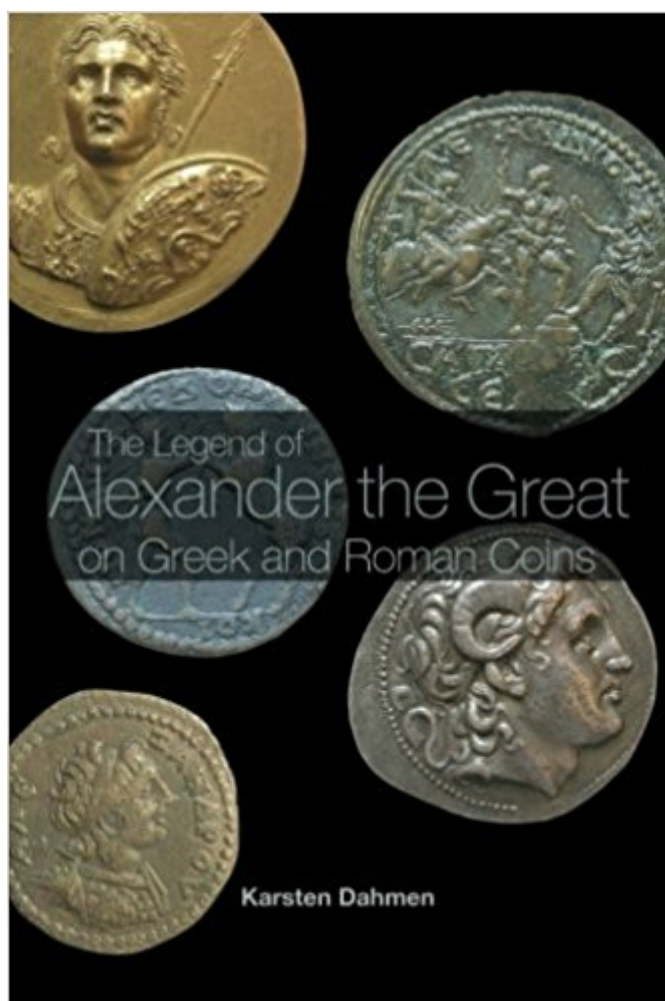


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# The Legend Of Alexander The Great On Greek And Roman Coins



## Synopsis

This outstanding introductory survey collects, presents and examines, for the very first time, the portraits and representations of Alexander the Great on the ancient coins of the Greek and Roman period. From 320 BC to AD 400, Karsten Dahmen examines not only Alexander's own coinage and the posthumous coinages of his successors, but also the re-use of his image by rulers from the Greek world and the Roman empire, to late antiquity. Also including numismatic material that exceeds all previous published works, and well-illustrated, this historical survey brings Alexander and his legacy to life.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

'a very welcome distillation in terms of both approach and information... it cannot be doubted that Dahmen's volume fills a useful gap in the literature of Alexander... Dahmen has undertaken a valuable study of Alexander's portraiture on coins spanning some 700 years.' - Bryn Mawr Classical Review 'One of the chapters in Dahmen's strongly academic yet non-fusty book, is "Making Good Use of a Legend", and his whole book shows comprehensively that this is what happened to Alexander on coins, repeatedly through the centuries. - The Times of Acadiana 'If you want to learn more about how Alexander the Great was depicted on coins, this is a wonderful book... some parts of the book rise above the merely excellent to the superb... the best textural description of these coins I've seen in English... a valuable addition to ancient numismatic scholarship.' - The Celador

Alexander the Great has been a constant theme in art and history; there has been a recent big-budget movie by Oliver Stone, and there are always new, sometimes revisionist, biographies coming out. The historic figure was remarkable enough with conquests that no one has ever matched. The legendary Alexander was coming into being even in the real Alexander's lifetime, and afterward his image was borrowed to define or proclaim political power. He was frequently depicted upon ancient coins, and in *The Legend of Alexander the Great on Greek and Roman Coins* (Routledge), Karsten Dahmen has reviewed the coins produced from about 320 BCE to 400 CE which carry images of Alexander. This is a remarkably full review of a very specific sphere of numismatics. Dahmen is a classical archeologist and a numismatist in the Berlin Coin Cabinet, and his book offers insight not only into coinage of the time, but also into the esteem in which Alexander was held and how his image was employed by rulers and cities all over the lands he had conquered. Each coin mentioned here is illustrated by photograph, and the history described will make the volume interesting to more readers than just those interested in ancient coins. Alexander died in 323 BCE, so that the coins here are almost all tributes to Alexander after his death. The coins here of the Hellenistic age were struck not only by the absolute monarchs of the different lands, but also by cities whose coins would be used in only a limited region. It was Ptolemy in Egypt (ruling 322 - 283 BCE) that first borrowed some of Alexander's glory by putting him on coins, and he made the most elaborate use in this way of any of Alexander's lieutenants. Ptolemy had continued the Alexander cult principally by hijacking the dead king's body for eventual burial in Alexandria itself a few years after his death. One of the images he used of Alexander recalled the image of Heracles with a lion scalp, but shows Alexander wearing instead an even more improbable scalp of an elephant, complete with tusks and trunk. Ptolemy recalled Heracles, but the chapeau was specifically from Alexander's history. Alexander had defeated King Poros and conquered the war-elephants of India in 326 BCE. This portrait also has another animal part, one that is in many of Alexander's pictures here. Above Alexander's ear is a ram's horn, reminding the coin's possessor that Alexander had been a welcomed liberator in Egypt, where the priests had pronounced him the son of Zeus Ammon, whose symbol was the ram's horn. Thus Ptolemy was drawing on a local part of Alexander's legend as well as his divinity. Significantly, gold coins were issued with this sort of image at the beginning of Ptolemy's reign; Ptolemy was eventually fully appointed king himself, and his own image took Alexander's place, with Alexander moving on to bronze coins, as if to indicate Ptolemy's increasing self-confidence. When Seleukos I of Syria used Alexander's image, he

included the elephant scalp but left out the ram's horn since he had no need to draw upon an Egyptian connotation. Just as kings found Alexander's image useful, so did cities, especially those that Alexander had founded or to which his name had been given. A coin from Smyrna in Ionia shows Alexander on the reverse snoozing under a plane-tree. This is a reference to the legendary founding of Smyrna; Alexander after a hunt took a nap under the tree near the Sanctuary of the Nemeses, and the Nemeses came to him in his dream and bade him to found the city there. Not all the coins shown here go back to the ancient world. There is a 1990 hundred-drachma coin from Greece with Alexander's head (with ram's horn) that would have been easily recognized two thousand years ago. It is interesting to know, too, that the Alexander coinage promoted Renaissance scholars to investigate portraits of the conqueror on coins. The renewed interest in classical history and in Alexander's legends thus were a driving force in making the academic field of numismatics. And Alexander continued to be borrowed for power plays even in the sixteenth century. The engraver Alessandro Cesati, in honor of Pope Paul III, made bronze medallions to commemorate the encounter of Alexander with the Jewish High Priest when he visited Jerusalem. It shows Alexander in armor bowing down "as every king should do" to the religious authority. It never happened; the depicted meeting is entirely fiction, a story dreamed up to please the hearers, and in this case the pope. One of the chapters in Dahmen's strongly academic yet non-fusty book, is "Making Good Use of a Legend", and his whole book shows comprehensively that this is what happened to Alexander on coins, repeatedly through the centuries.

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