

Magically back to life: Some thoughts on ancient coins and the study of Hellenistic royal portraits

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The character and function of Hellenistic royal portraiture (including the images of Alexander the Great) have been examined by an increasing number of modern scholars. This is in contrast to the use of these portraits as a means of gazing on the 'true' features of figures known from literature (a practice which admittedly played an important role in the Renaissance rediscovery of antiquity). Ancient portraits still decorate the endless stream of publications on great figures and events from the past, often (it would seem) with little more intent than to brighten up the text. It would be churlish to say that these can add nothing. Francis Haskell noted that '*even images wholly unrelated to specific events have made the past more generally accessible. The brightly illustrated dust-jackets within which publishers insist on disguising the most obscure and abstruse historical texts provide a telling, if frivolous, acknowledgement of the view that any authentic painting surviving from the period under discussion can, like Proust's madeleine, bring it magically back to life.*'¹ How true this is of the use of ancient portraits. But it is also true that there is today a greater awareness that we need to be able to read the complex messages encoded within a portrait, and that only an appreciation of context can provide any hope of achieving this goal. Coins have always played a crucial role in the study of Hellenistic royal portraiture but it is arguable that the art historian's use of this material fails to exploit the present day understanding of the function of Hellenistic coinage and the nature of its iconography. In short, art history has maintained its interest in coins but has not kept up with numismatics.

The standard work on Hellenistic royal portraits today is the monograph by R.R.R. Smith published in 1988.² Although described as a 'minimalist' survey by A.F. Stewart, Smith's study has the distinction of being focused on the philosophy and methodology employed by those who would identify ancient royal portraits.³ It is also challenging in its assessment of numismatic evidence. As noted above, ancient coins, historically, have been a basic resource in the study of royal portraiture; one need only think of the very long concern with the image of Alexander the Great and the obsessive search for some inkling of portraiture on the coins minted in his name. My paper, however, is largely concerned with the perceived relationship between the king or queen and the different media in which their portraits were reproduced.

At the outset we need to establish some basics. Smith observed that royal portraits played an important role in both 'defining and expressing' the very character of kingship.⁴ Their primary

1 Haskell 1993, 4.

2 Smith 1988, 56.

3 Stewart 1993, 56.

4 Smith 1988, 1.

function was not to give the king ‘a recognizable identity (whether real or not)’ but rather to provide ‘a visual portrayal of ideas about kingship’. The business of these portraits then was not to convey a realistic image of the monarch’s appearance or some characteristic feature of his/her personality, even though it might achieve this, but to inform the viewer about the formal position of the ruler. This assertion would seem to be supported by a good number of Hellenistic royal portraits in sculpture, for the general treatment of the subject is often decidedly idealized, with extensive use of generalized stylistic features. Consider, for example, the problematic ‘Terme ruler’ (Rome, Terme Museum 1049) now thought to depict Attalus II of Pergamon.⁵ But the coins are surprisingly detailed in their depiction of royalty. Staying with Pergamon consider, for example, the portrait of Philetaerus minted by Eumenes I (cat. 41) with its powerful almost brutal features. Moreover, attention to actual appearance is a feature of the very first Hellenistic coin portrait, that of Ptolemy I Soter (cat. 47-50), after the idealized Alexander images (cat. 42-46, 56-73).

Almost all art historians would probably join Smith in asserting that statuary was the most important medium for the royal portrait. The paucity of surviving examples from the Hellenistic period has been attributed to the contemporary taste for statues in bronze (which were subsequently melted down) and the fact that these images were never popular with the Romans and so were rarely copied in marble. In total, suggests Smith, there are today no more than about 120 surviving life size royal portraits.⁶ But how widespread was the Hellenistic practice of setting up statues of rulers? Many important towns and cities probably had shrines and statues honouring royal cults. But how many images of the kings and queens were to be seen by the populace outside administrative capitals? Were their statues largely confined to an *agalma* within the cult temple or in the council-hall that might be replaced once the ruler or his family had fallen from power? Smith calculated that on the island of Delos, with its internationally recognized sanctuary of Apollo, the evidence of inscriptions points to the existence of some 70 portraits of royalty set up between 314 and c.50 BC.⁷ In the Aegean there were few larger or more diverse audiences than those at the great festivals on Delos. On turning to the coins, Smith calculated that there are some 60 identified coin portraits for the approximately 80 known legitimate rulers who lived between c.300 and 30 BC.⁸ This apparently impressive record, however, does not match the more abundant number of Roman imperial coin portraits and, because many of the surviving Hellenistic royal portraits in sculpture ‘are so generalized that they can have been based on no defined portrait model’, he concluded that the use of coin identification in this context was ‘for us, for the most part, a fruitless pursuit’.⁹ The problem for Smith, and many other scholars wishing to identify otherwise anonymous statues, is that there often seems to be a poor match between Hellenistic coin types depicting named rulers and statues

5 Queyrel 2003, 200-234, cat. E1.

6 Smith 1988, 2-4.

7 Smith 1988, 21.

8 Smith 1988, 21.

9 Smith 1988, 4.

purportedly of the same figure. The fault, according to Smith, lies with the coins. A methodological crevasse begins to open when Smith suggests that there is ‘no *necessary* (his italics) connection’ between coin portraits and sculptured portraits¹⁰. But the overwhelming dependency on the evidence of coins (where available) in the great majority of attempts to identify statues of Hellenistic rulers immediately becomes apparent when one turns to the discussion of individual works in Smith’s book or in the work of any other scholar. I have already mentioned the study of Attalid portraiture by François Queyrel (2003). Here the examination of the surviving evidence for each figure inevitably begins with a detailed consideration of any relevant coins.¹¹ Ptolemy I provides a telling case (for which one also has the important study by Kyrieleis¹²). There are two main examples, a bust in the Louvre (MA 849) and another in Copenhagen (Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek 2300). The discussions of Kyrieleis and Smith make it clear that a resemblance to the coin portraits forms the key criterion for believing that they both depict the founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty. The two busts are not exactly the same and Smith takes them to be variations of the same ‘coin-portrait type’.¹³ On looking at the ‘dynastic’ coins (cat. 52-53) issued by Ptolemy II and reproduced by various other Ptolemies down into the 2nd century BC, I wonder if one of these busts (that in Copenhagen) might not depict Ptolemy’s devoted son.

Were there in fact fixed official types for the creation of royal portraits? We know that this was the case during the Roman Empire and that coin engravers, along with all other artists, carefully followed prescribed models. Because of the evident amount of variation among the surviving statues, Smith concluded that in the Hellenistic period there probably were official types but that their use was not the rule. In other words it was not necessary to adhere to the official image. In order to comprehend this situation Smith suggested that we are to suppose three basic categories of royal image: a) ‘coin-type’ portraits based on carefully defined and articulated image types, as found on coins; b) ‘type’ portraits which seem to be based on defined types but not those seen on coins; and c) ‘non-type’ portraits which do not seem to be based on any closely defined model.¹⁴ Whatever the merits of this system it does point to one clear fact - that defined image types are very largely confined to coinage. Here I would like to challenge Smith’s adjunct proposal placing the three categories in different contexts (‘close to the king’, ‘around the king’, and ‘outside the kingdom’).¹⁵ In essence he suggests that the further the source of production is removed from the king and court, the less likely it is to be a ‘coin-type’ portrait. This is surely contradicted by ancient accounts of the attempts by different artists to produce portraits of Alexander (our best attested case of a royal subject and his artists). Some of those who attempted the king’s portrait were great artists close to Alexander and his friends, but the results were very different. Consider these two quotes from

10 Smith 1988, 3.

11 Queyrel 2003.

12 Kyrieleis 1975.

13 Smith 1988, 90, and cat. 46-7.

14 Smith 1988, 29.

15 Smith 1988, 29.

Plutarch (trans. A.F. Stewart).

[Alexander's] *outward appearance is best conveyed by the portraits of Lysippos, the only sculptor whom the king thought was good enough to represent him ... When Apelles painted his Thunderbolt-bearer, however, he did not reproduce the king's complexion but made it too dark and swarthy ...* Plutarch, *Alex.* 4.1-7.

Wherefore Alexander gave orders that Lysippos alone should make his portrait ... For the others, in their eagerness to represent his crooked neck and his melting and limpid eyes, were unable to preserve his virile and leonine demeanor. Plutarch, *Alex.* 4.1-7.

The first account indicates differences among the various artists officially sanctioned by Alexander. The second informs us that there was rivalry between different artists in the same medium hoping to receive Alexander's favour; it shows that there were different images for Alexander to choose from (and that these remained in existence). Not everyone could have a portrait made by Alexander's chosen artists so the court probably had to make do with the others.

I would like to propose a somewhat different model from that of Smith. The leading artists of this era were recognized as great men in their own right; this is demonstrated, for example, by the (somewhat fanciful) story of Demetrius visiting the painter Protogenes during the siege of Rhodes (Pliny *NH* 35.104-5). During the Hellenistic age it is probable that these artists were expected to be inventive, or had the freedom to create their own particular portraits of the royal patron. Their own special devices or innovations, which were their artistic 'signatures', were welcomed rather than avoided. In this context fixed type portraits would hardly have been preferred. But I would also suggest that portraits on coins stood in a rather different relation to the ruler.

With the advent of ruler portraits on coins we begin to move towards the strict control of image that was characteristic of the Roman emperors. It is not yet an exact fit but it is moving in this direction. This is because it is the ruler who 'publishes' the coin type. The die engraver cuts an image, but it is the mint officials of the ruler who put the type before the public by minting coins. It needs to be remembered that a particular issue or a whole series required the services of a number of engravers. They were presented with an image that they had to reproduce as closely as possible, and this they did in nearly all details from die to die. Moreover, fixed images are a feature of royal portraiture on coins from the beginning. This is not the place in which to launch a discussion of the first portrait types in coinage, those of the 4th century BC Lycian dynasts (such as Perikla and Mithrapata) but I would argue that in these first depictions of the minting authority, the very first portraits of living people, we already see the presentation of official images.¹⁶

The images to be cut by die engravers were controlled by officials. It is probable that the monarch or a close advisor set out guidelines for the image and then scrutinized the submissions of the artists. It is fascinating to see the close portrayal of age in coin portraits. This is a feature largely

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Kraay 1976, 272-3. Earlier coins depicting Persian satraps are unlikely to be portraits of actual figures.

missing or reduced in other media. It is also thought-provoking to find that the first coin portrait which is not a completely idealized creation (as was the case with the youthful Alexander) is of a sixty year old man who is (more or less) made to look his age (cat. 47). There is clearly a more compelling drive to realize something of the individual in coin portraits than is visibly present in the surviving royal portraits in any other medium. And this drive seems to be linked to the fact that they are portraits put out by the state.

The creation of Hellenistic coin portraits undoubtedly owed something to contemporary fashions in the work of the leading sculptors and painters. Blanche Brown has explored these influences in a number of studies, notably her examination of the use of the 'dramatic style' in the portraits of the Successors.¹⁷ But after the creation of the first royal portraits on coins, the portraits of succeeding rulers within the same dynasty could owe more to the coin imagery of their predecessors than to any other influence. This is evident in the portraits of the Ptolemies, especially those of Ptolemy II, but there are other examples such as the coin portraits of Mithridates VI which imitated the portraits of Alexander created for the coins of Lysimachus.¹⁸

To return to Smith's categories and patterns of commission, I believe there is another point that might be made. The works of important artists were obviously limited in number (even if one takes into account workshop activity). The portraits commissioned by the ruler and his court would have been very largely set up in palaces or in the temples and sanctuaries favoured by the monarch. It is likely that these were often all in the capital city. Works commissioned by the court or prominent men would have been largely confined to private houses and select temples. As mentioned above, it is hard to judge the number of royal portraits that were set up during Hellenistic times in secular contexts. But I suspect, however, that major statues in bronze and marble played only a limited role in disseminating knowledge of the ruler. It is likely that only urban elites, and then those living in administrative capitals, ever regularly came into contact with these works of art. Instead, knowledge of the royal image – both the physical appearance and the compressed message of values and ideas – was very largely obtained through coins. The key target was inevitably the army.

It is worth considering the composition of the Hellenistic armies for it was upon their might that the rulers depended for their survival. They were extremely heterogeneous and while they might feature Greeks and Macedonians there was a significant component from the old Persian Empire. When Ptolemy arrived in Egypt after the death of Alexander he found only a small number of troops at hand. It was then necessary for him to recruit mercenaries from all parts of the eastern Mediterranean world. A number were certainly not Greek. His fleet was composed of ships manned by Phoenicians. It seems likely that most of this very diverse group of soldiers and sailors had never seen Alexander or his portraits. These men probably had little or no exposure to the statues and images of Ptolemy I now being set up in Alexandria. But they would have all known the coins of Alexander. This was their constant link with the symbolism and imagery of the great king. The soldiers were paid with coin; the image and name on the coins identified their paymaster. It was

17 Brown 1981, 1984 and 1995

18 Brown 1995, 67.

without doubt a highly prized means for Ptolemy to reinforce the message that he was the legitimate successor and heir to the king who had first created this coinage and made it a talisman of victory.

There is one crucial aspect of Hellenistic coin types that is rarely if ever explored by students of royal portraits, perhaps largely because it is deemed to have little relevance to the study of statuary. This is the relationship between the image and the legend. A quick review of the coins in this catalogue will reveal the very high percentage of coins with portraits of rulers who are not the same as the monarch named on the reverse. The most obvious examples are the different kings who minted coins with the portrait of Alexander on the obverse, but who name themselves together with the royal title. There is a complex relationship here between the way the portrait of Alexander is constructed and the coin owner's knowledge of the ruler who issued the coin. The Bactrian dynast Antimachus (c.174-165 BC) struck coins with the obverse portrait of an earlier king, Diodotus, combined with a reverse type also employed by Diodotus (the figure of 'thundering Zeus') but he moved the name of the earlier king to the obverse and placed his own name on the reverse (*SVG ANS* 296). Here we see the persuasive role of coin portraits in promoting an acceptance of continuity between successive rulers. A change in legend informed the owner of the coin that a new monarch was in place, but the continuation of a previous ruler's portrait on the same coin suggested the legitimization of his elevation to the throne through a tangible link to his predecessors. This matching of image and legend might also established a bridge towards the eventual introduction of the ruler's own image. Only coins allow us to follow this program.

Blanche Brown once noted in considering the role of coin evidence in the study of Hellenistic royal portraiture that 'they can document workshop activity as no other art can'.¹⁹ They form a 'remarkably intimate archive' for which we have often precise information about the date and location (mint) of the work produced. At the same time the sheer amount of coinage that survives often enables us to examine a range of images for the same figure, sometimes illuminating the most minute changes in portraiture. A greater appreciation of the function of coinage, the context in which it was used, and the construction of coin imagery (with the changing legends) can only strengthen the study of ancient portraiture.

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Brown 1995, 54.

Abbreviations

AMNG = <i>Die antiken Münzen Nord-Griechenlands</i>	Mitchiner = Mitchiner, 1975-1976
Bopearachchi = Bopearachchi, 1999	Newell and Noe = Newell and Noe, 1950
Devasne and Le Rider = Devasne and Le Rider, 1989	Price = Price, 1991
ESM = Newell, 1938	SC = Houghton and Lorber, 2002
ESMS = Kritt, 1997	SNG = <i>Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum</i>
Le Rider = Le Rider, 1977	Svoronos = Svoronos, 1904-1908
	WSM = Newell, 1941

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