The British Museum

Alexander's Last Battle

Object in Focus

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Clore Centre

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Alexander's Last Battle

Rare medallions propagating a contested version of history

In 336 BCE a young Alexander III of Macedon set out to conquer the world.

In just ten years Alexander's relatively small army expanded his empire from Greece, through Egypt and Iran, to India.

Crossing the Indus River his men, on foot and horses, met an entirely new type of resistance: an army of war elephants commanded by his adversary, the Indian King Porus. They fought, but refused to continue further east.

The battle in 326 BCE by the river Hydaspes, known in South Asia as the Jhelum, would be Alexander's last. Alexander and his men returned home and Alexander died suddenly just three years later.

According to Greek historians, Alexander 'the Great' won this last battle and remained undefeated.

Indian legend, however, recounts the story differently: Porus heroically resisted Alexander's invasion, putting a halt to Alexander's further expansion east. The two sides agreed to a peace treaty.

No Indian material sources survive to bear witness to this important battle. But a group of rare medallions show how the Macedonians chose to commemorate the event.

‘Porus Medallion’ commemorating Alexander’s last battle of the Hydaspes.

One side depicts a man on a horse and two men on an elephant engaging in battle. The horseman is Alexander III of Macedon fighting Indian King Porus’ men on elephants in what would be Alexander’s last battle.

On the other side, a man holding a thunderbolt is being crowned with a wreath by the goddess of victory.

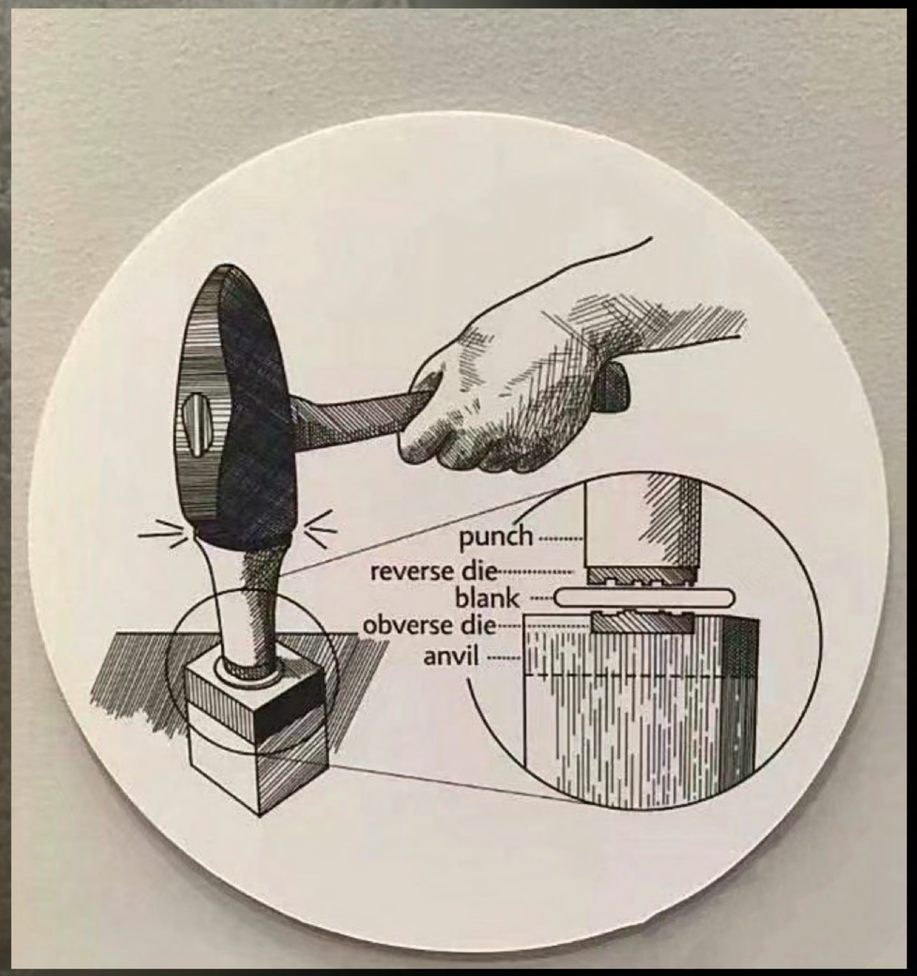
This is a rare depiction of an event on a coin of this period, and the first claim to divinity by a living Greek ruler.

Found in present day Iraq, place of production unknown
c. 325 BC
Silver
Donated by A.W. Franks
Purchased from E. Herzfeld
1887,0609.1; 1926,0402.1

Alexander

Porus

How were die-struck coins made?



Magnet

Necklace

Chain

Inspired by coins

What would Alexander say?

What would Porus say?

**If you were Alexander and his men,
how would you choose to describe your adventures
and final battle to your friends,
neighbours and subjects, upon your return?**

**If you were Porus and his men,
how would you choose to describe the same event,
defending India?**

We call him "Alexander III of Macedonia"

Porus retained his lands and continued to rule over his lands.
Porus gifted Alexander 80 war elephants,
befriended Alexander and made him his ally,
the two had an amicable partnership.

We heroically resisted the invasion from the West!
There was a stalemate and with the offer of
a hundred of our war elephants we extended to them
a peace treaty!

According to our myths and stories,
Porus told Alexander to
"Treat me as a King would treat his equal"

We talk about our heroic resistance
against the invader.

Indian beliefs and ways of life influenced
Greek philosophy and thinking from this onwards.