

Dates On Coins

by [Michael Marotta](#)

Modern coins have dates on them. In the west, we use a Christian calendar, dated from the probable birth of Jesus. Islamic countries count years from the Heigira of Mohammed. The coinage of Israel carries three letters for the last three digits of the year, according to the oldest calendar still in use. The current year for December 7, 1997 is 5758 to the Jews and 1418 to the Moslems.

In the west we use BC for Before Christ and AD for Anno Domini (Year of the Lord). Bowing to international sensibilities, we also use BCE and CE for (Before) Common Era. In western lettering the Islamic year is noted with AH. This is typical of coins from places under colonial domination, such as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Palestine.

You can find other calendar systems on the coins of Nepal, Tibet, and Japan. Like the Islamic states and Israel, Japan also uses the western calendar, especially where international trade is involved. However, the Japanese native system is actually the one found on most ancient coins: the year of the current ruler.

The ancient Greeks counted their important events from the time of the First Olympiad in 776 BCE. Even today, we regard this date as the end of the post-Mycenaean dark age and the start of the classical world. In daily life, people might say that they were born in the 96th Olmpiad or that a king was crowned in the third year of the 104th Olmpiad and so on. As important as the Olympiad was, no city actually used this as an official calendar.

Generally, each town had its own names for months and its own New Year's Day. Understandably, there were many commonalities. After the rise of the hellenistic kingdoms in the wake of Alexander the Great, the local year was counted from the ascension of the local ruler. The year 200 BC was the 4th Year of Ptolemy V, so his coins struck in that year have a simple Delta or Lambda Delta. (L to show that the D is a numeral.) The coins of Antioch would carry BIR (beta iota rho) for 2+10+100, the 112th Seleukid Year. However, the calendar of Antioch was changed in 55 BCE to honor Julius Caesar. A bronze coin showing a Ram, Moon and Star of 55 AD is dated in the Caesarion Year 104 with ETDR: Delta Rho = 4 + 100.

However, democracies, such as Athens -- and most other cities in general - - had no official or authorized system for counting years.

In Roman times, the coinage of an emperor carried the year of his consulship or the year of his declaration of power by the Senate or both. In the early empire, these were renewed annually. So, a coin of Trajan that says COS VI was struck between 112 and 114 CE. A coin of Antonius Pius that says TR P XVI was struck in 151 or 152 AD. Later emperors were happy to live a full year in office and sought no mandate from the Senate, so dating wasn't needed.

In the 500s CE, a monk named Dionysius Exiguus calculated the year of the birth of Jesus and this date was taken as 1 AD. However, it wasn't until the 1400s that Christian Era dating was accepted throughout the Christian world. By the late 1400s, some coins carried full four-digit dates. However, as late as the 1600s, some coins showed only the last two digits, omitting the century, just as modern Israeli coins omit the millennium digit. You would be challenged to find a western coin after 1750 from a ruling government that does not have a full four-digit date.

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