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The Portrait Tradition of Ancient Bactria

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The portrait, as defined by J. J. Pollitt,¹ and portrait sculpture in particular, is a favourite theme in ancient art research. While the portrait in the main Hellenistic kingdoms of the Mediterranean has become a subject of special articles and even monographic studies, the portrait in the "fifth Hellenistic realm" of ancient Bactria has almost been completely neglected by scholars. The objective of this article is to point out the existence of portrait tradition in Bactria and to outline its general features.

Many scholars have been attracted by the opportunity to identify the portraits on Graeco-Bactrian coins with some of the many unidentified marble heads in the world collections of ancient art. The marble head in Villa Albani, Rome,² represents a well-known example. As early as 1888, it was identified by J. Six as the portrait of the Bactrian king Euthydemos I. This identification was based on the similarity of the head to the image of the king on his coins.³ The Albani head has expressive and distinctive portrait features, and that is why it appears in almost every handbook on Hellenistic art. A great number of specialists have accepted that attribution without any doubt, including such authorities as W. W. Tarn, M. Bieber, G. Richter, M. Robertson, J. J. Pollitt and P. Zanker.⁴ However, those who have taken an opposing view are no less prominent. H. Von Heintze resolutely rejected the hypothesis in 1972 based on a stylistic analysis. In her opinion, a stylistic analysis makes it possible for the Villa Albani head to be dated to the 1st century BC, and not the 3rd century, as was previously put forth. She regarded it as belonging to the group of portraits from the Late Roman Republic. Among those who have agreed with her suggestion are G. Lahusen, R. R. R. Smith, L. Giuliani, P. Bernard and O. Bopearachchi.⁵ Contrary to these, J. Six came up with another curious hypothesis, which suggested that the portrait was created in Magnesia on Meandros, the hometown of Euthydemos, whose citizens supposedly wished to immortalize their famous compatriot. However, the distance dividing both regions as well as the geographical and geopolitical factors in general make this hypothesis untenable. Even if the compatriots had known about Euthydemos' great career, which is not likely, they could not have known his

¹ "An intentional representation of a person containing a sufficient number of specific features to make the representation recognizable to others", POLLITT 1986, p. 59.

² Originally Muso Torlonia, no. 133, from the Giustiniani Collections; SIX 1894.

³ "Bei einem ersten Besuch des Museo Torlonia im Winter 1888 ist mir ein merkwürdiger Kopf aufgefallen, in dem ich sofort, nach Stil und Tracht, einen Baktrischen König zu erkennen glaubte"; first publication: VISCONTI 1880 (it was described as "a head of the unknown man").

⁴ TARN 1951, p. 75; BIEBER 1955, pp. 86, 87, Figs. 311–313; RICHTER 1965 p. 278, Figs. 1970, 1971; ZANKER 1973, p. 36; ROBERTSON 1975, p. 521, Pl. 164d; POLLITT 1986, pp. 70, 71, Fig. 71.

⁵ HEINTZE 1972, pp. 235–237; GIULIANI 1986, p. 190ff., Abb. 54–56; SMITH 1988, Appendix IV; LAHUSEN 1989, pp. 320–322; BOPEARACHCHI 1998, p. 27.

appearance insofar as to have his realistic portrait made. The king, at the approximate age of 60, would definitely not have travelled across half of Asia to his hometown just to sit as a model. Another possibility — to summon an artist to his court in Bactria to make a sketch and to create his truthful portrait on return to Magnesia — seems even more absurd. Of course, there are also the above-mentioned stylistic and iconographic grounds which argue against this attribution as well. For example, the hat of the Villa Albani head has nothing in common with the Graeco-Bactrian *causia*. According to the followers of Six, the shape of the nose on the head is identical to the one on the coin portraits. The fact of the matter is, however, that the massive and bulbous nose (the tip of which has been, moreover, restored) on the Villa Albani head is considerably different from the straight, long nose noticeable on the coin profiles. Indeed, both portraits show some hardness in the features. However, it is rather fantastic to explain this hardness by referring to the necessity to be strong (or even cruel) on account of the fact that with only an Apollo-like appearance, one could not amaze the local people, who were accustomed to living in tough conditions. If that had been the case, why weren't the other kings depicted along the same lines?⁶ After all, the attribution was based upon one of the many coin portraits of Euthydemus I. The features on the other types are much less similar to the Villa Albani head. These points are quite relevant and, unfortunately, in conjunction with the stylistic arguments conclusive enough for the author to express consent to the rejection by H. v. Heintze and other opponents of the identification. 'Unfortunately' must be said because the idea of the existence of a high-quality marble portrait depicting a Bactrian king is very tempting for every scholar engaged in the study of ancient Central Asia.

Unlike the rest of the scholars, G. Richter went further in her searching for Euthydemus' portraits in sculpture. She found his representation also on the relief in Munich. Again, Heintze was right to reject this conclusion.⁷ Conclusively, after careful consideration of these positions, the author is inclined to see a portrait of one of the Roman generals⁸ or possibly of a peasant / farmer⁹ of the 1st century BC in the Villa Albani head rather than a representation of Euthydemus.

In a further instance, another head, which has been interpreted as a portrait of a famous Graeco-Bactrian king is exhibited in Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen.¹⁰ Again, the attribution is based on the coin portraits, in this case of King Antimachos I Theos. This ruler dominated Bactria, Paropamisadae and Arakhosia between 180 and 175 BC. It is not necessary to analyse this head separately. The author feels the need to reject this hypothesis on the basis of the same arguments as in the previous case. As far as is known, it has not been accepted or even further discussed by other scholars. Nevertheless, there is a partial similarity between the Copenhagen head and the coin portraits, noticeable especially in the treatment of the hair, which was rendered with small, regular curls.¹¹

One more example of misinterpreted sculpture should be mentioned here to make the group complete: a small bronze statuette of a naked hero-king with an elephant-skin cloak

⁶ POLLITT 1986, p. 71.

⁷ RICHTER 1965, Fig. 1975a; HEINTZE 1972, p. 236.

⁸ HEINTZE 1972, p. 237, suggests several generals, and favours P. Servilius Vatia Isaurius, who died at the age of about ninety and who fought pirates in 78–75 BC; SMITH 1988, Appendix IV; to make this picture complete, F. POULSEN suggested Attalos III and G. HAFNER Polemon II of Pontos, see JOHANSEN 1994, pp. 50, 51.

⁹ LAHUSEN 1989, p. 322; for the hat cf. also the bronze statuette of a peasant with a pair of young bulls from the Villa Giulia, CRISTOFANI 1985, p. 163, no. 54.

¹⁰ JOHANSEN 1994, I. N. 1583, Figs. 317, 318.

¹¹ BOPEARACHCHI 1991, Pl. 10, series 5, 8.

and scalp, originally mounted on horseback.¹² M. Bieber suggested that the figure represented King Demetrios of Bactria. However, she was careful to admit that "it could not be proved".¹³ G. Richter and G. Pugačenkova both dealt with the figure in a similar way.¹⁴ The reason for the identification appears to be simple: its resemblance to the coins of this king. The author does not consider such proof to be sufficient since, as Kyrieleis pointed out correctly,¹⁵ one of the first Ptolemies could also be seen in the statuette.

After having rejected the identifications discussed above, the author would now like to turn to the actual local portraiture and its tradition. Until recently, there have been no examples of royal portraits of the Graeco-Bactrian rulers apart from those of the coins. Thanks to intensified research, several objects of art have appeared, which can be incorporated into the subject of the present article. This progress in our knowledge owes much to O. Bopearachchi and his effort to monitor the illicit traffic of these finds. Before turning to each of them in detail, the portraits will be dealt with chronologically.

The Greek tradition of making portraits penetrated Central and South Asia together with Alexander the Great at the end of the 4th century BC. Portraiture had not been known in earlier periods. L. I. Rempel attempted to find earlier pre-Hellenistic roots of portrait tradition in Central Asia,¹⁶ a matter of unsubstantiated speculation as any earlier human representation shows only general and not individual features. However, a new, highly interesting find has come to light in this respect: a caricature-like male head (and a whole figure as well) from the site of Jarkutan (Surchandaya, Uzbekistan), which is most probably dated to the Late Bronze Age.¹⁷ Other examples of early human representation — let us call them images and not portraits — are given by Rempel in his above-mentioned article, but in regards to the portraits in Bactria, the images of Alexander himself shall be dealt with.

Some of the highest-quality portraits could have been created during Alexander's eastern campaign. For example: one tourmaline gem had been deposited in the Oxford collections long unnoticed before someone turned his attention to a tiny inscription below the portrait of Alexander (Fig. 1).¹⁸ It would not have been of special importance had it not been written in Kharoshti, the script of north-western India. This fact as well as the material supposedly of eastern origin indicates the probable provenance. J. Boardman, who published the findings on the gem, presumed that it could have been used as a personal gift to one of the local princes, perhaps during Alexander's lifetime or shortly after.¹⁹ This gem stands out above all the other gems of the eastern provenance with its pure Greek quality. We can see a diademed head — profile to the right — adorned with ram horns. The work can be assigned to one of Alexander's court artists, probably to someone from the Pyrgoteles school. This find does not come from Bactria; nevertheless, it is a good illustration of the way in which the first portraits were used in the East.

¹² At present in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 55.11.11.

¹³ BIEBER 1955, p. 84, fig. 298.

¹⁴ RICHTER 1965, p. 278, fig. 1972; PUGAČENKOVA 1971, ill. 93; PUGAČENKOVA 1979, ill. 99.

¹⁵ KYRIELEIS 1975, p. 22; H. KYRIELEIS suggests Ptolemy II Philadelphos as the most likely one but does not exclude Ptolemy III Euergetes either.

¹⁶ REMPEL 1989, pp. 111–131.

¹⁷ SHAYDULLAEV — HUFF — RAKHIMOV 2003; For the well-known stone head from Mirshade-I, dated to the late 2nd millennium BC, and for the gold male head from the Oxos treasure (5th to 4th century BC), see PUGAČENKOVA 1979, ill. 1, 7.

¹⁸ BOARDMAN 1970, pp. 360, 371, Fig. 998; BOARDMAN 1994, p. 119, Fig. 4.54; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 1892, 1499.

¹⁹ BOARDMAN 1994, p. 119.

Portraits of Alexander were very popular during the Hellenistic Age in the Mediterranean. Any new portrait (or a copy of the life-time portraits) was, from the point of view of style, a product of its time. In a similar way, Alexander's image might have undergone a peculiar development in Bactria and India. Traces of that development may be observed in the sculpture from the Buddhist monastic complex of Tepe Shotor in Afghanistan.²⁰ One of the many fragments of sculpture found there shows an apparent resemblance to the known portraits of Alexander (Fig. 2). The employment of this head, as well as of another (Dionysus-like) image, in the Buddhist religious context is unclear. As to its details, they seem to reflect an early Hellenistic model. The short intractable curls create the impression of plasticity. A tiny wrinkle on the bridge of the nose and the expressive superciliary ridge impart severity to the face. The mouth is slightly open, as can be seen on the Erbach and Pergamon heads. Unfortunately, the section of hair with the typical treatment above the forehead (anastole) has not been preserved. The date of origin of this sculpture was not given by the researcher, and the statement that it could be an image of the god Vajrapani (Buddha's bodyguard) is not supported by any argument except that of context. The style alone would allow it to be placed much earlier, even to the third century BC. Having the later context in mind, it can be said that the artistic tradition was surprisingly conservative and long-lasting.

The last object connected with Alexander's imagery was found in the temple of Tacht-i Sangin in Northern Bactria. This ivory relief depicts a roughly treated face with a lion scalp (Fig. 3).²¹ Thus, an image of Heracles could be easily seen in this head as well.

The evidence given above would not be sufficient without the support of literary sources. Although we do not have such sources for Bactria, itself, it is worth turning to India for this evidence where the situation must have been quite similar. Flavius Philostratus (170–245) speaks of metal sheets with reliefs depicting the deeds of Alexander and Porus. These reliefs were placed in a sanctuary outside the city of Taxila in Northern India.²² Other images of Alexander — gold sculptures — were exhibited in the city in the Helios sanctuary.²³ The monuments celebrating Alexander's victory over Porus included "Alexander on the quadriga at Issos" and "Alexander meeting Porus after battle".²⁴ In spite of the fact that the writings of Philostratus are not considered to be trustworthy enough to give a final answer, at least they provide another piece of evidence, and ultimately, one cannot doubt that portraits of Alexander the Great existed in the East.

The literary sources say nothing about the monumental images of the Seleucid kings in the East. However, many imports of the western mints of Antiochos I and Antiochos II are supplemented by their well-known mints from their eastern capital in Bactria. Their ancestor and founder of the dynasty Seleucos I may have been depicted in the sculptural portrait in the Oxus temple of Tacht-i Sangin,²⁵ although no more than a polychrome clay head (Fig. 4) has survived from the statue. P. Bernard was the first to propose this identification and

²⁰ MUSTAMANDY 1984, p. 176, Abb. 1, 2; BOARDMAN 1994, p. 143, Fig. 4.89.

²¹ REMPEL 1989, p. 117; 2nd century BC (Rempel); one more example — the depiction of Alexander in profile on the gem from Afrasiab (Sogdiana) — is mentioned here without a picture.

²² Flavius Philostratus, *Vita Apolloni* II, 20.

²³ *Ibid.* II, 23–24.

²⁴ *Ibid.* II, 20.

²⁵ BOPEARACHCHI 1998, p. 27, Fig. 5

Khanom head, which the author finds insufficient to support the theory. Nevertheless, such a find in Bactria is extraordinary. It can be matched primarily with the portrait bullae from Seleucia on the Tigris, which show, among other things, several Seleucid kings.³⁴

The impression described above is not the only evidence of the existence of a small-size portrait. Another interesting example is the gem from a gold ring found in Pakistan, which depicts a couple positioned to the left. The male bust is in the front and the female behind it. Again, it was published first by O. Bopearachchi.³⁵ As he remarks correctly, the cameos of the Ptolemies, who were portrayed together with their queens, could have inspired an image of this type. The source of this inspiration is, however, unclear, and the dates of some of the best cameos are still disputed. As we cannot use the find context to give a precise dating of the ring, it is necessary to turn our attention to coin images. Heliocles and Laodice are depicted on the coins of their son Eucratides.³⁶ Later, Straton I minted coins with his and his mother Agathocleia's image.³⁷ A third example was found on the coins of Hermaios, which depict the ruler with his wife Calliope (90–70 BC).³⁸ This particular couple could be represented on the gem. Therefore, it is not relevant for the subject of the present article, as Hermaios ruled the area south of Hindukush.³⁹

An attempt to revive the portrait tradition in Bactria came later under completely different conditions with the new power ruling the area, the Kushans. Their knowledge of portraiture was intermediated by the Graeco-Bactrian coins, still circulating in the region in the 1st century BC. The art of the Parthians constituted a second source of inspiration for them. At that time, the Parthians were in close contact with the Mediterranean world, and they occasionally used the representation of the king for their dynastic propaganda. The images of their kings were, however, not true portraits. They were rather figurative symbols provided with royal attributes: a modified style of portraiture, which the Kushans adopted.

The best manifestation of the early Kushan portrait production in Northern Bactria is the group of clay sculptures from the palace of Khalchayan in Surkhandarya (South Uzbekistan). They have, to a certain extent, portrait qualities in the true meaning of the word. G. Pugačenkova tried to connect them with Heraios and his kin, of course, by comparing them with his coins.⁴⁰ The presence of a diadem constitutes a loan from the western Hellenistic rulers' custom, intermediated more likely by the Parthians rather than by the Graeco-Bactrians. Some of the portraits from Khalchayan resemble the traditional Parthian imagery. The main features of this kind include long hair and a pointed beard.⁴¹ Although it is almost impossible to identify the figures represented in Khalchayan, they have a distinct portrait quality. They show how swift the Kushan reception of the late Hellenistic principles of dynastic propaganda was. It is even more astonishing when we realize the absence of any preceding development.

³⁴ INVERNIZZI 1998.

³⁵ *De l'Indus à l'Oxus* 2002, p. 147.

³⁶ *Ibid.* cat. No. 84.

³⁷ *Ibid.* cat. No. 97.

³⁸ *Ibid.* cat. No. 107.

³⁹ Another female portrait from Afghanistan is in a private collection in London. It shows a diademed bust to the left, probably depicting a queen. Agathocleia, mother of Straton I (135–120 BC), seems to be the most likely personage in this respect. M.-F. BOUSSAC attempts to date it to the 1st century BC by comparing it with the finds from Tilia Tepe (see below); *De l'Indus à l'Oxus* p. 148, cat. No. 136, published by M.-F. BOUSSAC.

⁴⁰ PUGAČENKOVA 1971, ill. 61–68, 78, (nos. 58, 45).

⁴¹ PUGAČENKOVA 1971, ill. 59; Pugačenkova assumes that this image represents a Parthian prince. She compares it with the Parthian coins of Orodes I and Phraates IV.

Unfortunately, the later famous portrait sculptures of the great Kushan kings have survived headless. Nevertheless, they illustrate that the trend was directed more at the Parthian rather than at the Hellenistic prototypes. Their style is somewhat schematic, plain and simplistic. It is the same case with the sculptures of Kanishka from Mathura and Surkh Kotal as well as with the statue of Vima Kadphises from Mathura.⁴² Two of them bear an inscription, but their only Hellenistic quality is the idea of the portrait itself. One more head should be mentioned in this respect: an interesting image of a bald-headed elderly man of individual aspect in the Peshawar Museum, which was tentatively interpreted by F. Tissot as the portrait of the Kushan king Huvishka.⁴³

As Roman political power never reached as far as Central Asia, we cannot trace any influence from that of Roman portraits, which constitute one of the most impressive contributions of Roman art to art history. Nevertheless, G. Pugačenkova has published a remarkable small marble head from the site of Ilantepa near the town of Shurtshi in Uzbekistan. She dated the head to the last decades BC or to the first decades AD by comparing it with early imperial portraits.⁴⁴

Conclusion

As is clearly seen, realistic portraits were not known in Central Asia before the time of Alexander the Great. His campaign brought with it Greek art principles, including that of portraiture, to the East. Both written and archaeological sources inform us of his portraits being made in a large scale (sculptures) as well as in small art (gems and statuettes). The same situation continued throughout the Seleucid and Greco-Bactrian periods. The development was similar to that happening in the Mediterranean, which is best documented by the coin portraits (not discussed in the present article). The substantial difference is thus to be seen in the material used for the portrait sculpture: marble and other high quality stones were not available in Central Asia; the bronze industry was not as well developed here. As in the case of architecture, clay was the most favourite material. In addition, faience was rarely used. After the collapse of Greek Bactria in the second half of the 2nd century BC, portraits continued to be created to the south of Hindukush. Again, coins were the main medium to carry the subject. Portraits of another kind, except for several gems, have not yet come to light.

The rise of the nomadic people of the steppes — the Yue-zhe or the Kushans — in Bactria brought about an important change. Except for the early phase closely connected to the earlier developments (Khalchayan, the coins of Herais), the portrait (or the images intended to be portraits) lose their realism, plasticity and, generally, the Greek-like appearance and acquire schematic and plain, more graphic features. This can be observed not only in the sculpture, but also on the coins of the Great Kushan kings.

Unlike Egypt, Syria and Greece, we lack the large amount of finds that would shed light on the development of portraiture in the Hellenistic and Roman / Kushan periods. The data we have for Central Asia, and especially for Bactria, are much like an uncompleted jigsaw puzzle. Nevertheless, the recent outstanding finds show that the phenomenon of portraiture in ancient Bactria has a hopeful possibility of being described more accurately in the future.

⁴² PUGAČENKOVA 1971, ill. 129, 130; PUGAČENKOVA 1979, ill. 134, 135; FUSSMAN 1983, Abb. 11.

⁴³ TISSOT 1986, Fig. 144, h. 29 cm, Peshawar Museum no. 1390.

⁴⁴ PUGAČENKOVA 1973, Ris. 46; PUGAČENKOVA 1979, ill. 229.

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