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Keeping up with the Seleucids and the Ptolemies

This paper explores the influence exerted by Seleucid and Ptolemaic art and coinage on the public art and royal coinage of Sparta in the third century B.C. The Ptolemaic connection is historically attested, whereas the Seleucid influence can be traced primarily through artistic evidence.

A colossal head of Heracles in Pentelic marble in the Sparta Museum is the most prominent example of public art in Hellenistic Sparta. The jagged edge and rough workmanship of its rear indicate that it was completed in plaster and therefore probably belonged to a wooden figure with the nude parts carved in marble. The acrolithic technique was common for cult statues in the Hellenistic period. The only known temple of Heracles in Sparta, seen by Pausanias (3.15.3) near the shrine of Helen at Therapne, may well have housed this acrolith. Its style is heavily dependent on Lysippus's colossal Heracles at Tarentum from the mid-fourth century, but its technique places it in the third century B.C. It may therefore be attributed to a follower of the master. As it happens, Lysippus's pupil Eutychides of Sicyon, active in the early third century, is known to have produced a bronze statue of the Eurotas River for Sparta. We do not know if Eutychides was also responsible for the acrolith of Heracles, but the association of Sparta with the School of Lysippus may have been due to both local (Peloponnesian) and dynastic considerations, since Lysippus and his followers were the favourite sculptors of Alexander the Great and his Successors. For example, Seleucus I commissioned Eutychides to fashion a statue of the Tyche of the newly founded city of Antioch. This statue was shown sitting on the bank of the Orontes River, with a personified Orontes swimming at her feet. Eutychides's statue of the Eurotas River falls in the same category of personified localities acting as guardians of cities, which became fashionable in the early Hellenistic period.

The creation of Heracles's colossal cult statue may be related to his appearance on the obverse of the first Spartan coins ever minted, on the initiative of King Areus during the Chremonidean War. Heracles was claimed as the divine ancestor of both royal houses of Sparta, but Areus may have introduced him as the patron deity of the Agiad dynasty in an attempt to reinforce his power at the expense of the Eurypontid royal house. In his appropriation of Heracles, Areus may have looked to the Seleucids's use of Apollo as a patron deity of the ruling house.

That Heracles became emblematic of Sparta is clear from the coinages of Cleomenes III and Nabis, which employ a variety of numismatic types of the hero. The reverse type of seated Heracles used by Nabis is possibly a deliberate echo of the seated Apollo on Seleucid coins. Seleucid influence is already evident in the coinage of Cleomenes, who portrayed himself wearing a royal diadem in imitation of the Macedonian dynasties. His numismatic portrait is in fact modeled on that of Antiochus II.

Cleomenes III's well-known association with Ptolemy III is attested, apart from his adoption of Ptolemaic coin types such as the eagle and winged thunderbolt, by a portrait

of Ptolemy III found in Sparta. It is made of Parian marble, a material not otherwise encountered in Laconian artifacts after the Archaic period. The head was probably imported from Alexandria as a gift from Cleomenes, an Egyptian ally. Since the portrait is under life-size, it is not a cult statue but may well have stood as a Ptolemaic dedication in a Laconian sanctuary, paying tribute to the alliance of the two rulers.