

A Change in Change: an Examination of the Imagery of Ptolemy I Soter's Coinage from the
Early Years of his Reign

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Background and Introduction

At first glance, this coin looks like it was perhaps minted by Alexander the Great himself—after all, it bears his name and his likeness.¹ However, this coin was minted by Ptolemy I Soter, Alexander's successor in Egypt. The focus on Alexander, as I will explore throughout this paper, was a way for Ptolemy to connect himself to Alexander in the years following Alexander's death.

Before an assessment of the coin's imagery can begin, some background is required. One ought to begin at Alexander's prodigious impact on coinage. As his conquest in the late 4th century moved farther east, Alexander decided to have mints begin producing a standard coin, both as a way of facilitating easier payments to a large quantity of soldiers, and as a way to consolidate power.² This coin type most commonly showed Herakles, the mythical ancestor of Alexander, on the obverse, and seated Zeus on the reverse.³ This obverse-reverse configuration remained important long after Alexander's empire fractured, as did much of his imagery. As we shall see, even his name was present on coins after his death.

After Alexander's death in 323 BCE, his empire was divided among his successors, the Diadochi.⁴ Initially, the Diadochi hesitated to change Alexander's original coinage much, but eventually the coins took on traits of both their minting locality and of the ruler responsible for their production. The coin being examined here, one minted by Ptolemy I Soter, comes from Egypt between 323 BCE and 305 BCE.⁵ This is the period when Ptolemy was taking power in Egypt following the death of Alexander. Ptolemy's coinage in these early years of his rule reflects a slow (and not always linear) transition away from Alexander's imagery, though a persistence of his obverse-reverse configuration.

Although it is not the focus of this examination, it is also worth examining the coin's denomination in the context of Ptolemy's economy in Egypt. This coin is a silver tetradrachm, which was the most common denomination minted by Alexander during his reign.⁶ As such, the silver tetradrachm was a widely-accepted weight, and so the continuation of its minting by Ptolemy is unsurprising. Though Ptolemy did eventually diverge from Alexander's standard weight, that event comes after the time of this coin. The weight of this particular coin, a standard silver tetradrachm, is logical and predictable.

The Obverse

The obverse side of the coin depicts Alexander the Great himself. In his own coins, Alexander often showed Herakles on the obverse, not himself; this depiction of Alexander is a

¹ See Appendix A for an image of the coin being examined.

² Meadows, Andrew. "The Spread of Coins in the Hellenistic World," 172-174.

³ See Appendix B for an example of Alexander's widely-minted coin.

⁴ Ptolemy I Soter was one of the Diadochi.

⁵ Object Label, *Coin with Portrait of Alexander the Great with Elephant-scalp Cap and Horns of Ammon*.

⁶ Meadows, Andrew. "The Spread of Coins in the Hellenistic World," 172.

distinctive choice by Ptolemy, which has very specific symbolic consequences. In this portrait, Alexander wears an elephant-skin cap, which is commonly taken as a reference to his conquest in India.⁷ While Alexander had many military conquests across a broad range of locations, the one in India may have been particularly worth noting on a coin. It is documented that he was only able to achieve this success due to clever strategic planning, because in this conflict he had to reckon with a new type of weapon: war elephants. War elephants were unfamiliar to the Macedonian army, and presented a new challenge which had to be overcome.⁸ Thus, a reference to his conquest in India was not only a general reference to conquest, but also to Alexander's military skill and a unique battle from which he emerged victorious. The elephant-skin cap draws a direct line to his overcoming of the elephants in combat, and suggests a decisive victory.

On this coin, Alexander is also shown bearing the horns of Ammon, a god from the Egyptian pantheon.⁹ While the elephant-skin cap is a reminder of his conquest, the use of the horns of Ammon suggests the desire for a more peaceful integration of Egypt into his empire. In 332 BCE during his campaign in the area, Alexander traveled to the Siwa Oasis in Egypt, which was home to a temple of Ammon. There, he was declared by an oracle to be the son of Ammon.¹⁰ Some sources refer to this same event as declaring him the son of Zeus, or Zeus-Ammon, as the Egyptian pantheon had begun to merge with some deities of Greece. Thus, the depiction of Alexander with the horns of Ammon alludes to this divine status. The scales on the lower part of the elephant-skin cap have also been suggested to be Zeus's aegis, further cementing this image of divine parentage.¹¹ By associating himself with the already-existing gods of Egypt, as well as beginning to merge them with the gods of Greece, Alexander was ingratiating himself with the people of Egypt whom he hoped to rule. The reminder of this event on a coin by Ptolemy, even after Alexander's death, likely served to remind the Egyptian people of a positive reception of Macedonian rule.

Another detail of Alexander's adornment on the obverse is the mitra (or fillet) of Dionysos. Alexander had a well-known association with Dionysos, as well as Herakles and Achilles, but the association with Dionysos is said to have heightened during his campaigns in India.¹² Thus, the presentation of him with Dionysian qualities here would make sense, presented side-by-side with the elephant-skin cap. Dionysos was also a son of Zeus, which was an association which Alexander repeatedly made, as evidenced by the horns of Ammon.

Some of these features of the obverse also have implications regarding the date of the coin. Though this coin has been securely dated to 323-305 BCE, I would suggest a more specific

⁷ Object Label, *Coin with Portrait of Alexander the Great with Elephant-scalp Cap and Horns of Ammon*.

⁸ Hamilton, J.R. "The Cavalry Battle at the Hydaspes."

⁹ Object Label, *Coin with Portrait of Alexander the Great with Elephant-scalp Cap and Horns of Ammon*.

¹⁰ Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*. 27.3.

¹¹ Lorber, Catherine C. "The Coinage of the Ptolemies," 212.

¹² Edmunds, Lowell. "The religiosity of Alexander."

terminus post quem close to 312 BCE. It was at this point that the scales were added to Alexander's cap, and the mitra to his head.¹³ Since the coin bears these details, it is unlikely that it was minted in an earlier period of Ptolemy's coin production.

This date in the context of Ptolemy's reign also brings to light another possible motivation for placing Alexander's likeness on his coin. His initial minting of coins with Alexander's likeness comes around 319 BCE;¹⁴ meanwhile, Ptolemy acquired Alexander's mortal remains in 321 BCE.¹⁵ After having the remains interred in Alexandria, Ptolemy may have begun minting coins with Alexander's likeness as a way of advertising the fact that he was the possessor of Alexander's body. Indeed, the depiction of deified Alexander suggests something of a direct link between Ptolemy's coinage and the cult of deified Alexander, which he established in Egypt. The version of Alexander shown on his coin also bears a striking resemblance to a statue of Alexander in the same adornments, which was set up by Ptolemy.¹⁶

A few overall aesthetic details are also worth note. First, Alexander is used as a substitute for Herakles as the figure of the obverse coin, though he still looks much the same. Alexander, like his mythical ancestor, is shown youthful and beardless, as he so often was. This is unsurprising, as Alexander was routinely depicted in styles evocative of the deities that he was associated with. Another notable feature is the dotted edge of the coin. This style was common in Macedonian coinage, and indeed was featured on Alexander's own coins that he had minted across his empire while he was alive.¹⁷ (It is also present on the reverse of this particular coin.) While the dotted edge may have simply been a stylistic choice, it could also have strengthened the connection between this coin of Ptolemy, and the Macedonian line which first brought the empire to Egypt.

Ultimately, the obverse of the coin projects an image by Ptolemy through Alexander of forceful conquest, but happy acceptance. The elephant-skin cap serves as a reminder of Macedonian conquest across many areas, while the horns of Ammon soften the edges of Alexander's image by making him seem belovedly Egyptian. The mitra of Dionysos and the resemblance to Herakles are nods to Alexander's divine status and/or ancestry. Alexander's image may also allude to his body in Alexandria, and the cult that sprung up from it. Lastly, the aesthetic nuances of the coin keep it looking rather Macedonian. These images combined would have created a potent royal image of Alexander as a formidable yet accepted conqueror, whose influence and body were in Ptolemy's possession.

¹³ Lorber, Catherine C. "The Coinage of the Ptolemies," 212.

¹⁴ Lorber, Catherine C. "The Coinage of the Ptolemies," 212.

¹⁵ Mørkholm, Otto. *Early Hellenistic coinage: from the accession of Alexander to the Peace of Apamea*, 63-64.

¹⁶ Mørkholm, Otto. *Early Hellenistic coinage: from the accession of Alexander to the Peace of Apamea*, 63-64.

¹⁷ See Appendix B for an example of a dotted-edge coin minted by Alexander III of Macedon. See Appendix C for an example of a dotted-edge coin minted by Philip II of Macedon.

The Reverse

The reverse is yet again an iteration of Alexander's original coins, but altered to Ptolemy's preferences. Some of the symbols utilized on the reverse are not as clear as those of the obverse, but Ptolemy's influence on the coin is quite obvious. In the lower right hand side of the reverse is an eagle standing on a thunderbolt—Ptolemy's personal symbol.¹⁸ While much of the coin may have drawn connections to Alexander, this eagle was a way for Ptolemy to put his personal identity on the coin. Interestingly, the legend still bears Alexander's name, ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ.¹⁹ This was common in coins which followed closely after Alexander's death; the Diadochi were at first hesitant to change their coin types too radically from Alexander's. Ptolemy was the first to make drastic changes; indeed, he began minting coins with only his name around 298 BCE.²⁰ The combination of Alexander's name and Ptolemy's personal symbol is a way for Ptolemy to draw on Alexander's power and image, as he was wont to do, as well as to make the coin his own.

The main subject of the reverse is standing Athena, who has taken the place of seated Zeus on Alexander's original coins.²¹ She bears a shield and spear, as well as her usual plumed helmet, and is shown in the motion of battle. The depiction is also notably in the archaizing style, as is evident by the pleating of her chiton.²² The switch from Zeus to Athena may perhaps seem counterproductive—after all, Ptolemy was clearly trying to advertise Alexander as the deified son of Zeus-Ammon. However, the drastic change of reverse deity may have been a way of signaling a change in reign. As Ptolemy established his own court in Egypt, this was perhaps another way of differentiating his coins from Alexander's original Herakles-Zeus type. The Athena on this coin is also suggested to be Athena Alkidemos (“protector of the people”), so perhaps the shift to Athena was meant as a gesture of guardianship by Ptolemy towards the people of Egypt.²³ The presence of Athene, as well as Ptolemy's personal eagle, are features of the coin that define it as his, rather than Alexander's.

The two remaining features of the reverse are less easily defined than Athena and the eagle. On the right hand side of the reverse, directly above the eagle's head, is a small rounded impression. Some other coins of Ptolemy I Soter have featured a small pegasus on the reverse, mid-flight with its legs in a galloping position.²⁴ I believe that this ill-defined impression, though not clearly recognizable as a pegasus, bears a significant structural similarity to the other pegasi seen on Ptolemaic coinage. I would suggest the rounded portion of the impression to be

¹⁸ Lorber, Catherine C. "The Coinage of the Ptolemies," 213.

¹⁹ The legends of coins were most often in the genitive case, as this one is. The direct translation of this legend is “of Alexander.”

²⁰ Lorber, Catherine C. "The Coinage of the Ptolemies," 213.

²¹ Object Label, *Coin with Portrait of Alexander the Great with Elephant-scalp Cap and Horns of Ammon*.

²² Mørkholm, Otto. *Early Hellenistic coinage: from the accession of Alexander to the Peace of Apamea*, 63-64.

²³ Thonemann, Peter. *The Hellenistic World Using Coins as Sources*, 19.

²⁴ See Appendix D for an example of a coin of Ptolemy I Soter with a pegasus on the reverse.

the body of the pegasus, with the leftmost branching extrusion to be the wings, and the two others to be its legs. This does leave questions unanswered— for instance, why is the pegasus so much less defined than the other images on the reverse? However, it would not be illogical for Ptolemy to feature a pegasus on this coin. As previously mentioned, there are examples of other pegasus-bearing coins by Ptolemy, and by Alexander before him.²⁵ By using another small, less overt image of Alexander, Ptolemy could strengthen his coin’s connection to Alexander without diverting too much attention from the fact that the coin was distinctly his. The reverse of the coin shows an interesting mix of imagery unique to Ptolemy with imagery unique to Alexander, so to see the use of another of Alexander’s coinage symbols would not be implausible.

Lastly, the reverse bears a small symbol below Athena’s shield-bearing arm. It appears to be a monogram, as was common on many coins, including many of Ptolemy’s. However, this monogram does not match any other monogram from Ptolemy’s coinage, nor from any of his successors’ coins, in as much as I have seen. Indeed, it does not seem to match any monogram which I was able to identify on any coins, nor in any database.²⁶ The constituent letters are likely K and O, though Λ and Γ are possibilities as well. While the exact meaning of the monogram is not clear, it is not unreasonable to suggest that it was another choice by Ptolemy to draw the focus of the coin to himself, rather than Alexander. If the monogram was something unique to Ptolemy, it would serve a similar purpose to the eagle— differentiating Ptolemy’s coinage from Alexander’s.

The reverse is more of an eclectic mix of images than the obverse. While the obverse is purely indicative of Alexander, the reverse features symbols of Ptolemy alongside those of his predecessor. The goddess Athena and the eagle are both distinct changes made by Ptolemy, while the pegasus is a continuation of Alexander’s own imagery. The monogram may be either. The reverse in its entirety, however, demonstrates well the transition from Alexander’s coins to Ptolemy’s independent coins.

Conclusions

This coin of Ptolemy’s is something of a double-edged sword— it recalls the power and influence of Alexander, while also marking the transition to Ptolemy’s reign. The obverse portrays Alexander as divine in multiple ways, and alludes to his remarkable conquest of India, as well as to a warmer reception in Egypt. The reverse, on the other hand, is more indicative of Ptolemy’s reign. The subject of the reverse changes from Alexander’s typical seated Zeus, and Ptolemy has incorporated his own imagery alongside Alexander’s, such as his personal eagle image. These elements combined suggest a coin produced at something of a crossroads— on one hand, Ptolemy was hesitant to venture too far away from Alexander, out of a desire to draw on his near-mythical reputation. On the other hand, he was taking the rule of Egypt into his own

²⁵ See Appendix E for an example of a coin of Alexander III of Macedon with a pegasus on the reverse.

²⁶ American Numismatic Society. PELLA.

hands, which is subtly reflected in this stage of coinage. This coin is unique, caught between two eras— not quite Alexander’s, not quite Ptolemy’s.

Appendices

Appendix A



Silver tetradrachm, minted by Ptolemy I Soter in Egypt, 323-305 BCE²⁷

Appendix B



Silver tetradrachm, minted by Alexander III of Macedon at Amphipolis, 336-323 BCE²⁸

²⁷Object Label, *Coin with Portrait of Alexander the Great with Elephant-scalp Cap and Horns of Ammon.*

²⁸American Numismatic Society. PELLA.

Appendix C



Silver tetradrachm, minted by Philip II of Macedon at Pella, 359-348 BCE²⁹

Appendix D



Gold stater, minted by Ptolemy I Soter at Memphis, 323-316 BCE³⁰

²⁹American Numismatic Society. PELLA.

³⁰American Numismatic Society. PELLA.

Appendix E



Silver didrachm, minted by Alexander III of Macedon at Amphipolis, 336-323 BCE³¹

³¹American Numismatic Society. PELLA.

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