

SILENT WITNESSES OF PHASELIS: ECONOMIC AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY THROUGH COINS FROM ARCHAIC TO ROMAN IMPERIAL PERIODS^{1,*}Dr. Tuncay Çiçek and ²Dr. Mevlüt Özdemir¹Department of Art History, Faculty of Letters, Ankara University, 06100 Ankara, Türkiye²Kırıkkale University, Türkiye**Received** 09th March 2026; **Accepted** 12th April 2026; **Published online** 15th May 2026

Abstract

This study examines the coins unearthed in the excavation areas of the settlement at the ancient city of Phaselis as a primary dataset for understanding the city's economic and religious identity. Within a broad chronological framework extending from the Archaic period to the Roman Imperial era, the numismatic finds bear witness to both the continuity of urban life and the city's integration into Mediterranean trade networks. The silver staters with galley prows from the Archaic and early Classical periods reflect the maritime character of Phaselis as well as its regional and long-distance commercial connections, while Hellenistic and Roman bronze coins make visible the city's political affiliations and local cult practices through imperial portraits and local symbols. The article goes beyond a purely typological and iconographic analysis by focusing closely on find contexts. Coins recovered from public spaces such as the theatre, agora, baths and main street play a key role in dating the construction, repair and phases of use of these buildings. In this way, the numismatic evidence allows for a holistic reassessment of the economic dynamism of Phaselis, its role as a harbour city and its religious topography. The paper thus brings together urban archaeology and numismatics to propose a new reading of the long-term historical development of Phaselis.

Keywords: Phaselis, Numismatics, Harbour city, Archaic period, Roman Imperial period, Economic history, Religious identity.

INTRODUCTION

Located to the east of Antalya, in the border zone between Pamphylia and Lycia, Phaselis stands out as a major harbour city that became integrated into the trade networks of the Eastern Mediterranean from an early date thanks to its favourable geographical position [1]. The coastline opening onto three distinct harbours enabled the city to function as a strategic centre in both military and commercial terms, and this situation proved decisive for the long-term occupation of Phaselis from the Archaic period to the Roman Imperial era. In the literary sources the city is mentioned in the context of piracy, maritime trade and regional power struggles; when viewed in the light of archaeological evidence, however, Phaselis appears not only as a military-political focus but also as a dynamic sphere of economic and cultural interaction [2]. Systematic excavations and survey projects conducted at Phaselis have revealed that the city possessed a planned urban fabric, a developed organisation of public space and a multi-layered religious topography [3, 4]. Architectural units such as the theatre, agora, baths, main street and harbour installations may be regarded as the principal elements that materialise the urban identity of Phaselis [5]. Nevertheless, when one relies exclusively on architectural data, the detailed dating of the construction, repair and use phases of these buildings often remains open to debate and dependent on broad chronological ranges. At this point, numismatic finds, which provide chronological and economic indicators, offer the possibility of tracing the historical development of the city within a much finer temporal framework [6]. The coins recovered from the settlement excavations at Phaselis constitute one of the primary datasets documenting the economic and political networks of the city in different periods [7].

The silver staters with galley prows dated to the Archaic and early Classical periods make visible the maritime character of the city and its long-distance commercial connections, whereas the Hellenistic and Roman bronze issues reflect the political affiliations, urban identity and religious practices of Phaselis through imperial portraits and local iconography [8, 9]. In addition to the typological and iconographic features of the coins, the stratigraphic levels from which they were recovered and the architectural units with which they are associated play a crucial role in understanding the chronology and usage dynamics of the settlement [5]. This article does not aim merely to compile a coin catalogue; rather, it uses the numismatic material spanning from the Archaic period to the Roman Imperial era as a basis for reassessing the economic and religious identity of Phaselis. In this framework, the coins are examined both from a typological-iconographic perspective and in relation to their find contexts in public areas such as the theatre, agora, baths and main street. In doing so, the position of Phaselis within Mediterranean trade, its role as a harbour city, its urban continuity and the functions of its cult spaces are discussed from a multi-layered perspective on the basis of numismatic evidence.

Geographical and Historical Background

Phaselis is situated on a coastline indented by natural bays at the southern foothills of Mt Tahtalı, and this topography constitutes the principal element determining both the defence of the city and its harbour arrangements. The three-harbour configuration transformed the city into a junction point between north-south maritime routes and overland roads extending into the Anatolian interior, thereby enabling Phaselis to develop not merely as a regional but as an international trading station. Its geographical location provided the infrastructure for the connections the city established with both the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean from an early date;

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within this framework, Phaselis became one of the focal points of intense movement of goods and people throughout the 1st millennium BC. In the accounts of ancient authors, Phaselis is mentioned sometimes in connection with piracy and political conflicts, and sometimes for its prosperity and the vitality of its harbours. While these narratives emphasise the role played by the city in military and political history, archaeological evidence shows that Phaselis also possessed a strong economic infrastructure and a diversified model of production and consumption. The public buildings, water systems and harbour arrangements identified in the city point to systematic urban planning, while ceramic, amphora and numismatic finds demonstrate that Phaselis was tightly integrated into commercial networks reaching across different geographies. In the course of history, Phaselis was successively incorporated into different political frameworks: first under regional dynamics, then under Persian, Hellenistic and ultimately Roman rule. Although these political changes transformed the administrative status and regional alliances of the city, they did not entirely interrupt the continuity of the harbour-city identity and commercial function of Phaselis. Having been associated primarily with local and regional powers in the Archaic and Classical periods, Phaselis became part of the inter-royal competition of the Hellenistic period and, in the Roman period, a component of the imperial-scale administrative and economic system. These transformations may be traced as a shift in mentality and representation reflected both in the urban fabric and in the numismatic record [5].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The primary dataset of this study consists of coins recovered during excavations conducted in the settlement area of the ancient city of Phaselis, particularly in and around the theatre, agora, bath complexes, main street and harbour installations. These numismatic finds have been evaluated not merely as individual objects but within the framework of the strata to which they belong, the architectural units with which they are associated and their relations with other small finds. By taking into account both the typological-iconographic features of the coins and their contextual positions, the aim has been to produce a multi-layered reading of the chronology, economic structure and religious topography of Phaselis [8]. During the data collection phase, coins were first recorded in detail together with their find-spot, elevation, context type and associated architectural unit. Mechanical and chemical cleaning procedures were then applied according to the state of preservation; following the removal of surface corrosion, the iconographic details and legends on the coin surfaces were documented with high-resolution photographs and drawings. At the measurement stage, diameter, weight and die axis were recorded on a standard form so that each specimen could be analysed in a manner suitable for typological classification [1]. In the typological classification process, coins were first divided into main groups according to metal (silver, bronze), denomination, obverse portrait and reverse type. The silver staters with galley prows dated to the Archaic and early Classical periods were subdivided according to prow form, incuse square structure and any additional iconographic marks, while imperial portraits, ethnic legends and local symbols served as the principal distinguishing criteria for the Hellenistic and Roman bronze issues [9, pp. 45-67; 6]. Throughout this process, available scholarly corpora and catalogues (regional coin corpora, SNG series and studies specific to Phaselis) were used as reference works, and each

type was matched, as far as possible, with its counterpart in the literature [11]. In the chronological assessment, the date range of the coins was determined through stylistic analysis, the trajectory of iconographic development and the datings given in the relevant catalogues; these dates were then cross-referenced with the stratigraphy of the levels from which the finds originated in order to reach their final form. In this way, especially for levels belonging to the Archaic-Classical and Hellenistic-Roman transitional phases, the coins were used as the primary indicators establishing terminus post quem and terminus ante quem boundaries [7]. This approach facilitates both a more precise dating of architectural phases and a clearer tracing of ruptures and continuities in the economic and political history of the city. From a methodological perspective, the use of numismatic data goes beyond serving merely as a chronological tool; the distribution densities of the coins, type-context relationships and spatial clusters have also been taken into account. In this context, the tendency of coins from different periods to concentrate in specific spaces (for example, the theatre precinct, the agoras or the baths) has been correlated with the modes of use, social functions and ritual dimensions of those areas [9, pp. 100-120]. In this way, the numismatic data has been positioned as a dynamic analytical tool that contributes to a re-reading of the public spaces of Phaselis not only in architectural terms but also within the context of economic and religious practices.

RESULTS

Archaic and Early Classical Coins

The Archaic and early Classical numismatics of Phaselis takes shape around series of silver staters with galley prows that reflect the maritime identity of the city and its early commercial connections. The earliest examples dated to this period are characterised on the obverse by a dynamic stylised rendering of a galley prow sometimes evoking the forepart of a boar and on the reverse by a generally tripartite coarse incuse square. The general form of the prow, the gunwale line, the stempost projections and occasional details resembling a fighting platform are among the principal criteria for distinguishing different emissions [8, pp. 46-65]. These types both constitute a distinctive iconographic tradition within the regional Lycian-Pamphylian coinage and directly visualise the early harbour-city identity of Phaselis. The chronology of the staters belonging to this period is placed roughly between the late 6th and the first half of the 5th century BC, taking into account stylistic development and weight standard. Weight values allow one to understand how far the coin standard adopted by the city was aligned with systems valid in regional and international trade. On some specimens, small symbols, monograms or marks located on or around the prow depiction are interpreted as control marks indicating different minting workshops or persons responsible for striking (magistrates) [4]. This symbolic richness indicates that the Archaic-Classical coinage of Phaselis points to a developed structure not only in technical terms but also with respect to the intra-urban administrative organisation and modes of representation. In terms of excavation finds, the great majority of Archaic and early Classical period staters have been recovered in secondary contexts within later fill and use levels. This situation points to the length of the circulation periods of the coins in question and to the continuity of circulation in the economic life of the city. At the same time, the fact that some specimens have been found in levels associated with early architectural remains,

particularly in areas connected with harbour installations and intra-urban circulation axes, suggests that Phaselis possessed a regular commercial and exchange network from the Archaic period onwards [1]. In this way the Archaic-early Classical period coins rise to the position of a fundamental indicator in understanding both the early economic history of the city and the development of its harbour infrastructure. From an iconographic perspective, the continuity of the galley-prow motif signals that Phaselis particularly emphasised a civic identity through which it defined itself by the sea. The prow may be evaluated both as a symbol of the city's character as a harbour city and as a multi-layered symbol evoking diverse maritime activities such as piracy, sea trade and military expeditions. Within this framework, the Archaic and early Classical period staters of Phaselis may be read not merely as instruments of exchange carrying economic value, but also as powerful visual manifestos reflecting the collective memory, political claims and maritime identity of the city.



Figure 1. Archaic silver stater of Phaselis with galley prow on the obverse and tripartite incuse square on the reverse (late 6th – early 5th century BC)

Hellenistic and Roman Imperial Coins

The Hellenistic and Roman Imperial period numismatic evidence from Phaselis reflects a phase in which the city, while progressively integrating into higher-scale political structures, continued to preserve and reshape its local identity. This period is conspicuous for the replacement of the silver stater tradition, which carried considerable weight in the earlier phase, by abundant bronze coinage meeting the needs of everyday monetary exchange. These bronze issues, shaped first under Hellenistic kingdoms and then under Roman administration, make visible through ruler and imperial portraits as well as rich local symbols both the position of Phaselis within the broad political framework and the urban and religious identity of the city itself.

Late Hellenistic Staters and Bronze Coins: The Hellenistic period presents itself as a phase in which both continuity and renewal can be observed simultaneously in the coinage of Phaselis. On the one hand, iconography related to the galley prow and seafaring continues to emphasise the importance of the city's harbour-city character and its economy based on maritime trade; on the other hand, new symbols, monograms and elements reflecting royal influence are superimposed on this tradition. On late Hellenistic silver staters, the prow type is frequently preserved on the obverse, while symbols of a divine or dynastic character such as a trident as well as magistrates' names and marks appear in the fields, and the legend *ΦΑΣΗΛΙΤΩΝ* is given on the reverse [6, nos. 127-140]. These additions allow for the division of the series into more refined typological subgroups, while also making readable on the coins themselves the political and economic relations that Phaselis established with the Hellenistic kingdoms. Bronze

coins increasingly became, in the Hellenistic period, the primary instrument of everyday trade and the local market economy. On these bronzes, the obverse typically bears a divine or royal head, while the reverse shows symbols such as an anchor, galley prow, wreath or other emblems identified with the city, together with ethnic legends such as *ΦΑΣΗΛΙΤΩΝ*. The variety of denominations and intensity of production point to an increasingly complex urban economy at Phaselis and a wide circulation network. In the archaeological context, the frequent recovery of Hellenistic bronzes from street levels, shop fronts, agora fill and use layers, and from the vicinity of the theatre and baths, shows that these coins were in circulation at the very centre of commercial and public life [6, no. 127; 12]. These find patterns both contribute to the dating of the use phases of the buildings and provide concrete clues about the economic and social organisation of the city in the Hellenistic period.



Figure 2. Late Hellenistic silver stater (3rd century BC). Obverse: galley prow with trident; reverse: stern with eagle and the legend ΦΑΣ

Roman Imperial Bronzes: The Roman Imperial bronze coinage of Phaselis is shaped around imperial portraits placed on the obverse and reverse types referencing the city's harbour identity, public buildings and cult spaces. Imperial portraits and titulature attested in series ranging from Hadrian to the Severan dynasty document the city's loyalty to imperial authority as well as its place within the empire-wide political-economic network. On the reverses, ship and anchor depictions reflecting the harbour identity of Phaselis, together with temple façades and cult statues, foreground the city's religious topography. The frequent recovery of these bronzes from the theatre, baths, agora and main-street levels demonstrates that Roman-period coin circulation was structured around the public spaces and ritual contexts of the city [8].



Figure 3. Roman Imperial bronze of Phaselis. Obverse: bust of Hadrian; reverse: galley prow with the legend ΦΑΣΗΛΙΤΩΝ

Typological Tables

The principal Hellenistic and Roman Imperial period coin types of Phaselis recovered from the excavations are summarised in Tables 1 and 2 below. The tables systematise the specimens according to period, metal, obverse–reverse iconography and catalogue references.

Table 1. Hellenistic Period Phaselis coins: specimen types

Period / Date	Metal	Obverse	Reverse and Legend	Catalogue Reference
Mid-3rd cent. BC (c. 250–220 BC)	AR stater	Galley prow r.; trident on prow	Ship's stern r.; eagle; magistrate's name ΦΑΣ	Heipp-Tamer 127; SNG von Aulock
3rd cent. BC (c. 250–220 BC)	AR stater	Galley prow r.; marks on fighting platform	Ship's stern r.; eagle and EUKLEAS	Heipp-Tamer 140; SNG von Aulock
Late 3rd–2nd cent. BC	AR stater	Galley prow r.; dolphin or shrimp below	Ship's stern l./r.; Nike or wreath	Heipp-Tamer Series 6–8
3rd–2nd cent. BC	AE bronze	Divine head (Athena/Apollo)	Galley prow or anchor; ΦΑΣΗΛΙΤΩΝ	SNG von Aulock 4393–4396; SNG Cop. 120
3rd–2nd cent. BC	AE bronze	Royal head / idealised male bust	ΦΑΣΗΛΙΤΩΝ within wreath	Regional corpus; Heipp-Tamer, Hellenistic bronze series

Table 2. Roman Imperial Period Phaselis bronzes: specimen types.

Emperor / Period	Metal	Obverse	Reverse and Legend	Catalogue Reference
Hadrian (AD 117–138)	AE bronze	Bust of Hadrian; ΑΥΤ ΚΑΙ ΤΡΑ ΑΔΡΙΑΝΟΣ	Galley prow or anchor; ΦΑΣΗΛΙΤΩΝ	SNG von Aulock; SNG Cop., Lycia
Antoninus Pius (AD 138–161)	AE bronze	Imperial bust with titulature	Temple façade; cult statue; ΦΑΣΗΛΙΤΩΝ	SNG series; local Phaselis corpora
Severan dynasty (AD 193–235)	AE bronze	Bust of Septimius Severus / Caracalla	Harbour arrangement or ship; city name and titles	SNG; Roman Provincial Coinage
Late 2nd–3rd cent. AD	AE bronze	Imperial head, plain bust	ΦΑΣ or ΦΑΣΗΛΙΤΩΝ within wreath	SNG Cop.

DISCUSSION

Assessment of Hellenistic Bronzes and Late Staters

The stater and bronze series belonging to the Hellenistic period clearly reflect both the perpetuation of the maritime identity of Phaselis and the transformations in its political allegiance. The preservation of the galley-prow type with the addition of tridents, eagles, monograms and magistrates' names shows that the economic basis of the city continued to rest on the harbour and maritime trade, while the mint organisation and representational language diversified in a way that adapted to the political atmosphere of the Hellenistic kingdoms [8, pp. 66–90]. The typological and nominal richness of the bronze coinage implies that small-scale exchange was growing in the city and that an urban economy centred on the marketplace and public spaces was becoming more pronounced. In this context, the types summarised in Table 1 demonstrate that, between the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, Phaselis possessed a multi-layered harbour economy integrated into both regional and broader Mediterranean networks.

Assessment of Roman Imperial Bronzes

The Roman Imperial period bronzes show that Phaselis developed a powerful visual language combining imperial ideology with local civic identity on the same coin surface. While the imperial portrait series from Hadrian to the Severans underlines the city's place and loyalty within the Roman world, the reverse types bearing ships, anchors, temple façades and the city's name within a wreath foreground the harbour-city identity and cult spaces of Phaselis. When the specimens in Table 2 are considered alongside the archaeological evidence suggesting that bronzes were concentrated particularly around the theatre, baths and agoras, it appears that in the Roman period public spaces became the focal points of both economic and social life [9, pp. 150–175]. In this way, the Roman bronzes offer the possibility of reading together the city's status within the Empire, its urban representations and the everyday circulation of money.

Religious Topography and Public Space

The contextual analysis of numismatic evidence in conjunction with excavation data yields important insights into the religious

topography and the use of public space in Phaselis. The concentration of Hellenistic and Roman bronzes around theatres, agoras, baths and the main street indicates that these areas served as nodal points where trade, sociability and ritual practices converged. Reverse types depicting temple façades, cult statues and symbols possibly associated with votive activities suggest that economic transactions and cult practices were often embedded in the same spatial and symbolic settings [6; 8].

Conclusion

The numismatic material from Phaselis, spanning from the Archaic period to the Roman Imperial era, clearly demonstrates that a harbour-based economic continuity was one of the decisive factors in the historical development of the city. The early silver staters with galley prows show that Phaselis constructed an identity defined through the sea and was integrated into Eastern Mediterranean trade networks from an early date. In the Hellenistic period, the persistence of maritime imagery on late staters together with the diversification of bronze coinage suggests that the harbour character of the city was not merely an ideological emphasis, but also the structural foundation of everyday monetary circulation and market economy. The recurring use of ships, anchors and harbour motifs on Roman Imperial bronzes further indicates that, despite empire-wide transformations, the economic life of Phaselis continued to be anchored in maritime trade and harbour activities. This long-term economic continuity must be read in conjunction with changes in political allegiance and modes of representation. The “pure” maritime symbolism of the Archaic and early Classical periods is enriched in the Hellenistic era by magistrates' names, dynastic symbols and new iconographic elements, translating the language of a harbour city into the competitive framework of Hellenistic royal politics. In the Roman period, imperial portraits, titulature and local symbols are brought together on the same coin surfaces, creating a composite system of representation in which Phaselis articulates both its loyalty to imperial authority and its own urban memory. In this sense, the coins function not only as economic instruments, but also as visual texts that record how the civic community perceived and wished to project itself within changing political contexts. Future research should aim to extend the present approach by

integrating new excavation data with broader regional comparanda, including hoard evidence from neighbouring Lycian and Pamphylian cities. A more systematic investigation of die studies and metrological analyses, combined with the contextual recording of every coin recovered in stratified contexts, will further refine the chronological framework and clarify the place of Phaselis within wider Mediterranean monetary networks. In this way, the coinage of Phaselis emerges as a multi-layered source that brings together harbour-based urban continuity, shifting political allegiances and a transforming religious identity within a single interpretative framework, providing an indispensable analytical tool for reconstructing the long-term history of the city.

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List of Abbreviations

AE	Bronze (copper-alloy coin)
AR	Silver coin
AV	Gold coin
AST	Araştırma Sonuçları Toplantısı
BMC	British Museum Catalogue of Greek Coins
CNG	Classical Numismatic Group (Auction Catalogues)
IGCH	Inventory of Greek Coin Hoards
JRS	Journal of Roman Studies
obv.	obverse
Pha.	Phaselis: Disiplinlerarası Akdeniz Araştırmaları Dergisi
rev.	reverse
RIC	Roman Imperial Coinage
RPC	Roman Provincial Coinage
RRC	Roman Republican Coinage (Crawford)
SNG	Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum
SNG Cop.	SNG, Denmark – The Royal Collection of Coins and Medals, Copenhagen
SNG France	SNG, France
SNG von Aulock	SNG, Deutschland. Sammlung von Aulock

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