



Lots of people have been on money through the years. Usually it's whoever ruled the kingdom or won a war for them or something like that. Boring! That's been done, get out of here, nerds! Do something original! So instead, I'm going to tell you about a plant, who was way more popular than any of those people.

Silphium is its name, a massive fennel plant that decided it only wanted to grow in North Africa and nowhere else. The ancient Greeks, as they did, were bumping around the Mediterranean looking for someplace to colonize and stumbled across the Cyrene valley with all these silly giant fennels growing everywhere. It was pretty good as a spice and made a decent additive to wine, it could cure stomach problems and warts, and that was good enough for the Greeks. Useful plants! Time to colonize!

Then they realized what else it was good for, and went, "Wait, this plant does *what?*"

It was an amazingly effective contraceptive, the birth-control pill and the plan-b pill rolled into one. In 400 B.C.! The Greeks forgot all about planting whatever crops they brought along with them, and switched to farming silphium full-time. They tried bringing it back to Greece, but it proved impossible to plant and grow anywhere outside of the valley they originally found it in, so they had to guard their stash aggressively and set very strict harvesting controls. And also, sell it on the open markets and get ludicrously rich in the process. This was a time when the best other effective birth control was wearing sheep intestines on your fun parts. A little pea-sized dose of ground-up seeds once a month and no risk of pregnancy? It was basically a miracle drug at the time. So the Greeks started putting it on their coins, which they were suddenly rolling in piles of. At first it was Zeus on one side and silphium on the other, and if you know your Greek mythology, that's a pretty fitting pair. Then they took Zeus off and added the seed pod to the other side instead. Out of the way, Zeus! Lightning is old news!

In retrospect, putting it on the coins was probably a bad move, when you're making bank and the Romans are right there looking for more stuff to add to the empire. Like pretty much every story about non-Romans in this time period, it ends the same way. They were conquered by the Romans. Rome took over the market, and then *they* got even richer, and then started putting silphium on *their* coins. But the Roman Empire had a lot more people

with a lot more demand, which this crazy unplantable plant couldn't handle, so eventually the supplies started to dwindle and the plant eventually went extinct. Was it a hybrid or something, and that's why farming it elsewhere didn't work? Was it magic? Nobody really knows. There's other plants in the genus that sort of have similar properties, but none of them came even close to being as good as the real deal. Rome got bored and conquered something else, and everyone else was sad.

It's like the saying goes: "Sex sells". And gets put on the coins.