

UNDER THE SIGN OF THE DOLLAR

The Great Seal

Current archeological record shows coined currencies first appearing in the Western Anatolian kingdom of Lydia around 600BC.

Initially privately pressed by tradespeople to settle debts between them, privately minted money soon fell out of circulation. (Graeber pg.225)

The first known publicly circulated coins were impressed with the symbols of regal power (the lion) and of material wealth (the bull). While this symbolic display of authority (the king as lion) over commerce (the bull) was coded into coinage the mark of coinage was meant also to establish authenticity of the coin as a consistent measure of precious metal.

In places with a significant amount of trade the practice of using precious metals while unwieldy were used to “settle” debts. To deal with concerns of measures and worth the State was glad to provide its indelible impression on coinage to convey that the money was “backed” by the State.

Soon sovereigns were having their faces stamped on coins to signify who you could “settle” your debts with. These coins were put into circulation as a method of payment to soldiers who could use the coins to purchase the fruits of their campaigns.

To manage storing and exchanging large amounts of currency the concept of bank notes came into existence in China around 700 AD (Pater). These notes could be easily stored and exchanged. To prevent counterfeiting special papers, inks, and seals were used to establish the authenticity of a banknote. This concept spread slowly in Europe at first but with the rise of colonialism with its enormous spoils and the devaluation of metals used for exchange the practice soon picked up.

Banknotes were initially used mostly by the wealthy, and were signed by all parties - almost as if by contract. Pater makes an interesting claim that by virtue of having one's name on a banknote it was akin to being in an exclusive club.

One can make a comparison here to the concept of the blockchain, and the exclusivity intrinsic to the NFT market. Each transaction is recorded on the blockchain which while ostensibly anonymized—the NFT space often de-centers the anonymous nature of the blockchain through displays of exclusivity—be it in sharing one's portfolio, or literal “exclusive clubs” such as the Bored Ape Yacht Club. The valuation of currency is tied to its scarcity and its “authenticity” as much as its intrinsic value.



Don't Have A Sacred Cow, Man



Roland Barthes Simpson

In God We Trust

In the beginning was the word.
But what words were there in the beginning?

While many early texts of the world are lost to us as moth and rust destroy there is a use in looking at our oldest known written records.

Interestingly the first records of written language contend not with creation from on high, but of commerce. In Mesopotamia we find cuneiform accounts of transactions, sales, balances much earlier than epics such as that of Gilgamesh, and importantly we see trade in terms of exchange of and settling of debts before we see coined currency in circulation. (Pater)

Anthropologist David Graeber in his book Debt challenges the accepted economic notion that governments arise to regulate markets that exist. Graeber culls from: economic history, philosophy, and anthropology to show that the State doesn't come into existence to regulate money, but to impose currency on the people. The evolution from barter, to money, to credit is turned on its head as historical evidence shows debt and credit, not currency were primary even in developing civilizations.

Adam Smith's “Invisible Hand” of the market was later elaborated on by Smith as “Divine Providence”. The Eye in The Pyramid is commonly referred to as “the eye of providence”, or the eye of God.

Currency is what not only the State accepts in taxes, but what authority dictates is an acceptable token of exchange.

Graeber points to Geoffrey Ingham's assertion that all Indo-European languages etymologically tie “debt” and sin and guilt together. The German “geld” for money, the Gothic “Gild” for taxes, and the English “guilt” all share common roots.

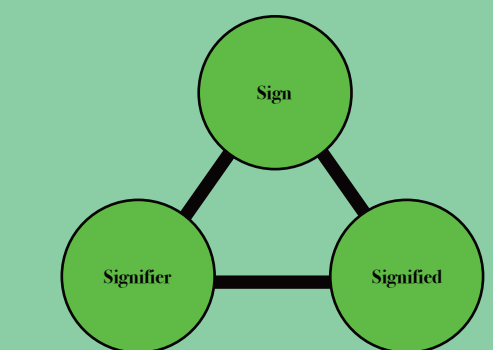
While many monetary theorists place a prime value on gold as the terminal store of value and have little respect for fiat currency, if we interrogate the claims of gold's intrinsic value we come up lacking. Any currency is only as good as the “faith” people using it have in it. With fractional reserve banking for instance, the entire system would collapse should all account holders try to withdraw all of their money.

Money is a traded token on debt, not an intrinsically valuable commodity.



Philosopher and literary critic Roland Barthes proposed a semiotic definition of myth as a sign that has connotative meaning that is not commonly questioned.

A “sign” is any representation that “stands-in” for an object, concept, or action. All are comprised of the signifier: which is the word, image, or sound that relates to the signified: the content, or thing referred to.



His work postulated that signs that are not commonly subject to scrutiny may not be the “natural order” of things, but instead are indicative of an intentional dehistoricization (mythologizing) of stories and social practices.

Myths generally require a set of signs working of multiple levels, unfolding into other signs and signification.

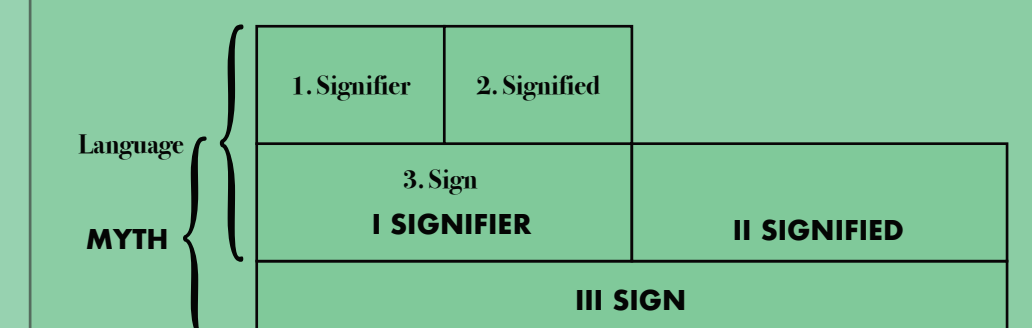
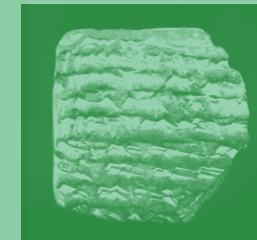


Diagram based on Barthes' Second Order Semiological System from Mythologies

The mythologizing of Capitalism and the common understanding of currency as a convenient and equitable form of exchange ignores anthropological and historical evidence to the contrary, and substitutes reflections from early economic thinkers as accepted history.



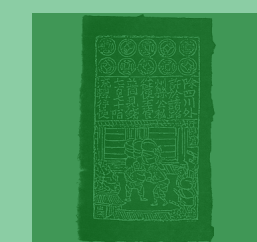
Gold was used for a store of value from around 3500BC



Babylonian cuneiform tablet promissory note for barley 555–539 B.C.



Lydian “starter” 564–539 B.C.
One of the first minted coins known on record



Chinese Jiaozhi (交子) note 1023 A.D.
Notably the first widely circulated paper currency



United States Federal Reserve Note 1914

Citations and References:

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Texts:

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CAPS LOCK: How Capitalism Took Hold of Graphic Design, and How to Escape It. Ruben Pater Valtz, 2021

Debt: The First 5,000 Years. David Graeber. Melville House, 2014