



Summary :

Cistophoric were called the silver coins based on the four-drachma coin (tetradrachm) of 10-12 gr, which had a half-open knitted basket with an emerging snake on the front side and two snakes twisted around a quiver on the verso. They came into circulation by the king of Pergamon, Eumenes II (197-159 BC), and flooded western Asia Minor from the second half of the 2nd century BC until the Roman period.

Date

188 BC - 3rd c. AD

Geographical Location

Pergamon, western Asia Minor

1. Etymology and Iconographic History

The Hellenistic Kingdom of Pergamon differentiated its [coinage](#) from the rest of Asia Minor as soon as the so-called Cistophoric silver coins came into circulation by King [Eumenes II](#) (197-159 BC). The name "Cistophoric" comes from the cista mystica, a very characteristic circular knitted basket known from the Dionysiac cult, which appeared on the front. A snake popped up from the half-open lid of the basket – sometimes the snake was depicted coiled around the basket. On the verso two snakes were twisted around a [quiver](#). With the exception of some symbols, monograms or letters helping to identify the mint (e.g. ΠΙΕΡ for the mint of [Pergamon](#), ΕΦΕ for [Ephesus](#)), Cistophoric coins are generally of unknown origin. Only a series of coins not minted in Pergamon reports the years of separate issues (Α-Δ) and the abbreviated name of the king.(ΒΑ ΕΥ: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΕΥΜΕΝΟΥΣ). They were minted by [Aristonicus](#) (133-130 BC), who disputed the will of his half-brother, King [Attalus III](#) (138-133 BC), who had bequeathed the Kingdom of Pergamon to Rome after his death, and remained in power until 130 BC as Eumenes III.¹ The coins of lower value carried various iconographic motifs, such as [botryes](#) (clusters of grapes), clubs or a lion's skin inside a wreath. The selection of these motifs is justified by both the special position of the cult of [Dionysus](#) in Pergamon, whom the [Attalids](#) considered their ancestor, and the foundation myth of the city, according to which [Telephus](#), [Herakles'](#) son, had founded the state.

Cistophoric coins were also minted after the Kingdom of Pergamon was bequeathed to Rome in 133 BC and the Roman [province of Asia](#) was founded in 129 BC. The names of the [proconsuls](#)² were added in [Pompey's](#) years (106-48 BC), while in 57/56 BC there were coins even with [Cicero's](#) name (106-43 BC), who adopted a derogatory tone when he wrote to Atticus and referred to the value of Cistophoric coins.³ The investigation of the iconographic development of the particular coins allows for better understanding of the penetration of Roman imperial portraits in local coinage. More specifically, [Mark Antony](#) was the first to be honoured as New Dionysus, replaced the cista mystica of the front side with his portrait and the quiver of the verso with the portrait of Octavia, his wife from 39 BC onwards and [Octavian's](#) half-sister. As a member of the triumvirate, he added the inscription III VIR R.P.C. In Augustus' years there were radical changes in iconography, since the cista mystica and any reference to Dionysus were no longer used.

The Cistophoric coins were followed by the imperial silver medals with Latin inscriptions, which were minted by the emperor indicating his auctoritas and used for paying the army and covering other expenses. The last coins of this collection were issued by the Severan dynasty, although not all emperors minted medals. Cistophoric coinage was absent from the years of [Tiberius](#) (14-37), [Caligula](#) (37-41), [Antoninus Pius](#) (138-161), [Marcus Aurelius](#) (161-180) and [Commodus](#) (180-192), while the coins issued by certain emperors, such as [Trajan](#) (98-117) and [Hadrian](#) (117-138), were very ephemeral. The expressive portraits on those coins and their iconographic repertoire probably aimed to impress. For example, the early representation of Augustus, where he calls himself *vindex libertatis* (the avenger and defender of the Roman liberty) depicts Pax (Peace) on the background, which undoubtedly was a universal desideratum after the civil wars (91-89 BC).⁴ The iconographic repertoire of the same emperor also includes Capricorn, the Sphinx, Fertility, Affluence (whose promise is represented by a sheaf of corn) and the altar of Artemis.



In 20 BC, when the Romans recovered the banners they had lost in 53 BC during the battle against the Parthians at Carrae, the coins included the triumphal arch erected in Rome in honour of the emperor and the small temple of Mars Ultor, which Augustus ordered to be built on the Capitolium⁵ in order to accommodate the banners.⁶ The iconographic type depicting the temple dedicated to the common cult of Augustus and Rome (probably on the occasion of the tenth assembly of the [Koinon of Asia](#) in Pergamon in 19/18 BC), often including the emperor's statue in the interior of the building being crowned by the personification of Asia, was used later as well. In [Claudius'](#) years (41-54) the representations included the statue of [Artemis of Ephesus](#) and the portrait of the empress as well as [Nero's](#) (54-68) portrait as princeps juventutis. The military banners of the Roman legions depicted on [Titus'](#) (79-81) coins were also adopted by [Domitian](#) (81-96), who honoured both Titus' daughter, Julia, with whom he had been living together since 80/81, and Domitia, his legal wife from 70 onwards and augusta from 84 onwards. Moreover, he honoured the memory of his father, [Vespasian](#) (69-79), when Capitolium was reconstructed in 82.⁷ Finally, [Artemis Pergaia](#) is represented on Nerva's (96-98) coins.

In Hadrian's years, the number of Cistophoric coins minted increased remarkably. Several of his coins were re-struck on earlier coins of Mark Antony and Augustus, while the Koinon of [Bithynia](#) minted coins in honour of the emperor while he was still alive. In the rest of the same emperor's medals there is an obvious attempt towards the combination of Greek and Roman elements, which aimed at the ideological promotion of the union of the Roman state, without though neglecting local gods, such as [Zeus of Labraunda](#), [Artemis of Ephesus](#) and the two Nemeses of [Smyrna](#).⁸

2. Coin Divisions

The main volume of Cistophoric coinage included silver and bronze coins. Apart from the silver four-drachma coins (tetradrachms) weighing about 12.5 gr, this category also includes two-drachma coins and drachmae with various iconographic motifs. Finally, the bronze coins were minted in various mints and are of the same numismatic types as the silver ones, while their distinguishing mark is a monogram indicating the place of production.⁹

3. Chronology

There has been a lot of debate about the moment the aforementioned coins were minted. A relatively recent view supports that the dates suggested as possible, 175 BC and 167 BC, did not take seriously into account Livy's references to Cistophoric coins within the wider framework of the [Syrian wars](#) of the late 190s BC.¹⁰ According to the most prevalent view, those coins started to circulate in Pergamon in parallel with Philetaerus' (c. 343-263 BC) coinage, but their use spread to the dependent cities after the [Peace of Apamea](#) (188 BC). Those coins continued to circulate until 130 BC, although between 133 and 130 BC they circulated as coins of the usurper Aristonicus or Eumenes III (died in 128 BC). However, they continued to be minted by other cities, sometimes with dates (i.e. Ephesus), and the Romans, who continued to issue the specific division occasionally and in different types at first until Hadrian's years and probably until the Severan dynasty.

4. Organisation of Coin Production

The uniformity in the early Cistophoric coins with respect to their type and weight is now attributed to the fact that they were minted by order of only one authority, the king of Pergamon. It has been proved that the mint of Pergamon issued coins in the name of both this city and other cities, such as [Sardis](#), Phrygian [Apameia](#) and [Synada](#). [Tralles](#) also minted a Cistophoric coin along with all its divisions on behalf of [Laodicea](#). It remains unclear whether the Cistophoric coins were minted by a number of mints equal to the monograms preserved. It is most likely that they were minted by a couple of mints, where the name of the city that provided the metal and was responsible for the production was inscribed.¹¹

5. Distribution and Evaluation of Cistophoric Coinage over Space and Time

It is worth mentioning that the Cistophoric silver tetradrachms, although they were quite lighter than the earlier Attic-weight



tetradrachms of Pergamon (17 gr), were conventionally accepted as equivalent to the coins conforming to the Attic-weight standard. This explains the reason why they rarely circulated outside the kingdom of Pergamon and why there were no coins minted by other issuance authorities within the territory of Pergamon.

In economic terms, the Cistophoric coinage marked the end of uncontrollable commerce in the region beyond the Taurus Mountains. Commerce was controlled and taxes were more easily collected. Cistophoric coins enabled Eumenes III to construct the magnificent buildings of Pergamon and promote the Attalid international policy of [donations](#), which was also followed by the subsequent kings, whenever and however they could.¹² Besides, the use of Cistophoric coins weakened the economic bonds between Pergamon and Syria.¹³ Things became worse after the Battle of Pydna (168 BC), when Eumenes II, following the example of [Rhodes](#), appealed to Rome. A collection of tetradrachms reading ΦΙΛΕΤΑΙΡΟΥ (PHILETAERUS), conforming to the Attic-weight standard, indicates that after the harbour of [Delos](#) was liberated the king of Pergamon had to string along with the Attic economy and detach from the Syrians.

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1. Robinson, E.S.G., "Cistophori in the name of King Eumenes", *NC* 6 (1954), pp. 1-8; Kampmann, M., "Aristonicos à Thyatire", *RN* 6 (1978), pp. 38-42.
 2. Franke, P.R., *Η Μικρά Ασία στους Ρωμαϊκούς χρόνους. Τα νομίσματα καθρέφτης της ζωής των Ελλήνων* (Athens 1985), fig. 470.
 3. Cic., *Att.* 2.6.2, 2.16.4, 11.1.1.
 4. The revolt of the Italian allies, whose main demand was to become Roman citizens (91-89 BC).
 5. The smaller hill of Rome known in all periods mainly as a city and religious centre. The Capitolium, mythologically connected with Saturn, is mainly known for the great temple dedicated by Tarquinia to Jupiter Optimus Maximus, Juno and Minerva.
 6. Dio C. 54.4; about the representation of the banners on the coins, see Aug., *Res Gestae*, 29.
 7. The simplified representation of the temple consisting of four columns instead of six probably aimed at a better result; see Franke, P.R., *Η Μικρά Ασία στους Ρωμαϊκούς χρόνους. Τα νομίσματα καθρέφτης της ζωής των Ελλήνων* (Athens 1985), pp. 63-64.
 8. About Cistophoric coinage in Roman times, see Burnett, A., *Roman provincial coinage I. From the death of Caesar to the death of Vitellius* (London - Paris 1992), from p. 23 onwards.
 9. Boehringer, Ch., *Zur Chronologie Mittelhellenistischen Münzserien 220-160 v.Chr.* (Berlin 1972), p. 45; Fritze, H. v., *Die Münzen von Pergamon* (Berlin 1910), pl. 1.3-6, 13, 14.
 10. Allen, R.E., *The Attalid Kingdom. A Constitutional History* (Oxford 1983), p. 112; Price, M.J., "The Larissa, 1968 Hoard (IGCH 237)", in Le Rider, G. et al. (ed.), *Kraay - Morkholm Essays: Numismatic Studies in Memory of C.M. Kraay and O. Morkholm* (Louvain-La-Neuve 1989), pp. 233-243; Nicolet-Pierre, H., "De l'Ancien au Nouveau Style Athenien: Une Continuite?", in Scheers, S. (ed.), *Studia Paulo Naster Oblata* (Louvain-La-Neuve 1989), pp. 211-212.
 11. Morkholm, O., *Early Hellenistic Coinage from the Accession of Alexander to the Peace of Apamea (336-188 B.C.)* (Cambridge 1991), pp. 172-173. According to research, it seems rather impossible that Cistophoric coins were minted by more mints; see also Franke, P.R., *Η Μικρά Ασία στους Ρωμαϊκούς χρόνους. Τα νομίσματα καθρέφτης της ζωής των Ελλήνων* (Athens 1985), pp. 60-61.
 12. Boehringer, Ch., *Zur Chronologie Mittelhellenistischer Münzserien 220-160 v.Chr.* (Berlin 1972), p. 49.



13. The theory of M. Rostovtzeff about the economic cooperation between Pergamon and Syria as well as about the use of Pergamenian coins in Syria, in order for the Seleucids to compensate for the lack of silver, contradicts the continuous extraction of silver by the Seleucids; see Boehringer, Ch., *Zur Chronologie Mittelhellenistischer Münzserien 220-160 v.Chr.* (Berlin 1972); see also Rostovtzeff, M., "Some Remarks on the Monetary and Commercial Policy of the Seleucids and Attalids", in Calder, W.M. - Keil, J. (ed.), *Anatolian Studies Presented to W.H. Buckler* (Manchester 1939), pp. 277-298; Rostovtzeff, M., *Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World 2* (Oxford 1941), pp. 654-660, from p. 1293 onwards.

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Glossary :

	botrys, the Decorative motif in the shape of a cluster of grapes.
	gorytus, the



Bow and arrow holder. This word derives from the word «χωρῦτός» of the ancient sources which means "to include bows". By placing both arrows and bows in a holder, the warrior was able to have his hands free.



proconsul, -lis

A quite high ranking official, *vir spectabilis* according to the rank of the senate, who was inequable only to the *Domestikos* of the *Scholae* and to the *Magister Militum per Orientem*. The proconsul usually served as a governor of the Imperial provinces (i.e. in Asia Minor the provinces of Asia and Cappadocia). The office was demoted from the 9th century onwards and the term was in use until the 12th century meaning a dignity.

Chronological Table

188 BC: Cistophoric coins are widely used.

133 BC: Cistophoric coins continue to circulate after the Kingdom of Pergamon is bequeathed to Rome by Attalus III.

129 BC: Cistophoric coins are still used after the establishment of the Roman province of Asia in 106-48 BC (in Pompey's years): The names of the proconsuls are added from Pompey's years onwards.

82-30 BC (Marc Antony's years): Portraits appear on Cistophoric coins. Marc Antony (New Dionysus) replaces the *cista mystica* of the obverse with his portrait and the quiver of the reverse with Octavia's portrait.

27 BC-14 AD (Augustus' years): The *cista mystica* and the references to Dionysus are no longer used in Cistophoric coins. The iconographic repertoire is enriched.