



POSEIDON: IN BACTRIA

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Poseidon in Bactria presents the unusual pairing of an Hellenic sea-god with landlocked Central Asia. From the time of Alexander the Great's invasion, the worship of various Greek deities spread through the region (Plutarch, *De Alexandri Fortuna aut Virtute* 328D; Curtius 8.2.6 and 32; Arrian 4.8.1-2; Pliny *Historia Naturalis* 6.18). Isolated archaeological finds provide tangible evidence of this phenomenon at such places as Ai Khanoum (see [ĀY KĀNOM](#)), Takht-i Sangin (Takht-e Sangīn: see [BACTRIA](#)), Dilberdjīn (see [DELBARJĪN](#)), and Tillya-Tepe (Telā Tapa).

That evidence expands significantly when we add numismatic sources, since Bactrian coins survive in sufficient numbers to provide a more or less continuous historical record, and because many of these coins bear the images of Greek gods and heroes. Beyond the personal cults of the Bactrian kings themselves, the coinages attest an official reverence for Zeus, Apollo, Dionysos, Herakles (see [HERACLES](#)), the Dioskouroi, Athena, Artemis, Nike, Helios, Selene, Hermes, and Poseidon (Bopearachchi, 1991, pp. 377-80). Only the latter deity seems incongruous given his normal association with the sea, yet an unmistakable image of Poseidon with trident and palm branch appears on the coins of the Bactrian king Antimachus I Theos (ca. 175 BC). Many scholars have assumed that this coin-type must indicate some naval victory by the king. Nearly every waterway in the region has been suggested as the site of this putative battle: the Oxus River, the lakes of Drangiana, the Aral Sea, the Indus River, the Indian Ocean, the Hydaspes River, and even (by Seleucid proxy) the



Mediterranean Sea. No evidence corroborates the existence of a Graeco-Bactrian warfleet on any of these waters, however, forcing one expert to conclude: “Au total, toutefois, il est certain que Poseidon demeure le plus inexplicable des dieux monétaires gréco-bactriens, et il est assez douteux que rien ne puisse venir l’éclairer par la suite“ (Allouche-LePage, 1956, p. 104).

If not as god of the sea, then perhaps Poseidon in his role as the ‘earth-shaker’ may have been associated in Central Asia with earthquakes. Seismic activity in the region is certainly common, but on Antimachus’ coins the god’s palm branch (a victory symbol) seems inappropriate in this context. For this reason, scholars have now turned to the third major aspect of Poseidon’s power to explain his significance to Central Asia. According to Pausanias 7.21.7, “All men call Poseidon the god of the sea (Pelagaios), of earthquakes (Asphaleios), and of horses (Hippios).” As the inventor of horsemanship, Poseidon Hippios was often worshipped, trident and all, at inland Greek sites such as Mantinea in the central Peloponnesus. The historical primacy of cavalry forces in Bactria and surrounding regions makes sense of the victorious Poseidon appearing on the coinage of Antimachus I. Indeed, on the coins of his successor Antimachus II Nikephoros (ca. 160 BCE), the king appears as a cavalryman galloping to victory. On balance, such an interpretation makes much more sense than a naval victory by Poseidon Pelagaios or a generalized evocation of the earth-rattling Poseidon Asphaleios.

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