

The Apotheosis of Alexander in Art

Dr. Mark Fullerton,

Professor, History of Classical Art, OSU, fullerton.1@osu.edu

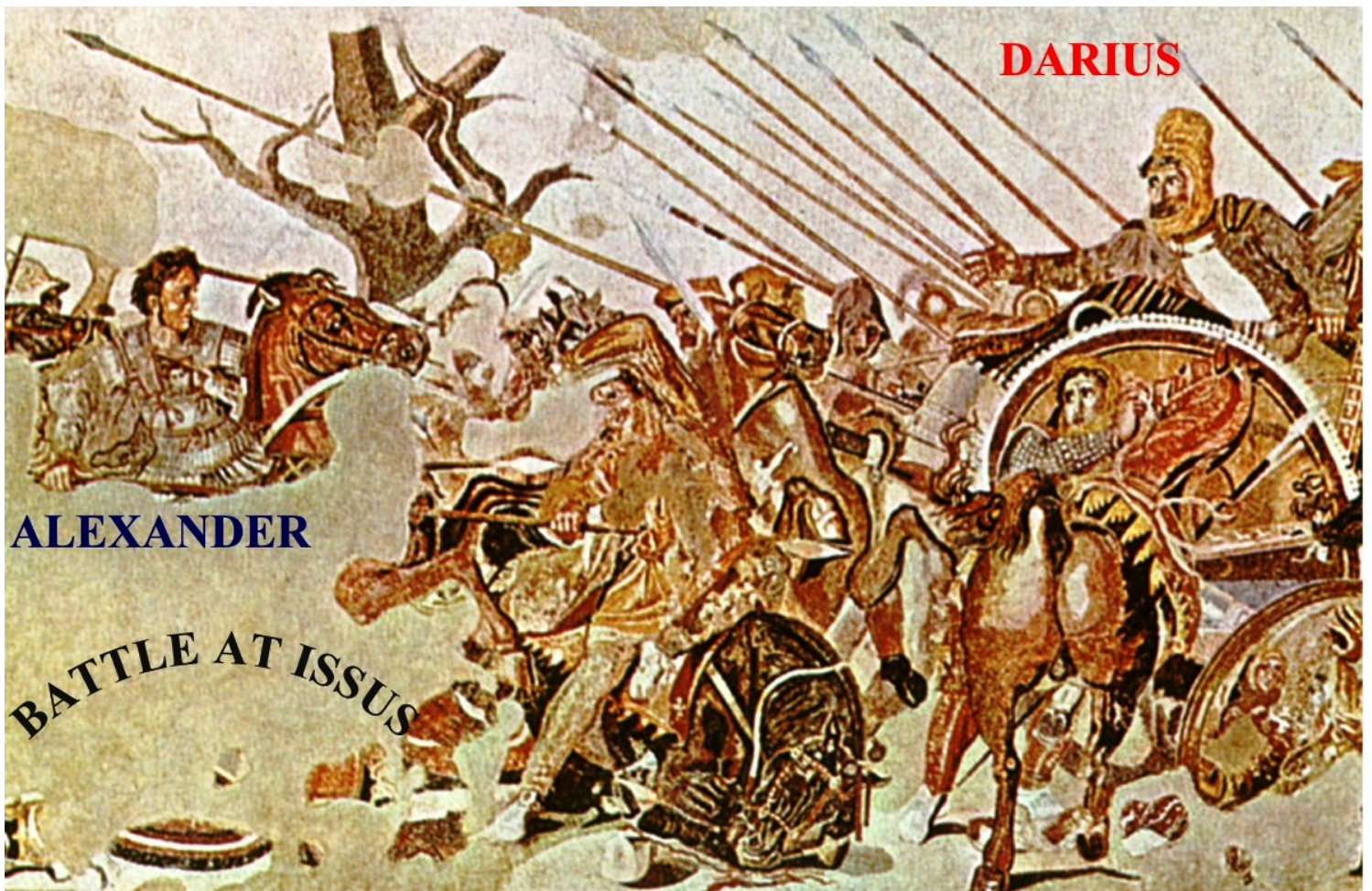
Every culture has its heroes. Larger-than-life figures, attempting and achieving the apparently impossible, function as role models for human behavior and offer hope to those who feel circumscribed by their own mortality. Mythological demigods like **Achilles** and **Herakles** [*Hercules*] surely served this role in ancient Greece and Rome, and from time to time, even historical figures were accorded semi-divine, **or even divine, status**.

Ostensibly this honor was prompted by an individual's extraordinary accomplishments, but equally important were the purposes of those who secured his elevation. The most obvious example of this was **Julius Caesar**, whose deification was secured by his heir G. Octavius, who thereby could fashion himself the son of a god and achieve a status that would give him a leg up in the struggle for power. In fact, the future emperor Augustus was following a precedent established much earlier by the lieutenants of Alexander, who attempted to solidify control in their individually allotted portions of Alexander's empire. It was they who embraced Alexander's divinity and perpetuated, if not constructed, his divine image, as is clear from the art of the time.

We know that portraits of Alexander were made in his own lifetime but know little of their appearance. Descriptions in later literary sources are consistent with our preserved images – long, windswept leonine locks, emotional, **deeply set eyes**, and a **godlike youthful beauty**. Yet the earliest representations we have date from the decades following Alexander's death.



Alexander did not put his mortal image on coins; the earliest certain depictions are found on the coins of **Lysimachos** of Thrace [*pic*] and Ptolemy of Egypt, who had served under Alexander and claimed for themselves lands that they intended to turn into monarchic kingdoms. The coins were designed to emphasize their association with Alexander, to borrow something from his **divinity**, and to strengthen their royal claims. Each shows Alexander with the attributes of a god–



the ram's horns of **Zeus Ammon** and the elephant skin of **Dionysos**.



When **Ptolemy** [*pic*] soon thereafter put his own portrait on coins, he chose an image closely fashioned after Alexander's, a precedent that was followed by his progeny, other **Hellenistic** royalty up to the last one, **Cleopatra**, and even Roman aspirants like Pompey the Great, who, we are told, deliberately styled his hair in the manner favored by the great Macedonian conqueror.

Perhaps the most famous of all Alexander images is that found on a Roman floor mosaic in a sumptuous **Pompeian house**. He is shown here in battle against the Great King of Persia Darius. The confrontation is dramatic and the **divine inevitability** of Alexander's victory is underscored by the panic skillfully indicated in Darius' expression. Although the mosaic is a work of Roman times, many believe it copied a monumental wall painting known to have been commissioned by Cassander, one of the potentates who struggled for power in the chaotic decades following Alexander's death. Interestingly, it is known that Alexander and Cassander [Κασσανδρος] detested one another, but that did not keep the latter from honoring posthumously the former, when it served his purpose to glorify his predecessor as king of Macedon. It was Cassander by the way who put to death **Olympias** and her grandson, Alexander's son from Persian Princess **Sateira**!

Even non-Greek kings used Alexander's image for their own purpose. The famous **Alexander sarcophagus**



from the royal necropolis at Phoenician **Sidon** is a fully Greek monument, covered with sculptured reliefs showing battles against Persians and hunting scenes. Such subjects had long been conventional on royal monuments in the ancient Near East. Here the king is joined by Alexander in his characteristic lion skin helmet - an allusion to Herakles, one of his protective deities. We are not certain whether the two kings ever actually fought or hunted together, but it is known that it was to Alexander that king Abdalonymus owed his throne. The sarcophagus should date to around the time of that Sidonian king's death in 312 B.C.; here again, the association with the heroic Alexander is emphasized for political purposes.

While Alexander's accomplishments were, by any measure, great, his lasting reputation was considerably enhanced by those later rulers whose own fortunes were, deliberately, linked with his memory. It was to them that we owe our knowledge of Alexander's image, and, as much as Alexander himself, it was they who were responsible for his perpetual "greatness", just as **Homer** and the great tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides perpetuated an epic image for the Trojan War warriors!