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The identity of the rider on Indo-Greek coins

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It may seem a regressive step in a volume dedicated to Joe Cribb, who has done so much to move the study of Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek coinage away from the preoccupations of Classical scholars, to focus on the identity of a particular equestrian figure on these coins. This paper, however, takes as its starting point a remark made by Cribb himself. In a broad analysis of coinage in Central Asia from its introduction by the Achaemenids to the appearance of Islamic coinage in the region in the eighth century AD, Cribb traced the influence of Alexander the Great on the coinage of the Indo-Greeks. Having discussed the introduction of the Attic weight standard, the reference to Alexander on the so-called 'pedigree' coins of Agathocles, and the portrait types chosen by the kings, Cribb comes to the image of a figure on horseback found on the reverses of coins of certain Indo-Greek rulers (Cribb 2007: 339–341). A horse is shown, galloping to the right, ridden by a male figure wearing a plumed Boeotian helmet, the ties of the royal diadem fluttering behind him. In addition, Cribb argued that a similar figure, but now dismounted performing a gesture of blessing with his outstretched right hand should be considered to have the same identity. Table 1 lists the series of each ruler on which these images appear.

Ruler	Obverse	Reverse	Bopearachchi 1991 reference
Antimachus II	Nike	Figure on horseback	196–197, série 1
Agathocleia	Bust of Agathocleia	Standing figure making blessing gesture	251, séries 1 & 2
Philoxenus	Bust of Philoxenus	Figure on horseback	288–293, séries 1–9
Nicias	Bust of Nicias	Standing figure making blessing gesture	311–312, séries 2 & 3
Nicias	Bust of Nicias	Figure on horseback	312, séries 5 & 6
Menander II	Bust of Menander	Figure on horseback	313, série 3
Hermaeus and Calliope	Jugate bust of Hermaeus and Calliope	Figure on horseback	325, séries 1 & 2
Hermaeus	Figure on horseback	Zeus, seated on throne making blessing gesture and holding sceptre	329, séries 7 & 8
Apollodotus II	Bust of Apollodotus	Figure on horseback	348, série 4
Hippostratus	Bust of Hippostratus	Figure on horseback	356–358, séries 3–7

Table 1: Indo-Greek coins with the figure of 'Alexander'

[1] I am grateful to the editors of this volume for the invitation to contribute and their comments on this paper. I must also thank Rachel Wood for discussion of the image of Alexander in Central Asia on non-numismatic media. Above all I wish to thank Joe Cribb for his support, guidance, and advice since the beginning of my work on the coins of the Graeco-Bactrian kings a decade ago.

The reverse of Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek coins is usually reserved for a divinity or divine attribute, the side of the coin on which we find the figure on horseback with only one exception. In the two rare series of Hermaeus the equestrian figure appears on the obverses of the coins while the reverse features Zeus seated on a throne making a blessing gesture with his outstretched hand. This gesture and its use by the standing figure on the coins of Agathocleia and Nicias were taken by Cribb, along with the reverse position of the image as evidence that the figure was divine and therefore a deified Alexander rather than the king on horseback which had been the traditional explanation.[2]

I wish to offer an argument, made on the basis of a particular feature of the horse ridden by the figure to support further Cribb's identification of Alexander the Great.[3] On many (but not all) of these coins the horse seems to have protuberances on its head. Although close to the position of the horse's ears, these features seem intended to represent a different part of the head. These features are not depicted in a consistent manner. On some examples they are positioned parallel to and are not much larger than the horse's ears (figure 1.12). On other coins the depiction of a single horn appearing from the horse's head seems likely (figures 1.4, 1.6, 1.11). There are also clear multiple horn features on other coins, sometimes showing two (figure 1.10) and occasionally three (figure 1.9). On other coins the features are quite elaborate, with horizontal sections at right angles to the horn attached directly to the head (figure 1.7). There are also instances where there appear to be uncertain features on the head of the horse which are distinct from the ears, mane, and other natural parts of the horse's anatomy (figures 1.1, 1.5). Finally, it is very important to note that the horns are not a consistent feature of the depiction of the horse and two coins (figures 1.2, 1.13) are presented here from the beginning and end of the sequence to illustrate this phenomenon.

Although the horse ridden by Alexander is not universally depicted with horns, there is enough evidence to conclude that there was an intention to show these unnatural features. The occasional appearance of such 'horns' might be attributed to die breaks or other flaws, but the feature appears too often to allow such an explanation. Our understanding of the production process of the coins is limited, although it is highly likely that dies were engraved following instruction from mint officials and that, in this case, the engravers chose to depict the horn features in different ways, perhaps not comprehending why a horse should be given horns, leading to the varying depictions, even to the extent of the number of horns for inclusion. If we accept the suggestion that the horse was intended to be depicted with horns on its head, we come to the obvious question: why?

Horns had long had an association with power and divinity, a tradition found in the Old Testament (Süning 1984: 328–333). The so-called Pashupati Seal of the Indus Valley Civilisation famously depicts a figure with a large horned headdress. Closer in time to our coins the deified Alexander had been depicted on coins of Ptolemy I and Lysimachus with the ram's horn of Zeus Ammon emanating from his temple. Seleucus I had also been depicted posthumously with bull's horns on coins of his successors (Kroll 2007: 116–120). Horns on the head of a horse, however, might have a specific meaning.

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[2] 'Roi cavalier' is the phrase used in Bopearachchi (1991) to describe the figure. Mitchiner (1975) refers to an 'armed horseman' on the coins of Antimachus II (76, type 135) and 'king' elsewhere, whether a generic king or the issuer of the coins is unclear.

[3] The identity of the rider as Alexander had, in fact, been suggested very briefly by Jenkins (1958: 71 and 73) and slightly elaborated by Bivar (1965: 79) with regard to the features of the horse's head. Both scholars were aware only of the phenomenon on the coins of Philoxenus.

Alexander's own horse was famous both in his lifetime and, like much of the Alexander legend, for long after. Named Bucephalus ('ox head' in Greek) Alexander first encountered the horse when it was offered for sale to his father, Philip II, as a magnificent, but untameable beast.[4] Alexander, however, was able to mount and ride the horse which became his steed throughout his later campaigns until its death in 326 BC following the Battle of the Hydaspes (Arrian, *Anabasis*, V, 19). Arrian tells us that Alexander founded two cities at this point in his conquests, one called Nicaea to commemorate the victory and the other Bucephala in memory of his horse. The location of the city is not known although it was probably on the west bank of the Jhelum (Hydaspes) river (Cohen 2013: 308–312). Although Narain was sceptical that the city was still in existence at the time of Menander I, later references, notably in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (47) suggest that it survived well into the first century AD (Narain 1957: 80–81).

The origin of Bucephalus's name is uncertain, although it most likely comes from a bucranium brand on the horse's flank, indicating its Thessalian origin and therefore high quality. The clear meaning of the name to any Greek speaker as 'ox head' led to other suggestions, some more extraordinary than others. Bucephalus may have received this name because of a patch of white hair in the shape of an ox's head in the middle of his forehead, a particularly fierce appearance like that of a bull, an especially broad head, a head the same shape as an ox's, or, most interestingly for our purpose, because he had horns on his head like an ox (Anderson 1930: 3–8). This latter explanation only appears relatively late in the tradition and is rejected by Byzantine scholars before reappearing in the *Roman d'Alexandre en Prose* and elsewhere. It should be noted at this point that, although it is apparently possible for horses to have bony growths on their foreheads they do not, of course, have fully-fledged horns (Miller 1917).

Although this may seem to be a rather tenuous conclusion, other earlier numismatic evidence can support the suggestion. Horses with horns were a type regularly used under the early Seleucids, particularly in the east of their empire (figures 2.1–2; Miller and Walters 2004: 49). There seems to have been a particular focus at the mints of Bactra and Aï Khanum with the type appearing on a wide range of denominations. The horned horse head was also used by the Seleucids as a small symbol subordinate to the main type, appearing presumably to demonstrate some piece of information relating to the coins which was important for mint administration (figure 2.3). Here, however, it has no broader significance, being simply one of a range of such symbols. The larger type of the horned horse head had been thought of as depicting Bucephalus, although this explanation has been rejected and it has been suggested that these Seleucid coins were in fact the basis for the later legend in the literary tradition that Alexander's horse had literal horns (Miller and Walters 2004: 52–53).

There is, however, one further Seleucid type of importance to our discussion. In 1999 Arthur Houghton and Andrew Stewart published a previously unknown tetradrachm of Seleucus I (Houghton and Stewart 1999; Houghton and Lorber 2002: 81, no. 203). The obverse features the usual image of the lifetime and posthumous coins in the name of Alexander the Great: a beardless Heracles wearing a lion scalp. On the reverse appears a figure on horseback wearing a helmet adorned with horns and a cloak which bellows behind him while he holds a spear in his right hand. The horse on which he is sitting clearly has horns protruding from its head (figure 3.1). The coin is dated by Houghton and Lorber to *c.* 295 BC. The type is also

[4] Plutarch, *Alexander*, 6. The literary accounts of Bucephalus are collected in Anderson (1930).

known from drachms (figure 3.2) and hemidrachms (Houghton and Lorber 2002: 84, no. 209; 85, no. 213). The series is securely attributed to the mint of Ecbatana.

Although this much is known we find ourselves in the familiar position of being uncertain regarding the identity of the rider on the reverse of the coins. E.T. Newell (1938: 181; Houghton and Lorber 2002: 71–73, nos 173–175) suggested that the rider was Seleucus I himself, linking the horned helmet worn by the horseman to that found on the obverse of Seleucus's Susa victory coinage (figure 3.3). The identity of the male head on these latter issues is also the subject of debate. The figure is clean shaven and shown wearing a helmet adorned with a bull's horn and ear and covered in a panther skin the paws of which are tied at the figure's neck. The clear allusion in this imagery is to Dionysus and by extension to the Graeco-Macedonian conquest of the East. For Newell (1938: 156–157) the head depicts Seleucus, while Hadley (1974) argued that it instead shows Alexander, in either case the figure is shown in the guise of Dionysus.

More recently Hoover (2002) has rejected the identification with Alexander, preferring Seleucus on the grounds that other Diadochi had begun to have themselves depicted on coins by the time of these issues. The fact that, unlike other posthumous representations of Alexander, such as the famous image found on the coins of Lysimachus in which Alexander sports a ram's horn and *anastolē*, this helmeted image is absent from the depictions of Alexander in other media is taken by Hoover as further evidence that the great conqueror is not the one represented on these coins. The lack of a continuing tradition of showing Alexander in this manner is not, however, necessarily a barrier to his identification in the image. The coins were produced at a time of considerable iconographic experimentation and by no means were all depictions widely adopted. For example, the early issues of Ptolemy I showing a deified Alexander with ram's horn at his temple wearing an elephant scalp headdress, *mitra*, and *aegis* were not widely reproduced elsewhere.[5] A direct connection to the obverses of the Indo-Greek kings who, following Demetrius I, were depicted wearing elephant scalp helmets, seems unlikely.

Hoover also deals with the equestrian figure. The identification of Alexander as the horse rider is rejected on the basis that the figure is shown wearing trousers, a garment Diodorus tells us Alexander refused to adopt (Hoover 2002: 59). On the examples of this type available for study it is far from clear that the figure is indeed wearing trousers. For Hoover the horns of the horse are not conclusive evidence that it is Bucephalus and being ridden by Alexander. The prevalence of horns on horses is to be explained as a general symbol of power rather than as a direct punning reference to Alexander's horse (Hoover 2002: 58). Other, and later, depictions of Bucephalus are not particularly helpful in clarifying whether he was regularly given horns. On the one hand, his appearance on the famous Alexander Mosaic from Pompeii sees him with ears a different colour from the rest of his head, and indeed the other horses in the scene, giving a similar appearance to horns. (Houghton and Stewart 1999: 31). On the other hand, of the large numbers of coin types produced in the Koinon of Macedonia in the third century AD depicting Alexander riding or taming Bucephalus none clearly show the horse with horns (figure 5).

The image of Alexander was, of course, used in Central Asia in other ways and was clearly important. Imitations of his coins showing Heracles wearing a lion scalp continued to circulate in the region, in various styles, until the second century AD (Abdullaev 2017: 219).

[5] For the type see Lorber (2018), 256–270, e.g., no. 40.

These issues may have helped contribute to the conclusion that the image on the obverse was Alexander, a misapprehension which seems to have been demonstrated by the so-called 'pedigree' coins of Agathocles on which the legend 'of Alexander, son of Philip' appears (Glenn 2020: 135–143). Indeed, it is quite possible that the intention of those responsible for making the image of the equestrian figure on the coins differed from how it was interpreted by those who encountered the coins later. Unlike other forms of visual representation, however, we have all the same information on the coin as users in the ancient world. It is likely, therefore, that the image had a degree of ambiguity even at the time of its production. The image of Heracles (perhaps considered to be Alexander by this time) wearing a lion scalp headdress was clearly a powerful one and is found on an ivory miniature *makhaira* handle discovered among the votive offerings at Takht-i Sangin (Litvinskij and Pičikjan 1980: 67).

Alexander's lasting influence on the imagery used by the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek rulers in the region is, however, beyond doubt and, although we shall never know for certain the intended identification of the figures and horses adorned with horns, it seems likely that the figure on the reverse of these Indo-Greek coins is, given the position on the coins, deified and a king, since he wears the diadem. The horse he rides, which in many cases seems to have been adorned with horns, may have been intended to represent Bucephalus, or perhaps was simply a horse with supernatural power. Given the use of the great conqueror's image and legacy elsewhere in the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms he is surely the only candidate as a deified king and in either case the identity of the rider is Alexander.

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