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MATURE HERACLES AND YOUTHFUL
KINGS. THEOCRITUS 17
AND HELLENISTIC ICONOGRAPHY

Abstract: *In the 'genealogical' passage of the 'Encomium' of Ptolemy Philadelphus Theocritus several times calls upon Heracles as the ancestor of both the Argead and Lagid dynasties, and surprisingly for his time recalls the mature image of the hero when portraying him. The present paper attempts at the interpretation of this passage in the context of the representations of Heracles in the art of the 4th century BC and the early Hellenistic age, and the assimilation of Alexander with his mythical ancestor.*

Keywords: *Alexander the Great; Heracles; Theocritus*

The primary meaning of the opposition of bearded vs. beardless male figures in Greek art since the Archaic age, and later in particular in the Classical period, had been the indication of well defined social roles of young and mature men (Allen 1859, 196-197; Mau 1897, 30-32; Walker 1991); the clearest example of this distinction being the roles of the *erastes* and *eromenos* in homoerotic relationships (Dover 1989, 86, 144), also as portrayed in art, in particular vase paintings. The beardless image in art was not, however, reserved exclusively for *paides* and *ephebes*; it was also related to physical fitness as in the case of athletes, even though equally fit and strong warriors would be portrayed as mature, bearded men.

Archaic and Classical iconography operated in a major part on the *ethos* principle: despite the growing interest in rendering individual traits in sculpted images, the prevailing feature of Classical 'portraiture' were still the idealized types of statesman, athlete, military leader, philosopher etc., some of which demanded bearded representations, while the others

did not. The development of realism in the late Classical and Hellenistic age is marked, among other things, by the portraying of the playwright Menander and other poets of his generation, as beardless (Dillon 2006, 119), i.e. against the *ethos* of the man of learning or letters, while apparently in accordance to their actual looks.

The world of the gods' images was also ruled by models of representations: up until the last quarter of the 5th century BC the predominant type for male Olympians, with the exception of Apollo, was the bearded man,¹ but the second half of the 5th century BC saw the growing popularity of youthful images of gods and heroes, and by the end of the first half of the 4th century BC adolescent Hermes and Dionysos replaced the severe ones, which survived in traditional herms. For Dionysos the change of the image in art is elegantly paralleled by the literary testimony in Euripides (*Bacch.* 451-459), where the god is portrayed with soft, effeminate features.

In case of Heracles the two images had co-existed for a long period of time, even if until mid-5th century BC the bearded type was largely predominant (Boardman *et al.* 1988, 791), while Hellenism saw the growing popularity of the youthful image, partly due to the influence of the image of Alexander the Great on the iconography of a number of deities and heroes with whom he was assimilated or identified.

One of the best known, and possibly the most widely circulating images of the youthful Heracles, is found on Alexander's silver denominations. It has its iconographic antecedent in the gold and silver of Philip II, while the issues of the kings before Philip present the type of bearded Heracles (Huttner 1997, 67ff). The early issues of Alexander III are stylistically identical with those of his father, only later, in particular after the king's death, the dies from the numerous European and Asiatic mints would present a whole range of images, from high quality pieces of art to barbarized, heavy and shapeless specimens, in which the original design is barely discernible. Among the finest dies is the lifetime Alexandrian issue, whose engraving is so exquisite that J. J. Pollitt (1986, 25f.) ventured the opinion that the original engraver could be Pyrgoteles, and the image may have been modelled on the king's facial features. Unfortunately, these hypotheses

¹ For rare exceptions of Zeus as child/youth see Tiverios *et al.* 1997, 322 and 333. For the possible exceptions of bearded Apollo in Archaic battle scenes see Lambrinudakis *et al.* 1984, 316, for the Hellenistic statue in Hierapolis see Lucian *Syr. D.* 35 and Macrobian *Sat.* 1.17.66-67.

must remain conjectural, since we do not know if Pyrgoteles worked for the Alexandrian mint, or whether he ever executed a portrait of Alexander in lion scalp.

However, the association of Alexander with Heracles both in legend and in art is undisputable. The most well known and unquestioned representation of Alexander with the hero's attribute is the sarcophagus of Abdalonymos from Sidon, portraying the king in the lion scalp helmet, exactly as the Heracles on his coins (see von Graeve 1970, 62-68 and 146-152). As in any other type of portraiture, Alexander-Heracles is always represented as the youthful beardless hero (e.g. Athens, National Archaeological Museum inv. no. 366; Boston Museum of Fine Arts inv. no. 52.1741²), while the bearded images of Heracles in the Hellenistic age are mostly variations on the Lysippean types (Boardman *et al.* 1988, 794).

In this context, the appearance of the bearded Heracles in the *Encomium of Ptolemy Philadelphos* of Theocritus, draws attention. The pertinent fragments of the passage in question run as follows (*Id.* 17.13-33): 'From his ancestors what a man ... was Ptolemy, son of Lagos ... Him the father made equal in honour even to the blessed immortals, and a golden throne is built for him in the house of Zeus; beside him, kindly disposed, sits Alexander ... Facing them is established the seat of centaur-slaying Heracles ... Both have as ancestor the mighty son of Heracles, and both trace their family back in the end to Heracles. Therefore, whenever, now having drunk his fill of fragrant nectar, he leaves the feast ... to one he gives his bow and the quiver ... and to the other his iron club ... to the ambrosial chamber of white-ankled Hebe they lead both the weapons and the bearded son of Zeus himself.'³

Ptolemy Soter, father of the poem's addressee, is portrayed as one in the line of the latter's divine ancestors, along with Alexander and Heracles. The descent from Zeus *via* Heracles, the forefather of the Argead house,⁴ whose extinction gave the impulse for the establishment of the Hellenistic monarchies, is repeatedly mentioned in the passage. The descent of Ptolemy

² It was identified as Alexander by Sjökvist 1953; see Stewart 1993, 282 and Ridgway 2001, 119 for discussion.

³ Translated by R. Hunter (2003).

⁴ Hunter 2003, 120-121 mentions only the late version of the Argead ancestry (Theopomp., *FGrHist* 115 F393; Satyr., *FGrHist* 631 F1; Marsyas, *FGrHist* 135-136 F14; Diod. 7.15; Plut. *Alex.* 2.1), and in the 'mighty descendant of Heracles' sees Karanos through an unclear genealogical line, ignoring the older and simpler version of the line of descent from Temenos, recorded by Herodotus (8.137-138); similarly Huttner 1997, 142f. For discussion of the various versions of this descent see Hoffman 1906, 121ff; Borza 1982; Sprawski 2010, 127-129.

from Zeus finds its analogies in the gossip about him being an illegitimate son of Philip (e.g. Curt. 9.8.33; Paus. 1.6.2), as well as in the legend recorded in the *Suda* (s.v. Λάγρος, Adler λ 25) about the miraculous delivery of Ptolemy, exposed as an illegitimate child, and subsequently saved and fed by the eagle sent to him by Zeus; however, some ancient sources allow for tracing the Zeus ancestry through Soter's mother, Arsinoe, who was supposedly Philip's cousin, even if not mistress (Hoffman 1906, 270). The 'personal badge of Ptolemy', as Otto Mørkholm (1991, 64) called the image of the eagle standing on a thunderbolt, may be connected with this legend.

It is not Zeus, however, whose importance is being emphasized in the poem, but Heracles, the hero particularly worshipped and hallowed by Alexander, who himself appears alongside his ancestor in the divine banqueting scene. And surprisingly this Heracles, who takes the place of the host in the 'palace of Zeus' is described in the last line of the passage as *γενειάτης*, i.e. 'bearded',⁵ even though the contemporary artistic tradition saw him mainly as the youthful beardless hero.⁶ It appears as if Theocritus, conscious of the assimilation of king and hero, resulting in the ambiguity of artistic renditions, was summoning this image to distinguish Heracles from Alexander, but also to show the two as a father and son group (cf. Hölscher 2009, 33ff). One may want to add to this argumentation the notion raised by J. L. Lightfoot (2003, 466-467) that the epithet in question 'as well as meaning "bearded", it is also an age-term standing in contrast to *πρωθήβης*, of immature and mature men' (cf. note 3 in the present paper). The scholar's supposition is based on a passage from Lucian (*Sacr.* 11), concerning the sculpted images in which the artist show

⁵ This noun is not commonly used in ancient texts, even though the verb *γενεῖάω* ('to grow a beard') is quite frequent, beginning with Homer, and *ῥ̄ γενειάς* is considered the most widespread word for 'beard' in all Greek dialects (Adams 1986, 18); for *γενειάτης* seven occurrences are noted in Liddell Scott, and one may add the usage by Callimachus (*H.* 3.90). The only two instances, in which *γενειάτης* applies to a deity, apart from the Theocritus locus, are Luc. *Sacr.* 11 (Zeus) and the aforementioned Callimachus (Pan), otherwise (*Anth. Pal.* 11.158; Lucian *Rh. pr.* 23 and *Bis acc.* 28; Julian *Or.* 4.131a) the meaning is generic and indicates the mature age (and most likely, therefore, actual facial hair) of the person it describes.

⁶ In his commentary to this line R. Hunter (2003, 124) observes that 'Hellenistic art regularly portrays Heracles as a bearded man, past his prime, whereas Alexander and Soter ... are standardly clean-shaven', but see Boardman *et al.* 1988, 793f. for the characteristics and statistics of the two types of the hero himself.

‘Zeus as a bearded man (γενειήτην), Apollo as a perennial boy (παῖδα),’⁷ which stresses the difference between the mature and the youthful regardless of the actual or intended meaning of γενειότης, and also relates to the *ethos* oriented traditions of Greek art, mentioned at the very beginning of this paper.

One of the poetic/mythological concepts in this passage is the ‘shift’ of generations: Heracles takes the place of Zeus, and the kings in turn take the hero’s place as the god’s sons, which makes the bearded/beardless opposition the more meaningful. If we assume that Theocritus alludes to images well known to the Alexandrian Hellenistic reader, then the artistic model for the figure of Heracles himself, as portrayed in Theocritus *Idyll* 17.33, would be on one hand the Zeus type (bearded Heracles on coins resembles Zeus and only the attributes allow for distinction), and on the other hand the Lysippean weary but victorious and accomplished⁸ Heracles of the Farnese type or the *Epitrapezios* of the same sculptor, the latter allegedly executed for the private use of Alexander (Mart. 9.43). The epithet used would at the same time reflect the artistic representations of the hero, and his position in the ‘family picture’ painted in the quoted passage of the encomium: that of the mature – even if eternally not-aging – man, the father figure, as contrasted with the youthful figures of his descendants.⁹

This passage may also be taken for further, even if indirect testimony of the assimilation of the youthful image of Heracles with Alexander, or possibly the appropriation of the image by the deified king who became the tutelary deity of Ptolemaic Alexandria. By emphasizing the fact that Heracles is bearded/mature, and he leaves his weapons in the hands

⁷ A. M. Harmon in *Lucian with an English Translation in Eight Volumes*, vol. 3. London, Cambridge MA.

⁸ Cf. the verse of the *Encomium* omitted in the in-text quotation (17.14-15), on Ptolemy Soter: ‘whenever he laid down in his heart a plan, the like of which no other man could have conceived’ and Hunter’s (2003, 108f.) analysis of the accomplishment motif.

⁹ Cf. the bearded Ammon on the coins of e.g. Cyrene and the youthful horned Alexander on the coins of Lysimachus. What also comes to mind in this context, but falls outside the scope of the present paper, is the tradition of representing Philip II with beard, for which we have no contemporary evidence, but only later elaborations, such as e.g. the famous Tarsus medallion from the Severan age, and possibly the late Hellenistic ceramic medallion (N. P. Goulandris Coll. 503, currently in the Cycladic Art Museum, Athens).

of his descendants, the new and young Heraclids,¹⁰ the power of the hero is transferred not only to Alexander but also to the Lagid dynasty and therefore to Ptolemy Philadelphos, to whom the encomium is addressed. Such interpretation and the context of the poem could apply for instance to the bronze figure (British Museum, reg. 1849,0517.1), being possibly a reflection of a monumental statue, which portrays Ptolemy Philadelphos with combined attributes alluding to Alexander (elephant scalp) and Heracles – the club, which by the Hellenistic time had become the main weapon of Heracles, and also is given to Ptolemy Soter in Theocritus' poem.

Also noteworthy, in spite of all the sophisticated allusion at the divine ancestry of the Ptolemies, Theocritus calls Ptolemy simply 'Lageidas' at the very beginning of the quoted fragment. Double fatherhood is characteristic for the heroic biographies but in the case of the poem in question Heracles may also be regarded as father of the king, or even kingship, patron of the dynasty together with Alexander. Apart from the traditional relations with the Macedonian dynasty, Heracles made a perfect role model for the Macedonian/Hellenistic kings as both the great warrior and, possibly even more importantly, as the cultural hero, i.e. the model for the royal *euergesia*.¹¹ Thus the double image of the mature Heracles and his young counterparts in the persons of the kings may point not only at the mythical ancestry of any particular person, but also at the divine legitimacy of the Ptolemies, equalled to that of the Argeads, as well as to the intended character of their rule.

¹⁰ Later Hellenistic age sees the growing popularity of royal epithets with *neos* or *neoteros*, which may be another manifestation of similar idea. Noteworthy, however, Heracles is absent from official royal titulature; cf. Huttner 1997, 296f.

¹¹ Isocrates in his oration addressed to Philip (5.76) calls Heracles 'ἀπάσης τῆς Ἑλλάδος εὐεργέτης' and later in the same oration (5.114) urges the king to follow his mythical ancestor in both fighting the Persians and introducing peace among the Greeks. Also interestingly, Heracles appears on the list of ancestors of Ptolemy III Euergetes in the Adulis inscription (Dittenberger 1903-1905, vol. 1, no. 54). For Heracles as the patron of rulers and elites in earlier Greece see Huttner 1997, 25-64 and 271-318.

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