Although extremely rare on coins, their presence motivates much further research. In this article it will be explored how, when and why bicorporates emerged on coins, and parallels will be drawn between them and the same motif in other forms of art. Whether images of bicorporates really depict two bodies or just one will also be discussed – as this question is raised whenever bicorporates are studied. Some scholars argue that bicorporate images are merely a reflection of stylistic laws concerning the representation of perspective, without intending to depict double bodies; numismatic and iconographic analysis, however, show that this is highly improbable. Finally, the meaning and significance of bicorporates will be discussed in the light of earlier scholarly interpretations.



Fig. 1. Coin from Mysia, Kyzikos *electrum stater*, c. 500–450 BC. 15.88 gr, 22 mm. Obverse: Bicorporate sphinx with symmetrical double-bodies with curled-up wings, plaited hair falling behind, wearing a uraeus (Greek: *ouraios*) on her head. Beneath the sphinx a tuna. Reverse: Quadripartite incuse square. © Roma Numismatics Ltd.

Fig. 2. Coin from Mysia, Kyzikos *electrum hekte*, c. 500–450 BC. 2.62 gr, 14 mm. Obverse and reverse with the same motif as the stater in fig. 1. © Roma Numismatics Ltd.



### *Bicorporate Sphinxes and the First Numismatic Bicorporate*

The earliest known examples of bicorporates on coins are found on the *electrum* coins (*electrum stater*, fig. 1; and *hekte*, fig. 2) of Kyzikos in Mysia (in Anatolia) from around 500–450 BC.<sup>6</sup> They took the form of a bicorporate sphinx. The sphinx was the most popular bicorporate in the ancient Mediterranean world. According to the art historian Paul Jacobsthal, sphinxes outnumber all other bicorporate creatures on surviving artefacts from the 4th century BC onwards.<sup>7</sup> Visual and artistic images migrate by human cross-cultural communication, intervention and activities such as trade, colonisation and war. The bicorporate sphinx images spread widely in the Mediterranean and its periphery; the distribution map on p. 98 (fig. 3) shows the items that the author has found in Asia Minor, present-day Italy and Greece. The first known bicorporate sphinx is found on an ivory seal (fig. 4) from the Argive *Heraeum* (a temple or sanctuary dedicated to Hera) and was struck sometime during the 8th or 7th century BC. This sphinx displays an idiosyncratic appearance that is quite different from that of the later classical types. It has quasi-symmetrical double lion bodies with





Fig. 3. Distribution map: examples of objects with a bicorporate sphinx, c. 700–300 BC. Cf. legend on page 117.

a slightly tilted head and curled-up wings. The most peculiar feature is its wide face, with continuous V-shaped eyebrows and long wavy (wig-like) Egyptian hair. This rather monstrous face was transformed into a more human one on a Proto-Corinthian *olpe* (i.e. a spoutless ancient Greek jug or pitcher), the so-called Chigi vase (fig. 5), made in Corinth around 650–640 BC, but discovered in the main chamber of an Etruscan tomb in Monte Aguzzo (Lazio, Italy).<sup>8</sup> Like its predecessor, it is depicted with curled-up wings and continuous V-shaped eyebrows, but with a distinctly human, feminine face and plaited hair.

Both the Chigi vase and the Kyzikos coin sphinxes thus show an already established classical bicorporate image, facing the viewer with symmetrical double bodies, provided with a human head, plaited hair and crowned by an *ouraios* (a uraeus, a crown representing a sacred serpent which is an emblem of supreme power and deities). Under the feet of the Kyzikos sphinx is depicted a tuna, as fishing was an important source of revenue for the town. The reverse shows a simple quadripartite incuse square, vaguely resembling a swastika.



Fig. 4. Bicorporate sphinx, with a monstrously wide face. Ivory seal, Argive Heraeum. 8th–7th century BC. National Archaeological Museum of Athens. After Slomann 1967, fig. 41.

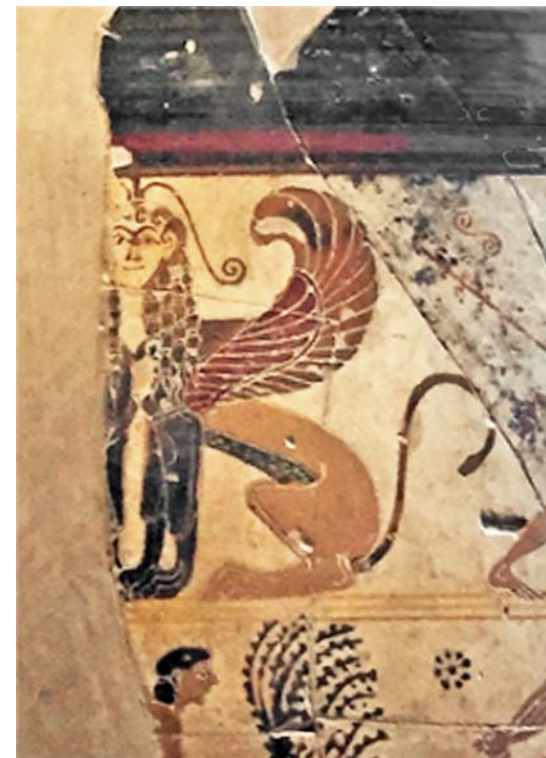


Fig. 5. Bicorporate sphinx with a humanised face. Detail of the so-called Chigi vase, an *olpe*, found at Veii. Late proto-Corinthian period, 2nd half of 7th century BC, 26.2 cm. Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia, Rome.



Fig. 6. Bicorporate sphinx with symmetrical double-bodies with curled-up wings. Scarab, Ionic. 6th or early 5th century BC. After Slomann 1967, fig. 46.

Anatolia is widely considered one of the birthplaces of minted coinage, represented by the electrum issues of Lydia and Ionia,<sup>9</sup> and Kyzikos produced a great number and variety of electrum coins from the late 6th to the 4th century BC. Jeffrey Spier explains that the motifs on coins and gems were shared naturally as they had 'simple shape, size and similar function – the identification of an owner, a responsible magistrate, a ruler or a city.'<sup>10</sup> Sometimes the same carvers seem to have worked on both gems and coins. It is therefore reasonable

Fig. 7. Bicorporate sphinx with the head of Bes (Egyptian god of magic). Phoenician green jasper scarab, 5th century BC. © Christie's Images/ Bridgeman Images CH725647.



to consider the bicorporate sphinx as influenced or inspired by the design on scarabs or scaraboids, commonly encountered as carved gems. The posture and the curled tails of a bicorporate sphinx on a scarab (fig. 6), made during the 6th or 5th century in a neighbouring region in Anatolia, are quite similar to those on the Kyzikos coins. The scarab (a representation of the beetle *scarabeus sacer*), one of the most popular amulets in ancient Egypt, was commonly used on seals but also on funerary amulets placed on mummies for the protection of the dead.<sup>11</sup>

Like scarabs, which could be used for both the visible and invisible worlds, coins could also have the same two functions. Coins are basically made to facilitate economic transactions, i.e. for practical purposes in daily life. There is, however, something special about them. They were sometimes believed to be endowed with magical properties, and therefore could play an intermediate role between the visible world and the invisible, mythical otherworld; there is plenty of both written and archaeological evidence for coins being used for magical and ritual purposes.<sup>12</sup> An Egyptian god, Bes, represented as a dwarf with a large head, goggle eyes and protruding tongue, plays an important role in ritual magic and is often placed in the outer area of temples to act as a magical defence.<sup>13</sup> A bicorporate sphinx with the head of Bes, found on a Phoenician green Jasper scarab from the 5th century BC (fig. 7), suggests an apotropaic function of the bicorporate. Judging from the precious material (electrum, alloy of gold and silver) of the coins, it is possible to consider them as intended for magical purposes, as amulets.

#### *Bicorporate Owls and the Coinage of Athens / Asia Minor*

The next bicorporate to appear on coins was the owl, which is found on small Athenian coins from the 4th and 3rd centuries BC such as the silver (*AR*) *diobol* (fig. 8) and bronze (*AE*) *dichalkon* (fig. 9).<sup>14</sup> These owls represent a special type of the Athenian owl, with double bodies on the reverse, and the image of the head of Athena on the obverse. They also appeared on coins issued by the Athenian colony of Sigeion in Asia Minor.<sup>15</sup> Coins with bicorporate owls were struck about the time of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) and his successors as well. For instance Chares of Athens (c. 400–c. 324 BC), a prominent Athenian general who resisted the growing Macedonian power, issued a bronze coin with a bicorporate owl (fig. 10).<sup>16</sup> The head of Athena, wearing a triple-crested





Fig. 8. Coin from Athens, silver diobol, c. 353 BC–294 BC, 1.23 gr., 10 mm. Obverse: Helmeted head of Athena facing right, with profile eye. Reverse: Bicorporate owl, olive sprig in upper corners, AΘE. © Classical Numismatic Group Inc. LLC.



Fig. 9. Coin from Athens, bronze dichalkon, c. 297–255 BC, 1.84 gr., 12.1 mm. Obverse: Helmeted head of Athena facing right, with profile eye. Reverse: Bicorporate owl, olive sprig above right, and retrograde A[Θ]E. © Vcoins shop Pavlos S. Pavlou, SKU:002199.

helmet, is here depicted with a frontal face instead of in profile, which was the prototypical image on Athenian coins. And Agathocles (c. 310–284 BC), son of Lysimachos (a general of Alexander the Great who became a king of Thrace and Anatolia) also issued a coin with a bicorporate owl on the reverse in Adramyteion (fig. 11); the image on the obverse shows the laureate head of Apollo.<sup>17</sup>

Some scholars tend to see composite creatures as the product of caprices, made for the amusement of the artist, and find them nothing but decorative. Jacobsthal writes, ‘the thesis that double animals owe their existence to material or decorative condition needs no refutation.’<sup>18</sup> He points out that the bicorporate owl on Athenian *diobols* may be viewed as rather exceptional for also having a potentially practical purpose: ‘a class of double animals where ‘twinning’ serves a practical, prosaic purpose ... the double owl is a mark of value.’<sup>19</sup> Generally speaking, scholars tend to see bicorporates as rather insignificant and meaningless, or representing meaning of the simplest kind. However, the bicorporate figures on these coins coincided with a period of acute stress and political upheaval for the issuing authority. The same image of the Athenian bicorporate owl, with the helmeted head of Athena in profile, also appeared

Fig. 10. Bronze coin from Troas, Sigeion, 4th century BC. 16 gr., 21 mm. Obverse: Frontal head of Athena wearing triple-crested helmet. Reverse: Bicorporate owl, crescent in right field, ΣΙΓΕ in exergue. © Vcoins shop Pavlos S. Pavlou, SKU:GR909.



Fig. 11. Bronze coin from Adramyteion, struck for Agathocles (Agathocles), son of Lysimachos (King of Thrace), 290–283/2 BC. 1.52 gr., 12 mm. Obverse: Laureate head of Apollo facing right. Reverse: Bicorporate owl, ΑΓΑΘΟ. © Roma Numismatics Ltd.



Fig. 12. Bronze coin from Mysia, Miletopolis, 2nd–1st century BC. Weight: 6.81 gr., 19 mm. Obverse: Helmeted head of Athena facing right. Reverse: Bicorporate owl, ΜΙΑΗΤΟ. © Numismatik Naumann GmbH.



on the bronze coins of Miletopolis (a town in Mysia) during the 4th century BC and continued to be issued in the 2nd century BC (fig. 12).<sup>20</sup> This period coincided with a period of political instability because of the military conflict (the Roman-Syrian War 192–188 BC) between the Seleucid Empire and the growing power of the Roman Republic. Therefore, it is not impossible that the double-bodied owl also has an apotropaic aspect.

Bicorporate figures are found in Roman sculptures and mural paintings. But as far as the present author knows, there are no Roman coins showing a bicorporate; they seem to belong almost exclusively to the Greek and oriental cul-

tural sphere. This might reflect the Roman attitude to use coins exclusively for more practical purposes such as political propaganda and advertisement, apart from the daily financial transactions.

### *Bicorporate Lions in Mediaeval Europe*

In Europe, bicorporates are found in the ancient Greek and Roman periods, but they stopped appearing after the 4th century AD.<sup>21</sup> They then began to re-emerge around the 11th century AD and spread over almost all of Europe.<sup>22</sup> Bicorporate lions appeared on the *denarius* of Alfonso VII of León and Castile (1105–1157), struck in León, Spain, c. 1155 AD (fig. 13).<sup>23</sup> He led a series of crusades and conducted victorious campaigns against the Muslims of the peninsula.<sup>24</sup> The kingdoms established after the conquest of Muslim territories used the Christian cross to indicate their religious and administrative authority,<sup>25</sup> while the lion seems to have been chosen not only for the authority of the king, but also for the name of the city, León. This coin presents a quintessential image of a bicorporate lion, standing upright with symmetrical double bodies and facing the viewer straight on with huge, apotropaic eyes. The reign of Alfonso VII is considered one of the most interesting periods in Mediaeval Spanish coinage, but also the most difficult to study: an enormous variety of coin types are attributed to Alfonso's reign, but precious few examples of each type have survived.<sup>26</sup> Since 1147 the lion had been used as a heraldic emblem of the empire, and the coins struck after c. 1155 present two lions in various compositions.<sup>27</sup>

The lion is the essential animal of heraldry and was on display on countless knights' shields and helmets, as well as on the seals and thrones of royal or ecclesiastical potentates. The Lion Rampant (a lion in profile, standing upright on its hind legs and with forelegs raised as if about to attack) is derived from Assyrian and ultimately Sumerian models.<sup>28</sup> Slomann explains that this fully erect lion – upright like a human being – emerged during the Prehistoric period (c. 3000 BC) in a conceptual world where no clear-cut distinctions between gods, animals and men existed. These humanised lions are often found on Mesopotamian, Akkadian, Assyrian and Persian seals,<sup>29</sup> and, as Anne Roes highlights, the oriental bicorporates that reached Europe and entered into Romanesque art came via Iran, Syria and Byzantium.<sup>30</sup>

From the earliest times the lion has been the ultimate symbol of power. It was considered the “king of animals” because of its strength and majestic beau-

Fig. 13. Silver coin, *denarius* of Alfonso VII, struck in León, Spain, c. 1155. Obverse: Square Cross. Reverse: Bicorporate lion standing upright. © Hubert de Vries 2013.



ty across a wide range of Afro-Eurasian cultures. Edmond Potter (1855–1934), both art historian and archaeologist, points out the tendency of Chaldean art to depict the lion's face in full whereas the body remains in profile. He indicates that the Chaldeans were aware of the “magical force” that emanates from the gaze and its power to impose respect on the viewer.<sup>31</sup>

Bicorporate lions have been depicted at least since the Bronze Age. An early example of a bicorporate lion standing half-erect and supporting itself on an altar is found on a Creto-Mycenaean gem (fig. 14) from around 1400 BC; and



Fig. 14. Creto-Mycenaean gem from tholos tomb in Mycenae, c. 1400 BC. Bicorporate lion standing half-erect supporting itself on an altar. National Museum, Athens. After Slomann 1967, fig. 28.

Fig. 15. Gold plaque, Assyrian, from the Ziwiyeh Treasure, 8th–7th century BC. Winged bicorporate lion with sacred tree. Metropolitan Museum, New York. After Slomann 1967, fig. 27.







Fig. 16. Granite baptismal font in Vester Tørslev Church, Jutland, Denmark, 12th century. Bicorporate lion. After Slomann 1967, fig. 146.



Fig. 17. The basilica of St Nicholas (1087–1197), Bari, Italy: capital with a bicorporate lion. © Inigo Fraser Jenkins.

a winged, upright, bicorporate lion is depicted with a sacred tree on an Assyrian gold plaque in the 8th or 7th century BC (fig. 15). This same powerful expression of the lion's face, gazing straight at the viewer, is reflected on the coin issued by Alfonso VII some two millennia later (fig. 13).

The mediaeval period was the time when bicorporates flourished most in Europe and, according to Slomann, France has more Romanesque bicorporates than any other country, at any other period.<sup>32</sup> But during the same period, they also appear quite frequently in and on Scandinavian ecclesiastical buildings. An astonishingly large amount is found on the 12th century baptismal fonts in the churches of Jutland, Denmark (fig. 16; cf. figs. 24–26).<sup>33</sup> Good examples of bicorporate lions are in fact found in churches from Bari in the south (fig. 17) to Lund in the north (fig. 18); they also appear on the misericords of several English cathedrals.<sup>34</sup> After the Middle Ages the bicorporate lions continued their existence mainly in heraldic contexts, on coats of arms and seals (fig. 19).

#### *Bicorporate, Wingless Sphinxes: Creatures from the Holy Lands*

A number of medieval coins show an image of a centaur-like bicorporate, consisting of a human figure and a lion. They are found on Austrian silver coins issued by Henry II, Duke of Austria (1141–1177; fig. 20), Leopold V (1177–1194; fig. 21), Frederick I (1194–1198; fig. 22) and Leopold VI (1198–1230; fig. 23). In the Greek Classical period, the sphinx was normally depicted with wings, but



Fig. 18. Lund Cathedral, Sweden: capital with a bicorporate lion, holding a human figure. After Slomann 1967, fig. 590.



Fig. 19. Heraldic bicorporate lion on a seal from the 16th century. Drawing in Harleian MS 6163f. 67r. British Museum, London. After Slomann 1967, fig. 22.



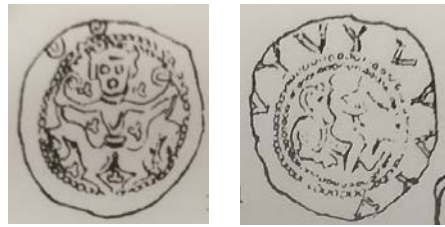


Fig. 20. Silver coin, *breitpfenning*, Henry II, Duke of Bavaria and Austria (1141–1177). Obverse: Bicorporate sphinx holding its tails. Reverse: Samson holding the lion. After Szego 1970, fig. 1.



Fig. 21. Silver coin, *pfennig*, Leopold V, Duke of Austria (1177–1194). Kremes mint, 0.89 gr. Obverse: Bicorporate sphinx holding its tails ending in a head-like form. Reverse: Samson holding the lion. After Szego 1970, pl. 1.

on these coins they are wingless in Egyptian style. Nevertheless they are, like the Greek sphinxes, decidedly feminine, betraying a blend of different traditions. Their double bodies are split from the torso and the feminine-looking human part of the figure is holding the two tails, each ending in a head-like form. The reverse shows Samson wrestling with the lion.

Henry II participated in the Second Crusade in 1146,<sup>35</sup> and Leopold V made the pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1182 and participated in the Third Crusade (1189–1191). The migration of bicorporate images from the south of Europe, and indeed from West Asia, to northern Europe, may be the result of pilgrimages and crusades to Palestine and Syria.

Danes also participated in the European pilgrimage and Crusade movement around the year 1100.<sup>36</sup> The journey was normally made over land since the roads through Asia Minor remained relatively safe under Byzantine rule.<sup>37</sup> Pilgrims were eager to bring back souvenirs from the Holy Lands, and crusaders hunted for relics – fragments of the True Cross etc. – to bring back to their home countries.<sup>38</sup> Most of the pilgrims and crusaders made the return trip by sea, since ships more easily could carry heavy loads of souvenirs and treasures, including plaster models which, according to Slomann, played an important role in the formation of Romanesque art.<sup>39</sup>

As previously mentioned, in the 1950s Vilhelm Slomann carried out an impressive study on the bicorporates trying to find the origins and migration routes of the enigmatic animals. His starting point was the Romanesque baptis-

Fig. 22. Silver coin, *pfennig*, Frederick I, Duke of Austria (1195–1198). Kremes or Vienna mint, 0.76 gr., 21 mm, Obverse: Bicorporate sphinx holding its tails ending in a head-like form. Reverse: Samson holding the lion. © Numismatas.com.



Fig. 23. Silver coin, *pfennig*, Leopold VI, Duke of Austria (1198–1230). Vienna mint, 0.96gr., 20 mm. Obverse: Bicorporate sphinx holding its tails ending in a head-like form. Reverse: Samson holding the lion. © Numismatas.com.



mal fonts in Danish Jutland, where there are over one hundred of them,<sup>40</sup> many of which with carved human-headed lion bodies, like the sphinxes on the coins examined above. However, most of them have male, moustached faces (fig. 24); clearly female or feminine faces (fig. 25) are rather rare.<sup>41</sup> In addition there are also bicorporate lions with humanoid heads or faces with animal ears (fig. 26).

Similar creatures had appeared on Mesopotamian cylinder seals in the early 3rd millennium BC (fig. 27). Danish bicorporate sphinxes do not resemble the examples in classical Greek and Roman art and thus seem to indicate their mi-



Fig. 24. Granite baptismal font in Laasby Church, Jutland, Denmark, 12th century. Bicorporate sphinx with man's face with moustache. After Slomann 1967, fig. 69.

gration directly from Syria and Palestine.<sup>42</sup> Many of them are, however, not depicted strictly symmetrical and static in the classical way, but rather with a sense of variation and movement. According to Slomann these bicorporates arrived in Denmark with crusaders and Christian pilgrims,<sup>43</sup> and were inserted as decorations in the Christian churches not because their Biblical relevance but due to their provenance in the Holy Lands. He imagined that when Christians encountered these enigmatic animals, 'they spoke to them with all the authority of the Holy Lands' even though they could not comprehend their meaning.<sup>44</sup> It is possible that they were interpreted as ancient Christian art and should be reproduced simply on that ground.<sup>45</sup> Slomann's hypothesis, then, is that the models of bicorporates were included in the treasures brought back from the Holy Lands by Christian pilgrims and crusaders.<sup>46</sup>

As stated above, Mysia in Asia Minor was the Mecca of bicorporates as far as numismatics is concerned, and the numismatic evidence seems to support Slomann's hypothesis. Plaster models were not necessarily needed for the migration of images; small portable objects like scarabs, seals and coins, not to speak of silk fabrics and silver vessels, very likely did the same job.



Fig. 25. Granite baptismal font in Skovby Church, Jutland, Denmark, 12th century. Bicorporate sphinx with a feminine face. After Slomann 1967, fig. 71.



Fig. 26. Granite baptismal font in Skellerup Church, Jutland, Denmark, 12th century. Bicorporate lion with a humanoid face and animal ears. After Slomann 1967, fig. 154.



Fig. 27. Mesopotamian cylinder seal, found at Uruk (Warka). Early 3rd millennium BC. Bicorporate, winged creatures with human-like faces, with animal ears and crossed tails. Mrs. M. Moor Collection, New York. After Slomann 1967, fig. 93.



Fig. 28. Sumerian seal, 2nd Early Dynastic Period c. 2800 BC. Bicorporate centaur holding its tails ending in a head-like form (animal heads). After Slomann 1967, fig. 188.



Fig. 29. Plane drawing of the decoration on the baptismal font in Svenstrup Church, Jutland, Denmark, 12th century. Second from the left: Bicorporate animal with a human face, with animal ears and the tails ending in a head-like form. After Slomann 1967, fig. 162.



The variety of different sphinx-like creatures reflects a plethora of *therianthrope* (part human and part animal) creatures among the mediaeval sculpture of Eurasia. The sphinx is one and the centaur another of the multiple kinds of bicorporate hybrids. Here it should be mentioned that there are two types of such images. The majority are of the type where the body splits under the neck, the other, where it splits under the torso. Centaurs and mermaids belong to the latter. Interestingly enough, the image of a bicorporate centaur holding tails ending in animal heads originates in Mesopotamia. It is found on the Sumerian seal from the 2nd Early Dynastic Period c. 2800 BC (fig. 28).<sup>47</sup> As we have seen, the image of a bicorporate with a tail ending in animal heads is also found on a Danish baptismal font, further reflecting the movement of images from West Asia to northern Europe over time (fig. 29).

#### *The Bicorporate Lion-Eagle Hybrid*

Leopold VI (1198–1230), Duke of Austria, like his predecessors also participated in the crusades, in 1212 and 1217–1221.<sup>48</sup> Vienna was situated on the main road between Western Europe and the Holy Land providing a staging area for crusades, and a new mint was established there in order to meet the need of merchants and crusaders.<sup>49</sup> Leopold VI issued a coin with a very interesting bicorporate, one with a lion's head and the bodies of a lion and an eagle (fig. 30). A lion-headed eagle, called *Imdugud*, was a god of agriculture in Sumerian culture (c. 2900–2460 BC).<sup>50</sup> There are multiple variations of hybrid creatures among bicorporates, but examples with two bodies consisting of two different kinds of animals are rare. A prototype of this kind is found already in the ancient Minoan civilization around 1400 BC; a gem from Crete (fig. 31) shows a bicorporate animal with the bodies of a lion and a bull, and a bull's head.<sup>51</sup>

#### *Two Bodies or One?*

As noted in the beginning of this article, whenever images of bicorporates are discussed, the question of whether they depict one or two bodies is raised. With reference to the double-bodied representation of a bicorporate sphinx on the Kyzikos electrum stater (fig. 1), the numismatist W. Greenwell suggested that it 'is possible that this treatment of the Sphinx is merely a way of representing it as seen facing, arising from the difficulty of depicting a figure in that position'.<sup>52</sup> Jürgis Baltrušaitis also argues that the bicorporate images are a mere reflection

Fig. 30. Silver coin, pfennig, Leopold VI, Duke of Austria (1198–1230). Vienna, 0.80 gr. Obverse: Bicorporate lion-eagle hybrid. Reverse: Lion under a tree. After Szego 1970, p. 6.



of stylistic conventions concerning the depiction of a single body without any intention of depicting double bodies.<sup>53</sup> This interpretation seems convincing only when considering sculptural bicorporates placed on corners with one body on each side and the head at the corner (e.g. on capitals or column bases; cf. fig. 17). However, this arrangement is never found in earlier periods of the Mediterranean and West Asian world. Jacobsthal states that '[t]he vast majority of double animals are two-dimensional either painted or in relief and only a few are in the round, decoration of corners, most of them Roman'.<sup>54</sup>

The fact that there are some bicorporates that have the bodies of two different animals also supports the hypothesis that they were usually meant to depict two bodies. Therefore, it seems probable that bicorporates were originally and traditionally depicted as creatures with one head and two bodies.<sup>55</sup>

#### *The Significance of Bicorporates*

Some scholars regard bicorporates as a caprice created by artists for their own amusement and consequently find them rather insignificant, meaningless and



Fig. 31. Late Minoan gem, Crete, c. 1400 BC. Bicorporate animal with bodies of a lion and a bull and a bull's head. Museum of Art, Boston. After Slomann 1967, fig. 5.

just decorative. If that is not true, what do they signify? Were they monsters or gods? Do they carry any symbolic meaning?

Slomann believed that the origin of bicorporates was the need to visualise gods who could be integrated neither in the shape of a human nor in that of a definite animal, a concept originating in the Near Eastern mythical milieu.<sup>56</sup> A bicorporate is thus a representation of a mythical conception of gods similar to other composite creatures.<sup>57</sup> It is impossible to know if they signify specific monsters or gods or more general responses to the challenges of depicting divine or supernatural beings. Nevertheless, what is clear is that they were not presented as mere monsters, but something positive and dignified, most likely intended to represent a demi-god and thus invested with symbolical meaning.

The bicorporate sphinx on the Kyzikos coins (fig. 1, 2), wearing the *ouraios* crown worn by Egyptian pharaohs, represented supreme power and deity. Therefore, its positive meaning is obvious. A bicorporate sphinx was also applied to funeral sculptures as guardian of the deceased in Athens during the 5th century BC (fig. 32). The question arises: what is the difference between a single bodied and a bicorporate sphinx? In Jacobsthal's view the answer is simply that 'a beast with two bodies is stronger and more formidable than a one-bodied'.<sup>58</sup> As guardian of a graveyard, a bicorporate sphinx is simply more powerful than one with only a single body. Its double body and frontal face is impressive enough to drive a thief or an evil force away.

As already noted above, numerous bicorporates with lion's bodies are found on the bowls of Romanesque baptismal fonts in Denmark. Søren Kaspersen attributes to them a positive, apotropaic meaning. Regarding the interpretation of the double bodies, he refers to the various theories of the two natures of Christ united in one body, the two powers of Christian society, secular and divine united, also alluding to the concept of the King's two bodies (the physical body and the symbolic, anointed divine body), reflecting the medieval political theology. Kaspersen concludes that 'the lion with two bodies united in one head was considered to be a convenient symbol for a new set of concepts that became important during the period of Christianization of the Danish realm.' He also maintains that they are to be taken in 'a positive sense, [as] orchestrating the transformation of the baptised in the ritual'.<sup>59</sup>

Naturally, each bicorporate may carry its own specific meaning in its specific time and place, but its visual language appeals to humans beyond cultural

boundaries. The work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), the father of the structuralist movement in anthropology and archaeology, 'is founded on the notion that binary oppositions and mediation of those oppositions constitute a unifying thread, hidden logic, that runs through all human thoughts'.<sup>60</sup> Binary oppositions such as male/female, positive/negative, good/evil, progression/regression, up/down, above/below and spirit/matter are universal themes and essential questions for all human beings. The image of bicorporates embodies a union of contrasting powers.

Frontality is perhaps the most compelling characteristic of bicorporates. Even though there are a few exceptions in the early period, the great majority of bicorporates are looking straight towards the viewer. Symbols have power, and staring eyes in particular are strongly linked to the frontal view. It arrests attention, and the reaction to such a stimulus is evolutionarily embedded in our psyche over millennia. This explains why images such as the Medusa/Gorgon and the *Taotie* have been invested with apotropaic power.<sup>61</sup> Bicorporates can generate the same effect and convey a significance that appeals to humans across cultural boundaries.



Fig. 32. Grave stele with amphora and bicorporate sphinx. Athens, marble, 5th or early 6th century BC. British Museum, London. After Slomann 1967, fig. 48.



### Conclusion

This paper has examined bicorporates on coins and their parallels in other art forms. The earliest known bicorporates on coins are found on electrum coins of Kyzikos (c. 500–450 BC), in Asia Minor, and took the form of a bicorporate sphinx. Similar images also appeared on scarabs intended for both the visible world (as seals) and the invisible world (as amulets). Judging from the proximity with scarabs, the bicorporate coins could also be used in and for the Otherworld. Bicorporate owls appearing on coins in Athens and Asia Minor coincided with a period of acute stress and political upheaval for the issuing authorities. Therefore, the design may suggest an apotropaic intention.

For centuries after the Classical period, bicorporates were seen neither on coins nor in other art forms. They reappeared in Europe during the mediaeval period, as a result of pilgrimages and crusades to the Holy Lands. Coins with bicorporate images were struck in Spain and Austria in the 12th century by rulers who participated in the crusades and went to the Holy Lands. A bicorporate lion issued by Alfonso VII shows the quintessential image of a bicorporate with a frontal face and big apotropaic eyes. The bicorporate images that appeared on the coins issued by the dukes of Austria were possibly inspired by ancient prototypes found in Syria or Palestine.

Some scholars argue that bicorporate images are merely a reflection of stylistic conventions without the intention to depict ‘real’ double bodies. However, the present author maintains that this is improbable and that they were intended to have a positive meaning and an apotropaic effect. Moreover, bicorporates depicted on small objects like coins could function as portable and personal amulets, carrying a strong evocative charge and suggesting a value of coins beyond the visible world.

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### Legend to fig. 3, map: Objects with a bicorporate sphinx, c. 700–300 BC.

- 1: Wingless, bicorporate sphinx on Etruscan Bucchero Nero (black) ware, 6th century BC. Tarquinia National Museum. After Slomann 1967, fig. 26.
- 2: Bicorporate sphinx with Egyptian headdress, Etruscan terracotta antefix, Capua Curti, 6th century BC. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen. After Slomann 1967, fig. 45.
- 3: Bicorporate sphinx with two serpents; breast shield, part of horse harness, bronze, Taranto, Magna Graecia (Greek, South Italian), c. 550 BC. Badisches Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe. After Slomann 1967, fig. 44.
- 4: Bicorporate sphinx, Hellenistic Corinthian capital, limestone, Magna Graecia (Greek, South Italian), Tarentine (18.1 x 33.0 cm), late 4th–3rd century BC. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995.95.
- 5: Bicorporate sphinx, ivory seal from Argive Heraeum, 8th–7th century BC. National Archaeological Museum of Athens. After Slomann 1967, fig. 41. [See also above p. 99, fig. 4]
- 6: Bicorporate sphinx, Proto-Corinthian Chigi vase (Olpe), late proto-Corinthian period, 2nd half of 7th century BC. Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia, Rome. After Slomann 1967, fig. 42. [See also above p. 99, fig. 5]
- 7: Bicorporate sphinx with an inverted lotus between its forelegs, Corinthian vase (Alabastro), c. 640–625. British Museum. After Payne 1931, pl. 16. 14. Ref. Amyx 1988, pl. 18.4.
- 8: Bicorporate sphinx, grave stele, marble, Athens, 5th or early 5th century BC. British Museum, London. After Slomann 1967, fig. 48. [See also above p. 115, fig. 32]
- 9: Bicorporate sphinx, Thracian gold medallion from Pasargik, 6th century BC. National History Museum, Sofia, Bulgaria.
- 10: Bicorporate sphinx with large palmette polos crown, terracotta antefix, Pella, Macedonia, 5th–4th century BC. After Slomann 1967, fig. 47, drawing by G. F. Hetsch.
- 11: Bicorporate sphinx, electrum stater coin, Mysia Kyzikos, c. 500–450 BC. © Roma Numismatics Ltd. [See also above p. 97, fig. 1]
- 12: Bicorporate sphinx, Ionic Scarab, 6th–5th century BC. After Slomann 1967, fig. 46. [See also above, p. 100, fig. 6]
- 13: Bicorporate sphinx with the head of Bes (Egyptian god of magic), Phoenician Green jasper scarab, 5th century BC. Length 1.9 cm. © Christie’s Images/ Bridgeman Images. [See also above, p. 100, fig. 7]
- 14: Bicorporate male sphinx, Persian seal, Achaemenid, 5th–4th century BC. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, no. 631. After Slomann 1967, fig. 36.
- 15: Bicorporate male sphinx seated beneath a winged sun, Persian Chalcedony scaraboid, Achaemenid, 5th–4th century BC. After Boardman 2001, fig. 836.

## Notes

- 1 Slomann 1967, 18.
- 2 Slomann, 1967, 11.
- 3 Slomann, 1967, 11.
- 4 Slomann, 1967, 11.
- 5 Travaini 2017, 178.
- 6 *Electrum* is a natural or artificial alloy of gold with at least 20 per cent of silver. *Stater* is an ancient Greek coin denomination for gold, silver or electrum coins. *Hekte* is an ancient Greek coin denomination, one-sixth of a *stater*. Levante 2001, 280; von Fritze 1912, IV, 14.
- 7 Jacobsthal 1944, 50.
- 8 Hurwit 2002, 5.
- 9 Spier 1990, 110.
- 10 Spier 1990, 113.
- 11 Taylor 2001, 205
- 12 Some examples of coins used for magical and ritual purposes: Ancient authors such as Strabo (4, 1, 13 C 188) and Diodorus (5, 27, 4) mention that the Celts dedicated large amounts of gold and silver to the gods at the sacred precincts of the gods (Nick 2020, 31–33). Coins from around 700–600 BC, found in the temple of Artemis at Ephesus, indicate their use as votive offerings (Konuk 2012, 48). The ‘Charon’s obol’, as a payment for Charon, the ferryman who brings the soul of the deceased from this world to the otherworld, is another example (Stevens 1991, 215; Merrifield 1987, 54–57). Coins are used as a special kind of foundation deposit, for protection, safe journey and as good luck charm (Merrifield 1987, 68). Archaeological evidence shows that during the Iron Age coins were often buried in large quantities or sunk in the waters of streams, sometimes intentionally damaged (killed) as sacrificial offerings to reach the otherworld (Koenig 1966, 24).  
Henry Maguire points out that in the ‘Roman period, coins had value not only in the physical world of human exchange but also in the invisible world of spirits and demons. Their ability to act in both places derived from the general medieval tendency to invest precious substances, such as gold, silver, and gemstones, with value in both the earthly and the spiritual realms.’ He presents several examples of coins with portraits of Roman emperors, Alexander the Great, Constantine the Great, and Christian symbols as amulets to ward off evils in the form of pendants, a pectoral, a copper band from a helmet, various caskets and coin images in Mediaeval (Carolingian and Ottonian) manuscripts (Maguire 1997, 1037).
- 13 Pinch 1994, 171, 129.
- 14 Svoronos 1997, Plate 17, 21, 22; Kroll 2002, 133; Breitenstein 1944, 82. AR (silver) *di-obol* is an ancient Greek silver coin denomination with a value of 2 *obols* or 1/3 *drachma*; one *obol* is worth 1/6 *drachma*. AE (bronze) *dichalkon* is an ancient Greek bronze coin denomination with a value of 2 *chalkous*.
- 15 Sear 1979, 382; Wroth 1894, 87; Kraft 1959, 1570.
- 16 Hazel 2000, 54.
- 17 Hazel 2000, 150.
- 18 Jacobsthal 1944, 50.
- 19 Jacobsthal 1944, 50.
- 20 Levante 2001, 1298–1300; Ashton 2007 XXVII, 704–712.
- 21 Neither Slomann nor the present author have been able to find any bicorporates between the Classical period and the early mediaeval period. In the Near East / West Asia, bicorporate creatures seem to have reappeared in the Seljuq empire (1037–1194) only after the 11th century.
- 22 Slomann 1976, 11.
- 23 Roma Valdés 2000, 70.
- 24 Barton 2000, 312–320.
- 25 ‘In the Christian Imperium Romanum and in the postulated Imperium Christianum the square cross or Crux Quadrata (also called ‘Greek Cross’) has developed into a symbol of the Christian administrative authority, together with the rectangular cross for the religious, and the cypher of Christ for the armed authority.’ See: <http://www.hubert-herald.nl/SquareCross.htm>
- 26 Crusafont 2013, 235.
- 27 See Roma Valdés, *Moneda Medieval Momeca* 16.2.
- 28 Slomann 1967, 18.
- 29 Slomann 1967, 18–19.
- 30 Roes 1935, 317, 325.
- 31 Pottier 1910, 421.
- 32 Slomann 1967, 11.
- 33 Slomann 1967, 11.
- 34 E.g. Chester Cathedral and New College Chapel, University of Oxford.
- 35 Ruckser & Rodrigues, Numismatas.com, 6.
- 36 Slomann 1967, 178.
- 37 Slomann 1967, 171f.
- 38 Slomann 1967, 177.
- 39 Slomann 1967, 177.
- 40 Slomann 1967, 11. Søren Kaspersen mentions that about 180 examples of Romanesque baptismal fonts from the eastern parts of Jutland are decorated with lions on their bowls and many of them are bicorporate lions (Kaspersen 2018, 94).
- 41 Slomann 1967, 28f.



- 42 Slomann 1967, 29.  
 43 Slomann 1967, 178f.  
 44 Slomann 1967, 180.  
 45 Slomann 1967, 180.  
 46 Slomann 1967, 177.  
 47 This image shows not a frontal face, but a face in profile. In the early period (c. 2800 BC), bicorporates were not always depicted with frontal faces. The prototypical style of bicorporates with frontal face was established in a later period, probably around 1400 BC (e.g. fig. 14). However, rare exceptions of profile face bicorporates in later periods could exist.  
 48 Ruckser & Rodrigues, Numismatas.com, 9.  
 49 Local mines were modest and did not satisfy the need. Richard I of England, ‘the Lion-heart’, offended Leopold VI while campaigning together in the Holy Land. Leopold raised his own pennant alongside that of Richard, who had Leopold’s pennant removed and desecrated in a disrespectful manner. Leopold never forgot it. When Richard was on his way back to England, Leopold, with the cooperation of the Holy Roman Emperor, arrested him. The English monarch was imprisoned and held until an enormous ransom in silver was paid and subsequently converted into Vienna *Pfennige* (silver coin), which became the principal currency of Eastern Europe for about 200 years (Szego 1970, III).  
 50 Hall 1994, 22.  
 51 The very emblem of Austria, the “double-headed Eagle” of the House of Habsburg, is often confused with a bicorporate. But of course it is not a bicorporate since it consists of one body with two heads, i.e. is bicephalic/bicephalous, which is quite the opposite of bicorporate. The emblem displaying a double-headed eagle was derived from the Byzantine Empire, but just like bicorporates its origin can be traced back to ancient Mesopotamia. Nevertheless, they are much more common than bicorporates. Associated with solar and sky deities from the earliest time, they were placed on the Roman military standards as a symbol of power and victory (Hall 1994, 22).  
 52 Greenwell 1870, 102.  
 53 Slomann 1967, 13–15.  
 54 Jacobsthal 1944, 50.  
 55 Slomann 1967, fig. 453. In China, bicorporates first appeared on two-dimensional surfaces on ritual bronze vessels around 1500 BC, and started to be applied as decorations of three-dimensional corners around the 4th century BC.  
 56 Slomann 1967, 147.  
 57 Slomann 1967, 148.  
 58 Jacobsthal 1944, 51.

- 59 Kaspersen 2018, 95–96.  
 60 Lewis-Williams 2004, 58.  
 61 Taotie: An ancient Chinese mythological creature often found on bronze ritual vessels during the 1st millennium BC.

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