

The Three Graces

by Peter E. Lewis



Ruins of Aphrodisias (Wikimedia Commons) Overlay: a coin of Aphrodisias (Gorny & Mosch 126, 1832)

IN Greek mythology the Three Graces were goddesses concerned with beauty, charm, gracefulness and cheerfulness. They were in the retinue of Aphrodite (Venus) who made use of their services when she needed to adorn herself with all her female seductions. Their association with Aphrodite is indicated by the number of coins that featured them

minted at Aphrodisias, a city in western Anatolia, where she was the principal deity. (Figures 1 and 2) The Greeks began to worship the Three Graces in about the eighth century BC, and the earliest record of them is probably in the *Iliad*, which Homer wrote in about 700 BC. A little later the Greek poet, Hesiod, mentions them in his *Theogony*. He describes the night festival that celebrated them at Orchomenus, a city in Boeotia, where the oldest sanctuary dedicated to them was situated. (Figure 3) There they were worshiped in the form of stones, probably meteorites. Their popularity spread to other cities, and Aristotle in the 4th century BC remarked that their sanctuary in Athens was in a prominent place.

According to Hesiod the Three Graces were the offspring of Zeus, the chief of the gods, and Eurynome, the daughter of Oceanus, who was one of the elemental forces that had formed the world. The Three Graces are depicted holding a variety of objects: apples, vases, ears of corn,

poppies, wreaths and musical instruments. In the early stages (Classical Period) they were occasionally shown clothed, but later (Hellenistic and Roman Periods) they were usually shown nude or wearing transparent gowns. This was apparently to indicate that they were without pretence. According to S.W. Stevenson (*A Dictionary of Roman Coins*, page 438) they “display as if in a dancing attitude, symmetry of person, combining with elegance of movement, unadorned beauty, unconscious of offence to modesty.”

Their number and their names varied according to time and place. In Sparta they were two: Cleia and Phaenna. But according to the most widely accepted tradition there were three Graces and their names were Aglaia, Thalia and Euphrosyne. These names are simply the Greek words for brightness, flower and joy respectively. According to F. Guirand in the *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* each of the Graces had a specific function: Aglaia was ‘the brilliant’, Thalia



Figure 1 – Bronze coin of Aphrodisias, c. 250-255 AD. 20 mms diam. Bust of Hera on the obverse, and on the reverse Aphrodite stands holding an apple and a sceptre. The apple refers to the contest between Hera, Aphrodite and Athena. A golden apple was the prize ‘for the fairest’. It led to the Trojan War. (Roma Numismatics, Auction May 2013, Lot 477)



Figure 2 – Bronze coin of Aphrodisias. Crispina, the wife of Commodus (177-192 AD), is on the obverse, and the Three Graces are on the reverse. (Gorny & Mosch, Auction 126, Lot 1832)



Figure 3 – Bronze coin of Orchomenos, c. 370-364 BC. 14 mms. On the obverse there is a Boeotian shield with an ear of grain on it. On the reverse the star is probably Venus. The letters EPXO stand for Erchomenos. (Triton IX, Lot 225)

was 'she who brought flowers' and Euphrosyne was 'she who rejoices the heart'. The three together were considered the personification of grace, which is ΧΑΡΙΣ (charis) in Greek. The plural is ΧΑΡΙΤΕΣ (charites). This Greek word has the sense of 'favour' as well as the sense of 'loveliness'. But it is favour to someone that is undeserved, not out of compassion, which would be 'mercy'. The Greek word, 'charis', is the root of the English word,

'charity', and this has led to the Three Graces sometimes being called the Three Charities, but this is confusing and should be avoided.

Statues of the Three Graces were erected in various cities in Greece and the wider Greek world. Most of these no longer exist, but some still do. (Figure 4) Coins minted at Pautalia in Thrace in about 200 AD indicate that some of these statues may have been out in the open, not enclosed in temples. The centre of the city is shown on the coins, and although the statues of Asklepios and other gods are in temples, the Three Graces are not. (Figure 5) Mosaics and wall paintings of the Three Graces were also popular, and they have even been found at Pompeii. (Figure 6) It is interesting the way the ideal female figure, as represented by the Three Graces, has changed over the centuries. When the women in the painting from Pompeii are compared with those in a painting made by Rubens in



Figure 5 – Bronze coin of Commodus (198-217 AD) minted at Pautalia in Thrace. It shows the Three Graces in miniature. (Fritz Rudolf Künker, Auction 124, Lot 9282)

1635 (Figure 7) the latter could be an advertisement for *Weight Watchers*. The current ideal figure, of a very thin teenager, could be used in an advertisement for *Oxfam*.

In his excellent book, *The Three Graces and Their Numismatic Mythology*, printed in 2004, Mark A. Staal listed, many with images, all the coins with the Three Graces on them of which he was aware. They were particularly common around 200 AD, and many cities issued coins with their image on them, either in miniature or as the only type on the reverse. Where they are the only type the images are very similar. (Figures 8 and 9)

The Three Graces should not be confused with other groups such as the Three



Figure 4 – Marble statue of the Three Graces found in Rome but now in the Louvre. Made in the 2nd century AD and restored in 1609 it is a copy of a 2nd century BC Greek statue. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 6 – Fresco from Pompeii now in the Archaeological Museum in Naples. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 7 – ‘The three Graces’ by Sir Peter Paul Rubens, c. 1635. The painting is in the Prado Museum in Madrid. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

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Figure 8 – Bronze coin of Gordian III (238-244 AD) minted at Anazarbus in Cilicia. 20 mms diam. The objects on either side of the Three Graces have been described as censers or altars, but they look like the objects in the statue in the Louvre (Figure 4), which seem to be water vessels covered with towels. (CNG Electronic Auction 300, Lot 159)

Danaids or the Three Nymphs. The former are shown wearing long flowing gowns and carrying water jugs, while the latter are shown holding hands. The Three Graces are distinctive because the centre figure stands with her back to the viewer and her arms around the shoulders of the others who face the viewer. When they are in miniature it may not be possible to make a definite identification. The three tiny figures that appear on a new-style tetradrachm of Athens are probably the Three Nymphs. They are to the right of the owl. (Figure 10) The

Three Graces do appear in miniature on tetradrachms minted at Gadara in the Decapolis. (Figure 11)

The cities that issued coins featuring the Three Graces were mostly in Thrace (modern Bulgaria) and Anatolia (modern Turkey). Tarsus issued a number of them under various rulers from Maximinus I, 235 – 238 AD. (Figure 12) There were probably statues of the Three Graces in all these cities, well before the coins were issued.

What is particularly interesting in all this, is what influence, if any, the Three

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Graces had on early Christianity. Saint Paul was born in Tarsus and lived there for several years after his conversion. Subsequently he traveled extensively in Anatolia and Greece, and probably visited cities in Thrace. It is therefore likely that he saw statues of the Three Graces and knew their significance. In his first letter to the Corinthians he wrote, "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." (1 Cor. 13:13) Could this triad be related to the Three Graces? Concerning Aglaia (the brilliant) Paul would have known the verse in Isaiah (Isa. 2:5), "Let us walk in the light of the Lord", which suggests the idea of faith. Concerning Euphrosyne (she who rejoices the heart) Paul would have known the verse in the Psalms (Ps. 31:7), "I will be glad and rejoice in your love", which suggests a connection between joy and love. But what would Thalia (she who brought flowers) have to do with hope? The answer to this question is found on coins showing hope personified as a woman holding a flower. (Figures 13, 14 and 15) Hope (Spes in Latin and Elpis in Greek) holds a flower because where there is a flower there is hope of fruit to come. In his letter to the Galatians Paul wrote, "The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." (Gal. 5:22)

In the King James Version of the Bible



Figure 9 – Bronze coin of Gallienus (253-268 AD) minted at Serdica (now Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria). 28 mms diam. (CNG Electronic Auction 300, Lot 141)



Figure 10 – New-style tetradrachm of Athens (c. 113-112 BC) showing three small figures to the right of the owl. They are probably not the Three Graces. (Roma Numismatics, May 2013 Auction, Lot 287)



Figure 11 – Tetradrachm of Macrinus (217-218 AD) minted at Gadara in the Decapolis. 26 mms diam. The Three Graces are in a laurel wreath below the eagle. Caracalla and Diadumenian issued similar tetradrachms, which attests to their popularity in the area at that time. (CNG Auction 93, Lot 984)

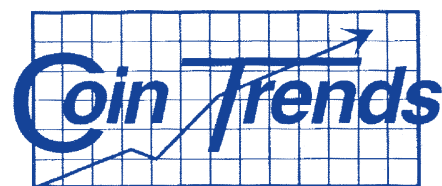
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Figure 12 – Bronze coin of Maximinus I (235-238 AD) minted at Tarsus. 37 mms diam. (Collection of St John’s Cathedral, Brisbane)



Figure 14 – Detail of Figure 13 with colour added.

written in the 17th century the Greek word, ΑΓΑΠΗ (agape), is translated wrongly as ‘charity’. Hence Paul’s triad in the KJV is “faith, hope and charity”. Modern versions translate ‘agape’ correctly as ‘love’. The word, ‘agape’, occurs frequently in the New Testament where it means a love that in essence is a self-giving concern for others.

Collectively the Three Graces were the personification of grace (Greek: charis), and the concept of grace is central in

Paul’s theology, but for him it meant God’s unmerited favour. One of Paul’s famous statements expresses this clearly: “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:8) So an argument can be made that the Three Graces did influence early Christianity. In any case, with their gentleness, cheerfulness and loveliness, they would have had a beneficial effect on those commun-



Figure 13 – Sestertius of Claudius (41-54 AD) minted at Rome in 42 AD. On the reverse Hope (Spes) holds a flower in her right hand. (Dr Busso Peus Nachfolger, Auction 409, Lot 340)

ities fortunate to have them as part of their culture. As Guirand explains, “They were smiling divinities whose presence spread joy not only throughout the external world but also in the hearts of men.”

☆☆☆



Figure 15 – Bronze coin of Gordian III (238-244 AD) minted at Tarsus showing Hope (Elpis) holding a flower on the reverse. 37 mms diam. The letters AMK to the right of Elpis stand for ‘first, greatest, most beautiful’. They refer to Tarsus and indicate the rivalry between the cities. (Collection of St John’s Cathedral, Brisbane)