

Alexander the Great, son of Philip II of Macedon, is revered in Western Culture for his abilities as a conquerer, and is sometimes heralded as a bringer of Greek language and culture to the East. He has been portrayed in many different ways throughout history by many different people depending on their goals, whether they show him as a great civilizer, or a drunken fool who forsook his own country and paid the price for such a mistake with his early death. But what these coins allow us to see is how Alexander or his direct successors wanted him to be portrayed.

The coins themselves feature, on the obverse, the head of Herakles, adorned with his traditional lion's skin, a reference to one of his 12 labors in which he defeated the Nemean Lion. The reverse features Zeus seated on a throne, holding an eagle and a scepter, featuring the word "ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ," meaning "of Alexander." On coin 5A, the word "ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ," meaning "of the king", is also written. Of course, Zeus is the king of the gods, which is why he is seated on a throne. Traditionally, the eagle is the animal that Zeus is most closely associated with as well. According to Macedonian legend, their kings, members of the Argead family, are descendants of Herakles, who is himself a son of Zeus. Both Philip II and Alexander were members of this line. Therefore, Alexander is openly flaunting his lineage on the coins themselves.

Coin 4A most likely was created after the death of Alexander himself, which happened in 323 BCE. The reason for that can be seen in the feet of Zeus¹. Generally, coins that were minted while Alexander was still alive featured Zeus' feet both displayed next to each other, while the coins made after Alexander's death typically show one leg behind the other. The St. Olaf collection seems to have one of each of these categories.

¹ A. McIntyre, "Coins of Alexander the Great," on coinsoftime.com.

However, the coin with “of the king” added to Alexander’s name suggests distribution somewhere other than the mainland of Greece, as the term *basileus* carries many negative connotations with it in Ancient Greek culture, whereas in Asia, it was a generally accepted position, as they did not have the same hatred of kings as the Greeks. The iconography and inscriptions on these coins give the modern scholar an important insight into how Alexander and or the successors wanted to portray this great conqueror. This portrayal can better be seen by a study of this material culture rather than solely of the traditional literary works.