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Front cover: Sirinos/Pyxoes, incuse stater c540-510BC (not to scale). See article "An incuse stater from the series 'Sirinos/Pyxoes' "

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A royal graffito on an Alexander drachm

Nicholas L. Wright

Abstract

This note discusses a Mylasan silver drachm produced posthumously in the name of Alexander the Great, c.310-300 BC. The reverse of the drachm has been inscribed with an otherwise unknown graffito which gives Alexander the royal title, Basileus. Comparisons are made with a range of other published examples of numismatic graffiti and arguments are presented to date the graffito on this drachm to the third century BC.

Key words

[Graffito] [Hellenistic] [Mylasa] [Alexander the Great]

This note discusses an early Hellenistic silver drachm produced posthumously in the name of Alexander the Great (Fig. 1). Price attributes the monogram combination used on this drachm to Mylasa(?) after the initial identification by Thompson.¹ While Price lacked Thompson's conviction regarding the exact identity of the minting city, he was confident enough to locate it "very probably in the Carian region". The series to which this drachm belongs (Thompson's first group) has been dated to the period 310-300 BC. The right leg of Zeus is pulled back behind the left which is consistent with other posthumous issues² and five drachms of this issue were included in the Armenak Hoard (IGCH 1423) which was buried soon after 280 BC.

The drachm was purchased by the present owner from a Lebanese dealer in a group lot along with three other Alexander type drachms. One of the other drachms was from the same issue of Mylasa (Price no.2479), the second was from Kolophon, Ionia (Price



Figure 1

Obv. Head of Herakles r. (beardless), wearing lion skin headdress; dotted border.

Rev. Zeus Aitophoros seated l. on throne holding eagle in r. hand, grounded sceptre in l.; in r. field, ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟ[Y]; in l. field, ; below throne, ΕΥ.
* AR drachm, 18mm; 4.16g; Cf Price no.2479; Private Coll., Ex Bassem Daou, Beirut, Lebanon 2005.

1 Price, MJ 1991, *The Coinage in the Name of Alexander the Great and Philip Arrhidaeus*, Swiss Numismatic Society, Zurich: p.313. Thompson, M 1981, "The Alexandrine mint of Mylasa" *Quaderni Ticinesi di Numismatica e Antichità Classiche* 10: pp.207-17.

2 Price 1991, p.30.

no.1844, struck c.215-190 BC) and the third was from an uncertain mint – there are two worn controls in the left field, mostly off the flan and a broken-bar alpha or alpha-epsilon monogram under the throne. All four coins from the lot exhibit the same level of even wear and the same reddish tint to the patination which suggests that they may all have been part of a hoard buried around the turn of the second century BC.

An unusual graffito, carefully inscribed in the outer right field, ‘above’ the ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟ[Υ], reads ΒΑCΙΑΕΩ[C] (Figs. 2 and 3). On palaeographic grounds, the inscription can be roughly dated to the third century BC with the first half of the century being, perhaps, more likely.³ The lunate letter form of the *sigma* (rendered C rather than Σ) only begins to appear from the third quarter of the fourth century BC and the *epsilon* with detached horizontal bar somewhat after that. The *omega* has not been flattened out (ω), perhaps indicating a date before 200 BC.⁴ However, as the inscriptional form of *omega* (Ω) remained as a model to influence private scripts, it is not possible to rule out a post-200 BC date.



Figure 2



Figure 3

Graffiti on Greek coins are uncommon but not unusual. Price knew of nine different examples of graffiti on coinage produced in the name of Alexander. Four of these used Greek characters: Α, Κ (retrograde), and ΦΙ were each identified on single specimens, while Χ was known from 10 coins. Five different Aramaic graffiti were also noted, each known from a single example.⁵ Further Aramaic graffiti found on coins in the name of Alexander from hoards at Demanhur, Egypt, and Tel Tsippor, Israel, consist of individual letters, monograms, personal names and place names of Egyptian, Jewish, Nabataean and

3 Dr. Alan Johnston *pers. comm.*

4 Thompson, EM 1912, *An Introduction to Greek and Latin Palaeography*, Clarendon Press, Oxford: pp.107–9, 144. On the development of the private script in the early Hellenistic period, compare the Derveni Papyrus of c.340 BC (Betegh, G 2004, *The Derveni Papyrus: Cosmology, Theology and Interpretation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge) with an Egyptian copy of Plato's *Phaedo* from the mid-third century BC (British Museum Papyrus no.488).

5 Price 1991, p.71.

Safaitic origin.⁶ The purpose of the graffiti is debatable, but suggestions include bankers or merchants vouching personally for the value of the coins, or claims of ownership over individual coins by members of a group or caravan.⁷

A more extensive range of coin graffiti comes from a mid-third century BC hoard of Ptolemaic tetradrachms found at Gülnar in Kilikia Tracheia. Here, a mixture of Greek and Cypriote graffiti provides a catalogue of personal names such as Timagoratis, Olympiakes, Raphaelos and *zo-wa-ti-ri*.⁸ These too have been hypothesised as banker's or merchant's marks or as indications of ownership.

Other fifth and fourth century BC examples of informal inscriptions are known to have served to transmute coins from political and economic devices into votives or love tokens. By marking coins out in this way, the dedicators were intentionally removing them from circulation and sacrificing them to the gods or to their loved ones. A didrachm from Kroton is marked as 'sacred to Apollo', while a stater from Sikyon is inscribed more specifically 'to Artemis, the one at Sparta' (Artemis Orthia). This process was also known in Hellenistic Phoenicia where a Ptolemaic didrachm was inscribed in Phoenician with the divine title 'Baal'. A Skotoussan didrachm carries the hand-carved inscription 'Deinis is beautiful', a graffito on a didrachm from Metaponto reads 'Love to Lala', while from Agrigento comes a tetradrachm inscribed with the message 'Good luck to Sykon, from Philon'.⁹

A small hoard of 14 AR staters which may have been found in an unnamed Boiotian shrine contained five coins bearing graffiti. One of the graffiti seemingly labelled the hoard as spoils of war (*leia*) and a second dedicated the whole hoard to Nike (*Nika*). The other three graffiti gave the initials A, N and the name Onasim[...] who are presumed to be the dedicators.¹⁰ Here we can perhaps see the votive nature of some ancient graffiti

6 Torrey, CC 1937, *Aramaic graffiti on coins of Demanhur*, American Numismatic Society Numismatic Notes and Monographs 77, New York; Rahmani, LY 1966, "A hoard of Alexander coins from Tel Tsippor." *Schweizer Münzblätter* 64: pp.129–45.

7 Milne, JG 1939, *Greek and Roman Coins and the Study of History*, Methuen & Co., London, p.78; Rahmani 1966, p.133.

8 Davesne, A and Masson, O 1985, "A propos du trésor des monnaies de Gülnar en Cilicie; problèmes numismatiques et 'graffiti' monétaires." *Revue Archéologique* 1: pp.29–46. Coin graffiti was not limited to the eastern Mediterranean, see for example a recently published Iberian graffito on a Punic shekel, see García-Bellido, MP and de Hoz, J 2014, "Grafitos sobre un shekel del Tesoro de Mogente." In Bádenas de la Peña et al. (eds.), *Homenaje a Ricardo Olmos: Per speculum in aenigmate Miradas sobre la Antigüedad*, Anejos de Erytheia, Madrid, pp.285-92.

9 Davesne and Masson 1985, pp.36–9.

10 Liampi, K 2008, "NIKA, ΛΕΙΑ: Graffiti on Sicyonian and Theban staters in a new hoard from Boeotia / Beginning of 2000." *American Journal of Numismatics* 20: 209–26. Liampi suggests, quite convincingly, that the hoard may have been dedicated by Macedonian soldiers following their victories at Chaironeia (338 BC) or the sack of Thebes (336 BC).

linked directly with possessive informal inscriptions – a relationship only visible because of the contextual nature of the hoard.

However, the Alexander type drachm which forms the focus of this paper was not inscribed with any form of personal identifier which could be linked to a merchant or owner, nor with any deity (in the strictest sense). Rather, it takes the form of the royal title, *Basileus*. The royal title first appeared on Alexander's coinage in the last three years of his reign (325-323 BC). Price suggests that its use was initially restricted to coinages produced to pay off veteran military units returning home to the shores of the Aegean. While it does occur on coinage in the name of Alexander produced in Anatolia (at Sardes, Side and Tarsus), the mint at Mylasa did not produce coins bearing the title.¹¹

Interestingly, where it is used on Alexander coins, the royal title most commonly occurs on the reverse below the exergue line. This placement is also reflected on the coins of the Alexander type produced in the name of his successors such as Philip III Arrhidaeus, Lysimachos and Seleukos I. The location of the royal title in the right field, 'above' the monarch's name, only occurred in the early third century BC, initially with the silver issues of Seleukos I in Central Asia¹² and then as standard on the non-Alexander type coinage of Lysimachos and the Seleukids. By placing the royal graffito in the far right field, it is plausible to suggest that the inscriber was betraying more familiarity with the third century BC coinage of the successor kings than he was with the coinage produced in the name of Alexander.

Why would anyone inscribe the royal title on a posthumous coin of Alexander? The worn coin was well handled and had presumably seen much use before it was removed from circulation. The inclusion of *Basileus* did not qualify the coin as being anything other than what it was, a posthumous coin of Alexander. Was the inscription an act of whimsy, or did the inscriber feel compelled to underline Alexander's kingship for some quasi-political, reverential, or even religious reason? The answer, for now, remains enigmatic.

Author

Nicholas Wright is an archaeologist and numismatist based in Ireland. He holds a BA (Hons) in archaeology from the University of Sydney and a PhD from Macquarie University. He was an ACANS Junior Fellow in 2007. Dr Wright would like to express his appreciation to Dr Alan Johnston, Assoc. Prof Kenneth Sheedy, Dr Gil Davis, Alexey Shitvov, Laura Wright and the anonymous JNAA reviewers for their helpful suggestions. All errors remain the responsibility of the author. nicholas.l.wright@gmail.com

¹¹ Price 1991, pp.32–3.

¹² See for example Houghton, A and Lorber, C 2002, *Seleucid Coins, a Comprehensive Catalogue Part I: Seleucus I through Antiochus III* (2 volumes), American Numismatic Society, New York, nos. 232–4.