

Zeitschrift: Schweizerische numismatische Rundschau = Revue suisse de numismatique = Rivista svizzera di numismatica
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Numismatische Gesellschaft
Band: 61 (1982)

Artikel: Alexander the Great, the Emperor Severus Alexander and the Aboukir medallions
Autor: Vermeule, Cornelius
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-174697>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 09.12.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

ALEXANDER THE GREAT, THE EMPEROR SEVERUS ALEXANDER
AND THE ABOUKIR MEDALLIONS

Prologue: Sources

«And he had himself depicted on many of his coins in the costume of Alexander the Great, some of these coins being made of electrum but most of them of gold.» *Historia Augusta*, Severus Alexander, XXV.9.¹

«And he used to preside at contests, particularly at the Hercules contest which was held in honour of Alexander the Great.» *Historia Augusta*, Severus Alexander, XXXV.4.²

«The following charges were brought against Alexander: ... that he wished to seem a second Alexander the Great...». *Historia Augusta*, Severus Alexander, LXIV.3.³

«Alexianus changed his name from that inherited from his grandfather to Alexander, the name of the Macedonian so admired and honoured by the alleged father of the two cousins (Elagabalus and Severus Alexander). Both the daughters of (Julia) Maesa (Julia Soemias and Julia Mamaea), and the old lady herself, used to boast of the adultery of Antoninus (Caracalla, Severus' son), to make the troops think the boys were his sons and so favour them.» Herodian, V.7.3.⁴

The Medallions from Tarsus and Aboukir

Discovery of the Macedonian royal tomb at Vergina (seemingly ancient Aigai) in 1977 and subsequent exhibitions with their publications have brought the great Roman gold medallions from Tarsus in Cilicia and Aboukir in Mediterranean Egypt back into prominence.⁵ The Tarsus medallions give the most precisely-defined portrait of Philip II and the most forcefully romantic portraits of Alexander the Great surviving from ancient times, specifically the second quarter of the third century of the Christian era.⁶ The medallions from Aboukir add many more, varied and remarkable portraits of Alexander to the repertory and include at least three ideal likenesses of a queen who can only be Olympias, mother of Alexander the Great. Finally, they present two versions on three obverses of a half-figure bust of the Emperor Caracalla as he appeared near the

¹ Ed. Loeb, II, trans. D. Magie (1924–1967), pp. 226–227.

² Ed. Loeb, II, pp. 244–245.

³ Ed. Loeb, II, pp. 306–307.

⁴ Ed. Loeb, II, trans. C.R. Whittaker (1970), pp. 58–59.

⁵ e.g. *The Search for Alexander, An Exhibition*, Boston, 1980, colorplate 5; pp. 103–104, nos. 10, 11 (Olympias and the *triumphator* medallion of Alexander the Great, with a notation that in 231 Severus Alexander reconfirmed Macedonia, and particularly Thessalonike, in ancient privileges, and that this occasion may have called for striking of these medallions); pp. 114–115, no. 33 (Caracalla).

⁶ G.M.A. Richter, *The Portraits of the Greeks*, III (1965), p. 253, fig. 1706 (Philip II); p. 255, no. 4, figs. 1716, 1717 (Alexander the Great). R. Mowat, *RN* 1903, pp. 1–30. J.N. Svoronos, *JIAN* 10, 1907, pl. 8, nos. 1–3.

last years of his life (reigned 198 to 217), when he campaigned or at least progressed from Thrace to Egypt to Mesopotamia and Syria⁷ (pl. 5, 1).

The three medallions from Tarsus were discovered in 1863 (some say 1867) with a large gold medallion of Severus Alexander issued for his Decennalia of 230, twenty-three contemporary gold Aurei, and sundry ornaments.⁸ The context of the Aboukir medallions is less certain. The twenty were found in 1902, together with six hundred Aurei ranging in date as late as the Tetrarchy, and eighteen gold bars. The biggest of all these is the Tarsus medallion with Alexander's filleted head gazing slightly upwards to the right, seventy millimeters in diameter. The majority of the rest are between fifty and sixty millimeters at their maximum dimensions. Such heroic works of Roman imperial numismatic art are thought to have been created as *Niketeria* or prizes awarded at games and contests of the type held in many cities of the Greek imperial world.

To my knowledge, the authenticity of the Tarsus medallions has never been seriously questioned. They were purchased by agents of Napoleon III for many thousands of golden francs, together with the medallion of Severus Alexander, and placed in the Cabinet des Médailles of the Bibliothèque Impériale (now Nationale) where they remain. Blessed by the reigning numismatists of Europe, they were published shortly after discovery and, then again, the year after the appearance of the Aboukir medallions. The latter were not treated so royally.

Falling into the hands of several shadowy personages in cosmopolitan Alexandria following discovery, the Aboukir medallions came to Europe only to be rejected by the sages in Paris and London. Finding a champion in Heinrich Dressel of the Berlin Cabinet, where five were purchased, the majority passed to those American barons of finance who were collecting almost everything that glittered in the Edwardian era. J. Pierpont Morgan of Lambousa Treasure fame bought eight; H.B. Walters of Baltimore acquired four; and Jacob Schiff collected the remaining three.⁹ Since one of the Henry Walters Olympias pieces was a near duplicate of the other, it did not pass to the Walters Art Gallery but to Mrs. Walters and, eventually, at auction in Basel in 1962, to the Greek government for exhibition in the Thessalonike Archaeological Museum.¹⁰

Questions of authenticity were dissipated with recognition of the gold medallion having a helmeted bust of Athena on the obverse and Alexander on Bucephalus, hunting a lion, as subject of the reverse. Identical in technique of striking, this small *Nikete-*

⁷ J.N. Svoronos, *op. cit.*, pp. 369–371, pls. 9–14 (the best full set of photographs). S.P. Noe, *NNM* 78, 1937, p. 14, no. 6, and bibliography. H. Dressel, *Fünf Goldmedaillons aus dem Funde von Abukir* (*Abhandl. d. Königl. Preuss. Akademie der Wissenschaften* 1906). J.M.C. Toynbee, «Greek Imperial Medallions», *JRS* 34, 1944, pp. 69–73.

⁸ The gold medallion of Severus Alexander has an impressive half-figure bust in full armor, aegis, and Victoriola with trophy on the extended right hand as the obverse design. See *BMC* VI, R.A.G. Carson, *Severus Alexander to Balbinus and Pupienus* (1962), 180, no. 669. Fr. Gnechi, *I Medaglioni Romani* I, (1912), pl. 1, no. 9.

⁹ S.P. Noe, *loc. cit.* (note 7). S.P. Noe, W. Raymond, *The J. Pierpont Morgan Collection*, New York, 1953, pp. 29–31. E.T. Newell, «The Gold Medallions of Abukir», *AJN* 44, 1910, pp. 128–130, pls. 14, 15. Dr. Mário de Castro Hipólito of the Museu, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisboa (Lisbon), kindly tells me (by letter, 11 March 1982) that the former J.P. Morgan collection Aboukir medallions were bought by Mr. Calouste Gulbenkian in 1949 and are part of the collection exhibited in the museum.

¹⁰ *Monnaies et Médailles S.A.*, Basel, Vente Publique XXV, 17. November 1962, p. 40, no. 732 (the Olympias medallion now in Thessalonike).

tion was bought by Colonel Leake in the bazar at Serres in northern Macedonia, on the border of Thrace, during the Napoleonic wars and has long been in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.¹¹ Other small gold *Niketeria* have appeared in recent decades, confirming the notion that such pieces were prizes of various classes for games big and small, or perhaps the giant examples were bestowed by the emperor the way United States presidents give out «Medals of Freedom» or the British Queen bestows birthday and New Year's honours.¹² Provenance of the Leake medallion adds evidence to the supposition that such pieces were connected with celebrations of Alexander the Great by emperors from Caracalla to Gordian III (reigned 238 to 244) in Macedonia or along the Thracian pathways to the Eastern campaigns.

The Medallion of Alexander the Great as a Roman Triumphator

Connections with Macedonia provided by the medallion in Cambridge leave unanswered how three pieces reached Tarsus and twenty turned up near Alexandria. Tarsus had its own games, Alexandria its many festivals, and both cities were visited by all the warrior Severans on their Eastern adventures. The provenance of Tarsus suggests imperial travelling awards, but the Aboukir group must have been collected at a later date by a lover of numismatic gold. It is to one of the Aboukir medallions, now in the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, that I turn now for four reasons.¹³ Its stylistic details confirm what J.M.C. Toynbee and H.A. Cahn, most recently, have said about the authenticity of the Aboukir medallions as documents of Roman and Greek imperial courtly numismatic art. There are iconographic details which have not been noticed or emphasized in the many earlier publications. Obverse and reverse seem to confirm the thesis stressed here that the Aboukir and Tarsus medallions were first struck under Severus Alexander (reigned 222 to 235), as instruments of the late Severan dynastic notions mentioned in the sources cited here. Finally, regardless of where the dies were prepared, there is one

¹¹ F. Heichelheim, et al., *SNG IV, Fitzwilliam Museum: Leake and General Collections*. Part III, *Macedonia-Acarnania* (1951), pl. XLIII, no. 2351. J.M.C. Toynbee, *JRS* 34, 1944, pp. 70–71, pl. III, no. 5. Despite the provenance, the obverse of this medallion is disturbingly like the Hellenistic coins of Pergamum: compare *SNG v. Aulock, Mysien* (1957), pl. 42, nos. 1374–1379.

¹² Jeffrey Spier kindly called my attention to the small «Aboukir» medallion which was auctioned in the Hess-Leu Sale, Lucerne and Zurich, 16. April, 1957, lot 163, and also in *Ars Classica Sale* 17, Lucerne 1934, p. 22, lot 413, pl. 13. «It is gold weighing 2.36 grams, and bears the head of Alexander with horn of Ammon on the obverse and cista mystica with serpent and the legend ΟΛΥΜΠΙΑΔΟΣ on the reverse.» It is hardly much bigger than a dime and must have been a relatively small prize or present. Alexander's head is in the style of coins of Lysimachos. The word on the reverse is divided ΟΛΥΜ/ΠΙΑΔΟΣ either side of the cista mystica, which hardly suggests «OLYMPIA» and the Actian era 274: A.D. 242, as many have supposed. See below, note 20. This little medallion is said (in the Hess-Leu catalogue only) to have come from the Aboukir find, no doubt counted among the many Aurei. It is now Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, E.S.G. Robinson Collection: *SNG Part III* (1976), pl. 68, no. 3311. The choice of obverse portrait and the badge on the reverse suggests Pergamum. Could the Athena Parthenos ΟΛΥΜΠΙΑΔΟΣ medallion from the J.P. Morgan group also refer to Pergamum, and the Tarsus-Aboukir medallions have been issued or bestowed there? Is Macedonia a «red herring»? Pergamum certainly had the facilities to strike big medallions and had Olympic games. See below, note 15; also note 22.

¹³ See above, note 5. It is *The Search for Alexander, An Exhibition*, color plate 5, and pp. 103–104, no. 11.

and only one mint in the northern Aegean world which was producing huge coins and therefore had the capabilities to strike these issues, Perinthus in Thrace. Furthermore, a famous series of large bronze medallions of Perinthus with complex busts of Severus Alexander on the obverse and Zeus enthroned frontally, surrounded by the Sun, Moon, Earth and Sea, all encircled by the band of the Zodiac, in the reverse suggests the Aboukir medallions, especially the *triumphator* example in Baltimore, could have been created by the most masterful die-designers of this southern Thracian mint on the Propontis.

The obverse of the *triumphator* medallion also occurs with a Writing Victoria, bound eastern barbarians, and trophy reverse (Berlin) and a Nereid (Thetis) on Triton reverse (J. Pierpont Morgan Collection). The obverse of the Morgan specimen was described by E.T. Newell as follows:

Bust of Alexander the Great, facing, in armor, with shield and spear. The king is bareheaded, with flowing locks and slight sidewhiskers. His head is energetically thrown back and eyes turned towards heaven. The shield, of which only the upper part is seen, is covered with reliefs; in its centre is a female bust, facing – perhaps Gaea – with mantle flying above in semi-circle. Above, between six stars, busts of Helios and Selene *vis-a-vis*, and over these, and forming the outer circle of the shield, five of the signs of the Zodiac: Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, and Leo.

In addition, Alexander's (own, visible) right shoulder-strap features a high-relief figure of the Macedonian Athena Promachos or Alkidemos of Pella, and the part of the breastplate between strap and shield shows a Pergamene-type, shaky-legged giant defending himself with his raised left arm and hurling a rock at unseen Zeus or Athena with his right hand. (Athena was a goddess who followed the Macedonians from their homeland throughout Asia Minor. She had a special position in her own temple on the hilltop at Pergamum. The excerpt from the Gigantomachy can only suggest the outer frieze of the altar-complex of Zeus Soter at Pergamum.) Finally, on the medallion, there are the ends of fillets either side of Alexander's neck.

The reverse is summarized by J.M.C. Toynbee: Alexander, wearing military dress, holding helmet and spear and crowned by Nike, driving a frontal quadriga, flanked by two helmeted and armed warriors (*pl. 5, 2*).

In addition, the crested Macedonian (?) helmet held in Alexander's extended right hand has more than an anthropomorphic face-mask. The entire object appears to be a bust of Philip II. The two «warriors» who also carry palms in their hands closest to the quadriga with its pairs of horses turned left and right, are (on the viewer's left) the Amazonian Virtus and (on the right) bearded Mars in a crested Greek helmet and a field cuirass with a cloak. Alexander also has a shield between his spear and the left side of his field cuirass. There are figures in relief (Achilles and Patroclus?) between the garlands on the front of the chariot.

The Medallion Bronzes of Perinthus

These pieces are in excess of forty millimeters in diameter, larger than the smallest or Pythian Apollo medallion from Aboukir. Some of the half-figure busts of Alexander (Severus) on the obverse show him with the aegis and Gorgoneion covering his cuirass-

ed chest, while others present the young emperor with the Gorgoneion on the armor and the snaky aegis on the left shoulder. He is laureate and has his head in full profile to the right¹⁴ (*pl. 5, 3*).

The reverse inscription commemorates the second time that Perinthus achieved the title of Neokoros or Temple-Warden. The coins suggest dedication of a temple to the ruling Severan house (or to Caracalla as «Pater») in the reign of Severus Alexander's ill-fated cousin Elagabalus (reigned 218 to 222). (A similar, big bronze of Caracalla late in his career shows the Tyche of Perinthus holding *two* temples, and a companion piece with two temples alone and two agonistic urns celebrates Aktian-Pythian games.)¹⁵

The complex figures of the reverse are best described from the British Museum Catalogue of 1877:

Within a dotted circle, Zeus, seated, facing, holding patera and sceptre; at his feet, eagle; in field above are Helios and Selene; Helios right, in a quadriga, Selene left, in a biga drawn by bulls, each group surmounted by the symbol of the other (i.e., crescent over the horses of Helios and star over the bulls of Selene); beneath the figure of Zeus are Gaia and Thalassa recumbent; Gaia right, holding cornucopiae, Thalassa left, with head-dress of crab's claws, and holding rudder, at her feet, a prow; between the inner circle and the outer border are the signs of the Zodiac (*pl. 5, 1*).

Bearing in mind that these are medallic bronze coins rather than special medallions in gold, the die-cutting of the pieces from Perinthus rises to a level approaching that of the comparable Aboukir medallion. From the geographical personages to the Sun, Moon, and stars to the compartments or symbols of the Zodiac, the two works of numismatic art have much in common. Other large medallic bronzes of Severus Alexander from Perinthus, notably the pieces with draped bust on the obverse and the emperor standing on a ship being crowned or greeted by Sarapis while Isis Pharia holds her windblown veil in the bow, are even finer in detail than the examples with the cosmic or Zodiacal reverses¹⁶ (*pl. 6, 4*). And it is more than just imagination to say that the series of Aboukir medallions with helmeted, draped, cuirassed busts of Alexander the

¹⁴ *BMC, Thrace*, (1877), p. 157, no. 58 (line cut, aegis on left shoulder, and the description of the reverse quoted here). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, no. 62.629: Diam.: 40.5 mm. (full aegis): M.B. Comstock, *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* 61, 1963, pp. 110–111, 2 figs. C. Vermeule, *Roman Imperial Art in Greece and Asia Minor* (1968), pp. 146–147, fig. 74, S. Morgan, et al., *Romans and Barbarians*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, (1976), p. 89, no. C60, 2 figs.

¹⁵ *BMC, Thrace*, p. 153, nos. 41 and 42, the first with the Tyche-holding temples reverse being illustrated by line cuts. Perinthus had up to four or five different sets of games, more than most cities: see Barclay V. Head, *HN* (1911), p. 271. Pergamum, discussed above in note 12, had ΠΙΠΩ-ΤΑ ΟΛΥΜΠΙΑ games, according to coins of Gallienus: B.V. Head, *op. cit.*, p. 537. Jeffrey Spier points to the two *Niketeria* with reverse showing a horse feeding to the right, a type identified with Alexandria Troas. The British Museum specimen came in 1880 with twenty-seven other coins, mostly from the Troad. A small gold medallion so specific in nature may expand the list of cities in Asia Minor where the big medallions could have been issued, if not struck. See *BMC, Troas*, no. 37. A head of Herakles appears on the obverse, but the reverse is labelled ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ. Alexandria Troas was a Roman way-station to the East which combined traditions of Troy with those of Alexander the Great.

¹⁶ Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, no. 63.1240: Diam. 41.5 mm. Compare T.E. Mionnet, *Description de médailles antiques grecques et romaines I* (1807), p. 412, no. 321 (var.). For what it is worth, Ephesus, a possible place for striking and distribution of *Niketeria*, had World (Oikoumenikos), Olympian, Hadrianic and Pythian games, as a bronze of Elagabalus tells us: *SNG v. Aulock, Ionien* (1960), no. 1905, pl. 59.

Great, head in profile to the left, are as much ideal portraits of Severus Alexander as the profiles on some of the big, medallic *aes* of Perinthus. We may cite the obverse with *aegis*-bearing cuirassed bust to right, which is combined with a reverse showing the emperor hunting on horseback in the manner of the Thracian marble rider-reliefs, notably the big examples in the Archaeological Museum, Istanbul¹⁷ (pl. 6, 2).

To be sure, the design of the frontal quadriga of imperial triumph, led by Virtus and Mars, becomes popular on Roman medallions of Gordian III and Philip the Arab (244 to 249), but this composition begins under Severus Alexander as a special feature of the medallions struck for the Consulship of 229¹⁸. The fashion of the first fifty years of Aboukir medallion scholarship has been to state they were struck in 242, for Gordian III's visit to the Olympic games at Beroea in Macedonia and possibly also for a similar ceremony at the Pythian games in Thessalonike. In late Autumn 242 Gordian passed through Moesia and Thrace on his way to the Syrian war, but there is no positive evidence he detoured south to the Thermaic gulf. He did cross into Asia Minor at the Hel-

¹⁷ Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, no. 1974.143: Diam. 42.5 mm., Compare *BMC*, p. 157, no. 59.

¹⁸ *BMC* VI, pp. 171–172, pl. 20, no. 590. Fr. Gnechi, *I Medaglioni Romani* II, p. 81, nos. 14, 15, pl. 99, nos. 3, 4. A rare bimetallic medallion, golden copper in the center and yellow brass on the rim, has an obverse comparable to the gold medallion from the Tarsus find (above, note 8): see S. Morgan, et al., *Romans and Barbarians*, p. 85, no. C40, 2 figs (pl. 5, 3). Jeffrey Spier reminds me that Tarsus, also a possible candidate for the city where big *Niketeria* were struck and distributed, had *triumphator* medallions or big bronzes under Caracalla and Severus Alexander, with elaborate busts on the obverses: see *BMC Cilicia*, nos. 177, 191 (pl. XXXV, 8), 211 and 214; also *SNG v. Aulock, Kilikien* (1966), nos. 6010, pl. 205, 6028, pl. 206 (pl. 7, 1. 2. 4. 5). The types are generally allegorical, Nikai driving the chariots, and from Septimius Severus on, die-cutting at Tarsus becomes flat and somewhat stringy rather than clear, high and cameo-like.

There are, however, some exceptional portrait busts of all the Severans at Tarsus as at other cities along the Pamphylian and Cilician coast, presumably made when a gifted medallist or gem-cutter came by to supply medallic dies. Furthermore, Tarsus united all the elements present in these big gold medallions, especially the connections between the deeds of Alexander the Great and the Roman Severans. After the defeat of Pescennius Niger at Issus in the spring of 194, Tarsus instituted a «Severan Olympian» contest or festival held at a triumphal arch near the battlefield where both the Macedonian and the Severan dynasties had won their crucial victories: see D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor*, I, (1950), p. 672.

Caracalla stopped at Tarsus, after his cure at Pergamum and his winter in Nicomedia, on the way to his Parthian war in the spring of 215, and the city, having received supplies of grain from him, added his name to those of Hadrian and Septimius Severus in its titles: Magie, p. 683. Severus Alexander reappeared in the East just over fifteen years after Caracalla's progress, and this must have freshened memories of the three «Alexanders»: the Great, Caracalla, and the last Severan.

Caesarea in Cappadocia also could have produced the Tarsus and Aboukir medallions, as a bilon tetradrachm of Gordianus III proves. The young emperor is shown as a half-figure bust with a spear on the right shoulder and a figured shield on the left arm: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, no. 63.99 (pl. 7, 3). Relatively worn coins of Severus Alexander with the same bust are also known, as the large bronzes of the year 222 in Berlin and elsewhere: see *SNG v. Aulock, Kappadokien* (1967), no. 6509, pl. 222 (compare also no. 6511, the deep, armored bust, as on Roman medallions). Like Syrian Antioch, Caesarea in Cappadocia was an imperial mint for the East. Facilities were surely available for striking big medallions on unusual occasions, as the big bronzes of Macrinus (217 to 218) and his small son demonstrate. Caesarea in Cappadocia had a very good «Roman» style, while the later coins of Syrian Antioch always looked like provincial art from the eastern end of the Mediterranean.

lespont, near Sestos and Abydos, as Alexander the Great had done centuries before¹⁹. This is, of course, southwest of Herakleia-Perinthus, which lies on the northwest coast of the Propontis on the high road to Byzantium.

Since contests and games were held in many Greek imperial cities at regular and special intervals, as the coins show, especially when Severan emperors were in the East, it is a circular argument to identify the Aboukir medallions only with big games under Gordian III and possibly Philip the Arab because this Alexander the Great as *triumphator* reverse was popular on the Roman medallions of the 240's. The composition was more innovative back in the early 230's when Alexander the Great's namesake and reputed natural son of Antoninus Caracalla was marching East against the Sassanians, whom the Romans thought to be the reborn Persians and whose «great king» Ardashir they called Artaxerxes. Gordian III never had any particular reason to strike medallions honouring Caracalla. Severus Alexander remembered him not only as a dynastic and fictionally-natural father but also as an emperor who had seen success in the East, Armenia, Parthia, and Mesopotamia, under Septimius Severus and who, like Alexander the Great, had been cut off in his prime while with his troops in the East.

The *triumphator* medallion in particular and the Aboukir or Tarsus medallions in general were not isolated afterthoughts for a hasty or *ad hoc* set of games during an imperial crisis in the East. They were major documents of identification on the part of one Alexander with another.

Summary

The modern views of the Tarsus and Aboukir medallions as illustrations for popular books on Philip II, Olympias, and Alexander the Great in the light of 1977 and later discoveries at Vergina (ancient Aigai?) have led to a reappraisal of these medallions. They were created under Severus Alexander in the 230's as sumptuous documents of Severan infatuation with Alexander the Great's legend and with a Syrian royal and imperial family's own roots in the Hellenistic East, where Macedonian deeds of conquest and civilization were still cherished. These big gold medallions and the contemporary events, including elaborate festivals or games, they celebrated were culminations in a long history of Roman preoccupation with the image of Alexander the Great, his family, his court, and his conquests.

Alexander the Great, god and legend in his own lifetime, left a legacy of heroic divinity to his successors, the Hellenistic rulers. Roman generals, notably Pompey, Caesar, and Mark Antony, found these models flattering, convenient, and, indeed, politically most suitable for the transition of power in the East, from decadent Hellenistic monarchies to strong Roman military authorities. The last Seleucids and Ptolemies were hardly fit models for the titanic Macedonian past, but by 50 B.C. the heroic ends of Philip V

¹⁹ The TRAIECTVS AVG medallion of 242 shows Gordian III crossing into Asia with his legionaries on a galley to fight the Persians: see M. Grant, *Roman History from Coins, Some Uses of the Imperial Coinage to the Historian* (1958), pl. 15, no. 7. H. Mattingly placed this crossing in the summer of 242: *RIC IV 3* (1949), p. 11, also note on p. 50. A small medallion of this period with Gordian sacrificing in front of a round temple of Victoria is bi-lingual, showing that die-designers in the mint of Rome had no trouble producing legends in Greek as well as Latin: *loc. cit.*, 51, and note.

and Perseus at the hands of Roman Republican generals in the first third of the second century B.C. gave a direct conduit back to Alexander the Great in Macedonia and Greece. And Alexander had been everywhere the Romans wanted to be, from Thrace to Asia Minor to the northwest frontiers of the Indian sub-continent.

The myths and legends, rather than the sober truths, of Alexander not only fascinated the romantics like Mark Antony but also the practical *principes* like Augustus, even Vespasian, Trajan, and Hadrian. They paid him honors, and his successes influenced their policies in the East. The mad or egocentric ones, whatever the degree, like Nero and Domitian, found comfort in the iconography of Alexander the Great as interpreted by Pergamenes, Rhodians, and other artists in the centuries after 300 B.C.

But Alexander the Great truly conquered Rome with the advent to power of Septimius Severus, the North African, and his Syrian wife, Julia Domna, in 193. Their older son, Antoninus «Caracalla» was almost encouraged to seek and, certainly on his own, soon sought out Alexander's alleged model for his own rule and style of life. The Parthian victories of Septimius Severus as well as Julia Domna's family connections with the old royal houses of Syria made the Alexander image, physical and mental, seem very real.

Alexander the Great's shadow became a fact in name in 222 when the royal Syrian Alexander, grandson of Julia Domna's sister, Julia Maesa, became emperor. His mother, Julia Mamaea, was a veritable Olympias, and his fictional descent from Caracalla and Septimius Severus gave the young prince the feeling of having had a Philip II in the family. Marcus Aurelius Severus Alexander seemed to have been a clean, straight, and honest youth, but his Syrian mother, certain advisors, and cities in the East, threatened by revived Persian (Sassanian) power, encouraged the notion of Alexander the Great born again. The imperial sentiments of Severus Alexander's reign, combined with the military climate of the times, produced the Aboukir and Tarsus medallions.

After Severus Alexander's murder by his troops in Germany, emperors from the East, such as Philip the Arab, or boy-emperors, such as Gordianus III, campaigning in the East, had recourse to influential aspects of Alexander the Great. The last years of Gordian's reign (238 to 244) marked the six-hundredth anniversary of Alexander the Great's birth, and the Olympic or Pythian games regularly held at Beroea (the largest city near ancient Aigai and Pella) and Thessalonike (the Roman metropolis) must have taken on special splendor, perhaps with the emperor's presence, although some chronologies suggest he had passed by into Asia Minor. Big gold medallions (*Niketeria*) may have been awarded, and the one (from the J. Pierpont Morgan collection) inscribed ΟΛΥΜΠΙΑΔΟΣ has been thought by some to be read as 274 of the Actian era or A.D. 242 to 243 (big medallions for the big anniversary),²⁰ but this inscription is shown elsewhere, on a small medallion from the Aboukir find, to have been *one word* having nothing to do with a date in the Actian era. In short, if there is a connection with Macedonia under Gordian III, the dies for the Aboukir and Tarsus pieces, if not the medallions themselves, must have been around for nearly fifteen years.

²⁰ See B.V. Head, *HN*, p. 242. The ΔΟΣ of ΟΛΥΜΠΙΑΔΟΣ may mean «the Olympic monument», referring to the pillar by the Athena Parthenos as an honor to Zeus: «more ingenious than it is convincing» according to J.M.C. Toynbee: see *JRS* 34, 1944, p. 71, note 59. But ΟΛΥΜΠΙΑΔΟΣ appears to be *one word* and refers either to the divinity (here Athena) or the games, wherever held, in general. See above, note 12; also Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon* II, (1951), p. 1219.

Romantic aristocrats in the turmoil of Valerian (253 to 260), captured by the Persians, and Gallienus (253 to 267) cherished material tokens of Alexander the Great, but his legacy was almost dormant as hard military leaders from the Roman Balkans took over the Empire, from Claudius II (268 to 270) to Constantine the Great (306 to 337).

Alexander the Great's last appearance in the ancient world was in the fourth century of the Christian era, from about 350 to 425 as a symbol of the chivalrous paganism being replaced at that time by official Christianity. Alexander, however, was to live on in fantasy into the Middle Ages in the East and, occasionally, even in the Latin West.

Epilogue: Conclusions

This paper began as an effort to show the Tarsus and Aboukir medallions were made as luxurious dynastic statements of Severus Alexander's connections with the earlier Severans, notably Caracalla, with their victories in the East, and ultimately, with Alexander the Great and his family. If the medallions were struck in Macedonia or the nearby parts of Thrace, regardless of where the dies were prepared, Herakleia-Perinthus on the northwest coast of the Sea of Marmara seems to have been the only local Greek imperial mint producing coins of comparable size. Although there must have been good contemporary reasons (a Sassanian scare) for burial of the Tarsus medallions (in a tomb?) near or at Tarsus, only an earlier day «Goldfinger» would have assembled so many medallions, aurei, small *Niketeria*, and bars at Aboukir near Alexandria in Egypt. Not only are there iconographic reasons for connecting all the big medallions with Severus Alexander, but review of the Athena Parthenos reverse with its pillar labelled ΟΛΥΜΠΙΑΔΟΣ shows this to be one word referring to the goddess or the games rather than OLYMPIA plus Actian 274 or A.D. 242 of the reign of Gordian III.

When Jeffrey Spier called my attention to the miniscule *Niketerion* from the Aboukir hoard with a Lysimachos-era Alexander the Great on the obverse and Pergamum's cista mystica with ΟΛΥΜΠΙΑΔΟΣ, clearly one word, on the reverse, I suddenly realized that maybe the whole group of big gold medallions had nothing at all to do with Beroea and Thessalonike. Pergamum had the «First Olympics» of Asia, and the city also had a long tradition of striking giant coins in bronze, with complex reverses. To be sure, the Leake-Fitzwilliam *Niketerion* has a Turkish-era provenance on the Macedonian-Thracian border, but the obverse type of Pergamum's patroness Athena seems to be derived from that city's early second century B.C. coinage, like the other, even smaller *Niketerion* with the Pergamene cistophorus reverse. Maybe the Emperor Severus Alexander or his special legate appeared with the dynastic dies of the big gold medallions, but the local city, here Pergamum, was allowed to design the little *Niketeria* with types both complementing the bigger pieces and giving iconographic or stylistic references to the city where the ceremonies took place. More may be known when other second and third prize *Niketeria* are identified.

Finally, the obverse with Philip II and those with Olympias seem out of place outside Macedonia. If the big medallions are thought of in Severan dynastic terms rather than as Macedonian memorials, Alexander the Great's parents can be equated with Septimius Severus or, possibly, with the mature, bearded Caracalla (Philip II) and with Julia Domna or Julia Mamaea (Olympias). If the facing or left-profile, helmeted busts of

Alexander the Great on six big Aboukir medallions look a little like Severus Alexander on big Greek coins, then it is not fantasy to see his mother Mamaea or his deified great-aunt and fictional grandmother Domna in the profiles of the three veiled busts of the lady identified as Olympias.

Going back to the article by Captain Mowat in 1903, the Tarsus and Aboukir medallions have been identified in no small measure with Macedonia because of the quasi-autonomous bronzes of the *koinon* with various Alexander heads on the obverse and vistas of the hero taming Bucephalus or as a heroic rider on the reverse (*pl. 7, 3*). These bronze coins may have been influenced by the *Niketeria* or news of their types. There is even one with a crude cista mystica reverse, seemingly copied from a bronze of Pergamum struck under Septimius Severus.²¹ It is inconceivable, however, to think that these rustic Macedonian coins could have been produced in mints or in the presence of die-designers who had created the gold *Niketeria*, big and small. And other regions in the imperial age struck coins with Alexander the Great's bust as the obverse type. Those of Apollonia Mordiaion on the Phrygian border of Pisidia, for instance, give Alexander the Great the features of the young Caracalla, as the latter appeared in the last several years of the reign of his father, Septimius Severus, about A.D. 209.²²

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due, over the decades past and more recently, to many persons for help with the Aboukir medallions and their relatives. I studied the Aboukir medallions in the J. Pierpont Morgan Collection at the American Numismatic Society a number of times on the eve of World War II and again in the late 1940's, early 1950's. Those who have provided information and assistance include Diana Buitron, Herbert A. Cahn, Robert A.G. Carson, Mary B. Comstock, the late Leonard Forrer, Sr., the late Dr. Jacob Hirsch, Silvia Hurter, G.K. Jenkins, William E. Metcalf, Leo Mildenberg, the late Sawyer McA. Mosser, the late Sydney P. Noe, the late Wayte Raymond, and Jeffrey Spier. The photographs of the Aboukir medallions were provided by the Walters Art Gallery. Those of the Roman medallion and the Greek imperial in the Museum of Fine Arts were taken by the writer, and prepared by Complete Photo in Cambridge-Watertown.

²¹ *SNG v. Aulock, Mysien*, no. 1410, pl. 43.

²² See *SNG v. Aulock, Pisidien* (1964), nos. 4988–4990, pl. 164. Alexander the Great is described as founder of this city, which evidently received a settlement of Thracians in imperial times. The British Museum Catalogue puts three small gold coins and three small silver coins (or are they medallions?) with filleted or lionskin-clad busts of Alexander on the obverse (the lionskin is around the neck and a wreath in the hair) and a lion walking on the reverse, sometimes with the inscription ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ, under Macedonia, «time of Caracalla or Severus Alexander»: *BMC, Macedonia* (1879), pp. 21–22, nos. 92–97. There is a familiar type of a lion walking to right on Roman imperial coins of Caracalla, and this lion does appear on the bronze *Koinon* coins of Macedonia under Severus Alexander (*BMC*, pp. 23–27, nos. 111: dated A.D. 245 to 246; 112: the same; 117, 118, 142: the last three undated, etc.). See also, *SNG IV, 3 Fitzwilliam Museum*, nos. 2352–2358 (no. 2356 having the cista mystica reverse), pl. XLIII. The Danish Sylloge calls these small silver pieces «coin-like issue» (s): *SNG Cop.*, Part III, No. 10, (1943), no. 1381, pl. 36. The *Koinon* bronzes are nos. 1351–1380, pls. 35, 36. They are all somewhat crude. Twenty-seven small *Niketeria* are listed by Hugo Gaebler, in *Die Antiken Münzen Nord-Griechenlands* (1906), III, part I, pp. 192–196, nos. 872–902, pl. IV, 1–10, a reference I owe to Jeffrey Spier. Mr. Spier also points out that one with a head of Alexander the Great and a blank reverse comes from the Tarsus hoard (also *NC* 1898, p. 99, no. 3, pl. X, no. 6). Clearly, a new study of all *Niketeria* is needed.

Jeffrey Spier has written two long letters to me on the subject of the Aboukir medallions, the Tarsus pieces, the various small gold and silver *Niketeria*, and their putative connections with Asia Minor, including possibly Tarsus, rather than Macedonia. We are in agreement on the important issues, that the big gold medallions belong to Severus Alexander and not later, and that the bronzes of the Macedonian Federation are, at the most, derived from earlier *Niketeria*, large and small. Jeffrey Spier points to the many iconographic and stylistic links between the small *Niketeria* and the Hellenistic silver of Asia Minor, from the Athena on the reverses of the second century B.C. tetradrachms of Ilium to the so-called «stephanephoric» tetradrachms of the mid-second century B.C.

Appendix (pl. 8)

To all other compelling evidences for the authenticity and possible provenance of the Aboukir medallions may now be added the cut and rolled-up lower two-thirds to one half of a standard-sized gold medallion with a new but predictable obverse and a reverse of Nike with a long palm pacing to the right in a victor's quadriga. This reverse happens to be the one common to the Tarsus medallion for King Philip II (*JIAN* 1907, pl. VIII, no. 3) and the Berlin Aboukir medallion with Alexander's filleted head in profile to the left (*JIAN* 1907, pl. IX, no. 1). Of the two reverse dies involved, the new find is closest to the Alexander medallion from Aboukir. It, indeed, may even provide a die-identity, thereby strengthening the case for the Aboukir medallions even further.

The obverse of this newly-revealed medallion has been identified by the owner, Jeffrey Spier (who has helped this paper in so many ways), as an almost half-figure bust of the Athena Parthenos in profile to the right. The source was the same as that of the red jasper intaglio in the Museo Nazionale Romano (Terme, inv. no. 52382), from Austrian and Italian collections, and signed by Aspasio (G.M.A. Richter, *Engraved Gems of the Romans*, London, 1971, p. 137, no. 642; N. Leipen, *Athena Parthenos*, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, 1971, pp. 9–10, no. 36, fig. 38). This accords excellently with H. Dressel's connections between the Aboukir reverses and Graeco-Roman gems (above, note 7). The art of the Tarsus and Aboukir medallions paralleled the finest Greek and Roman imperial traditions of gem-engraving and die-designing, using the same classical antiquarian sources.

This newly-documented medallion, partially rescued on its way to the melting-pot or from its rôle as a piece of golden «Hacksilber», like the silver-plate from Germany and Scotland, is reported to have been found in Asia Minor. This is, of course, where the arguments in this paper seek to place possible distribution-points as well as a mint for these medallions.

Illustrations

- Pl. 5, 1 Gold Medallion from the Aboukir Find. JIAN 10 pl. 14,1.
Bust of the Emperor Caracalla (A.D. 211 to 217) and Alexander the Great hunting a Boar.
Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery 59.3. Diam. 57 mm. Wt. 70 gm.
- Pl. 5, 2 Gold Medallion from the Aboukir Find. JIAN 10 pl. 11,3.
Bust of Alexander the Great and Alexander in Triumph.
Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery 59.1. Diam. 54 mm. Wt. 95 gm.
- Pl. 5, 3 Bimetallic Bronze Medallion, Mint of Rome, 229. Unpublished, rev. cf. F. Gnechi, *I medaglioni romani* (1912) 2, p. 81, 14 f.
Bust of Severus Alexander and Alexander in Triumph.
Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Chatswold Collection. Diam. 37 mm. Wt. 36.03 gm.
- Pl. 6, 1 Bronze Medallion Coin of Perinthus in Thrace. Unpublished variety: E. Schönert, *Die Münzprägung von Perinthos* (1965), pl. 48, B and pl. 49, 788.
Bust of Severus Alexander (222 to 235) and Zeus Enthroned in a Cosmic Setting.
Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 62.629. Diam. 40.5 mm. Wt. 32.59 gm.
- Pl. 6, 2 Bronze Medallion Coin of Perinthus in Thrace. Schönert, *ibid.* p. 242, 787.
Bust of Severus Alexander and Emperor on Horseback, as a «Thracian Rider».
Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 1974.143. Diam. 42.5 mm. Wt. 37.16 gm.
- Pl. 6, 3 Bronze Coin of the Macedonian Federation, Time of Severus Alexander. H. Gaebler, *Die antiken Münzen von Makedonia und Paionia* 1 (1906) p. 171, 764.
Bust of Alexander the Great and Alexander Training Bucephalus.
Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 1970.429. Diam. 28.5 mm. Wt. 14.38 gm.
- Pl. 6, 4 Bronze Medallion Coin of Perinthus in Thrace. Schönert, *ibid.* pl. 48, 782.
Bust of Severus Alexander and Emperor on a Ship with Isis Pharia and Sarapis.
Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 63.1240. Diam. 41.5 mm. Wt. 37.20 gm.
- Pl. 7, 1 Bronze Coin of Tarsus in Cilicia. Cf. *BMC Lycaonia etc.* (1900), pl. 35, 8 (obv.), 9 (rev.),
Bust of Caracalla in the Costume of Demiourgos.
Elephant with Bird and Prize-Crown Above.
Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 63.3005. Diam. 35.5 mm. Wt. 28.54 gm.
- Pl. 7, 2 As Previous, bust of Caracalla to Left. Cf. *SNG v. Aulock*, pl. 205, 6010.
Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 63.1513. Diam. 29.5 mm. Wt. 16.65 gm.
- Pl. 7, 3 Billon Tridrachm of Caesarea in Cappadocia. Cf. *SNG v. Aulock*, pl. 223, 6523.
Bust of Gordianus III (238 to 244).
Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 63.99. Diam. 27 mm. Wt. 10.46 gm.
- Pl. 7, 4 Bronze Coin of Tarsus in Cilicia. Cf. *SNG v. Aulock*, pl. 204, 6008.
Bust of Caracalla as a Young Autocrat.
Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 63.2629. Diam. 34 mm. Wt. 19.86 gm.
- Pl. 7, 5 Bronze Coin of Tarsus in Cilicia. Cf. *SNG v. Aulock*, pl. 205, 6012.
Bust of Caracalla on his Eastern Campaigns.
Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 62.414. Diam. 32 mm. Wt. 15.39 gm.
- Pl. 8, Rolled-up fragment of an «Aboukir» medallion, J. Spier collection (enlargement 1:3).



1



2



3





1



2



3



4





1



2



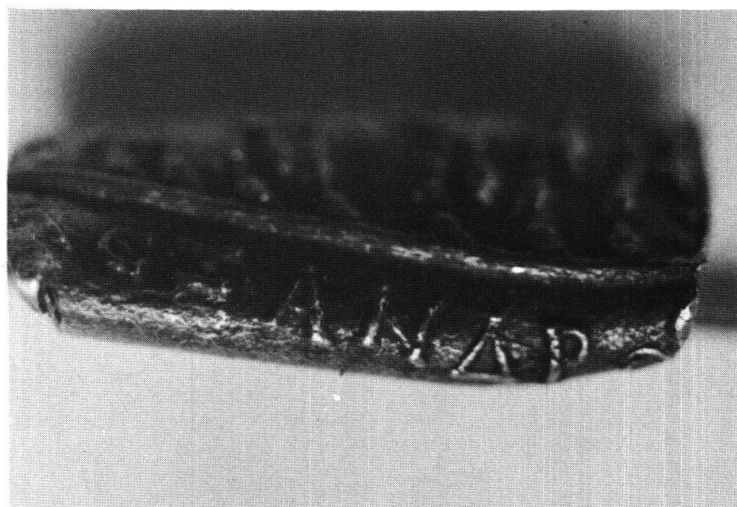
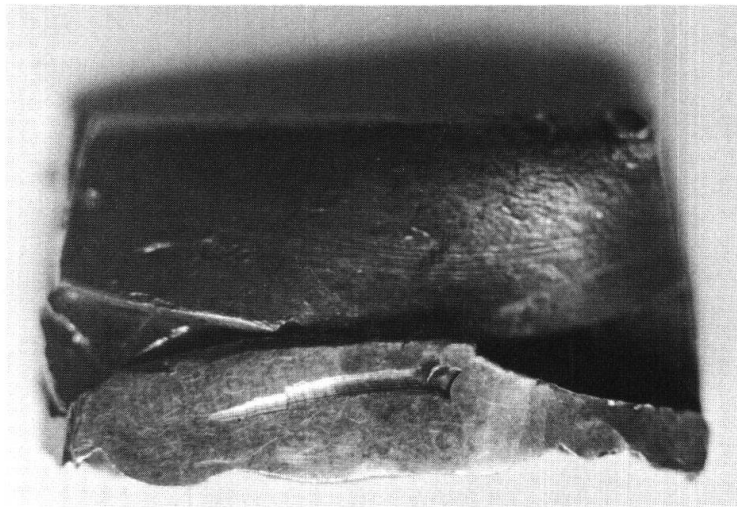
3



4



5



C. Vermeule, Alexander the Great, the emperor Severus Alexander and the Aboukir medallions

