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HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

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MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS - COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES



THE COINAGE OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Alexander III (Alexander the Great) is an eternal ideal for conquering generals. During his reign of circa a decade (336–323) he brought a whole continent, as well as numerous peoples and cultures, under Macedonian rule. Even though the empire did not survive its founder, Alexander's campaigns broadened the horizon of the Hellenic world as far as the Himalayas. An essential point in his state-building activity was the organization of an empire-wide system of coinage which survived in the successor states. His coin types were adopted by his immediate heirs, and the coins of the legendary king were minted in unchanged types centuries later in many Greek cities. Outside the borders of the Greek world, a number of "Barbarian" peoples – the Celts (46–47), the Thracians (44–45) the Dacians and the Getae (49–51) – used Alexander's coins as prototypes. Macedonian kings had started minting money at the beginning of the 5th century BC, during the reign of Alexander I, relying on the rich mines of precious metal in the region (1). Money was minted from silver, as in most contemporary Greek states. (At this time,

gold coins were only issued regularly in the Persian empire, the daric of the Great Kings being the gold currency in the period. Alexander I issued silver coins of a high value; his successors only lower-value ones (2–3). The reason for this may have been the exhaustion of the silver mines and the universal spread of Athenian coins. By the mid-5th century BC, Athens, which had led the Greeks to victory over Persia, had become the dominant power in the Aegean. Athenian silver "owls" and the Attic monetary and weight system became widespread everywhere in Hellas. And even though Athens lost her political leadership by the end of the 5th century BC after the Peloponnesian war, its economic importance remained unchanged.

In 359 BC, a great ruler ascended the Macedonian throne: Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great. Philip brought one Greek city-state after the other under Macedonian hegemony, and transformed Hellas into a unified empire. He then set out against the Persians, planning a revenge-campaign for the devastation caused by the Greco-Persian wars fought one and a half centuries earlier, but his assassination left the task to be finished by his son. It was Philip II who made the first steps towards the establishment of an empire-wide monetary system. He was the first in the Greek world to introduce simultaneous gold and silver minting on a regular basis. This was primarily made possible by his



12/a



12/b



21/a



21/b

seizure and exploitation of the gold mines around the Mount Pangaion. His gold coins (7–9) issued on the Attic weight standard were intended to displace Persian gold darics. His silver coin issues (4–6), however, were still produced on the local Macedonian weight system.

Alexander III continued the work of his father. He began to mint silver, too, on the Attic standard (21), thus establishing the basis for the dominant monetary system in the Hellenistic world for almost three centuries to come. The raw material for his extensive coinage derived from the huge reserves of precious metal looted from the Persian treasuries (ancient sources mention more than 220 thousand talents, about 6000 tons, of silver). His coins were issued in a number of mints, outside Macedonia in Asia Minor (22), the Near East (23), and Egyptian Memphis (where regular minting began with Alexander's own coins, 24). The style of the coins and the symbols and monograms incised on them (perhaps marks by officials responsible for the minting) may all indicate where the coin was issued.

Just like today, the design of the coins proclaimed a clear and easy to understand political message: Alexander had set out against the Persians at the head of the entire Greek world. This is why the image of the goddess Athena, who represents the city of Athens that had been the leader of the former anti-Persian coalition, and the image of Nike, the goddess of victory holding a mast in her hand and symbolising victorious sea battles, appeared on his gold staters (10–15). Heracles with a lion-skin headdress, represented on the obverse of Alexander's silver tetradrachms and drachmas, and continuing an old tradition (3), referred to the mythical origins of the Macedonian royal

family (21–24). Zeus seated on his throne on the reverse, appeared, however, as a universal god in a manner similar to the representation of supreme deities in the Near East (21–29).

The coins of Alexander III – like those of his predecessors – always included the name of the ruler in the genitive: ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ. The royal title, also in the genitive, ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ, appeared on his coins only towards the end of his reign (14), first perhaps in Babylon. His subjects in the Near East considered him the successor to the Persian Great Kings and worshipped him as a god, which was expressed by the word *basileus* on his coins. The Greeks, however, had traditionally condemned the marking of rank, just like the representation of the facial features of the living: the royal title never appeared on the coins issued in Macedonia in his lifetime. The portrait of Alexander the Great was first represented on the coins of one of his successors, Lysimachus, the king of Thracia: the face adorned with ram's horns is a clear reference to Alexander's putative role as the son of the god Zeus-Ammon (40). The Heracles-head shown on the silver coins of Alexander was regarded as the portrait of the king even in antiquity: on the obverse of the bronze coins issued in the province of Macedonia in the 3rd century AD for example, the inscription ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ is to be read alongside the hero's head (57).



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The coinage of Alexander the Great did not cease after the ruler's death. Philip III Arrhidaeus, half-brother to Alexander, who was at first considered the legitimate ruler, continued to mint Alexander's coin types, albeit in his own name (32–34). For a while the diadochi, the generals who had divided up Alexander's collapsing empire, continued to issue his coin types in unchanged form. Ptolemy I, who had established an independent dynasty in Egypt, was the first to introduce a new design on the coins (around 315 BC), although at the beginning he also preserved the inscription 'belonging to king Alexander' (42–43). Another general, Seleucus, following his triumphant entry into Babylon (312 BC) started to issue coins in the name of Alexander. After assuming the royal title in 306 BC, however, he had his own name inscribed on the coin types taken over from Alexander the Great (41). Demetrius Poliorcetes, the ruler of Macedonia, issued tetradrachms not only in his own name, but also with his own portraits (35–36). His successors also introduced their own coin designs, sometimes even including their portraits (37–39).

The monetary system of Alexander the Great, which was based on the Attic standard, remained in long use in Macedonia and most of the Hellenistic states. His coin types did not vanish entirely either, since a number of cities with their own independent coinage continued to issue coins with unchanged design and inscriptions – albeit in a completely different style – even in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC (28–29); some, for example Odessus, even in the 1st century BC (30–31). Tetradrachms on the Attic standard were issued in Roman Macedonia mainly during wars to cover military expenses (52–54). At the beginning of the 1st century BC the design and inscription on some of the coins issued by Roman legates in Macedonia still recalled the former ruler (55–56). The representation of Alexander the Great remained popular on Roman commemorative coins of the 4th century AD (58–59), symbolising the greatness of the pagan past in the Eternal City, which was becoming Christian.



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6



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MELINDA TORBÁGYI



46



47



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