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The Skylla of Corinth

A monstrous Skylla haunts the reverses of five generations of Corinthian bronze coin issues of the second and early third centuries AC (Antoninus Pius-Caracalla). Although the die-cutters who rendered Corinth's Skylla reduced and simplified their subject in order to make it legible at a small scale, they captured enough detail to reward a re-examination of the evidence. From the waist up, the figure might be a beautiful young woman with a frontal, nude body, averted head, one arm raised, the other thrust out horizontally. It is in her lower half, however, that Skylla's monstrous qualities stand out. Dog protomes protrude from her hip, and below, a seaweed skirt gives way to a rocky base; one coin-type shows a long tail. A basin to one side indicates that the figure functioned as, or as part of, a fountain. On coins minted under Lucius Verus and Septimius Severus, Skylla is centered within a square space backed by a scenic façade; another Severan issue shows her as a pendant to the nymph Peirene. Such details have led some scholars to hypothesize that the Skylla fountain adorned the courtyard of the Peirene Spring, a possibility first suggested by A.R. Bellinger (*Catalogue of the Coins Found at Corinth, 1925* [1930]) and embraced by M.J. Price and B.L. Trell (*Coins and their Cities* [1977]). Insufficient archaeological evidence has prevented the full acceptance of this hypothesis.

This paper draws on architectural and artistic comparanda, as well as recent archaeological observations, to reconstruct the form, original context, and possible meanings of the Skylla of Corinth. The fountain-figure emerges as a work of considerable complexity and importance. Representations of Skylla in varied poses and media were not uncommon as decorations of fountains and baths in the Roman world; however, the form of Corinth's Skylla qualifies her for membership in an elite subset of the corpus. This public-sphere sculpture belonged to a relatively rare type, of which the closest known large-scale examples inhabited water-pavilions in the imperial villas at Sperlonga and Tivoli.

Roman Peirene would have been perfectly suited to house a monumental Skylla group, offering an impressive architectural backdrop, suggestive water-caves, and a court with ample running water. Formal and situational parallels strengthen the assignment of Corinth's Skylla to the court of Peirene, and specific details may suggest that her donor was personally familiar with the emperors' private *antra*.