

# Reflections

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## THE PHARAOH'S TRACHEA

"The past is a foreign country," L.P. Hartley famously said, in the memorable opening lines of his novel *The Go-Between*. "They do things differently there."

They do things differently in the future, too, which is where so much science fiction takes place, and that is a big reason why we read it. But a great deal of superb science fiction has been set in the past, and we go to it eagerly for the same sort of strangeness that future-oriented science fiction offers. I think of such classic time-travel tales as L. Sprague de Camp's *Lest Darkness Fall*, which took us back to pre-medieval times, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court*, John Taine's dinosaur epic *Before the Dawn*, and Connie Willis' *Fire Watch*, and I could cite a great many other examples.

The past has had its science fictional appeal for me, too; I have ventured into it in such works as the Byzantium-based novel "Up The Line," "Gilgamesh the King," which is set in ancient Sumer, the prison-camp novel "Hawksbill Station," and the time-hopping short story "The Far Side of the Bell-Shaped Curve." My fascination with the past as story material has taken me all over the world in search of direct experience of it: to Stonehenge, to the palace of Minos on Crete, to the pyramids of Egypt, the Forum of Rome, the Acropolis of Athens, and many another romantic venue, as well as a multitude of museums where the surviving treasures of antiquity are stored.

Recently I found myself looking through catalogs of ancient coins—artifacts that vividly depict the world from which they come down to us. Roman coins provide us with a gallery of formidable imperial portraits, Augustus, Tiberius, Trajan, Hadrian, and on and on to the end of the Empire. The coins of ancient Greece are often magnificent miniature works of art, such as those of Syracuse in Sicily that show us galloping chariots, or the silver coins of Athens from which huge-eyed owls solemnly stare, or the coins of the forgotten Greek kingdoms of India and Pakistan, giving us our only glimpses of their virtually unknown kings, maharajas with names like Demetrios, Apollodotos, Eukratides, Menander. And in one of those catalogs I came upon a coin of Egypt that for me demonstrated the full alienness of the past with astounding force.

Egypt, though it is one of the most ancient civilizations of all, a First World nation thousands of years ago, was slow to adopt the novelty of coinage that was invented in Asia Minor in the seventh century B.C. The Pharaonic Egyptians handled their financial transactions throughout their first three millennia by a complicated system of barter: their basic unit of value was a quantity of copper known by various names over the centuries—the *uten* in one era, the *deben* in another, etc. All goods were defined in terms of their value in these units: this much cotton was valued at three hundred *deben*, this many bushels of wheat at five hundred *deben*, and then transactions took place by exchanging equivalent quantities of goods as valued in *deben*. No *deben* actually changed hands—the transactions were purely bookkeeping entries.

The system evidently worked, for it endured through most of the Pharaonic era, but eventually it dawned on the Egyptians that everywhere else in the Mediterranean world nations (by which was usually meant cities) were handling their business affairs with small coins, circular pieces of metal, bronze or silver or gold, on which an image characteristic of the issuing nation was stamped to indicate that the coins were of pure metal and honest weight. Thus Athens and its owls, the little island-state of Aigina

with turtles, Corinth with the flying horse Pegasus, the Etruscan city Populonia with the head of a Gorgon, and so forth.

Coinage finally came to Egypt near the end of the Pharaonic era. The Pharaoh Takhos of the fourth century B.C., under attack by the aggressive kingdom of Persia, hired Greek mercenaries to help defend him, and these soldiers expected to be paid in solid money, not in bookkeeping transactions. Takhos, or Teos, as the Greeks called him, therefore inaugurated coinage in gold, stamping the image of owls on them in imitation of the universally accepted coins of Athens. He was succeeded by his nephew Nekht-harhebi—Nectanebo in Greek—whom Takhos had placed in command of the army with the task of suppressing a revolt in Syria. When he was done there, Nectanebo returned to Egypt, overthrew his uncle, and in 360 B.C. seized the throne.

He, too, used Greek mercenaries in fending off the military menace from Persia, and he, too, struck coins with which to pay them. This may have included a series of silver coins and some of bronze, though these are very rare today and numismatic scholars are not certain that they are actually Nectanebo's coinage. But there is little disagreement about the attribution of a certain issue of gold coins to him. And I find these small gold coins of Nectanebo immensely weird—artifacts out of the bewildering, all but incomprehensible past.

The obverse of Nectanebo's gold coinage shows a prancing horse—to the Egyptians, a symbol of royalty. But the reverse—ah, the reverse, the bizarre, grotesque reverse—!

Turning the coin over reveals the image of a heart, a naked, exposed heart, with an equally bare windpipe leading downward to it. It looks like an outtake from some Aztec sacrificial rite: the body itself is nowhere to be seen, and only these organs are in sight. At right angles to that frighteningly exposed trachea is a straight line with objects dangling from it, which in fact represents a necklace with beads attached to it, but which can seem, when seen on the coin, to be some other sort of mysterious internal organ.

I can think of no other coin, ancient or modern, that attempts the horror-show quality of Nectanebo's eerie little gold piece. If I owned one—which I don't, because they are extremely rare, almost unobtainable—I would want to keep it in a locked drawer. But to the Egyptians of Nectanebo's time the coin, if they ever saw one (and very few did, because the purchasing power of that much gold was huge), would not seem frightening at all. Where I, with my modern eyes, see a heart and a trachea that have been ripped from some hapless Egyptian's chest, one of Nectanebo's subjects would have merely seen the pictograms that guaranteed the quality of the coin. For the heart and windpipe, taken together, were the hieroglyphs for the word "nefer," meaning "good," and the necklace was another hieroglyph, "nebew," meaning "gold." The two symbols on the reverse of the coin, taken with the prancing horse on the other side, simply meant "the king's good gold"—reassuring words, not scary ones.

Nectanebo was the last native Egyptian to hold the throne of the Pharaohs. In 343 B.C. his army was defeated at the battle of Pelusium by a combined Persian and Greek force, and during the next three years the Persians absorbed all of Egypt into their empire, Nectanebo vanishing into the south and disappearing from history. That Persian victory was a short-lived one, though, for within a few years the invincible Macedonian armies of Alexander the Great came sweeping eastward, conquering Persia, absorbing its vast empire, and pressing on deep into India before Alexander's homesick soldiers were able to persuade him to halt his relentless advance. After Alexander's death, his generals divided his realm, which by then spanned the entire Mediterranean world, among them, the Egyptian segment of it falling to Ptolemy, whose descendants ruled as Greek-speaking Pharaohs for nearly three hundred years, until the next conqueror—Rome—came along to swallow up Egypt

and everything else within reach. (The last of the Ptolemies was the woman we know as Cleopatra.) Under Alexander and his successors, Egypt, which now was tightly integrated into the world economy, continued to issue coins, but images of hearts and tracheas no longer figured on them: Alexander's coins showed Zeus enthroned, and those of the Ptolemies featured eagles.

It is a small thing, a coin, a little disk of metal. But that one of Nectanebo, nearly two and a half thousand years old, bears the imprint of a past that will be forever strange to us. Its bizarre imagery tells us of a lost world, utterly alien, blinking out at us across the great arc of centuries. I look at it and I see disembodied human organs, and I shudder. And yet that peculiar design is nothing more than a set of verbal symbols that any literate Egyptian of long ago could have recognized as bearing the meaning "good gold." I find that design ominous and terrifying; an Egyptian of Nectanebo's time would have found it reassuring. L.P. Hartley had it exactly right: "The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there."