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Royal iconography

Since the Hellenistic ruler cult (see Appendix II) served as the basis of and justification for much of the new political order of the Hellenistic age, it was clearly important that the subjects of the various Hellenistic kings be persuaded to accept and respect the institution. In an age when newspapers, electronic communication, and even an extensive book trade were not available to be enlisted as vehicles for political propaganda, the visual arts became one of the chief means by which this acceptance and respect were to be won and a ruler's policies and achievements conveyed.

Greek art in the Classical period had already been used in a modest way to convey political messages, as the monuments that lined the Sacred Way at Delphi, for example, attest. The most obvious form of such propagandistic monuments were votives which commemorated military victories, such as the Nike of Paionios at Olympia, or in a more general and complex way, the Periclean buildings on the Athenian acropolis. Although portraits of generals were sometimes included in such creations,¹ they were by and large impersonal monuments, emphasizing the events and the cities involved but placing little or no emphasis on specific personalities. By contrast, the major focus of much of the propagandistic art of the Hellenistic period was on the personality of the individual ruler who shaped events. One of the new tasks that confronted the Hellenistic artist was, therefore, the creation of a royal imagery that would make the nature of these individuals vivid.

In what perhaps deserves to be recognized as the first work of Hellenistic art, the funeral carriage of Alexander the Great, many typical elements of the sort of art that would long serve the institution of Hellenistic kingship are already apparent. The carriage, which was the principal feature of a funeral cortège that had been organized to carry Alexander's body back to Macedonia but was dramatically intercepted by Ptolemy, is described in detail by the historian Diodoros (18.26.3). From Diodoros's description it is clear that the fusion of Greek and oriental forms that typified Alexander's newly forged empire and his conception of kingship (see Appendix II)

was a part of Hellenistic royal art from the beginning. The body itself was placed in a hammered gold anthropoid sarcophagus, a form familiar in Egypt and Phoenicia but unknown in Greece. This sarcophagus, encased in a second gold casket and covered with a purple robe, was placed, along with Alexander's armor, in a carriage that consisted of a vaulted roof supported by an Ionic peristyle, both made of gold. The vault was decorated with 'scales studded with jewels' and from its cornice projected goat-stag protomes, both oriental features which are echoed, if not directly imitated, on the lid of the Alexander Sarcophagus in Istanbul (see [32] and p. 38). At each corner of the vault, on the other hand, there were typically Greek akroteria representing figures of Nike bearing trophies. Inside the peristyle were nets woven of golden thread and draped like screens around the sarcophagus on four sides. On these nets were suspended four paintings; one depicted Alexander seated and holding a scepter in the presence of a special honor guard of Macedonians and Persians; a second showed a military procession with war elephants guided by Indian drivers and carrying Macedonian warriors; a third showed cavalry drawn up in battle formation; and the fourth depicted ships being fitted out for battle. The themes of these pictures – the majesty of the king, the greatness of his power and exploits, and the diverse cultural character of his realm – set the tone for much of later Hellenistic royal iconography. Only the theme of apotheosis, the celebration of the divine nature of the king, seems to have been lacking in an explicit form, and that theme quickly came to be attached to the monument as a whole when it reached Alexandria.

The influence of the forms and ideas of this funeral carriage on those who lived in the newly-forming kingdoms of the Hellenistic age was apparently considerable. 'It attracted many sightseers,' Diodoros tells us, 'because of its far-flung renown. For the whole population of every city along its route always turned out to meet it and again escorted it as it moved on, nor were people ever satiated with delight from looking at it.'

The royal portrait

Images of Alexander

No genre of art is more closely bound up with the nature of the individual than is portraiture, and it was only natural that the artists whose task it was to create the royal imagery of the Hellenistic age should devote much of their energy to the development of effective, persuasive royal portraits. The master of this art, the virtual creator of Hellenistic ruler portraiture, was the sculptor Lysippos of Sikyon, whose portraits so pleased Alexander the Great that the king made him his court sculptor and decreed, according to Pliny, Plutarch, and others, that no other artist was authorized to make his image.² The Lysippan portraits of the king, in other words, became the official image, the one that Alexander wanted his subjects to retain in their minds. The characteristics of this image, fortunately, are well described in two passages from Plutarch.

It is the statues of Lysippos which best convey Alexander's physical appearance (and he himself felt it proper that he should be modelled only by Lysippos). For it was this artist who captured exactly those distinctive features which many of Alexander's successors and friends later tried to imitate, namely the poise of the neck turned slightly to the left and the melting glance of the eyes. (Plutarch, *Alexander* 4.1)

When Lysippos first modelled a portrait of Alexander with his face turned upward toward the sky, just as Alexander himself was accustomed to gaze, turning his neck gently to one side, someone inscribed, not inappropriately, the following epigram:

The bronze statue seems to proclaim, looking at
Zeus: I place the earth under my sway; you,
O Zeus, keep Olympos.

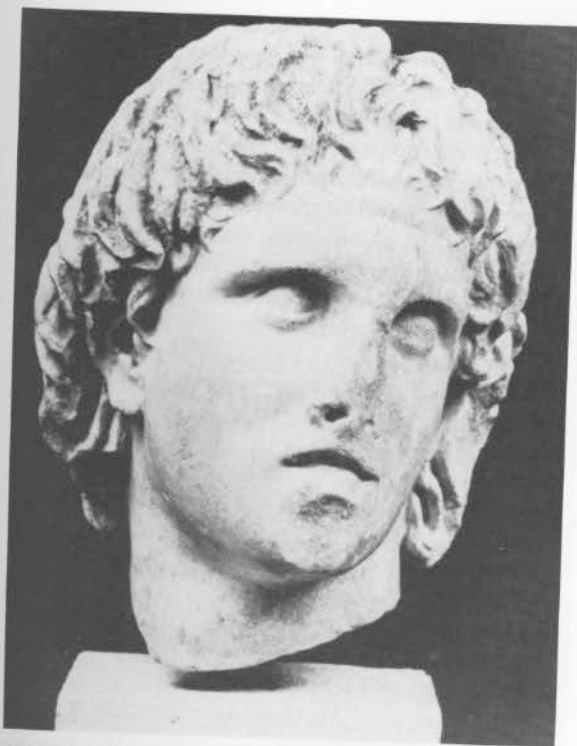
For this reason, Alexander decreed that only Lysippos should make his portrait. For only Lysippos, it seems, brought out his real character in the bronze and gave form to his essential excellence. For others, in their eagerness to imitate the turn of his neck and the expressive, liquid glance of his eyes, failed to preserve his manly and leonine quality. (Plutarch, *De Alexandri Magni Fortuna aut Virtute* 2.2.3)

Plutarch's language is revealing. The Lysippan images conveyed not only Alexander's *arete*, the virtues that society could be expected to admire, but also his *ethos*, his personal character. They were images of one whose role it was to rule and whose nature made him fit to rule. In them Lysippos created a new type in western art, the portrait of the 'ruler-hero,' a kind of historical Herakles endowed with great aspirations and capable of equally great deeds. The type became part of the standard royal iconography of the Hellenistic kingdoms and was used for centuries by lesser men who liked to see themselves as worthy successors of Alexander.

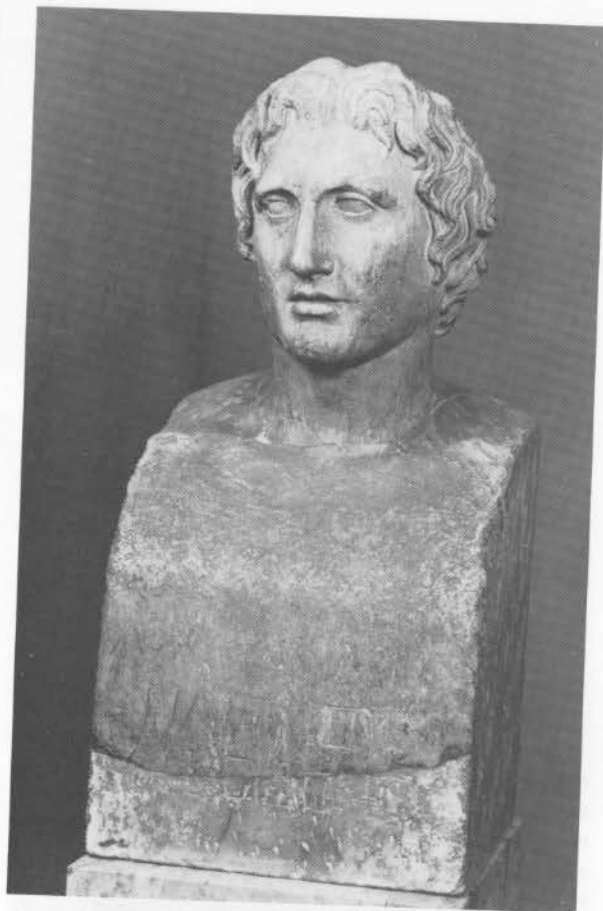
Although no original portrait of Alexander by Lysippos has survived, it is not difficult to identify the Lysippan features which Plutarch mentions – the turn of the neck,



5 Head of Alexander from Pergamon. Marble. Ca. 200 B.C. Istanbul, Archaeological Museum. H. 0.41 m.



6 Head of Alexander from Pella. Marble. Ca. 200–150 B.C. Pella, Archaeological Museum. H. 0.30 m.



7 Head of Alexander known as the 'Azara herm.' Marble. Roman copy after an original of the later 4th century B.C. Paris, Louvre. H. 0.68 m.

the upward, aspiring glance – in later portraits of the king, both Hellenistic originals and Roman copies. It is considerably more difficult to decide, however, how closely these later works mirror the original Lysippan type. The well-known head of Alexander from Pergamon [5], for example, probably to be dated somewhere around 180 B.C. (see p. 29), conveys, one would like to think, the dramatic force of the Lysippan portraits, but its undulating, bulging surface, its constricted, rounded eyes, and its deeply drilled hair clearly belong to the high Pergamene style.³ Perhaps closer to the original type is a less well-known head discovered in Yannitsa near the Macedonian capital at Pella [6]. The long mane of hair which typifies this head is a characteristic of images of the 'heroic Alexander,' the sort of image which came to express the spirit of the 'Alexander legend' (cf. [18]), and the portrait is probably to be dated to the time of Philip V or Perseus (i.e. ca. 200–175 B.C.). Its relative lack of dramatic exaggeration, however, and the way the general treatment of the eyes and hair approximates those of Greek sculpture of the late fourth and early third centuries B.C. suggest that, in some respects, it may be a close reflection of a Lysippan prototype.

The evidence of monuments which preserve what seem to be nearly contemporary and unheroized images of Alexander, such as the Alexander sarcophagus and the Alexander Mosaic [37 and 2], suggest that in his own

lifetime, Alexander was represented in a naturalistic fashion, with relatively short hair. For this reason, and also because it bears some resemblance to other works ascribed to Lysippos, the badly weathered and considerably restored portrait in the Louvre known as the 'Azara herm' has frequently been cited as the best surviving Roman replica of a Lysippan original [7]. That the Azara herm does represent Alexander is beyond doubt since it is inscribed 'Alexander, the son of Philip,' and even if the inscription did not exist, the portrait would probably be safely identifiable as Alexander because of the way the hair above the center of the forehead stands straight up. This *anastole* of the hair, Plutarch records (see *infra*), was a distinctive feature of Alexander's physiognomy.

Because the Azara head is in such poor condition, it does not help us much in visualizing the expression of the original Lysippan portrait, although, if one studies it closely, the typical features of the Lysippan prototype – turn of the neck, slightly open mouth, aspiring glance – can all be detected. The striking similarity, however, of the shape of the Azara head to the head on a small bronze



8 Statuette of Alexander with a lance. Bronze. Based on an original statue of ca. 330–325 B.C. Paris, Louvre. H. o.165 m.

statuette [8] also in the Louvre suggests that both the herm and the statuette are derived from the same original, and if this is in fact the case, it becomes easier to evaluate the effect of the total composition involved in Lysippos's portrait.⁴ The statuette, which presumably depicted Alexander with a lance, exemplifies the open, exocentric composition which typified the 'role portrait' of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. (see p. 62). Like the Lateran Sophocles [54], it was designed to convey the idea that influence and power radiated from the man whom it represented.

The exclusive right that was given to Lysippos to make

sculptured portraits of Alexander was a result of something more than a whim of personal taste on the part of the king. It clearly reflected the desire and need to have an official image, similar to those later cultivated by Roman emperors, for propagandistic purposes. This is made clear by the fact that the official image of Alexander that Lysippos developed in sculpture had its counterparts in other media. In painting, the exclusive responsibility, according to Pliny (*NH* 7.125), to shape the king's image was given to the renowned Apelles of Kos, and the responsibility of designing engraved images on gems and presumably also on coins was assigned to an artist named Pyrgoteles. Literary sources suggest that Apelles developed a surprisingly intimate, easy-going relationship with Alexander and was in a good position to evaluate the human qualities of the king's character.⁵ His portraits, on the other hand, at least those of which some description survives, seem to have emphasized Alexander's superhuman qualities, and it may be that Apelles worked for Alexander only at a late stage of the king's career, when the idea of his divine nature became an increasingly important political theme.⁶ The most famous image of Alexander by Apelles depicted him in the traditional format of Zeus *Keraunophoros*, i.e. Zeus holding a thunderbolt, and was placed in the great temple of Artemis of Ephesos, where many people could be expected to see it and be reminded that Alexander was not only the son of Zeus but also, in the new world of Hellenistic politics, wielded the power of Zeus. Aside from the presence of the thunderbolt, the appearance of Apelles' portrait is purely a matter of conjecture. It is likely that it depicted Alexander seated on a throne. This at least would have been the most formulaic format for representing Zeus *Keraunophoros*, one that Pheidias's great sculptured image in the temple of Zeus at Olympia had made a virtual archetype. A remote echo of Apelles' work may be preserved in the representation of a Zeus-like figure in the House of the Vettii at Pompeii [9]. It has been suggested, in fact, that the figure in the Pompeiian painting is a copy of Apelles' portrait.⁷

In addition to the *Keraunophoros*, we know something about the details of two more of Apelles' representations of Alexander, both of which were later exhibited in the Forum Augusti in Rome. Judging by Pliny's description of them (*NH* 35.94), they probably had a more specifically historical character and were replete with important political symbolism. One depicted Alexander in the company of Nike and the Dioscuri and was perhaps connected with a naval victory or expedition (the *periplous* of the Indian Ocean or the expedition down the Indus?), since the Dioscuri were patrons of sailors. Probably few educated viewers would have failed to note that Alexander was in significant and appropriate company in this painting. The Dioscuri were sons of Zeus, and they had been among the chief participants in one of the great



9 Painting of Alexander as Zeus(?), perhaps based on an original by Apelles. Pompeii, House of the Vettii. 1st century A.C.

eastward expeditions of Greek legend, the voyage of the Argonauts. The second picture in the Forum Augusti depicted Alexander in a triumphal chariot along with a personification of War (*Polemos*) with his hands bound, a reference perhaps to the final conquest of the Persian Empire.

The details of the portraits created by the third of Alexander's court artists, the engraver Pyrgoteles, are not described in any ancient source and hence are even more a matter for conjecture than Apelles' paintings. Conjecture is stimulated in the case of Pyrgoteles, however, by the fact that there is a small corpus of gems and coins of very high quality which can plausibly be connected with his influence.

Because of stylistic revivals and imitations, gems after the Archaic period are notoriously difficult to date, and it is virtually impossible to assert that any particular gem is from the time of Pyrgoteles and therefore possibly by him. There are, however, a few impressive gems which



10 The Neisos gem. Carnelian. Late 4th or 3rd century B.C. Leningrad, Hermitage. 29 x 20 mm.

many scholars feel can be dated to the late fourth or early third centuries B.C. and are worth examining here because, whatever their date, they do seem to document the type of royal imagery that Pyrgoteles and artists like him created at the beginning of the Hellenistic period. Of these the one that seems most closely associated with the ideas developed in sculpture and painting is a carnelian ringstone now in Leningrad which is inscribed with the name of one Neisos, probably its owner at some point rather than its maker [10]. The proportions and, to a degree, the pose of the figure on this gem are reminiscent of Lysippos's 'Alexander with a lance' type, but instead of a lance he holds a thunderbolt in his left hand and a sheathed sword in his right.⁸ An aegis is draped over his right forearm. To his left is the eagle of Zeus; to his right a shield. Certainly this must be Alexander as Zeus, a fusion of the aspiring-hero type of Lysippos with the god-like type of Apelles. If the stone is by, or influenced by, Pyrgoteles, one could conclude that his work for Alexander, like that of Apelles, belonged to the later stage of Alexander's career, when the king's divinity became part of official policy. The facts that his shield has been put aside, his sword sheathed, and the attributes of Zeus taken up would suggest that the conquering-hero phase of Alexander's career is behind him and his role as the all-pervading ruler is the focus of attention.

More famous but far more problematical are two large cameos, one in Vienna and the other, like the Neisos gem, in Leningrad, bearing the heads of figures who have sometimes been identified as Alexander and his mother Olympias.⁹ The decoration on the helmet of the male



11 The 'Vienna cameo.' Sardonyx. Probably early 3rd century B.C. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum. 115 x 113 mm.



12 The 'Gonzaga cameo.' Sardonyx. Probably 1st century A.C. Leningrad, Hermitage. 155 x 122 mm.

figure on the Vienna cameo [11] – a snake on the dome, the head of Zeus Ammon on the side, and a thunderbolt on the cheek-piece – are certainly appropriate for Alexander,¹⁰ but the profile of the face of the figure, in spite of its bulging forehead and aquiline nose, is quite different in its effect from that of the coin portraits of Alexander. It seems likely, as several scholars have suggested, that these figures are portraits of a Ptolemaic king and queen, probably Ptolemy II and Arsinoe II,¹¹ whose superimposed profiles were a familiar device on the coins issued by Philadelphos. These 'sibling gods' were offered worship during their lifetimes in the shrine of Alexander (see p. 273), and it would not be surprising, therefore, to find Ptolemy II clad in the attributes of Alexander.

The cameo in Leningrad [12], usually, but apparently erroneously, referred to as the 'Gonzaga cameo,'¹² has the same general format as the Vienna cameo, but the decorative details of the male figure's armor differ. On his shoulder is an aegis with the Gorgon's head and also a bearded male head, perhaps that of Zeus Ammon, worked into it. On the bowl of the helmet the snake again appears, but here it is winged and surmounts a laurel wreath. The workmanship of this cameo, particularly

details of the hair of the female figure and of the aegis, has the sharply defined, didactic quality of a neoclassical style and suggests that it belongs to the Roman period. In a recent detailed study, the cameo has been assigned to the time of Tiberius, and the figures have been identified as portraits of Tiberius and Livia.¹³ This date is argued very convincingly, but the identification of the figures, particularly the female, who does not look much like Livia, remains an enigma. Cameo carving, for example the Tazza Farnese (see p. 257) was a sophisticated, courtly art in Alexandria, designed for a small audience which could appreciate allegory, personification, and subtle political allusions. Roman imperial cameos were produced in the same atmosphere.¹⁴ The artist who carved the Gonzaga cameo perhaps deliberately represented the emperor and the accompanying female figure in very generalized form so that they would simultaneously evoke the imagery of a Ptolemaic cameo and, through it, the imagery of Alexander.

Because royal portrait gems are relatively few in number and because their dates are so difficult to establish, it is very difficult to draw conclusive generalizations about iconography from them. Perhaps a more promising genre



13 Coins depicting Alexander: (a) Head ostensibly of Herakles, perhaps a portrait of Alexander, on a silver tetradrachm issued by Alexander in 325 B.C. Berlin, State Coin Collection. Diam. ca. 29.5 mm. (b) Bronze coin with Alexander as Herakles on the obverse and Alexander with his horse Boukephalos on the reverse, issued by the Emperor Gordian III, 238–244 A.C. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts. Diam. 28.5 mm.

in which to search for the influence of Pyrgoteles and his contemporaries is coinage. Ancient coins, it must be remembered, were struck from carved dies, one die being set in an anvil and the other carved into a punch. Designing of coins was therefore really an offshoot of gem-carving. The same technique of intaglio carving that was used for most gems was also used to make coin dies. Thus it would not be surprising if Pyrgoteles served Alexander as a *sculptor* not only of gems but also of coin dies.¹⁵ One wonders, in fact, if designing coins was not Pyrgoteles' primary commission from Alexander. Gems, with the exception of official seals, would have had a limited private circulation, but coins, and their images, would have penetrated into every part of the new empire. At any rate, the coins issued by Alexander himself and the coinage representing Alexander issued by the Diadochoi, whether connected with Pyrgoteles or not, document in a more vivid and detailed way than any other medium the genesis of Hellenistic royal imagery.

Of all the forms of the visual arts in Antiquity through which political ideas could be broadcast none was more important than coinage. To be influenced by a sculptured portrait or a painting one had to be in a certain place at a certain time and also had to be in a receptive frame of mind. Coinage, on the other hand, was handled every day by virtually everyone in a city or state. It would be almost impossible not to notice and be affected by the portraits and symbols on coins. Although a certain veiled political symbolism can be detected in Greek coins long before the time of Alexander – for example, in the famous Demareteion type issued by Gelon of Syracuse after his defeat of the Carthaginians in 480 B.C. – pre-Hellenistic coinage had by and large been designed with the ideas of consistency and recognizability (and hence stability and reliability) in mind. Archaic and Classical Greek coins

were impersonal. Coin portraits of living men did not appear until the fourth century B.C., and then only tentatively (see p. 64), and symbolism on coins was limited to subjects like the patron deity or hero of a city or its particular emblem. It was not until the rise of the Hellenistic monarchies that the potential of coinage to propagate the personality, achievements, and policies of individual rulers was appreciated and exploited. The closest analogy in modern times to the ways in which Hellenistic coinage was used is found not in coinage but rather in commemorative postage stamps.

Upon his accession in 336 B.C. Alexander introduced a new type for silver coinage which in a few years was to become one of the most common and far-flung coins of the ancient world. On the obverse of these coins was the head of Herakles wearing the skin of the Nemean lion [13a] and on the reverse was a seated Zeus holding an eagle and a scepter. The motifs used on these coins were not completely new in Macedonian coinage. Since the Macedonian royal house claimed descent from Herakles, several earlier Macedonian kings had already used the head of Herakles on their coins, and Philip II had also used the head of Zeus.¹⁶ It is instructive to see how, as Alexander's career progressed, these rather conventional motifs were developed so as to take on increasingly broad yet specific meanings. There appear to have been two phases in this development. In the first, more traditional phase of the symbolism of these coins, the hero Herakles can be seen as a prototype for Alexander, a conquering hero and ancestor whose deeds of valor subdued barbaric forces and brought glory to Greek culture, of which the hero himself was a kind of embodiment. Zeus, as the father of Herakles, could be seen in this phase not only as the ultimate ancestor of the Macedonian line but also as the arbiter and judge of heroic achievement. This is just

the sort of symbolism which would have suited Alexander when, like a young Herakles, he was organizing the Greeks and Macedonians into a panhellenic force to support him in a great Heraklean labor, the attack on the Persian Empire. The use of a seated figure of Zeus, rather than simply the head which had been used on Philip's coins, was a carefully considered decision, because a seated Zeus would undoubtedly have called to mind for many Greeks the most panhellenic of all the god's images, Pheidias's great cult image at Olympia.¹⁷

After Alexander's conquest of the Persian Empire, his visit to the oracle at Siwa, and the official promulgation of the idea that he was to be viewed as a god (see p. 271), one senses a new phase in the symbolism of his coins. The idea now is not simply that Alexander is a descendant of Herakles but rather that he *is* Herakles, a living son of Zeus whose heroic labors, like those of Herakles, have led to his becoming a god. The outward expression of this idea seems to have taken place on the coins produced ca. 325 B.C. by the mint of Alexandria, Alexander's own city and the one in which the idea that he was a son of Zeus was first seriously promulgated [13a]. On the best of these coins we can observe the subtle transformation whereby the head of Herakles became the head of Alexander. Features familiar from the sculptured portraits – the bulging forehead, the narrow mouth with almost pouting lips, even something of the aspiring gaze – are detectable. Although some scholars have doubted it, these representations (particularly when judged by the definition of portraiture proposed in the third chapter (p. 59) seem clearly to have been intended as portraits of Alexander. As such they stand at the beginning of a long and splendid series of Hellenistic royal coin portraits.

In addition to its effectiveness as a vehicle to express Alexander's heroic and divine nature to the Greeks, the Alexander as Herakles image was probably valued for its adaptability as a royal image among the king's eastern subjects. As Charles Seltman put it: '... the Phoenician was to see in the obverse type his own god Melqart ... the Babylonian, though he might not be able to read the Greek name of Alexander, was to look on pictures that might recall his own Gilgamesh, the lion-slayer.'¹⁸ Royal imagery in the Hellenistic world had not only to be appealing to the eye; it also had to be international in spirit, and no one succeeded better in meeting this requirement than the creators of Hellenistic coinage.

Posthumous portraits of Alexander

After his death Alexander's image was perpetuated with reverence and circulated even more widely than it had been during his lifetime. The reasons for this were, first, that he became a kind of patron deity, the archetype of the divine ruler-hero, in whose mold later rulers, both Hellenistic and Roman, wished to cast themselves; and second, the fact, already mentioned, that a talisman-like



14 Silver tetradrachm depicting Alexander with the horns of Zeus Ammon, issued by Lysimachos. 306–281 B.C. London, British Museum. Diam. ca. 30 mm.

quality was popularly attributed to his image.

One of the first and finest of all the posthumous images was a portrait of Alexander adorned with the horns of Zeus Ammon on a series of gold and silver coins issued by Lysimachos after he, like the other Diadochoi, took the title of king in 306/305 B.C. [14]. The emphasis of this series is clearly on the divine Alexander, the son of Zeus Ammon. Lysimachos, of course, aspired, like the other Diadochoi, to succeed Alexander as the 'Great King' and hence sought to invoke him on these coins as both a political ancestor and a patron deity. This type is one of the most beautifully conceived medallions in ancient art, the masterpiece of a skilled gem-maker. One wonders if Pyrgoteles survived long enough to be its creator. At any rate it is not surprising that the type was also used on gems, for example a quartz ringstone in the Ashmolean Museum, probably made at about the same time as the coin of Lysimachos; and that its influence survived long enough to leave its mark on the coins issued by the Roman magistrates who governed Macedonia in 93–88 B.C., after it had become a Roman province.

On the coinage of Ptolemaic Egypt the evolution of an image of the divine Alexander followed a somewhat different course. Ptolemy I, when he was nominally still only a regional governor for Alexander's legal successors, Philip III and the infant Alexander IV, continued to issue the familiar coins of Alexander; that is, the type with the head of Herakles on the obverse and a seated Zeus on the reverse. After the murder of Philip III by Olympias, it must have become obvious to Ptolemy that the legal



a



b



c



d

- 15 Ptolemaic coins: (a) Silver tetradrachm issued by Ptolemy I, *ca.* 318–315 B.C., with Alexander wearing an elephant-scalp helmet on the obverse and (b) an archaic Athena on the reverse. Diam. *ca.* 26 mm. (c) Silver tetradrachm with portrait of Ptolemy I. Private collection. Diam. *ca.* 29 mm. (d) Gold octadrachm with portrait of Ptolemy III (246–221 B.C.). London, British Museum. Diam. *ca.* 28 mm.