# MEDICAL NUMISMATIC NOTES, VIII: COINS OF CYRENE[1]

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CYRENE, a Greek city of more than 100,000 inhabitants, was located on a plateau about 100 miles east of Benghazi in Libya. The story is told that about 640 B.C. a group of citizens on the island of Thera asked an oracle where to settle. The oracle told them to go south. Leaving Thera they settled on an island off the coast of Libya. On hearing that there was a good source of water about 15 miles inland, they went beyond the coast and settled in the hills near the source. Here they found the soil suitable for cultivation and there was sufficient grass for the raising of cattle and sheep. They discovered a plant, silphium, growing wild in the hills; it was valuable both medicinally and as a condiment. The export of silphium from Cyrene later brought great wealth to the city. The plant and its uses have been described in detail by Gemmill.[2]

Silphium was used on the coins of Cyrene as a coin-type for many years. At first very crude representations of the seeds appeared on the coins. Later the plant in flower was used (Figure 2). The coin-type of silphium is the first extant representation of a medicinal plant. It was not unusual for a Greek city to associate itself with a coin-type: for example, the owl of Athens, the colt of Corinth, the turtle of Aegina are

1. Seven previous notes on medical numismatics have appeared in the *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine, viz.*, *45*:512-14, 1969; *45*:637-39, 1969; *45*:1124-25, 1969; *46*:448-450, 1970; *47*:1130-31, 1971; *48*:599-602, 1972; *48*:1059-64, 1972.

Other references which may be of interest to the medical collector are as follows: Hart, G. D.: Even the Gods had goitre. *Canad. Med. Ass. J. 96*:1432-36, 1967. Hart, G. D.: Ancient coins and medicine. *Canad. Med. Ass. J. 94*:77-89, 1966. Brettauer, J.: *Medicina in Nummis.* Wien, Im Selbstverlag, 1937. Kisch, B. and Reich, J. P.: Medical coins and medals. *Ciba Symposia 9*:794-824, 1948. Bernhard, O.: *Griechische und Römischen Münzbilder in Ihren Beziehungen zum Geschichte der Medizin.* Zurich, Orell Füssli, 1926. Bernhard, O.: *Pflanzenbilder auf Griechischen und Römischen Münzen.* Zurich, Orell Füssli, 1924. Garrison, F. H.: Medical numismatics. *Ann. Med. Hist. 8*: 128-35, 1926.

2. Gemmill, C. L.: Silphium. *Bull. Hist. Med. 40*:295-313, 1966.

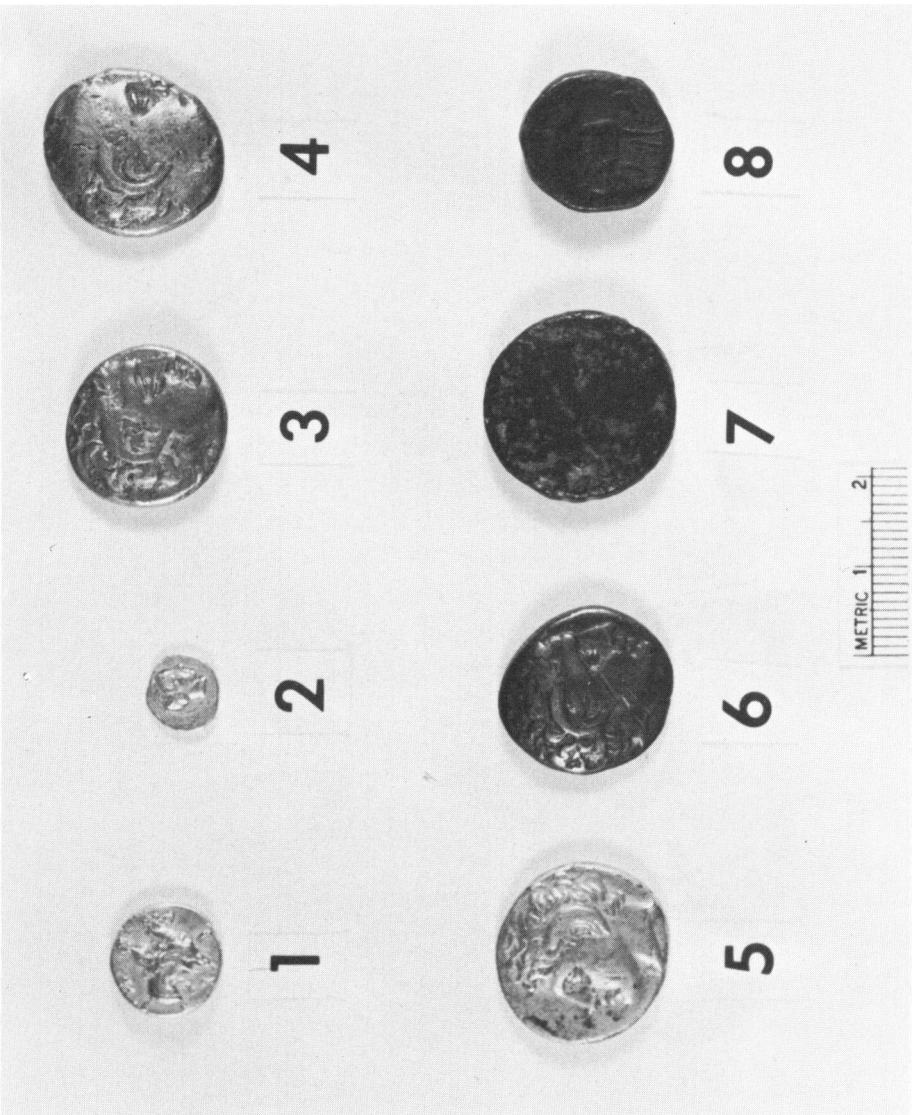


Fig. 1. Coins of Cyrene, obverse. 1) Gold coin: horseman, fourth century. 2) Gold coin; head of Carneius, 435-375. 3, 4, 5, and 6) Silver coins; youthful head of Aristaeos with ram's horn. 7) Bronze coin: head of Aristaeos. 8) Bronze coin: gazelle. A ram's horn is seen above the ear in Nos. 3-6. From the numismatic collection of the author.

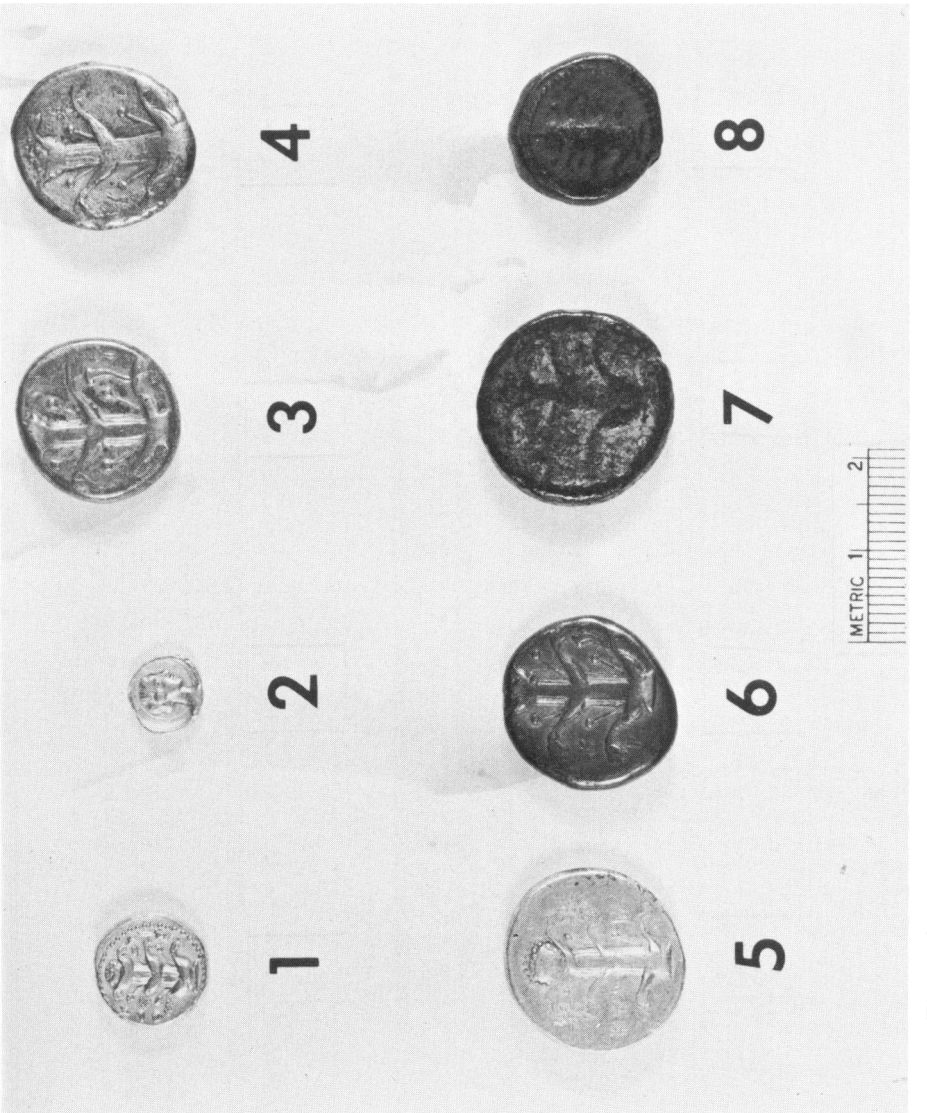


Fig. 2. Coins of Cyrene, reverse. 1) Gold coin: silphium plant. 2) Gold coin: Cyrene. 3, 4, 5, and 6) Silver coins: various representations of silphium plant, probably B.C. 323-285. 7) Bronze coin: silphium plant. 8) Bronze coin: silphium plant. From the numismatic collection of the author.

a few of the many marks used on Greek coins for identification. The first coins of Cyrene were minted in the period 570-480 B.C.[3]

The various forms of the silphium used on the coins are discussed in detail by Robinson[3] and Head.[4] A few of the types are given in Figure 2. The obverse usually depicted Zeus-Ammon, a combination of the Greek God Zeus and the Egyptian divinity Ammon, represented as a bearded head and accompanied by a ram's horn. Sometimes a more youthful figure was used, for example, Aristaeos, also with a ram's horn (Figure 1). Aristaeos was a protector of crops and livestock. It has been suggested also that the beardless type might be Carneius. Several females (Figure 1, No. 2) appear on the coins of Cyrene: Artemis, Libya, and Cyrene.

The ruins of Cyrene[5] are very extensive. There is a temple area looking down toward the sea and a business district on the hill. The agora has not been excavated. In the valley there is the seaport town of Apollonia from which the silphium was exported. The nearby towns of Barce and Euhesperides, as well as the mother-city of Cyrene, used the silphium plant as a coin-type.

Silphium is now extinct around Cyrene. The possible explanations for its disappearance have been discussed.[2] Moreover, exact botanical identification has not been made. By a process of elimination it is thought that the plant might be *Ferula tingitana*, a plant akin to asafetida, used in the treatment of many diseases and by many ancient physicians.

3. Robinson, E. S. G.: *Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Cyrenaica.* London, British Museum, 1927.

4. Head, B. V.: *Historia Nummorum. London,* Spink, 1963.

5. Goodchild, R.: *Cyrene and Apollonia.* Dept. of Antiquities, United Kingdom of Libya. London, Freebairn, 1963.