

A hypothesis about some so-called “posthumous” coins of Heliokles I, last king of Bactria.

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1. The mystique of a largely obscure history. Some puzzling questions on the Greeks in Bactria and India.

The history of the easternmost Hellenistic realms, the kingdom of Bactria and the Indo-Greek kingdom is as fascinating and challenging as still largely obscure. Scholars often found themselves moving into a realm of hypotheses and counterhypotheses around a variety of topics, starting from the attempt to explain the high number of kings (with different names and a variety of possible dynastic affiliations) that we mostly know only on the base of numismatic findings¹. Another quite open question regards the relationship between Graeco-Bactrians, Indo-Greeks and other peoples that came to power in the kaleidoscopic scenario of the Indian Subcontinent since the second half of the II century b.C., such as the *Indo-Scythians* and the

¹See, for a first overview, W.W. Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1951; A.K. Narain, *The Indo-Greeks*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1957; O. Bopearachchi, *Monnaies Greco-Bactriennes et Indo-Grecques, Catalogue Raisonne*, Biblioteque National Paris, Paris 1991; J. Cribb, *The Greek Kingdom of Bactria, Its Coinage and Collapse*, in *Ancien Carrefour Entre L'Est et L'Oest* (ed. Bopearachchi, O & Boussac, M-F), Brepols, Paris 2005; F. L. Holt, *Thundering Zeus: The Making of Hellenistic Bactria*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999; M. Mitchiner, *Indo-Greek and Indo-Scythian Coinage Volume I: The Early Indo-Greeks and their Antecedents*, London 1975; R.C. Senior & D. MacDonald, *The Decline of the Indo-Greeks. A re-appraisal of the chronology from the time of Menander to that of Azes*, Hellenistic Numismatic Society Monographs 2/1998 F. Widemann, *Phases et contradictions de la colonisation grecque en Asie central et en Asie centrale et en Inde du nord-ouest*, in “Indologica Taurinensia” 27/2001, 215-262.

Kushans (themselves stemmed from the *Yuezhi*, according to Chinese sources)². As these latter peoples showed the attitude to absorb many elements of Hellenistic culture³ (made visible also in the language and in the iconography adopted in their coinage), there is also the possibility that at the downside of *Greco-Bactrian* and *Indo-Greek* kingdoms dynastic lines between hellenistic kings and former nomadic tribes had mixed: some of the most remarkable clues of this can be found, e.g., in the coins struck by Indo-Scythian king *Maues* jointly with queen *Machene*⁴ See, on this point, F. Widemann, *Maues King of Taxila: An Indo-Greek Kingdom with a Saka King*, in “*East and West*”, 53, 1,4/2003, 95-125. or in the coin in which Indo-Greek king *Artemidoros*, while adopting typical Indo-Greek iconographical standards, defines himself as ‘the son of *Maues*’⁵. Another quite puzzling question regards the early bilingual coinage of king *Kujula Kadphises* - likely the founder of the *Kushan* kingdom - whose *recto* is dedicated to king *Hermaios* (commonly considered the last Indo-Greek king to reign in the area delimited by the *Hindu-Kush* to the North): the question becomes even more problematic if we accept the hypothesis (based on an analysis of overstrikes with other kings), that *Hermaios*’ kingdom was dated between 90 and 70 b.C., while *Kujula Kadphises*’ domain likely started almost a century afterwards⁶. The reason behind this symbolic connection deserves further attention, along with the hypothesis of a longer duration and wider extension of *Hermaios*’ kingdom, which might bring back to light some interesting suppositions by William W. Tarn about a possible connection between the later king and the *Yinmofu*, son of the king of *Ronqu*, who regained his kingdom with the help of the *Han*⁷. In our view, issuing coins in the name of *Hermaios* was all but a casual circumstance, considering that *Kujula Kadphises* placed his own name and title in the *verso*, thereby suggesting a connection that placed his rule as an ideal continuation of *Hermaios*’ kingdom. Another quite intriguing issue related to *Hermaios* are the so-called ‘posthumous imitations’, which sometimes re-

²*Hòu Hànsū*, 88. See, for an overview, Y. Juping, *Some Clues of the Hellenistic World and the Roman East hidden in China’s early four Historical Books*, in “*Talanta*”, XLVI-XLVII (2014-2015), pp. 121-143.

³See F. Reggio, *When Dionysos met the Buddha. A Reading on Interculturality, Identity and Globalization at the Crossroad between India and Late-Hellenism: Sociological and Legal-Philosophical Implications*, in I. Zarzosang Varte (ed.), *Society, Culture, Environment and Human Security: Rediscovering Northeast India*, 1-19.

⁴See O. Boppearachchi, *Was Indo-Greek Artemidoros the son of Indo-Scythian Maues ?*, in “*Numismatika Kronika*”, 2008/2009, 25-36.

⁵While Boppearachchi dates Hermaeus to c. 90–70 BCE, R. C. Senior to c. 95–80 BCE. See, for a further analysis on Kujula Kadphises in relation to the administrative articulation of post-hellenistic Bactria, H. Falk, *The Five Yabghus of the Yuezhi*, in “*Bulletin of the Asia Institute*” 28/2014, 1-44. About the possible relationship between Hermaios and Yinmofu I have recently written a few considerations in F. Reggio, *When Dionysos met the Buddha*, cit., *passim*.

⁷See W.W.Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, cit., 1951, 339-342.

semble the original lifelong emissions, while sometimes show totally different, yet relatively typical, traits and facial features in the King's portrait. Often related to *Indo-Scythians*, these other kinds of coins open some further questions about the importance of this king in relation to other peoples that came to power in that complex scenario⁸. The posthumous imitations that caught our attention here are not related to *Hermaios*, though.

2. Heliokles I, vassal of the Yuezhi? Heliokles coins struck by the DaYuan?

Our attention is focused on other coins which are commonly considered either *Indo-Scythian* or *Kushan* posthumous imitations, and which are dedicated to *Heliokles I*, commonly believed to be the last Greco-Bactrian King. We don't know much about the last Greek kings in Bactria after the fall of *Eukratides*, killed by one of his sons on the way back from a military campaign in India (Justin XLI,6): weakened by external (we might think of an unsuccessful attempt to seize the Indo-Greek domains from the contemporary Menander I) and internal struggles (possibly a civil war following the slaughter of *Eukratides*), the Greeks were finally defeated by the Parthians (from the West) and by the Nomadic invaders (from the North-East): the *Scythians* around 140 b.C., and, shortly afterwards, the *Yuezhi*, possibly a confederation of Indo-European peoples commonly related to the *Tocharians*. The fall of the Greek Bactria under the *domino effect* of the invasion of migrating tribes is where Western and Chinese sources overlap and pass the witness one to the other⁹. We know only from numismatic sources that four Greek kings reigned in Bactria after *Eukratides*: *Eukratides II*, *Demetrios II*, *Plato* and *Heliokles I*¹⁰. The coinage of this last king is rather extensive and includes some (later), lower-quality *strikes*, in billon or mostly in bronze, which present rather rough traits. In some cases, there is also a new symbol on the *verso*: instead of the traditional standing Zeus, a horse with a prominent leg, and this is exactly the kind of coin that caught our attention. The legenda remains the same in all these coins: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ/ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ /ΗΛΙΟΚΛΕΟΥ.

⁸See, e.g., R. C. Senior, *The Coinage of Hermaios and its Imitations Struck by the Scythians*, London, 1999. R. C. Senior, *Indo Scythian - The Indo-Greek and Indo-Scythian King Sequences in the Second and First Centuries BC* and *Indo-Greek - The Indo-Greek and Indo-Scythian King Sequences in the Second and First Centuries BC*, in "Supplement to Oriental Numismatic Society Newsletter", no. 179, London, 2004.

⁹See B. N. Mukherjee, *Ta-hsia and the Problem Concerning the Advent of Nomadic Peoples in Greek Bactria*, in "East and West", Vol. 19, No. 3/4 1969, 395-400; A. Di Castro, *The Barbarisation of Bactria*, in A. A Di Castro – C. A. Hope (eds.), *Cultural Interaction in Afghanistan c 300 BCE to 300 CE*, MAI Press, Melbourne 2005., 1-18.

¹⁰See J. Cribb, *The Greek Kingdom of Bactria, Its Coinage and Collapse*, cit., *passim*.

While these coins are often interpreted as later imitations struck by the new lords that had overrun the Graeco-Bactrian power, this reconstruction might not be as sound as it seems.

It must be noticed, first of all, that Heliokles' reign (and life) might not have come to an end in the moment of nomadic invasions of Bactria, and in fact the dates of his kingdom have been recently reviewed and postponed¹¹. While, as we saw, kings like the Kushan *Kujula Kadphises* have produced their own style of coins which included the name of a Greek king, it is hard to understand why these later coins carrying the name of *Heliokles* would be plainly considered as imitations from those people who overthrew his domain, rather than later strikes of *Heliokles* himself, or at least of some cities or territories that in a way still recognized themselves under the symbol of this Greek king. What is mostly catching our attention is the choice not just to try to reproduce the symbology of *Heliokles*, but rather to introduce a new symbol in the coins' verso: the horse. Why should new sovereigns keep one side of the coin and the name of the king and only change the symbol in the *verso*? Moreover, this coin, despite his roughness, does not imitate a previous model (as it happened, instead, in the 'so called' *Hermaios* posthumous imitations) but presented an autonomous style and format (typical of the Bactrian coinage, with Greek writings only in the verso, and non-bilingual). Once again, we must return to an interesting observation by Joe Cribb: "The control of Bactria by the *DaYuezhi* appears to be a loose control as the Chinese continued to send (or attempt to send) ambassadors to Bactria without reference to the *DaYuezhi* until at least 111 BC (*Han Shu*, chapter 61, parts 5–6), and the first Chinese reference to the *DaYuezhi* in actual occupation of Bactria does not appear until about AD 75"¹². This leads us to wonder whether these later coins could belong to the final part of *Heliokles*' kingdom, in which the king had remained in power on a smaller part of Bactria, maybe even on *Bactres* and surroundings, acting as a sort of vassal of the *Yuezhi*, yet with right to strike coins. This would also match with *Zhang Qian*'s description of *Daxia* (*Bactria*) in his *Chronicles of Dayuan*¹³. Actually, it is exactly *Zhang Qian* that leads us to formulate a hypothesis: as we learn from his report, the Chinese ambassador had first come in touch with the *Da Yuan*, whose features mostly lead to think of a *sui generis* Hellenistic kingdom that had remained independent from both the *Yuezhi* and the

¹¹See J. Cribb, *The Greek Kingdom of Bactria, Its Coinage and Collapse*, cit., *passim*.

¹²*Ivi*, p. 11. "The last successful mission to Bactria took place in about 115–113 BC, a separate mission to the Dayuezhi was sent at the same time. Embassies were sent later than 111 BC and before 90 BC, but their dates are not mentioned by the Han Chronicle. The case for the end of the Greek kingdom of Bactria by 130 BC, and therefore Heliocles I's reign ending about the same time, is accordingly not upheld by either the numismatic evidence or the Chinese testimony".

¹³See *Shiji* 123 and for some further insights, Y. Juping, *Hellenistic World and the Silk Road*, "Anabasis" 4/2013, 73-91; J. GallianaLlorca, *Trade and Cultural Contacts between China and the hellenistic World through the Silk Road*, in "Viaggiatori – Imperial China and the Silk Road", 2/2019, 139-187.

Saka. The *Da Yuan* (*Great Ionians?*) had the same language and habits of the people from *Daxia*, now vassals of the *Yuezhi*; they cultivated rice and wheat, produced wine and a herb called *alpha-alpha*, used to nurture a very peculiar kind of ‘blood-sweating’ horses on which part of *Da Yuan*’s economic and military power was based¹⁴. Exactly that horse which was at the base of the two military campaigns that the *Han* undertook against *Da Yuan* between 104 and 102 b.C.; the horse that we find in the later ‘*Heliokles*’ coins. What if the kingdom of *Da Yuan*, possibly placed in the Ferghana Valley, was a last surviving independent part of the former *Greco-Bactrian* Kingdom, which still recognized king *Heliokles* as a political (or at least symbolic) reference? What if these later *Heliokles* coins with a horse on the *verso* where emissions from the Kingdom of *DaYuan*, one of the last frontiers of the Hellenistic political entities which hadn’t been subdued by the new emerging powers in the easternmost regions of the former empire of Alexander? This is of course just a hypothesis, but we share it here in the hope that it can give impulse to further investigation.

¹⁴See, again, *Shiji* 123, and Y. Juping, *Hellenistic World and the Silk Road*, cit., *passim*.