

# NOTAE NUMISMATICAE

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# ZAPISKI NUMIZMATYCZNE



Tom XV

MUZEUM NARODOWE W KRAKOWIE  
SEKCJA NUMIZMATYCZNA  
KOMISJI ARCHEOLOGICZNEJ PAN  
ODDZIAŁ W KRAKOWIE

Kraków 2020

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The Editors

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## On Probability and Proof: Piecing Together the Puzzle of Alexander's Elephant Medallions

**ABSTRACT:** The elephant medallions associated with the reign of Alexander the Great continue to cause controversy. A recent attempt to remove the elephant/chariot type from this corpus is based upon the die axes of three known specimens. This conclusion is false on both methodological grounds and the existence of a fourth specimen. The elephant/chariot type should not be excluded from the corpus of these medallions.

**KEY WORDS:** Alexander the Great, elephant medallions, Porus

**ABSTRAKT:** *O prawdopodobieństwie i weryfikacji. Układając puzzle medalionów Aleksandra Wielkiego*

Tzw. medaliony ze słoniem, związane z panowaniem Aleksandra Wielkiego, wciąż budzą kontrowersje. Ostatnia próba usunięcia monet typu „słoń/rydwan” z tego korpusu opiera się na pomiarach osi trzech znanych egzemplarzy. Taki wniosek jest jednak fałszywy, z powodu zarówno błędnej podstawy metodologicznej, jak i istnienia czwartego egzemplarza. Tym samym typ „słoń/rydwan” nie powinien zostać wykluczony z korpusu wspomnianych medalionów.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** Aleksander Wielki, medaliony ze słoniem, Porus

The puzzle of the elephant medallions attributed to Alexander the Great seems as intractable as ever. An attempt to piece its many parts together was published in 2003, fitting the three silver types (Figs. 1–3) into a single coherent picture of

Alexander's heroized Battle of the Hydaspes River.<sup>1</sup> This book argued that the archer and chariot types supported the claim made on the larger decadrachms, namely that Alexander defeated Porus and his army by virtue of the Macedonian's divine power as the son of Zeus. Alexander conspicuously holds a bolt of lightning as he is being crowned victorious by Nike, having routed the enemy as symbolized on the large medallion's other side. The smaller silver types display the two Indian forces, chariots and archers, that were "miraculously" neutralized by the thunderstorms over which Alexander asserts control. Some earlier interpretations of these artifacts suggested either that they were minted by someone other than Alexander, perhaps Taxiles or a satrap such as Abulites or Eudamos, or that the medallions should be associated with an event other than the Battle of the Hydaspes, such as an elephant hunt, the Battle of Gaugamela, or a ceremony of concord between Indians and Greeks.<sup>2</sup> Alternative interpretations naturally persist among historians and numismatists, inspired in part by the ongoing appearance of additional specimens of these three silver types on the market since 2003.<sup>3</sup> Most dramatically came the publication in 2005 of a controversial new variety struck in gold.<sup>4</sup> The gold elephant medallion posed a new question for scholars, whether to work this unique piece into the puzzle or to dismiss it as a modern forgery. More recently, it has been argued that one of the three silver types (elephant/chariot) was never part of the series at all, meaning that piece of the puzzle should be removed entirely from the tableau.<sup>5</sup> What are numismatists and historians now to make of this jumble?

Proofs, as opposed to suspicions, that the unique gold medallion is false have not yet been adduced, and not much short of a second discovery in a secure archaeological context could prove its genuineness. Therefore, the larger methodological issue raised by this gold medallion is how scholars should handle disputes over authenticity: Ought questionable artifacts to be discussed at all until doubts have been allayed, or should such objects be accorded provisional status as historical evidence?<sup>6</sup> In any case, the existence of the gold medallion does not change the basic picture presented in 2003. If a clever forgery, the gold piece raises on its own no objections to the scenario shown on the silver series; if genuine, it has great iconographic significance relevant to the origins of certain Diadochic coinages, but only reinforces rather than challenges the interpretation offered in 2003. The more immediate

<sup>1</sup> HOLT 2003. Figures 1–3 courtesy of the American Numismatic Society: ANS 1959.254.86 (Elephant/Alexander decadrachm); ANS 1974.145.4 (Elephant/Archer tetradrachm); ANS 1990.1.1 (Elephant/Chariot tetradrachm). All specimens are silver.

<sup>2</sup> For a survey of these earlier theories, see HOLT 2003: 92–116.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, BHANDERE 2007: 208–256; DAHMEN 2007: 7–9; LE RIDER 2007: 247–252.

<sup>4</sup> BOPEARACHCHI and FLANDRIN 2005.

<sup>5</sup> HABICHT et AL 2018–2019: 24–50.

<sup>6</sup> HOLT 2011: 13–31.

problem, then, is not whether to add a new gold piece to the puzzle, but whether to take some silver ones away. That shall be the focus of this short investigation into the relevant methodologies of probability and proof.

The challenge to the elephant/chariot type is the main point raised in a recent article by Habicht et Al that is subtitled “crucial historical numismatic objects or clever counterfeits?”<sup>7</sup> The seriousness of the question certainly demands a fair hearing of the evidence. The authors fall short on methodological grounds, but do provide a more or less full rehearsal of the literature and main arguments.<sup>8</sup> On that basis, they conclude that the large elephant/Alexander decadrachms are genuine (a view hardly contested over the past century), and that the elephant/archer types are also authentic (likewise the longstanding *communis opinio*).<sup>9</sup> They leave to readers a final decision about the authenticity of the lone gold example. Only on the matter of the elephant/chariot type do the authors offer “highly significant new information” that, so they claim, shows these particular medallions were not minted by Alexander and thus are of dubious authenticity.<sup>10</sup>

To be clear, the article published by Habicht et Al was precipitated not by new specimens added to the corpus, but by only one newly discovered datum, namely that the die axis of a previously published elephant/chariot medallion is 12:00.<sup>11</sup> This is acclaimed to be very important because the die axis of the other two specimens known to the authors is also 12:00. They explain: “Two examples might have 12:00 axes by chance, but if all three known examples share a 12:00 axis, that strongly suggests it is a characteristic of the type”.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, they emphasize in their own italics: *The strong inference is that the chariot type was not issued by the same people as produced the Porus archer and decadrachm types [which have variable axes] and was therefore probably not issued by Alexander the Great.*<sup>13</sup> In the end, the authors

<sup>7</sup> The article in question was prompted by a recent auction (Numismatica Ars Classica, Auction 114, May 2019).

<sup>8</sup> One might nevertheless add to their bibliography such works as BHANDARE 2007: 208–256; BANNIKOV and POPOV 2013; COLLINS 2012: 371–402; MAJUMDAR 2011: 281–291; OLBRYCHT 2007–2008: 19–24; IDEM 2011: 13–26; PERASSI 2018: 137–212.

<sup>9</sup> Readers should note, however, the erroneous description of the decadrachm’s obverse on p. 28: the elephant is not moving to the left, no one is standing behind the elephant’s neck, and the second rider (without the goad) is obviously not the mahout.

<sup>10</sup> This response addresses only the ‘new’ numismatic evidence, although there are also some concerns about the use of literary evidence by the four authors. For instance, it may be doubted that “Alexander had been stung by a public comment by his uncle” (p. 35) to the effect that the one had fought warriors and the other women. This passage in Curtius is highly rhetorical and may well stem from an earlier rhetorical exercise in Livy 9.19.10, in which Livy himself actually lumps the Indians among the weak and disparaged forces. It requires more argumentation to justify the use of Curtius here to state categorically that Alexander’s uncle ever made the remark, that Alexander ever heard of it in India, and that he was “stung” by it enough to mint special coins to refute the slander.

<sup>11</sup> HABICHT et AL 2018–2019: 31, 42.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*: 31.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

declare categorically about the chariot type: “We have shown that it is not part of the Porus series issued by Alexander, since...the die axes are all 12:00 aligned”.<sup>14</sup>

Habicht et Al have shown no such thing. They have raced carelessly ahead of the evidence based upon a faulty probability statement and they have consequently reached a demonstrably erroneous conclusion. Let us first consider the matter of probability as a mathematical problem, and then answer the challenge issued by the authors<sup>15</sup> to produce further evidence about these coins that might refute their arguments.

What are the numbers? The authors suggest that the three elephant/chariot coins known to them were struck from at least two obverse and two reverse dies, since they report seeing “slight differences between the NAC [Holt E/C 2] and ANS [Holt E/C 3] coin dies especially on the chariot side”.<sup>16</sup> By their own calculations for die productivity,<sup>17</sup> this would mean about 40,000 coins at a minimum within the chariot mintage.<sup>18</sup> From that number, they reference a sample of three known specimens. The question is how reliably does that sample of three establish a fixed (12:00) axis for the entire mintage? One might suppose intuitively that this sample is much too small for the increasingly heavy weight placed upon it by Habicht et Al whose argument evolves quickly from a strong inference and a strong suggestion to a definitive result: “We have shown...” Based upon a Binomial Reliability Demonstration Test (BRDT), the frailty of their argument can be confirmed mathematically.<sup>19</sup> Three coins is not nearly enough; the authors would need to sample at least 90 coins to say that at least 99% of the mintage has the same fixed die axis with 95% confidence.

Based upon mathematical probability, the authors have published their conclusions much too soon. Based upon material proof, they have published their conclusions much too late. We may upgrade probability to proof because a fourth elephant/chariot coin (Fig. 4) is in fact known among the other elephant medallions that have appeared since the 2003 inventory.<sup>20</sup> The “new” specimen was allegedly found in November 2009 near Baalbek in Lebanon, and thereafter was sold to a private collector in 2010. Relevant information and photographs were acquired through

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*: 42.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*: 31. The inserted notations, such as [E/C 2], are the identifiers established in HOLT 2003: 167–169.

<sup>17</sup> HABICHT et AL 2018–2019: 29.

<sup>18</sup> That is, 20,000 coins per each of the two obverse dies they mention. Whether the authors accept any obverse die linkage to the BN coin [E/C 1] is unreported, leaving open the possibility of a third obverse die and thus a larger production of about 60,000 coins. The minimum estimate is nonetheless sufficient for the point being made here.

<sup>19</sup> JENSEN 2015: 253–266. I thank my colleague Dr. Cathy Poliak of the University of Houston’s Mathematics Department for guiding me to, and through, Jensen’s article.

<sup>20</sup> HOLT 2003: 167–169. Figure 4 courtesy of Dr. Osmund Boppearachchi, to whom I extend my gratitude.

correspondence with numismatists and dealers who have handled the specimen. It weighs 15.53 g and conforms to the pattern established for the elephant medallions as a whole: thick and dumpy, with irregular edges, erratic weights, and so forth.<sup>21</sup> It is die linked to the other three examples as follows:

2009 (Market)	OBV	REV
E/C 1 (BN)	OBV	REV
E/C 2 (NAC)	OBV	REV
E/C 3 (ANS)	OBV	REV

Most importantly, the fourth example has a 6:00 die axis, which shows that the die-linked mintage is variable. While we may have assumed that Habicht et al were premature in their conclusions, this medallion proves it. The elephant/chariot type remains an important piece in the puzzle of Alexander’s medallions.

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<sup>21</sup> HOLT 2003: 141–146. Here and at 136–137 the ancillary points raised by Habicht et al regarding the border, chariot, and monograms were already addressed.

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PLATE 1

Fig. 1. AR, decadrachm, "Elephant/Alexander" type  
Photo courtesy of the American Numismatic Society (ANS 1959.254.86)

Fig. 2. AR, tetradrachm, "Elephant/Archer" type  
Photo courtesy of the American Numismatic Society (ANS 1974.145.4)

Fig. 3. AR, tetradrachm, "Elephant/Chariot" type  
Photo courtesy of the American Numismatic Society (ANS 1990.1.1)

Fig. 4. AR, tetradrachm, "Elephant/Chariot" type  
Photo courtesy of Dr. Osmund Bopearachchi



1



2



3



4