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Portraiture and the Persians

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The purpose of this brief paper is to consider the relationship between the choice of coin types to represent the authority of the Persian king and his officials, and the emergence of portraiture on coins during the fourth century BC. It reflects the recent work of a number of scholars, and is intended simply as an expression of some thoughts (not all conventional) on the background to the royal coinages of the Hellenistic period.¹

Lydian electrum origins

Ancient Greek coinage, paradoxically, was invented by the Lydians during the reign of Sadyattes (c.621–610 BC) or perhaps more likely under Alyattes II (c.610–560 BC).² There is a temptation to see the Lydians as pretenders to Greek culture. This distorted perspective fails to diminish the evidence that the Lydians, a ‘barbarian’ people, invented coinage to facilitate the administration of an economy of empire (which included Greek subjects). This invention can be seen as a logical result of the extensive use of precious metals by eastern rulers and religious organisations to manage economies of far greater scale and complexity than anything achieved in Greece until the reign of Alexander. It was a Lydian idea to put the royal seal (the lion’s head; Figs 1a and b) on the coin so as to identify it as the possession of the king and to assert that it

was the king who guaranteed the coin’s value. The first coins were of electrum, a mix of gold and silver which occurred as a natural alluvial ore in Lydia, but in which the proportion of gold to silver fluctuated.³

Robert Wallace has argued that the creation of coinage came about through a need to guarantee a standard value for a metal object whose intrinsic value might vary considerably (though we know now that the Lydians artificially increased the silver levels).⁴ Recent American excavations at the capital of Lydia, Sardis, have confirmed that (despite uncertainty among modern scholars) the last Lydian king, Croesus, continued to mint electrum coins until around the mid sixth century BC, when as Herodotus claimed, the king then produced separate gold and silver coinages.⁵ The Greeks knew a gold coin which they called a *croesid* and it should be that which carried the obverse emblem of the lion and bull.

When the Persian king, Cyrus the Great, captured the Lydian empire in 546 BC he was content to allow the mint at Sardis to continue issuing the old royal coinage of the Lydians. Even though the Mermnads had fallen from power the royal seal of the Lydian king continued to guarantee this coinage for some thirty years until, under Darius I around 510 BC, a new, ostensibly Persian, coinage was introduced.



Figure 1. Lydia. Electrum trite.

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Figure 2. Persian mint at Sardis. Siglos.

Marr Bequest. ACANS.

A Persian coinage

The gold coin of the Persians was called a *daric* by the Greeks (this was later explained as a reference to Darius, but it should also be noted that *dari* was Old Persian for golden).⁶ The silver coin was a *siglos*, a word linked to *shekel* (Figs 2a and b). The obverse of both coins shows a bearded figure wearing the tiara and armed with a bow (hence the popular Greek name *toxotes* or archer); he might also carry a quiver, a spear, or sword. This cannot be seen as an attempt to create a portrait of the king—but it is a representation of the king. It may simply be noted here that these are the very first coins to show a representation of a king and arguably the very first to show a representation of a living person.

Let us remind ourselves of some salient points about Persian coinage. It is a sobering fact that the mint of Sardis was the imperial mint of the Persian king; it is the only mint known to have certainly struck royal Achaemenid coinage. Sardis was the capital of the second most western satrapy of the empire. It is at one end of the royal road from Susa, some 2,500 km away or 90 days travelling at 30 km a day.⁷ In short, this single royal mint was physically a long way from the king. Its

output circulated very largely in the west of the empire, well away from the royal treasuries in Persis itself. Coinage was not minted in the eastern half, which included the heartland of the empire, the province of Parsa or Persis (Fars in modern day Iran). Coinage was essentially alien to the Persians. It was viewed as a means by which the financial administration of the western lands could be achieved. The Persians, like the Romans, typically adopted and adapted local practices in their approach to the task of ruling foreign people. They were happy to accept the role of coinage in the local political economies and tolerated a certain amount of freedom in the right to mint coins and in the selection of coin images. Herodotus (3.89) tells us that at tax time coinages were treated as bullion; a subject state could offer any coins, for they were simply all melted down by the Persians and made into ingots.

There are few coin hoards from Iraq and Iran which predate the invasion of Alexander. But, remarkably, two of the earliest dated hoards in existence come from deposits within the foundations of the palace at Persepolis which were begun by Darius I in the decade 520–510 BC, just prior to the reform of Persian coinage.⁸ These held a total of eight gold croesids, and four silver coins of the

Greeks. The mix of coins officially minted under Persian control but still carrying the iconography of the last Lydian king, and then of coins randomly, it would appear, from subservient (Abdera, Cypriot cities) and independent (Aegina) Greek states is puzzling in the context of the Apadana with its carefully orchestrated range of images of Persian royal power. It would appear that our own modern understanding of the symbolism of coinage was not shared by the Persian king himself.

We can divide the different minters within the (western) Persian Empire into three categories. Firstly, there was the Persian king; next, there were high ranking Persian officials (satraps and governors); and thirdly, there were his subjects, the client kings and cities. The money of the king from his mint at Sardis carried an image of the king but never an inscription. His officials ordered subject cities and kingdoms to produce coin issues using local expertise and equipment; sometimes these probably carried the normal types of the mint, but those we can detect employed the same types combined with new inscriptions or introduced new types with new inscriptions. These legends identified the minting authority either as the Persian king, in which case no actual name is given, just his title, or as the king's official (but here only personal names are given and not the office). The new obverse types were typically representations of Persians: a head, bust or even full length figure, marked out with the appropriate iconography of rank. These were not depictions of gods or heroes. They were meant to be understood as representations of men. They signalled that the authority for the issue of the coins was invested

in the person of the king or in the king's officials. It is at this point that the question of portraiture joins the discussion, for a number of scholars have claimed to be able to perceive the features of individuals among these types.

In 1948 Stanley Robinson proposed that portraits of two Persian satraps, Tissaphernes and Pharnabazus, could be seen on some rare late 5th or early 4th century BC coins from Caria.⁹ Later scholars, notably Leo Mildenberg, have pointed out that there is very little to substantiate any part of Robinson's thesis.¹⁰ There are no inscribed names to identify the men on the coins and no supporting texts to prove that they even minted coins. We are not even sure where they were found. The soft cap with bow tie at front and absence of a tiara indicates that this is not a representation of the Persian king. But all three carry part of the inscription *BASILEUS*—the king—and this must mean that they were struck for the great king. The only argument for their status as satrapal issues, as Mildenberg pointed out (and Mildenberg would argue that satrapal coinages did not exist), rests with the identification of the obverse types as portraits of the satraps. There was of course no Greek tradition of coin portraiture at this time. There was also no Persian tradition, and there never would be one. The Greek and Persian traditions converge at this time in dictating that these images would be emblematic. Modern studies such as that of Borchhardt, which have benefited from the appearance of much new material, have shown the existence of an elaborate typology of Persian head types.¹¹ The dies were cut by local artists and followed the contemporary

conventions of Greek art (and it is the skill in rendering the human form which drives speculation over portraiture), but even when an inscription is present the images are to be understood as representations of authority, serving the same function as the cut-out figure of the king on his own coins.

The largest group of minters, those within the third category, comprised the Greek and non-Greek native states within the Persian satrapies of western Asia Minor, the Levant, Egypt, and the Aegean. They were all permitted to strike coins in their own name. Non-Greek states located in south-west Asia Minor were ruled through a system of native dynasts. The coinages of these rulers were inspired by Greek models; the dynasts regularly employed Greek engravers and chose to express their identity through wholly adopted or modified Greek designs but with inscriptions in their own native alphabets. They were also influenced by the iconography of coinage minted by Persian officials and might have themselves represented in the form of a Persian nobleman (with the appropriate headwear) but again with native inscriptions revealing their own name. A well known example is the Lycian dynast Kherei, who was in power at Xanthos sometime between 410 and 390 BC.¹² In the fourth century BC two Lycian dynasts, Mithrapata and Perikla, both dynasts at Antiphellus (modern between 380 and 360 BC, chose to Kaş) replace the generic ruler heads of the Persian officials with images that rendered something of their own features, and which may be recognised as true portraits.

The face of Mithrapata, identified through inscription, bears distinctly non-classical features: a receding forehead,

heavy brow, and a long rather uneven nose. Borchhardt recognised six separate portrait types which in sequence appear to document the aging of Mithrapata, suggesting that the die engravers tried to capture something of his features on each occasion that new dies were commissioned.¹³

The portraits of the other dynast of Antiphellus, Perikla or Perikles, are rather different for they have a distinctly idealising quality about them.¹⁴ One portrait seems to be based on the famous Syracusan die made by Kimon, depicting the facing Arethusa.¹⁵ The images of both dynasts were undoubtedly inspired by contemporary experiments in portraiture by Greek sculptors and painters, though these experiments were still confined to famous people who were deceased. The representation of living figures had no place in Greek art or coinage at this time, and portraiture had no place in Persian art. The Lycian dynasts combined the Persian tradition of representing authority through an emblematic image of the figure of the king or his officials with contemporary experiments by Greek artists on the portraiture of famous people.

These conventions for representing royal authority on the coinage of the Persian king, his officials and the dynasts subject to Persia did not disappear with the conquests of Alexander. Instead, it can be argued that they were to exercise an important influence on Alexander's own minting policies once he had taken possession of Darius's kingdom, and were crucial to the evolution of the royal coinages of the Hellenistic kings.

The first mints to be established in the eastern half of the old Persian empire were those of Alexander.¹⁶ In a sense the Macedonian king was responsible for the first truly Persian issues. After the capture



a. b.
Figure 3. Alexander III, 'Babylon'. Tetradrachm.
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Colln.

of Babylon by Alexander in 331 BC a new mint was set up in the capital to issue large quantities of Alexander's own coins (fig. 3a and b).¹⁷ At the same time the Persian satrap Mazaios, who had been appointed governor by Alexander, was empowered to mint double gold darics weighing around 16.8g with their traditional obverse type, the figure of the king as archer.¹⁸ The iconography remains the same, the king holding bow and spear. But who is being represented? Not the Persian king Darius III for he was now dead and his empire had fallen. Clearly the figure now symbolized Alexander. It was a representation of a Persian king, but it was primarily a symbol of royal power, and this status could be transferred to Alexander. One is reminded of the Persian's own use of Lydian coinage with its emblems of the Lydian king.

Alexander's Persian style coins perhaps suggested continuity in Persian traditions that fitted with Alexander's policy of combining native and Greek practices. Alexander's own 'Greek' coins were now being largely issued by the mints of cities that were formerly a part of the Persian Empire. The great majority of his new subjects, who were not Greek and had only a limited exposure to Greek culture, would have recognised the head of Herakles as a symbol of Alexander.

I believe that many would very likely have seen it as a representation of the king. If this was the case then it might be suggested that it was the force of this association by the conquered peoples, who far outnumbered the new Macedonian masters, which led to the rapid posthumous identification of Alexander with the Herakles type.

Notes

1. As this was given as a public lecture I have not attempted to give more than brief reference to the extensive literature which now exists on this topic. Special mention must be made of the following publications: I. Carradice (ed), *Coinage and Administration in the Athenian and Persian Empires*. *BAR Int.* 343 (Oxford, 1987); O Casabonne (ed), *Mécanismes et innovations monétaires dans l'Anatolie achéménide*. *Numismatique et histoire* (Paris, 2000); and G Le Rider, *La naissance de la monnaie* (Paris, 2001) and *Alexandre le Grand. Monnaie, finances et politique* (Paris, 2003).
2. Le Rider (n.1; 2001), 41–100.
3. A Ramage and P Craddock (eds), *King Croesus' Gold* (London and Harvard, 2000).
4. RW Wallace, 'The origin of electrum coinage', *American Journal of Archaeology* 91 (1987), 385–96. On the addition of silver see Ramage and Craddock (n.3), 172–3.
5. N Cahill and JH Kroll, 'New Archaic Coin Finds at Sardis', *American Journal of Archaeology* 109 (2005), 589–617.
6. Le Rider (n.1; 2001), 101–21; but now see Cahill and Kroll (n.5) in relation to the dating.
7. JM Cook, *The Persian Empire* (London 1983), esp. Chs VIII and X.
8. IGCH 1789. A Zournatzi, 'The Apadana coin hoards, Darius I, and the West', *American Journal of Numismatics* 15 (2003), 1–28.
9. ESG Robinson, 'Greek Coins Acquired by the British Museum, 1938–1948', *Numismatic Chronicle* 1948, 43–65.
10. L Mildenberg, 'On the so-called satrapal coinage', in Olivier Casabonne (n.1), 9–20.
11. J Borchhardt, 'Die Bedeutung der lykischen Königshöfe für die Entstehung des Porträts', in H von Steuben (ed), *Antike Porträts: zum Gedächtnis von Helga von Heintze* (Möhnesee,

- 1999), 53–84.
12. Borchhardt (n.11), 63–8.
 13. Borchhardt (n.11), 74–8.
 14. Borchhardt (n.11), 78–82.
 15. CM Kraay, *Archaic and Classical Greek Coins* (London, 1976), 272.
 16. Le Rider (n.1; 2003), 267–334.
 17. MJ Price, *The Coinage in the Name of Alexander the Great and Philip Arrhidaeus: A British Museum Catalogue* (London and Zurich, 1991), 484–9. Le Rider (n.1; 2003), 291–9.
 18. H Nicolet-Pierre, 'Argent et or frappés en Babylonie entre 331 et 311 ou de Mazdai à Séleucos', in Michel Amandry et Silvia Hurter (eds), *Travaux de numismatique grecque offerts a Georges Le Rider* (London, 1999), 285–305, has argued, however, that all of these darics were minted after the death of Alexander. But see Le Rider (n.1; 2003), 279–84, 323–7.

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