

Project Group B1

“Imitatio Alexandri”: Heroisms in Portraits and Images of Rulers and Heroes in Greco-Roman Antiquity

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The objective of this project group, which it successfully achieved, was the analysis and historical explanation of the transformation and appropriation processes of the model of the heroic ruler (the Alexander Code) that emerged both in visual representations of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) in the late fourth century BC and Alexander “heroisms” (heroically shaped habitus patterns by which communities acculturate heroic models) from early Hellenistic Greece to the end of the Roman Empire. The doctoral thesis by Martin Dorka Moreno (né Schwemmer) titled “Studien zu den Ähnlichkeitsrelationen zwischen Götter- und Heroenbildern und Bildnissen Alexanders des Großen im Hellenismus und der römischen Kaiserzeit” (A Study on the Similarities between God and Hero Images and Portraits of Alexander the Great in Hellenistic Greece and the Roman Empire) was completed in spring 2016. He also wrote a paper on the relationship between images of Heracles and Alexander (Schwemmer, publication pending). M. Kovacs also has finished a monograph (Habilitationsschrift) in 2017 on portraits, appropriations, and adaptations of Alexander the Great in Hellenistic Greece and the Roman Empire and has published part of his research in a paper (Kovacs 2015). Von den Hoff expanded on this idea to include fundamental observations about the *imitatio heroica* (the imitation of heroes) in his contribution to the anthology for the SFB conference “*Imitatio heroica*. Hero Likeness in Imagery” (2015a), which he coedited. He also published essays on Hellenistic portraits of Alexander (von den Hoff 2013a; von den Hoff 2014). Reviews pertaining to this theme were also published by Schwemmer (2013; 2014) and Kovacs (2016). In addition, research was further facilitated through the acquisition of important plaster casts of ancient portraits of Alexander by the Archaeological Collection of the University of Freiburg (J.-A. Dickmann).

(1) Images of Alexander and “Imitatio Alexandri” (Imitations of Alexander) in Portraits from Antiquity

In order to better conduct a typological and iconographical analysis of the relevant material, Martin Kovacs assembled a corpus of roughly 85 portrait heads, which served as the basis for studying the history of Alexander’s iconography from the fourth century BC to the fifth century AD. The portraits made of Alexander during his lifetime (he died 323 BC), which have survived as Roman copies, served as the point of departure. While the portraits from Alexander’s lifetime often display significant differences that could be related to the different expectations people had of the young ruler, they are not all based on images of heroes, as has often been claimed (including portraits of Alexander as an ephebos, with an individualizing hairstyle, Alexander with a lion-like appearance with a strong heroic reference, or Alexander with divine connotations). Due to the particularities of the Ptolemaic understanding of governance in the late Hellenistic period, Alexander’s youthfulness becomes increasingly emphasized in Egypt (in reference to Horus), while images dominate in other parts of the empire that stress a more vigorous dynamic according to the Hellenistic ideals of how a ruler ought to be. Four high Hellenistic types of portraits of Alexander could also be identified for the first time, as well as

several previously unknown Alexander statues from the third and second century BC that survived as Roman copies.

In portraits of rulers from the third to the first century BC, the iconography of Alexander was only rarely used for an *imitatio Alexandri*. The role of Alexander was apparently considered to be already “filled” in the broadest sense and was therefore defined as unachievable. It should be noted, however, that there was an attempt from the beginning to connect Alexander to the figure of Heracles. The first definite *imitationes Alexandri* emerged in the late Hellenistic period, acquiring a new dimension in the first century BC through Mithridates VI, who was portrayed as a “new” Alexander in an attempt to legitimize the struggle of all Greeks against the foreign power of Rome. Other rulers during their lifetime also refer to the Alexander Code more explicitly in their own image in the form of “heroisms” – a fact in which political conflict surely played a role. In the Roman period (Kovacs 2015), elements of the Alexander Code were used as a concise and poignant vocabulary that suggested military and political virtues and raised expectations. This “vocabulary” can also be found in different types of statues that originally represented Alexander, but were later used for the representation of Roman politicians and emperors. Under Emperor Gallienus, the iconography of Alexander was also adapted with special intensity as a way of presenting the extraordinary abilities of the emperor during a “crisis of the empire” (Kovacs 2015).

Meanwhile, the “real” image of Alexander continued to remain omnipresent through copies that were produced up until late antiquity. What is remarkable is that the Hellenistic designs are dominant here, and that they create a visual contrast to the image of Alexander that was transformed through literature and legends during the time of the Roman Empire. From a structural perspective, the figure of Alexander revealed a mythologized, decidedly heroized quality and becomes more and more detached from historiographical descriptions (as in the so-called Alexander romance and so forth). In this way, the Alexander Code increasingly became a heroic code. Instead of clearly referring to Alexander in terms of content, more general heroic – and, in some cases, also cultural and ethnic – aspects became more prominent. The image of a ruler that was initially only partially defined by heroism was thus transformed into the image of a distant, extraordinary ruler, giving birth to a heroic code with a heroically charged vocabulary (with youthfulness as the dominant trait), which ultimately evolved into a more general formula of “fashion” that causes the heroic to become visually independent and lose its semantic reference to Alexander.

(2) Imitations of Alexander in the Images of Heroes and Gods

Regarding the subject of the doctoral thesis by Martin Dorka Moreno (né Schwemmer), a monograph¹ with many examples had been published recently, in which focus was placed on similarities, but not the explanation of the significance thereof (Schwemmer 2013). This meant that the monograph also included many images of gods and heroes, although there were only superficial similarities or no similarities at all to portraits of Alexander. In Moreno’s doctoral thesis, he thus began by fundamentally deconstructing the phenomenon of Alexander motives in images of heroes and gods. Contrary to expectations, however, differentiated observations could only be made in very few cases regarding the mechanisms, forms, reasons, manifestations, and especially the significance of these relationships between images of Alexander and images of gods and heroes. These rare cases thus became the key focal point of Moreno’s doctoral thesis. The methodology developed as a systematic attempt to approach

¹ Trofimova, A. 2012: *Imitatio Alexandri in Hellenistic Art: Portraits of Alexander the Great and Mythological Images*, Rom.

the problem consisted in applying the poststructuralist linguistic method of intertextuality to pictures (interpictoriality) combined with cultural semiotics, in which individual pictorial formulas are regarded as signs to be investigated using a discourse analytical approach. This is connected with the fundamental question of how pictures convey meaning through interpictorial (image-to-image) relationships in the first place, which is a key aspect of any kind of *imitatio heroica*.

The figures that were systematically researched were Achilles and Heracles, as well as the Dioscuri Castor and Pollux and Helios. In the case of Helios, it should be noted that there was a very high degree of congruence between – and even a merging of – visual models from the beginning (shortly after Alexander's death).² Concerning the Dioscuri Castor and Pollux, for whom relatively heterogeneous iconographies were developed in Greek art, a unified visual model could not be identified until the Roman period, during which a strong orientation toward Alexander iconography evolved. Before this, Thracian coins from the second century BC were the only objects to show a congruence between forms and the iconography of Alexander. These works were the first to integrate the anastolé – Alexander's typical hairstyle. That Roman portrayals of the Dioscuri Castor and Pollux were closely based on the image of Alexander can most likely be explained by the fact that at this time the model of Alexander was very much linked to the heroic qualities of the Dioscuri Castor and Pollux, and heroic qualities in general. It was also seen as extremely fitting for a visualization of those who helped fight in the battle to save Rome.

Moreno was able to demonstrate that Heracles was the first hero whose image was adapted to Alexander through the use of the anastolé. There are even some cases of this from Alexander's lifetime – for example, the tetradrachm coins issued by Alexander himself that portray Heracles with a lion's scalp. These were thus also researched systematically in regards to this issue. This adaptation most likely indicates a "family resemblance" between the hero and the ruler. Many mints in Alexander's empire demonstrated how Heracles increasingly became stylized according to the conventions of Alexander. This phenomenon first occurred on a large scale in Babylon and spread across virtually the entire empire except Egypt, for example. The lack of references in Egypt is all the more significant because, shortly after Alexander's death, the first coin with his portrait was issued there, along with the tetradrachms with the image of Heracles.

The first image of Achilles that had formal qualities of the iconography of Alexander appeared around the turn of the fourth to the third century BC on coins from Thessaly, the mythical home of Achilles, and was easily identifiable because of the hairstyle. Due to these similarities, it must be assumed that this is the first time Achilles's lion-like character and his military skills as a Greek warrior *par excellence*, which had not previously appeared in pictorial tradition, could be visually conveyed. This could also be a reference to a heroic "family resemblance" (Alexander claimed that Achilles was an ancestor on his mother's side), or to the ruler-like character of Achilles.

Later in the Hellenistic period and during the Roman Empire, there are few comparably precise indications of an *imitatio Alexandri* in images of Achilles. In the sculptural group with Achilles and Penthesilea from the second century BC, references to the iconography of Alexander are very general. Images of Achilles in Roman times survived mostly in murals and sarcophagus reliefs and made no precise reference to the iconography of Alexander. Rather, this image of Achilles corresponded to the comparatively heterogeneous image of Achilles from earlier Greek art, especially of the fifth and fourth century BC, which is connected in a similarly general

² Schörner, G. 2001: Helios und Alexander. Zum Einfluss der Herrscherikonographie auf das Götterbild, in: Archäologischer Anzeiger 1, pp. 59–68

way to the iconographic concept of the image of Alexander that evolved in the middle of the fourth century BC. The image of Alexander thus had little influence on the image of Achilles in antiquity (likewise, Alexander was not systematically depicted as Achilles), and it also had only an isolated influence at best on the iconography of heroes and gods. A large-scale appropriation of Alexander-like traits, or an Alexander fashion, as can be found in the portraits, therefore could not be observed in this case.

Publications by the Project Group

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