



Issues in the Name of Alexander

Summary :

A survey of recent work on the numismatic production of the mints of Alexander the Great in Asia Minor demonstrates that Alexander did not try to change the Persian habits and that he was not in a hurry to impose his own coinage. The Asia Minor mints struck all metals and denominations in the name of Alexander, both during his lifetime and after his death, i.e. posthumously; not least, they were by far the biggest contributors to the striking of silver Alexander drachms.

Date

336- 323 B.C. and Hellenistic period

Geographical Location

Asia Minor

1. Lifetime issues: historical context

[Alexander the Great](#) crossed the Hellespont in March 334 B.C. In less than two years, he was before Tyrus. This may suffice to indicate the speed with which he and his army moved eastwards. Alexander did not stay in Asia Minor, nor did he strike coins in his name at that moment. His general attitude towards the Greek cities of Asia Minor has long been debated. E. Bickermann in 1934 argued that he acted just as (possibly even worse than) the Persian king, punishing and rewarding as he decided to, while in 1950 W.W. Tarn, an admirer of the Macedonian king, attempted to demonstrate that Alexander restored the original freedom of the cities.¹ Other voices have been heard ever since, favouring generally, if less drastically, Bickermann's thesis.² In financial terms, Alexander does not seem to have modified Persian customs. And, with few exceptions duly noted and made explicit, he certainly managed to collect money from Greek cities. At [Sardis](#), he appointed Nicias as the one responsible for tributes³ and we are left with the word 'syntaxis' in an edict from [Priene](#).⁴ Receiving financial resources from the cities is different from producing coins with one's own types. As we shall see, the striking of Alexander coins by the cities of Asia Minor is a phenomenon whose explanation goes far beyond local politics or needs. Let us first consider the number and location of the lifetime issues in Asia Minor.

2. Lifetime issues: number and location of the mints

It is a truism that it is thanks to E.T. Newell (in 1911 and in 1912) that L. Müller's 1855 list of Alexander-lifetime mints has substantially shrunk.⁵ Through the study of die-links,⁶ Newell proved that many symbols or monograms⁷ on the reverse were often employed by a single mint. In terms of Asia Minor mints, E.T. Newell's arrangement was essentially confirmed by A.R. Bellinger and by M. Thompson (1955): their publication of the Bab hoard (*IGCH* 1534: Syria) stood as the principal reference for Alexander drachms for long.⁸ Later, M. Thompson embarked on a most ambitious project: to produce a *corpus* for every Asia Minor mint to which a coin-strike of contemporaneous Alexanders could be attributed. She divided this work into three monographs, two of which have been published: her study on Sardis and [Miletus](#) appeared in 1983, the one on [Abydus](#) and [Lampsacus](#) in 1991. A third and last volume was (and is still) expected to gather the material for the mints of [Colophon](#), [Magnesia](#) and [Teos](#). To these seven mints, [Side](#) may be added.⁹ Thus the number of lifetime Alexander mints might rise to eight. However, not all attributions are definite. The uncertain 'Colophon' mint, for instance, whose related issues apparently belong to the most prolific mint of Alexander drachms,¹⁰ may in fact be identified with [Pergamon](#); ¹¹ it did not start to strike until 322 BC.¹² The attribution of 'Teos' is also uncertain, as the argument it rests upon, i.e. the appearance on the reverse of a unique variation of a seated griffin, the badge of the city of Teos, is weak. In any case, the production of this mint was small and probably began right after Alexander's death. The rest of these attributions, although likely or very likely, are also to be considered with prudence.¹³

3. Lifetime issues: volume and chronology



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All metals and denominations (including gold staters, silver tetradrachms and drachms) were struck by the Alexander mints in Asia Minor. The most remarkable feature of these mints is that they were, by far, the most significant contributors to the striking of silver drachms. This need not be taken against the prominence of gold, in terms of value. But, in terms of issued quantities, these Asia Minor mints distinguish themselves through the huge amount of drachms they produced. From the very beginning through to c. 290 BC, the Asia Minor mints must have required the engraving of c. 3,000 **obverse** dies in order to produce so many Alexander drachms. We may multiply this number by 10,000 or 20,000, in order to get an idea of the number of specimens put into circulation (from 30 to 60 billions coins). Recent evidence has lowered the chronology accepted so far for the beginning of these coinages. It appears now that all these mints, including Sardis and Magnesia, did not start to strike Alexander coins until 325/4 BC.¹⁴ This confirms what appears to be a general tendency for Alexander the Great, as for many other Greek rulers: his absence of hurry to impose his own coinage. Besides the fact that Alexander was in no shortage of funding and that he could rely on other resources to meet his expenses, one has recently advanced that, had he installed royal mints in Greek cities, he would have proved to be less liberal than the Great King.¹⁵

4. Lifetime issues: purpose of the issues

A big change happened in 325/4 BC. Then, in once, a huge production of Alexander coins was issued by the mints already noticed. Although the chronology could not be totally ascertained and that, here or there, a shift of one year or two could be argued, the evidence strongly favours a widespread, concerted phenomenon affecting dramatically the production of Alexander coins in Asia Minor. M. Thompson introduced in 1984 what appears as a most cogent explanation for this phenomenon: the need to pay the disbanded mercenaries and veterans.¹⁴ In order to avoid trouble on their way back (looting, rapes, etc.), they were said – as the hypothesis goes – that they will be paid just before to re-embark for their homeland. As expected, most of these mints (if correctly attributed) are harbours (except Colophon, Pergamon, Sardes and Magnesia). It has even been noticed that we may observe different patterns of production related to the supposed origin of the recipients. Mints turned to the Balkans, Abydus and Lampsacus, produced large quantities of gold staters, i.e. exactly what Thracian mercenaries were used to.¹⁶ Meanwhile Ionian mints turned to the West and they specialized in the production of drachms, *i. e.* what circulated in Thessaly, in the Peloponnese and in Crete, the other major known provenances of Alexander's soldiers. Anyway, it seems certain that the bullion required for the striking of such large quantities of coins was not provided by the cities but by Alexander himself. The idea that it was done through a type of contract which was not unprofitable for the cities accepting to cooperate is also cogent.¹⁷ In the meantime, the hoard evidence indicates that these lifetime Alexander coins struck in Asia Minor did not submerge at all the local circulation. We are thus left with the assumption that Greek cities may have continued to strike their own coinages.

5. After 323 BC

Distributed first to soldiers, these huge quantities of Alexander coins struck in Asia Minor, especially drachms, found at some moment their way into the local circulation. Hoards of the 3rd c. BC clearly indicate a strong prevalence of this coinage.¹⁸ Indeed, we do possess many hoards buried in the second half of the 3rd c. BC whose contents mainly attest these old (at that time) and worn coins struck during, or not long after, the reign of Alexander. Moreover the progressive loss of weight seems to indicate that these coins never cease to circulate in between. Now for what concerns new strikes of Alexander coins well after the death of the Macedonian king, we have especially to consider the period c. 215-167 BC. That is a troubled period, with many new wars involving the recruitment of hordes of mercenaries. Again, here lies the reason why huge quantities of Alexander tetradrachms were struck by many civic mints.¹⁹ Mints like Pergamum or Rhodes have been published and put into relation with the Macedonian wars.²⁰ To these mints, we can add Alexandria Troas, Assos, Cyme, Myrina, Temnos, Methymna, Mytilene, Clazomenae, Colophon, Ephesus, Erythrae, Magnesia ad Maeandrum, Miletus, Phocaea, Priene, Teos, Chios, Samos, Alabanda, Antioch (Caria), Cnidus, Halicarnassus, Mylasa, Nisyros and Sardes. It happens frequently that personal names engraved on the reverses are the same as the ones encountered on contemporary issues with civic iconographical types. This fact, combined with the large number of mints (c. 30), makes more difficult to determine the modalities of striking. To what extent were the cities responsible for these strikes is a question, which still needs an answer. It is the also the time when some mints of Southern Asia Minor (chiefly Phaselis, Aspendus and Perge) began to produce many issues of Alexander tetradrachms. These issues have been found mostly in the East (Syria, etc.).



Issues in the Name of Alexander

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2. Le Rider, G., 'Alexander in Asia Minor', in A. Burnett et al. (ed.), *Coins of Macedonia and Rome: Essays in Honour of Charles Hersch* (London 1998) p. 49-57.
3. Arrian 1.17.1.
4. Sherwin-White, S., 'The edict of Alexander to Priene', *JHS* 105 (1985) 69 ff.
5. Müller, L., *Numismatique d'Alexandre le Grand. Suivie d'un appendice contenant les monnaies de Philippe II et III* (Copenhagen 1855). . Newell, E. T., 'Reattribution of certain tetradrachms of Alexander the Great', (New York 1912).
6. Die-link: Two or more coins are said to be die-linked when their obverses or reverses share a common die.
7. Symbol: a minor design on the reverse of the coin flan, which was marginal to the main coin type. Symbols served as a means of distinguishing between different coin issues at a mint. Monogram: a compilation of letters, which appeared on the coin flan, on the border of the main coin type. Symbols were employed by a mint as a way of distinguishing between different coin issues.
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Issues in the Name of Alexander

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Issues in the Name of Alexander

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Glossary :

	obverse The face of the coin which bears the more important device. Due to ambiguities that sometimes exist, many numismatists prefer to use the term for the side struck by the lower (anvil) die.
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Chronological Table

336 BC: Philip II murdered at Aegae. Alexander III (the Great) becomes king of Macedon (until 323 BC). First issues of silver tetradrachms

334 BC: Alexander crosses into Asia Minor, leaving Antipater as regent of Macedon. Gold and silver issues in Asia Minor.

333 BC: Alexander enters Cilicia and defeats Darius III at Issus.

332 BC: Alexander occupies Coele-Syria and Phoenicia and captures Tyre after a seven-month siege.

332/1 BC: Alexander winters in Egypt, founds Alexandria, and visits the oracle of Zeus Ammon in the oasis of Siwah.

331 BC: Alexander defeats Darius at Gaugamela and occupies Babylon and Susa.

330 BC: Alexander occupies Persepolis, capturing the Persian royal treasure. Darius, in flight from Alexander, is murdered by Bessus, satrap of Bactria.

330/29 BC: Alexander's conquest of Bactria and Sogdiana.

327-325 BC: Alexander's Indian expedition.

323 BC: Death of Alexander at Babylon.



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323 BC: Posthumous gold and silver coin issues in the name of Alexander III.