

The equestrian portrait of Alexander the Great on a new tetradrachm of Seleucus I

Autor(en): **Houghton, Arthur / Stewart, Andrew**

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ARTHUR HOUGHTON AND ANDREW STEWART

THE EQUESTRIAN PORTRAIT
OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT ON A NEW TETRADRACHM
OF SELEUCUS I

Plate 5

The Coin

In late 1997 a previously unrecorded tetradrachm of Seleucus I reached the Swiss market and was put at auction the following April:¹

Obv.: Head of Heracles in lion's skin headress r.; dotted border.

Rev.: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΣΕΛΕΥΚΟΥ in exergue; male rider wearing horned helmet and holding spear in r. hand on prancing horned horse, r.; in l. field, ΣΩ; beneath horse's belly, ⚡; beneath forelegs ⚡; below, groundline; possible dotted border, off flan.

17.07 g. Numismatica Ars Classica 11, 1998, 110. (*Pl. 5, 1*)

Mint and Date

The issue was not known to E.T. Newell when he published *Eastern Seleucid Mints* (hereafter, ESM),² but fits exactly within a small silver series that include drachms and hemidrachms of the Heracles/rider type that he attributed to Ecbatana, the principal city of the province of Media (ESM 481 and 482), after 293 B.C.

The attribution of the coin to Ecbatana is not in doubt. The Heracles/rider series is monogram-linked to standard silver issues of Alexander (Heracles/seated Zeus) type issued by Seleucus after the opening of the mint c. 311 B.C., virtually all of which carry horse heads or horse foreparts, distinctive symbols of the Median capital.³ The new tetradrachm was itself struck from an obverse die used on an Alexander-type tetradrachm, with the same three monograms (ESM 475 λ, pl. 36, 2). The advanced state of die wear on the coin described here, however, shows that it was struck after ESM 475, but in parallel with other Alexander-type tetradrachms which also share the same die (ESM 480, noted by Newell, ESM, p. 181).

Newell's date of c. 293 B.C. for the Heracles/rider coins is a few years too late. On the basis of hoard evidence, Kritt has established the probable date for ESM

¹ The authors wish to thank Roberto Russo and Silvia Hurter for providing information and photographs necessary to this article. Brian Kritt read and provided very helpful comments on it while it was still in draft.

² E.T. NEWELL, *The Coinages of the Eastern Seleucid Mints from Seleucus I to Antiochus III*, ANSNS 1 (New York 1938, reprinted 1978).

475 and associated silver at c. 295 or slightly later,⁴ at a time of major changes in the administration of the East - including the loss of Persis and the possibly related appointment of Antiochus I as co-regent.⁵

The Identity of the Figure

Who is represented by the rider on the series' reverse? Newell was clear in his own view of the subject:

«That we have before us a representation of Seleucus (I) himself, rather than of the divine Alexander, is made evident by the rider's horned helmet which, as Imhoof-Blumer has already pointed out, we know from other coins was especially affected by Seleucus. Besides, the horn peculiar to Alexander is that of the ram because of his supposed divine descent from Zeus-Ammon. Small as are the representations before us, the horns which rise from the helmet appear clearly to be those of a bull.»⁶

Given the new detail of dress, headgear and attributes that the tetradrachm provides, the figure must represent Alexander the Great and not Seleucus. The figure wears along chlamys that billows behind him, a sleeved tunic (*chitoniskos*) that terminates below the hips; trousers; and soft, wrinkled boots. On his head he wears what is evidently an Attic helmet with cheekpieces and a neckguard. From the helmet rise two curved horns; an animal's ear juts rearward from its base. He sits on a saddle-cloth made of the skin of an animal, which could be a bull, a lion or a panther (only the sinuous tail just above the horse's rump shows clearly). In his right hand he holds a spear horizontally, close to his side. The horse, bridled and reined, is adorned with horns that curve upward above the head, similar to those that appear on the rider's helmet.

There is no doubt that we are looking at the representation of a hero, adorned with the horns and ears of a bull, sitting on an animal skin, perhaps that of a lion, panther or bull. The attributes are clearly those of Dionysus, the mythological conqueror of India, whose imagery, as various scholars now agree, was deliberately conflated with that of Alexander to support the claims of Alexander's successors in the east, including in particular Seleucus, who first applied Dionysiac divination to Alexander on his own coins of Susa (below). That it is unlikely to show Seleucus himself, as R.A. Hadley has pointed out,⁷ is the fact that the latter was not formally deified until 281/0, thirteen or more years after the issuance of the coin in question.⁸ The horned horse supports the view that the rider is Alexander, although the evidence is not conclusive. Babelon has suggested that the horns that appear on horse heads on a number of eastern issues of Seleucus I (and later, Antiochus I) represent symbols of power and—followed by Newell—that the horse head coins of Seleucus gene-

³ See the examples in ESM, nos. 421ff. and Newell's discussion, ESM, p. 167-169.

⁴ B. KRITT, *The Early Seleucid Mint of Susa* (Lancaster PA 1997), p. 85.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁶ ESM, p. 181.

⁷ R.A. HADLEY, *Seleucus, Dionysus, or Alexander?*, NC 1974, p. 12.

rally represent Seleucus' own mount.⁹ While Seleucus is recorded as having commemorated his horse with a gilded monument consisting of a horse's head, a helmet and a dedicatory inscription,¹⁰ it is nowhere reported that his horse was horned or associated with horns. One is left with the simplest explanation: that the horned horse on the present coin represents not Seleucus', but Alexander's own Bucephalus, so-called because he was said to have been marked by brand or nature with the image of an oxhead (Plutarch, *Alex.* 32.12; Arrian, *Anab.* 5.19.4-6). Alexander honored him after his death in 325 B.C., by naming a city for him, Bukephalia (Diod 17.95.5, Curt 9.1.6, Arrian *loc. cit.*).

The Susian Trophy Coins

The equestrian image of Alexander as a warrior-Dionysus on the coins of Ecbatana follows one other instance where the same representation appears, also on coins struck in the east. Beginning about 305 B.C., and continuing until c. 295/4 B.C., the mint of Susa struck a series of tetradrachms, drachms and fractions that show on their reverses the figure of a Nike crowning a trophy with a victory wreath, and on their obverse the head of Alexander in an Attic helmet covered in a panther's skin and adorned with the horns and ear of a bull (*Pl.* 5, 2).¹¹ The obverse head is recognizably the same as that of the rider on the tetradrachms of Ecbatana in virtually all respects, from the type and details of the helmet to the bull's horns and ear; only the panther's skin is missing on the Ecbatana coin.

From their chronology, the Susian trophy coins mark Seleucus' expedition of c. 305 or 304 to the east, when he met and fought the Mauryan emperor Chandragupta before returning to Babylonia.¹² In a real sense, they were quite revolutionary, since they showed Alexander's own image for the first time on any coinage struck by Seleucus, and given the uncertainty of the date may well have been intended as forward-looking propaganda, suggesting a victory to come rather than one that had already been gained. Heretofore, it has never been suggested that these early coin images of Alexander were anything other than an official fantasy. Since the new equestrian portrait of Alexander shows the same features, however, it should be asked whether we are looking instead at a sculptural type-a version of an existing

⁸ There are a number of posthumous portraits of Seleucus with horns, however: see, for example, the coins illustrated by R. FLEISCHER, *Studien zur seleukidischen Kunst I: Herrscherbildnisse* (Mainz 1991), pl. 1 and 2; and the likely head of Seleucus in Antakya, with raised surfaces in the hair above the forehead, probably prepared for attaching horns A. HOUGHTON, *AntK* 29, 1986, p. 52-61; R.R. SMITH, *Hellenistic Royal Portraits* (Oxford 1988), 156 no. 5, disputed by FLEISCHER, *ibid.*, p. 91-94.

⁹ E. BABELON, *Les Rois de Syria, d'Arménie et de Commagène* (Paris 1890), p. XX. In fact, bull's horns adorn the heads of horses on many eastern issues unrecorded by Babelon, including coinages most recently given to Ai Khanoum and other Bactrian mints by B. KRITT, *Seleucid Coins of Bactria* (Lancaster PA 1996).

¹⁰ Malalas 202.17-19; cf. Ammianus Marcellinus 21.15.2.

¹¹ For the series and its chronology, see KRITT, above n. 4, 11-19 (tetradrachm catalog), p. 53-56, and p. 63-65 (chronology).

¹² HOUGHTON, *SNR* 59, 1980, p. 8-9.

equestrian statue, the head of which was modeled on the coins of Susa (*Pl. 5, 2*), while the full composition was carried on the later silver issues of Ecbatana (*Pl. 5, 1*).

Iconography, Precedents, and Contexts

Although the horseman can hardly represent anyone else but Alexander, he is unique in a number of ways. His helmet, embellished with bull's horns and ears, is a fantastic concoction, as is the combination of garb – *chlamys*, *chitoniskos*, trousers, and boots – and mount, a horse with bull's horns sprouting from its head.

To Macedonians and Greeks, the horned helmet would have evoked the conquering Dionysos Tauros, especially if covered with a panther-skin as on the Susan tetradrachms and drachms cited above (*Pl. 5, 2*). This allusion, in turn, would immediately have recalled Alexander's famous visit to Dionysos's birthplace at Nysa in Swat and his even more famous rivalry with the god and with Heracles (*Pl. 5, 1*).¹³ For he had outdone both of them. He had advanced beyond Nysa far into India and had captured the mighty Rock of Aornos where Heracles had failed. To any Near Easterner, of course, the helmet would have signaled explicitly that the wearer was divine. For Syrian, Anatolian, and Mesopotamian gods regularly wore horned helmets, and their adoption by royalty goes back at least to Naram-Sin in the twenty-third century B.C.¹⁴

The *chlamys* and *chitoniskos*, on the other hand, were standard Macedonian attire, worn by Alexander on, for example, the so-called Alexander Sarcophagus and the Alexander Mosaic (under his breastplate: *Fig. 1*).¹⁵ Yet the trousers (*anaxyrides*) and boots (*akatia*) were Persian. Although the sources agree that the king had adopted some items of Persian dress by the year 329, they specifically state that trousers were not among them (though they say nothing about boots).¹⁶ This fanciful combination was presumably intended to send a very particular message to its audience.

As to the saddle-cloth, on the Alexander Sarcophagus both Macedonians and Persians have elaborate saddle-cloths (detailed in paint and now all but invisible), some of which are clearly animal skins.¹⁷ Furthermore, on a now-lost fresco from the early third-century 'Kinch' tomb in Macedonia the victorious Macedonian sits on a spotted saddle-cloth with a tail that flies out behind him (*Pl. 5, 3*), exactly as on the

¹³ For the sources and discussion, see A.F. STEWART, *Faces of Power: Alexander's Image and Hellenistic Politics* (hereafter, Stewart) (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1993), 78-80.

¹⁴ See, most conveniently, J.B. PRITCHARD, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures* (2nd ed., Princeton 1969), figs. 475, 490, 493, 498, 513-16, 525-29, 537-38, 540, and cf. 309 (Naram-Sin).

¹⁵ STEWART, pl. 5a and figs. 101-103.

¹⁶ Eratosthenes ap. Plutarch, *de Alexandri Magni fortuna aut virtute* 2. 2 (*Moralia* 330A); for this and other testimonia, see Stewart, p. 352-356 (T32-47). Diodoros 17. 77. 5 (*ibid.* T 35) exaggeratedly claims that he adopted «everything» except trousers and jacket (*kan-dys*). This is explicitly contradicted by Eratosthenes and others, who confirm that he never wore the tiara either.

¹⁷ See F. WINTER, *Das Alexandersarkophag aus Sidon* (Strassburg 1912), pls. 1-2, etc., for the polychromy.

coin (*Pl. 5, 1*). No explicit divine association can thus be argued for it, though a bull- or panther-skin would certainly have amplified the Dionysiac overtones of the helmet.



Fig. 1

The horned horse must, as argued earlier, be Bucephalus or ‘Oxhead.’ Here, the Alexander Mosaic (*Fig. 1*), which pictures either Issus or – less likely – Gaugamela (the king rode Bucephalus in both battles), offers a partial precedent. For in a striking visual simile, the ears of Alexander’s horse are the only ones in the entire scene that are colored white, hatched to make them look rounded, and horn-shaped.¹⁸

So this coin portrait was designed to speak both to Greco-Macedonians and to Near Easterners – just like the Alexander Sarcophagus.¹⁹ Yet neither addressed both races equally: their style and the preponderance of their imagery are Greek through and through. Like Alexander’s own ‘mixed’ attire, mass interracial nuptials at Susa, and biracial banquet at Opis, their attempts at ecumenism were conciliatory gestures to the conquered. They were devices to help reconcile them to their new status as favored subordinates in a Macedonian world.

Shrewd as ever, Seleucus followed Alexander’s example. Alone among Alexander’s marshals, he kept the Persian wife given him at Susa, and assiduously cultivated the Babylonians during his years as their satrap (319-315), before Antigonos drove him out of Mesopotamia:

¹⁸ STEWART, pl. 5a.

¹⁹ See STEWART, p. 302-303.

«During his four years as satrap he had shown himself generous to all, winning the goodwill of the common people and long in advance seeking allies to help him if the opportunity came to make a bid for supreme power» (Diod. 19. 91. 2).

His farsightedness paid off. Antigonos treated the Babylonians harshly, so when Seleucus came galloping back over the horizon in 312 they came to greet him *en masse*; helped him to eject Antigonos's armies; and allowed him to re-establish his control over the country. Chronically short of Greco-Macedonian manpower to run, police, and defend their vast territories, the Seleucids thereafter continued to rely heavily upon their non-Greek subjects for support.²⁰

To return to the coin portrait (*Pl. 5, 1*), it seems unlikely that this complex, poly-semantic image was devised specifically for this extremely rare series of tetradrachms. If the Alexander head on the Susian series (*Pl. 5, 2*) is indeed an excerpt from the same portrait, their common model was surely a statue – probably a monumental bronze erected sometime between 312/11 and ca. 305, when the Susian coins were designed. Though no ancient source describes such a work in Susa or Ecbatana (the two most likely locales), we know next to nothing about Seleucid art east of Antioch. Indeed, since Greek bronzes could easily be produced in multiple versions, both cities could easily have boasted such a statue.

Inspiration for its unique iconography might well have come from the statues of Alexander Aigiochos (i.e., Zeus) and Alexander Ktistes (also an equestrian image) at Alexandria, which Seleucus would have seen whilst a fugitive and Ptolemaic officer between 315 and 312. One might also detect a degree of rivalry with Ptolemy's own coin-portraits of Alexander, which from ca. 321 showed him wearing an elephant scalp and Ammon's horn, and from ca. 314 added a Dionysiac forehead-band or mitra and a scaly aegis to these.²¹

Whatever the truth, the image's message is crystal clear. Seleucus liked to invoke Alexander's name and deeds to justify his own actions and to boost his men's morale, and even claimed in 312 that the king had appeared to him in a dream; supported his recovery of Babylonia; and endorsed him as his true successor.²² The importance of such dreams and oracles for understanding the self-promoting coin-imagery of the Successors has been amply demonstrated by Hadley, and this coin (*Pl. 5, 1*) strongly supports his thesis.²³ For here, too, the divine warrior-king Alexander bestrides both West and East, and implicitly confirms Seleucus as his true heir.

²⁰ Diodoros 19. 91. 3-4; see the useful discussion by S.M. SHERWIN-WHITE and A. KUHRT, *From Samarkhand to Sardis: A New Approach to the Seleukid Empire* (Berkeley 1993), p. 10-12.

²¹ For discussion, sources, and illustrations, see STEWART, p. 229-262, p. 397-400 (T 126), figs. 52, 76-83.

²² 10. Diod. 19. 90. 4.

²³ R.A. HADLEY, *Dynastic Propaganda of Seleucus and Lysimachus*, JHS 94, 1974, p. 50-65; against the word «propaganda», now a cliché in the field, see STEWART, p. 48-49.

Key to plate 5

- 1 Tetradrachm of Ecbatana, c. 295 B.C., ex NAC 11, 1998, 110.
- 2 Tetradrachm of Susa, c. 304-301 B.C., ex Leu 45, 1988, 254.
- 3 Fresco from the 'Kinch' Tomb at Naoussa (Macedonia). Now destroyed. Ca. 300-270 B.C. From M.B. HATZOPOULOS *et al.*, Philip of Macedon (Athens 1980), fig. 48.

p. 31, Fig. 1.

Alexander, from the Alexander Mosaic. Naples, Museo Nazionale 10020, from the House of the Faun at Pompeii. Hellenistic/Roman copy of an original of ca. 330 B.C. Photo: DAI Rome 58.1448.

Arthur Houghton
3034 N Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20007
USA

Prof. Andrew Steward
Dept. of History of Art
University of California at Berkeley
Berkeley, CA 94720, USA



