

THE WAY THEY LOOKED: DYNASTIC PORTRAITURE ON PTOLEMAIC COINS

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Coins, although not completely unknown in pharaonic Egypt, only began to play a significant role at the beginning of the fourth century BCE, when the rulers of the thirtieth dynasty (380–343 BCE) first adopted them to facilitate trade with Greek merchants and to pay the wages of Greek mercenaries enrolled to counter the advance of the Persian army. These early coins were struck with dies imported from Attica and primarily Athens: only the hieroglyphs on the reverses of the tetradrachms from the reign of Teos (362–360 BCE) and the staters from the reign of Nectanebo II (360–342 BCE) distinguished this currency from the one struck in mainland Greece, attesting to the development of a steady, even if limited, local production.¹

Once the Ptolemies gained power over Egypt, coins took on a much-increased role. A new taxation mechanism based on currency favored local economy and long-distance trade, produced predictable income for the state, and, more importantly, spread the use of bronze coinage to a larger segment of the population,

indigenous as well as foreign.² The new rulers effectively controlled and dictated the economic and political agenda of their reign through coins. The royal monopoly over currency contributed to assert sovereignty over existing Egyptian institutions, primarily the powerful priesthoods at the major temples, and disseminated ideological messages that shaped the society's perception of the rulers' social and cultural identity. Ptolemaic coinage in Egypt, now completely independent from Athenian dies, was mainly produced in the mint of Alexandria, already established around 325 BCE during the reign of Alexander.³ The mint, closely controlled by the kings' dioiketes,⁴ developed over time a series of highly maneuvered iconographic motifs and legends that were designed to underscore the legitimacy of the ruling dynasty. The emphasis was placed on royal portraits, both of the king and the queen consort, on a small number of divinities characterized at once by Egyptian and Greek attributes, and on repeated allusions to the divine nature of the rulers through images of apotheosis.⁵ The combination of these elements set Ptolemaic coinage within the tradition of contemporary Hellenistic coin production, and ultimately identified the new pharaohs as fundamentally Greek.⁶



4-1 Octadrachm. Gold. Reverse: Jugate Portrait of Ptolemy I and Berenice I. Minted in Alexandria, 260–240 BCE. ANS: 1977.158.112. Courtesy of the American Numismatic Society. Checklist no. 40.