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ALEXANDER THE GREAT AND THE PERSIAN LION-GRYPHON

ALTHOUGH the coinage of Alexander the Great has of late years been intensively studied, and an immense advance made, almost entirely by the efforts of Mr. E. T. Newell, in its classification and dating, little attention has been paid to one detail which seems to me worthy of more careful consideration. This is the decoration of the bowl of the helmet of Athena on the gold coinage (Fig. 1). Müller (*Alex. le Grand*, p. 3) says merely that the bowl is most usually adorned with a serpent, sometimes with a running gryphon, rarely with a sphinx, and sometimes with nothing at all. He makes no attempt to explain these emblems, regarding them doubtless as purely decorative. There is no doubt that from quite early times such creatures had been used for purely ornamental purposes to support the crests of helmets.¹ Between using them actually to bear the crest and as decoration in relief on the bowl there is no significant difference. If, therefore, no plausible explanation of the meaning of these emblems on the coinage of Alexander is forthcoming it is not unreasonable to suppose that they are purely decorative; but that position should not be assumed until the possibility of their having a meaning has been thoroughly explored.

Mr. Newell himself (*The Dated Alexander Coinage of Sidon and Ake*, pp. 24-5) has a few remarks on the interpretation of the serpent and gryphon emblems:

The gryphon, an Eastern conception, was symbolic of irresistible might or supernatural power; both lion and eagle-headed gryphon occur repeatedly in Hittite and Mesopotamian art as demonic forces or companions of the gods; in Egypt the monster with hawk's head and lion's body was symbolic of the royal power. 'In placing this fierce monster upon the warrior-goddess' helmet the Sidonian artist may have wished to suggest the irresistible impetus of the Greek advance; or perhaps to symbolise the East now conquered by Athene's aid.' (We shall see that this latter suggestion contains more than a hint of the truth.) Then there is the well-known myth of the gold-guarding gryphons; what emblem could have been more appropriate for the gold coinage? Finally, Newell mentions the symbolical significance of serpent and gryphon as emblems of longevity and eternity; but he does not explain what special appropriateness to the gold coinage they possess in this respect.

Dr. Philip Lederer (*Zeitschr. für Numismatik*, 1922, p. 195) does not deal with the gryphon, but has a very attractive theory about the serpent (Fig. 1, No. 1). He first clears the ground by disposing of the alleged anticipation

¹ Daremberg et Saglio, *s.v.* galea, pp. 1450 f.

of Alexander by others in the use of this emblem on the helmet of Athena on coins. The examples which have been alleged, as on certain coins of Pharsalus, are, he maintains, nothing of the kind; the apparent serpents are merely decorations resembling the spirals or volutes which are so familiar to us as helmet-ornaments. The serpent on the helmet of Athena was therefore, he considers, so far as coinage is concerned, a real innovation on Alexander's part. In conformity with his theory that the type as a whole was inspired by the statue of Athena Promachos on the Acropolis of Athens, Lederer explains the serpent as the attribute—and the most important attribute—of the City-goddess.



FIG. 1.—GOLD STATERS OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT. (Enlarged 2 : 1.)

This last conclusion we may incline to accept, as the best at present forthcoming; but one of the premises requires modification. I find it difficult to believe that the objects on the helmet at Pharsalus are not serpents, in view of such a specimen as that in the Ward Collection.² And the coinage of Lampsacus provides clear evidence of the use of the serpent as a decoration for the helmet of Athena long before the time of Alexander.³ But the destruction of this premise does not necessarily take the ground from under Lederer's theory that Alexander's type was inspired by the Athena Promachos.

We now have to consider the gryphon. What is generally known as the

² Catal. No. 449.

(Period II. c. 490–470 B.C.); p. 19 (Period

³ Gaebler in *Nomisma* xii. (1923) p. 8 III. 470–387 B.C.).

Greek gryphon proper—although it is of Oriental origin—is a winged monster with lion's body and bird's head. On the great majority of staters with the types of Alexander other than those with the serpent, the running monster with straight wings that we see on Athena's helmet is of this type (Fig. 1, No. 3). But it is with some surprise that I have discovered that the other running monster, not so common but still frequent, with curled instead of straight wings, is of a different type; in fact its head is that of a lion, on which horns are occasionally discernible (Fig. 1, No. 2).⁴ In other words, it is the Persian lion-gryphon. I need not here go into the extremely complicated genealogy of the creature.⁵ Suffice it to say that, as developed by the Persians out of its Babylonian form, the authentic lion-gryphon was a lion, with lion's head bearing curved horns, curled wings, lion's fore-legs, hind-legs like an eagle's and eagle's tail. The curling of the wings in the Persian gryphon was, be it noted, not a native Persian feature, but due to the Greek influence which penetrated Iran at a comparatively early date. In adopting the lion-gryphon from the Persians, the Greeks dropped the aquiline character of the hind-legs and tail, so that in the Graeco-Oriental form, from the fifth century onwards, the lion-gryphon was indistinguishable from the lion save by its wings and horns. It is instructive to compare such a fine example of the Persian monster as is seen on a Lewes House gem (Beazley, Pl. I. No. 8) with the Greek version as we find it on the well-known staters of Panticapaeum (Head, *Coins of the Ancients*, Pl. 21, Nos. 1 and 2). Both are shown in Fig. 2.⁶

Now, although slightly modified, made less monstrous, by the Greek refining instinct, this lion-gryphon, as more than one writer has remarked, always remained to the Greeks associated with Persia; the consciousness of its Persian origin seemed always present to the Greek artist, who usually represented it as in conflict with Persians, slaying them or being slain by them. The lion-gryphon was conceived by the Greek as the enemy *par excellence* of the Persian. Now we see the appropriateness of this emblem on the coinage of Alexander.

Let us consider rather more closely the place and time of its use.⁷ The area is somewhat curiously limited. It is not found on any of the Western issues, *i.e.* in Europe or Western Asia Minor. It occurs at Sidon, at Ace-

⁴ The detail is so small that it hardly appears in the reproduction. I must ask my readers to take it on trust.

⁵ See the articles 'Gryps' by Furtwängler in Roscher's *Lexikon* and by Prinz and Ziegler in Pauly-Wissowa's *Realencyclopädie*; cp. also Dalton, *Treasure of the Oxus*, p. 87; and Rostovtzeff, *Iranians and Greeks in South Russia* (1922), p. 80: 'the lion-headed griffin' of Panticapaeum 'is the Iranian animal, created in Babylonia, and thenceforward common throughout Asia, especially in the Iranian area.'

⁶ I have to thank the Director of the

Boston Museum of Fine Arts for permission to reproduce the cylinder.

⁷ In this (as in all the questions of chronology and classification hereafter dealt with) I am specially indebted to Mr. Newell, who, when I called his attention to the real character of the monster with the curled wings, at once examined the whole of his unrivalled collection from this point of view and placed his notes at my disposal. I may note here that he knows of one, but only one, example of a bird-headed gryphon with a curled wing, viz. on a stater which is a variety of Müller 770.

Ptolemais, at Tarsus; possibly also in Cyprus. As regards time, we find it first at Sidon, on Newell's type *c*, which is the third of the four types which he attributes to the period 'end of 333 to *circa* 330 B.C.' If it was issued before the crowning victory of Gaugamela on Oct. 1, 331, it can at any rate hardly be much earlier than the date, in the late spring or early summer of 331, when Alexander started for Thapsacus.⁸ At Ace it appears in 329-8 B.C.; at Tarsus in 327 B.C. Before its appearance, the decoration of the helmet had been a



FIG. 2.—THE PERSIAN LION-GRYPHON.
(Impression of Chalcedony Cylinder and Gold Coin of Panticapaeum, 2 : 1.)

serpent. On many coins this serpent decoration continues to be used, even on the staters issued after Alexander's death by his successors. Is it a mere coincidence that either immediately before the beginning of the campaign which was to terminate in Gaugamela, or about the time of the victory itself, there first appeared on the gold coinage the emblem which every Greek who saw it would recognise as significant of the attack on the Persian royal power ?

⁸ I understand from Mr. Newell that he now inclines to the view that some if not all the staters and distaters which he had placed in his first group at Sidon, dating

them from the end of 333 to *circa* 330 B.C., may really have been struck at Damascus, and not earlier than Gaugamela. This revised view suits my purpose admirably.

But there is an objection to be met. Alexander had a mint in Babylon, probably also in other cities in the East. Mr. Newell's classification and attribution of the Alexandrine coinage of this region is not yet published; but the general characteristics of what is for convenience known as the Babylonian style are fairly recognisable, and it seems quite certain that the lion-gryphon never occurs on this Eastern coinage. It is, as we have seen, limited to the Cilician and Phoenician district. If the objector asks why Alexander did not advertise his Persian sovereignty in the very heart of his new Empire, the answer is that there such an advertisement was unnecessary. Where it was necessary was in outlying satrapies, and that is precisely where we find it.

The bird-headed gryphon on the coins with which we are concerned is always, with one possible exception, represented with straight wings, probably with the object of differentiating it from the lion-gryphon; but it should be observed that curled wings are just as appropriate to it in Greek art as they are to any other winged monster. However this may be, the bird-headed gryphon does not, according to Newell, appear on Alexandrine coins earlier than the reign of Philip Arrhidaeus. During his reign it is found in N.W. Asia Minor, and frequently at Babylon. It is also found at the latter mint after his death. At Sidon, where the lion-gryphon and the serpent had shared the honours from about 331, the bird-headed gryphon suddenly appears in the year Oct. 316–Oct. 315, ousting both the other emblems completely. At Ake the bird-headed monster had not so easy a victory; it and the lion-gryphon are used side by side on years 25 to 30, which seem to correspond to the period 322/1–317/6.⁹ Henceforth only the bird-headed gryphon is used, except that the serpent makes its appearance during one year, 33.

Thus the lion-gryphon had but a short life; it was threatened by its rival in 322, and disappeared altogether in 317. The threat to its existence coincides with the year of the disaster to Perdikkas in Syria and the return of Antipater to Macedonia with Philip Arrhidaeus and the young Alexander in his care (autumn 321). Its complete disappearance in 317–316 coincides with the years of Philip's death (317) and of the imprisonment (316) of the young Alexander by Cassander in Amphipolis—with, that is to say, the elimination from the political stage of the representatives of the royal house of Macedon and the blood of Alexander. The coincidences seem to be significant. They are at any rate as close as one is entitled to expect. Communications between various parts of the ancient world were not so perfect that political changes could be always immediately and accurately reflected in such matters as coinage.

The serpent, as we have already seen, is most plausibly explained as the attribute of the Promachos. On the other great statue of Athena at Athens, the Parthenos, the helmet was adorned with a sphinx, bearing the middle crest, and with gryphons at the side, according to Pausanias; some of the copies show Pegasi instead of gryphons, but the later coins of Athens, which are our most accurate records of the head, always have the gryphons. As

⁹ Mr. Newell informs me that there are coins dated 25 struck with his obverse die J (*Coinage of Sidon and Ake*, Pl. VII. 4)

which he had hitherto supposed to be used first in year 26.

these creatures support crests, their wings are curled. The gryphons are of the bird-headed species, of course. Like the serpent, this species of gryphon was not unknown on the helmet of Athena as shown on coins before the time of Alexander; it is found, for instance, in the fifth century at Thurium and at Velia in Italy, on a fourth-century Lesbian sixth of a stater, and early in the fourth century, if not earlier, at Soli in Cilicia, a place whose coins show marked Athenian influence. On the gold coins struck after Alexander's death with his types it may therefore possibly be purely ornamental; or it may be a reminiscence of the Parthenos, the two emblems, serpent and bird-headed gryphon, thus recalling the two most famous statues of Athena. In any case it would not, to a Greek, be associated with the conquest of the East; and that may even have been a reason for adopting it at a time when the mints where it was used were in the possession of rulers who no longer laid claim to Persia. Ptolemy held Phoenicia from the summer of 320 until 315; he made no claim on the East, and it is during this period that the bird-headed gryphon establishes itself. It is true that Newell (*op. cit.* p. 35) has put the question whether the sudden appearance of this emblem at Sidon in the very year (315) when Antigonos arrived in Phoenicia may not be connected with that ruler's policy. But, as we have seen, it had already shown itself at Ace-Ptolemais very soon after the death of Alexander. Is it, as the Egyptian symbol of royalty, due to the influence of Ptolemy?

Of the four emblems on the helmet, there remains only the rarest, the sphinx, to be considered (Fig. 1, No. 4). On Mr. Newell's authority it may be stated that, with the exception of a single coin of uncertain attribution (Pozzi Catal. 864), it is confined to Babylonian and Persian mints. It occurs at the beginning of Alexander's coinage at Babylon; it is found on some coins of Seleucus struck in those parts. Had it been a typical Egyptian sphinx, one would have been tempted to say that Alexander advertised his Egyptian sovereignty in Mesopotamia and Persia as he did his Persian sovereignty in Phoenicia. But it is a typical Greek sphinx, with curled wings, sometimes seated, sometimes lying, sometimes springing forward. The sphinx, as we have seen, was the supporter of the middle crest of the helmet of the Parthenos. It is also known as a helmet emblem of Athena before Alexander's time, as *e. g.* on a fine coin of Pharsalus of about 400 B.C. in the Jameson Collection, and on coins of Thurium of the fourth century. It seems probable, in view of the limitation of its area, that the sphinx on the Alexandrine coins has some special significance; but I can make no suggestion.

To sum up: the Persian lion-gryphon, hitherto unrecognised on the coinage of Alexander the Great, is seen to have been used by him as a manifesto of his claim to the sovereignty of Persia; with his death it begins to be discarded, and disappears within half a dozen years amid the wreckage of his Empire. These dates for its duration have been established on the evidence of a chronological arrangement based on other grounds; it remains to be seen whether it, in its turn, may be used for confirming or adding precision to that chronological arrangement.