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Ancient History



Alexander the Great - A Selective Discussion



The birth of a great man almost always gets attached to legends.

Alexander was said to be conceived when Zeus visited Olympias and showered her with golden rays, or Pharaoh Nectanebus visited her in the form of a snake. However, there is little doubt that Alexander's legal father was also his biological father, as coins of various eras and states showing profiles of Philip and Alexander display clearly their family resemblance.

Modern psychologists, applying thinking processes of our own era to Homeric times, often claim Alexander has the Oedipus complex, strengthened by his mother's sufferings from his father's infidelities. This is actually quite ridiculous. Polygamy was not just rampant at the time, but for a king, it was an instrument of diplomacy with marriage alliances cementing relationships based on material interests. Further, Olympias was quite acquiescent towards Philip having other women, as long as they did not threaten her position as queen and her son's position as heir. It was much later, when difficulties arose on these fronts, that confrontation became necessary.

Some of the stories about Alexander's precociousness need to be taken with a grain of salt, but that about the breaking in of the horse Bucephalus sounds real enough. As various experienced horse handlers tried but failed, Alexander noted that the horse feared its own shadow and calmed it down by leading it facing the sun, after which various horse handling techniques could be successfully applied. The story shows the same mental strengths of observation, analysis and solution synthesis that Alexander was to utilize on the battlefield.

later in life. It also reveals the kind of bond he had with his father.



Winston Churchill, the author of *History of English Speaking Peoples* and *Memoirs of 2nd World War*, was only semi-jesting when he said this to wrap up a non-consensual discussion "Gentleman, we must leave it to the judgement of history, and I will be writing the history".

Historians think their pens are mightier than the sword because they determine how posterity will remember a person, so that anyone concerned with his/her reputation would treat pens with respect however mighty his/her sword. However, while this is true in a collective sense, individually the sword can chop off the head of anyone who wields the pen in the wrong way, as Alexander did to Callisthenes, the nephew of his former teacher Aristotle.

But Alexander did respect the pen, shown by his hanger-on group of scholars who collected information wherever the army went, and by his asking the whole of Greece to worship him as a god, a tradition that can be maintained only as long as people wielding the pens provide supporting propaganda - he cared about posterity, and wanted to be on the right side of the pen as long as possible.

Which explains why he showed surprising deference to Diogenes after his humiliating sendoff "Stand aside and stop blocking the sun" when he went to Diogenes, who was sunning himself lying in a clay tub, to ask the latter whether he would wish to ask Alexander for a favour - "If I were not Alexander, I would be Diogenes", a recognition of parity of status in their own domains, an innovative thinker in war to an innovative thinker in individualism.

There is another story involving scholars: when a young Alexander scooped up a palmful of incense to drop onto the altar, his teacher scolded him for wastefulness "when you have conquered the land that produces these expensive material, you can use as much as you like"; after Alexander took Gaza, the entrepot for spices and fragrance, he had two tons of incense material sent to his former tutor, enough to make him rich beyond his wildest imagination, together with the message "With thanks to my teacher who inspired me to achieve this deed". Now what does this tell us about Alexander? Obviously, he had a good memory, and was very generous to his associates. At the same time, a man who remembers such an old slight, and makes such a grand response, could also produce other kinds of overreactions to any comments and bear very long grudges. In short, a dangerous person to trifle with.



In the year 337BC, King Philip of Macedonia precipitated a major court crisis by a surprising denunciation of his senior wife Olympias, mother of Alexander, and taking a new, Macedonian wife Eurydice. Within a matter of days, Olympias and Alexander had gone into exile in Epirote, which was ruled by her brother, though soon Alexander was persuaded to return. A year later, Philip was assassinated by Pausanias, one of his bodyguards, while celebrating the marriage of his daughter to the brother of Olympias, opening the way for Alexander to be proclaimed King of Macedonia and for Olympias to return and execute both Eurydice and her new born child. While the charge that Olympias arranged Philip's murder, to avenge her repudiation and ensure the succession of her son, remains unproven, there can be little doubt that Philip's action was extremely risky and costly. Why did he do it? Was it really a case of mid-life crisis, an aging man falling madly in love with a nubile young maiden and losing all senses? Did Eurydice, like Ann Boylen, demand the removal of Olympias, instead of being content with the status of a junior wife, and Philip was too besotted with her to say no? Surely he could have devised a better solution, considering how much was at stake?

The reason given by Philip himself for taking a new wife was that additional heirs were required, because both he and Alexander could be killed in battle. This would seem to be eminently sensible, since Philip's only other son was mentally retarded. Further, assuming that the Persian war went well and Alexander survived, he would have a large Asian empire to rule, and could well leave Macedonia under the rule of a younger brother. The wisdom of Philip's plan was all too well confirmed after Alexander's early death - with the army proclaiming his unborn son and half brother as joint rulers under regency, which soon disintegrated and a disastrous succession war followed.

Philip's justification tended to be dismissed by commentators because the immediate result of the marriage was to lose the heir Philip already had, but that is hindsight. Philip's actions with respect to Alexander clearly showed that he never intended to replace his heir. Alexander was allowed to remain in court after Philip's marriage to Eurydice, and went into exile only after a drunken brawl arising out of an insult from Attalus. Despite the unpleasant incident, Philip soon asked him to return, and avoided further trouble between Alexander and Attalus by sending the latter with Parmenio to fight in Anatolia. Though Alexander incurred Philip's anger in the affair of the Carian marriage, only his friends were punished while he got off with a mere scolding, which was in some ways quite reassuring "you are up for higher things than marrying the daughter of a barbarian king..."

The reason given by Philip for repudiating Olympias was adultery. Again this deserves more serious consideration than it is usually given. There is nothing unlikely about the Queen taking a lover, considering that her husband was away campaigning half the time and had been bringing back a new wife after almost every war. When Alexander said, in response to someone's report of his sister's sexual activities, "there is no reason why she should not get something out of her royal status", he could well be thinking of his mother rather than father - a parallel between mother and daughter would be more apt than one between father and daughter. The stories about Philip's dream in which he sealed up Olympias's vagina, and about him peeping at Olympias embracing a serpent, both cast him in the light of a jealous and watchful husband; while these might not be actual events, they could be based on real behaviour. Unlike the Asiatic kings that kept their women in harems guarded by eunuchs, European kings simply exercised special vigilance.

In other words, Philip's motives for marrying Eurydice and repudiating Olympias may be entirely logical by themselves, and need not reflect any wish to remove Alexander, who was in any case needed in battle as his centre cavalry commander for punching through enemy lines, hardly to be dispensed with on the eve of a war

with Persia. However, historians, and the Macedonian court, very naturally linked the three things together. Ambitious men like Attalus would quickly see Eurydice as the means to advance their own hardcore Macedonian faction, versus the half Macedonian prince, his young friends all educated by the Greek Aristotle, and his foreigner mother. Even if Olympias had been completely chaste, it would not be difficult for the court intriguers, working with the favoured young wife of Philip, to invent stories of Olympias's adultery and use every possible opportunity to humiliate and provoke Alexander.

Did Philip's repudiation of Olympias cost him his life? In other words, did Olympias organize his murder, and was Alexander a co-conspirator? It is far from easy to separate evidence from slander. No doubt they benefitted from the murder, but there were many other potential beneficiaries such as Persia, Boeotia, Athens, etc., as well as parties within Macedonia. The story of Olympias placing a golden crown on the head of the dead Pausanias might have been invented by the Cassander camp in their feud with Olympias, but even if true, gratitude to the doer is not equivalent to instigation of the deed. The particular occasion of the murder, a wedding to re-build the Macedonia-Epirote alliance previously broken by Philip's repudiation of Olympias - a bodyguard would certainly have other, quieter and less risky, opportunities to murder the King, but for Olympias, it would be much more satisfying to have the murder at the wedding - and Pausanias's origin from a part of western Macedonia which was previously under Epirote, provide some circumstantial support for the responsibility of Olympias, but I feel the strongest indication of her guilt lies in the subsequent behaviour of Alexander, which at the same time shows himself to be innocent.

It is well known that after a pilgrimage to the temple of Zeus-Ammon at Siwah, Alexander became a strong devotee to that oracle, well above alternative sources of divine advice. Siwah's answers to some of his questions must have deeply impressed him. Now what matter was so important to him that a good answer would have such an impact? It must have been related to the issue of his own origin, for after the pilgrimage he started to take seriously the presentation of himself as Son of Zeus. He was also reported to have written to Olympias about having received the answer he wanted on this matter from the oracle, promising to tell her about it when they see each other again. At Siwah Alexander was heard to ask "Have all my father's murderers been punished?" This was sometimes taken as indication of a guilty conscience, but if he knew himself to be his father's murderer, then the answer to that question was obviously no, and there was no need to consult an oracle about it. It is more reasonable to believe that the murderer he had in mind was someone else, one that was dear to himself, and whose guilt he was unsure about. Who could that be but Olympias?

Consider Alexander's situation after Philip's death. With the support of Antipater and other barons, he was proclaimed King. After eliminating enemies and potential threats at the court and putting down rebellions in Greece, he was ready to go to Persia. Though officially, those responsible for the murder had already been found and executed, he would still be having lingering doubts and might be hearing various stories about who conspired to kill Philip, including those hinting at Olympias. It would seem natural for him to decide to confront his mother directly once and for all before his departure. Assuming that she was indeed guilty, what would she say to her son? A flat denial would probably not be convincing, and in fact she would have been quite proud of her own deed and would want Alexander to know how much he was in her debt. So the simple way out: Never mind about Philip; it was time for him to go; he was only the mortal that raised you to prepare you for the great mission; your real father is Zeus.

Whatever we or ancient contemporaries might think, a story like this would appeal to Alexander: when Philip was still alive and active, Alexander already complained to his friends that his father was leaving him nothing to conquer for himself - he thought Philip was robbing him of the greatness he deserved himself. However, even then it was unlikely that he would take his mother's words at face value, but further investigation would be futile as well as dangerous. So with nagging doubts, Alexander set out on his great expedition, and within just a couple of years had conquered Anatolia, Phoenicia, Syria and Egypt. To have his great question settled by the Siwah in his moment of triumph made the occasion all the sweeter. So naturally, for the remainder of his life he showed great respect and devotion to the oracle of Siwah.

Callisthenes wrote "Alexander's fame depends on me and my history, not on the lies Olympias spread about his origin", and when the troops rioted at Opis, they jeered "Go and fight with the help of your father Ammon". So the story of Alexander's divine birth was widely known, and was not taken seriously by either the educated Greek scholar nor the rough Macedonian soldiers. Yet, shrewd and ruthless people that they were, Olympias found it necessary to tell such a story and Alexander was willing to believe it, to the extent of actually asking all Greeks to endorse it by worshipping him as son of Zeus, because it let both off the hook in facing the truth of Philip's murder.

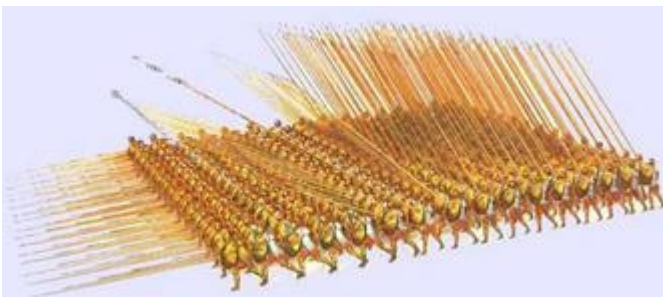


Alexander's lack of interest in

heterosex is well known, as is his relationship with Hephastion. This however need to be taken in the context of the time and the particular circumstance of Alexander. He obviously appreciated female beauty, as shown by his interest in the wife of Darius after she was captured at Issus - her pregnancy was presumably due to Alexander - and in choosing to marry Roxane, whose family was just a local tribal chief and therefore conferred limited political advantage through the marriage alliance; Alexander must have actually desired her. Both women were described as good lookers, and obviously he had no difficulty consumating the physical act with women and got both pregnant.

Homosexuality was part of the macho comradeship among men, in particular military men, while heterosexuality was part of the family relationship, in particular the need to produce heirs. There is actually no issue of "preferring" one to the other, since they serve very different purposes. In the same way, the idea of Oedipus Complex with wife competing with mother for the affection of the son-husband would be insignificant, since both are parts of the family alliance, but for different purposes. Olympias's most important role for Alexander was a feudal dynastic coalition partner, with the position of each dependent on that of the other. In an age when royal children were brought up (including breast feeding) by nannies, Olympias would have had few occasions to engage in intimate activities with Alexander, and it would certainly not do to blame his sexual interests, or lack of them, on mother fixation. She was more a figure of power rather than sex in his life.

The incident in which Darius's mother mistook the taller and more handsome Hephastion to be Alexander when they first met was interesting not just as a comical story, but also because it indicates Alexander's emotional security: he did not find it upsetting, nor did he develop a hostile attitude to either the queen mother or Hephastion because of it. A lesser man might have reacted very differently. Alexander however knew he was a genius, while Hiphastion was only a mediocre guy. For Alexander, only when a matter affects his status as conquerer, like his tutor's scolding about incense, would he get worked up. It is our own hedonistic society that elevated little vanities and instant gratifications to such significant levels.



The picture above shows the standard Greek infantry fighting formation of phalanx, with rows (or ranks) of men with overlapping shields forming a protective front, and long pikes that were held vertically during the initial march towards the enemy front, but lowered to form a dense row of spear points before reaching the clashing point. The rectangular formation also allows a phalanx to turn 90 degrees (with raised pikes) if an enemy attack on a flank, usually by fast moving cavalry or light infantry, is received, though this neat parade ground manoeuvre is not so easily executed in battlefield conditions. (In the Leuctra battle between Sparta and Boeotia, the Boeotia flank attack successfully broke through despite the Spartan manoeuvre. A similar result occurred in Magnesia between the Greek and Romans.)

Usually, cavalry is posted on the two sides to fight off the enemy cavalry's flank attack, but again in battlefield conditions the two components can get detached. The battleplan of a commander considered how to disrupt the coordinated formation of the enemy and exploit gaps in the front, before disruptions to his own were exploited by the other side. This requires both good pre-planning, knowing the limited manoeuvres that can actually be achieved during the battle, a sharp eye to observe the actual situation, and quick as well as accurate thinking in launching the right manoeuvre at the right time. What looked obvious after the event is not at all obvious during it. (An Athenian military disaster occurred at Amphipolis because the inexperienced commander, ordering a withdrawal, turned his men with their right, unshielded side towards the city rather than the left side, which the Amphipolians observed and so they immediately launched an attack that decimated the Athenians.)

Because each man needs to turn slightly to the right so that the left edge of his shield meets the right edge of the shield held by the man next to him, the phalanx's march has a tendency to drift towards the right. Epaminondas of Boeotia exploited this in his oblique advance tactic, with the right-drifting front shifting to the left side of the enemy, turning to launch a flank attack. A refinement on this anticipates that the enemy front would turn leftwards to face the threat, but in doing so causes a gap to open in his own centre because the right failed to coordinate with the left. At Mantinea Epaminondas carried this out against the Sparta-Athens alliance, but was himself killed in battle so that the result was inconclusive.

By the time Alexander faced the Persian Emperor Darius himself at Issus, he and his father Philip before him had utilized this tactic successfully many times, but the situation at Issus was different. First, as Alexander marched south along the Mediterranean coast towards Phoenicia, Darius slipped behind him from the east and blocked his communication line to the Anatolian territory he had already conquered. To another army under a lesser commander, this might be demoralizing news, but Alexander merely ordered his men to turn back and face Darius in battle. Second, the front at Issus was narrow, with the sea on one side and mountains on the other, so that neither side was able to carry out significant flank attacks. Alexander's men also had to cross a river in their attack, which further cramped scope for manoeuvre.

In Alexander's battle plan, the phalanx made a deliberately slow frontal attack across the river in the centre, just to hold Darius's centre static in a defensive position. His left wing cavalry under Parmenio, though greatly outnumbered by the Persian right wing cavalry, successfully stood its ground against the Persian attack, which, because of the narrow front, was held up in long and narrow file so that it could not bring its numerical advantage to bear. In the meantime, Alexander led his right wing cavalry across the river and broke the enemy front where the left wing cavalry met the centre infantry, turned leftwards and attacked Darius's centre on the left flank with both cavalry and infantry. While the battle was still undecided, Darius fled from the field; this gave him a big start in escaping, but caused a quick collapse in his fighting men.

It was clear that Darius was neither psychologically nor militarily well prepared to meet this very dangerous enemy, which he must have seriously underestimated. Bringing his wife and mother with him in his luxurious tent, and sitting in his grand chariot (till his escape when he rode a fast horse), he seemed to have the impression of assured victory. After the disaster at Issus he was anxious for peace, making several overtures, all rejected by Alexander, while mustering a new, much larger army from his eastern territories.

At Gaugamela Darius's men outnumbered Alexander's at least 10 to 1, but he suffered from numerous disadvantages in other ways. Alexander had already outmanoeuvred him by marching east after crossing River Euphrates, instead of south towards Babylon, avoiding the result of the scorched earth policy already carried out in preparation for a southern march. Darius had to hastily prepare a new battle ground east of the River Tigris. He also wasted his resources on outdated technologies like Scythian chariots, for which Alexander already devised a dispersal avoidance tactic.

At the start of the battle, Darius's left wing cavalry successfully blocked the oblique rightward drift of Alexander's front by even quicker movements leftward, launched an attack on Alexander's right wing cavalry, and broke through, but instead of turning right to attack Alexander's centre, it charged onward, some going into the enemy camp behind the front and carrying out some looting. In the meantime, Parmenio's left wing successfully withstood the attack of the Persian right, while Alexander's centre cavalry, followed by his phalanx, broke through the Persian centre which had been left unprotected by the left wing cavalry charge. Darius was scared into a second quick escape from the battlefield.



THE BROKEN LADDER

Alexander's battle against Porus on the banks of Indus River was the high point of his career, and things went downhill after it. The battle might not sound spectacular compared to Gaugamela, where Alexander's army defeated an enemy many times larger in size, but it showed Alexander's military talents even better in his ability to deal with a wide variety of threats in rapidly changing conditions through quick and accurate thinking. The battle took place in heavy rain, requiring a wide, rapidly flowing river to be crossed (made worse by a mistaken landing on a mid river island instead of the opposite bank) against strong defense, which included quality cavalry and elephants. To each challenge Alexander devised workable solutions.

After that his magic somehow faded. He was unable to convince his men to march further east (where, it was said, 5000 elephants were ready to come into battle, after their frightening experience with just 200). His deliberate choice to march through the Kirman desert, coordinating a fleet with the land army, with the ships carrying food needed by the army and the marching soldiers digging wells allowing the ships to replenish their water supply, failed disastrously, nearly resulting in the loss of both parts. Fighting his way out of India, he almost lost his life during the siege of a minor fort when he led the charge up the wall but received only delayed followup support because the ladder broke. Rejoining civilization at last, he then conducted a purge of his regional governors for not providing adequate assistance to his beleaguered army and other presumptive behaviour, causing, among others, his treasurer, a childhood friend, to escape to Athens with a large booty. At Opis a near-mutiny resulted from his attempt to integrate Persian youths into his army, eventually patched up with a series of inter-racial marriages and distribution of money. His friend Hiphastion then died, causing deep mourning by Alexander which might well have included an element of portent for his own mortality. At last he returned by Babylon against soothsayer advice and prepared to start a new conquest in Arabia, but died shortly.

However, the deterioration in the personality of Alexander started much earlier, as the following two episodes of his life portended. Absolute power had its insidious effects.

I also mention in passing that his horse Bucephalus died after his battle with Porus. It all fits.



Conspiracy of Seistan

In the year 330 BC, on route to Bactria in pursuit of Bessus, Alexander was said to have discovered a conspiracy on his life headed by Philotas, the son of the great general Parmenio, then 400 miles away in Hamadan with part of the army guarding the captured Persian treasure. After successfully prosecuting Philotas before the soldiers in his camp, Alexander had Philotas executed together with Alexander of Lycentis, supposedly Philotas's candidate to replace him as King after the assassination. He then arranged for the murder of Parmenio by officers of the Hamadan army.

The one available account of the event is seriously faulty. A soldier by the name of Cebalinos is said to have heard of a conspiracy from his brother, who was the homosexual lover of Demnus, one of conspirators. Cebalinos asked Philotas to report the matter to Alexander, but Philotas failed to pass on this information and repeatedly put Cebalinos off. Suspicious, Cebalinos then went through a royal page and got the news to Alexander, who ordered the arrest of Demnus. However, Demnus committed suicide without giving up further information about the conspiracy, leaving Alexander with no serious suspects to pursue. He then seized upon the failure to pass on the report as justification to act against Philotas. To a number of authors, the incident looked like Alexander was removing a blacklisted opponent using a pretext, and provided further evidence of his growing megalomania, while Philotas was assumed to be an old guard Macedonian opposing Alexander's Persianization policies, thus incurring his wrath.

Let us leave aside the issue of Persianization and megalomania for now and simply look at the account of Philotas's reported behaviour: it makes no sense whether we assume him to be part of the conspiracy or not. In the former case, why did he not find some way to eliminate the informer? If the latter, why did he adamantly refuse to report the matter? The idea that he actually thought the whole matter was a joke, not worth pursuing, must be dismissed - he might say that in self defense when questioned by Alexander, but any Macedonian army officer and courtier showing this kind of complacency about such dangerous matters would not have survived long. The idea that he secretly wished to let things take their natural course is also difficult to sustain: by taking no action, he was making it almost inevitable that the informer would go through another channel to foil the conspiracy. Guilty intriguer, cynical onlooker or innocent victim, Philotas's activities must have been misreported in some way or other.

There is another reason to reject the story as it stands: A couple years later another conspiracy was reportedly uncovered, this time among the royal pages. The exposure was also supposed to be due to

the homosexual lover of a conspirator giving information to his brother. Surely this is too much of a coincidence? Or perhaps someone transplanted details of one story to the other? If that is the case, how much of the story could be trusted?

In this article I construct a slightly different story, using widely reported, generally accepted facts. In my view, conditions at the time were ripe for a conspiracy and Philotas was well suited to be its leader, and there is a reasonable explanation for the strange account of Philotas's behaviour.

1. A Plausible Conspirator

Parmenio, then aged nearly 70, was a veteran commander of King Philip's generation, with an unquestioned record of achievement and loyalty under both Philip and Alexander. His son Philotas did not quite cut a figure of the same magnificence, but as Alexander's cavalry commander, he was an important person all the same. Why should they risk it all and organize a conspiracy against Alexander? For us to be convinced that they would contemplate such a thing, it is necessary to find both motive and opportunity: They must have a reason to conspire, and they must have felt that they had a good chance of succeeding.

First consider the position of Philotas. He was a friend of Alexander from their time of youth, but unlike those others whose fortune depended completely on the favour of Alexander, being the son of Parmenio, Philotas had his own power base, and need not give Alexander the same level of devotion. In consequence, he never enjoyed Alexander's complete trust, and was at best a peripheral member of Alexander's circle. As the brother-in-law of Attalus, the bitterest enemy of Alexander at Philip's court, and a friend of Amyntas, the boy king superseded by his uncle Philip, Philotas was on the wrong side of the succession struggle, but together with his father he switched camp in time to survive. He was said to be arrogant and boastful, and his mistress Antigone had long turned informer for Alexander and was reporting his words and actions regularly. Suspicions of conspiracy would readily fall on him in any crisis. But how fair are such suspicions? Had his differences with Alexander developed into such an unbridgeable gap that murder and coup d'etat were the only way out?

Consider now the situation of Parmenio. In the various past battles, he had always commanded the left wing of the army. In the typical Philip/Alexander battle plan, the left wing anchors the front of the oblique advance, while the right swings out in an apparent threat to outflank the enemy, tempting him into making re-dispositions that cause a gap to open in his front, thereafter allowing the centre led by Philip/Alexander to punch through. This is a vital command position. Parmenio was also an important advisor to both Kings, and various stories attribute to him a number of pieces of advice during the course of the Persian conquest, most of them bad advice that were rejected by Alexander. Are these stories all made up by Alexander's sycophants to slander Parmenio and justify his execution? Not necessarily. In such discussions it is natural that Parmenio would take the role of "leader of opposition": Giving advice to an absolute monarch is a tricky business, and even in enlightened democratic countries not many people would want to risk frequently disagreeing with the boss and earning himself the reputation of a bad team player and naughty boy. Disagreeing with a military genius like Alexander on how to conduct a war must be doubly difficult. But old Parmenio, his father's trusted lieutenant with a long record of service and loyalty, and an indispensable commander in Alexander's battles, was in a better position to be the dissenter and could speak out his mind more freely. Indeed, anyone who hoped to influence Alexander's actions would see two channels to make his voice heard: he either got close to Alexander himself to earn his confidence and attention, or he joined the group around Parmenio in the hope that Parmenio would forward his ideas in front of the King. Hence, officers and courtiers would naturally divide into two camps, with Philotas of course in his father's group. Also quite naturally, where there was disagreement, the views Parmenio represented would be mostly the losing views, with only the odd occasion when he would prevail over Alexander.

By the time of Seistan Parmenio was no longer with Alexander, and someone else would be playing the role of opposition leader and dissenting camp chief. Who better than his son Philotas to take on this role and speak for people who used to follow his father? (Indeed, at river Beas, when both Parmenio and Philotas were long dead, it was Coenus, Parmenio's surviving son-in-law, who spoke out for the men against further marches into India - the role, it seems, continued to move within the family!) Less experienced than his father and hot tempered, he would have played the role rather badly, and his relation with Alexander would have been poor.

Let us put ourselves in Philotas's situation as the army approached Seistan: His family's influence was on the wane with Parmenio's career ending; his two brothers were both dead; his own position in the army, while important, was not to be compared with his father's; in the continuation of the war, mostly pursuits of a retreating enemy, conquests of isolated territories and anti-guerrilla warfare to pacify them, his and his father's military expertise would be less indispensable; they had done years of real fighting, but it only served to benefit the little boy Alexander, who was now styling himself Son of Zeus-Ammon, Pharaoh of Egypt, King of Kings, etc., and wanted further sacrifice and bloodshed from his men to advance his own grandiose ambitions...

2. A Plausible Conspiracy

Now consider the second issue. I believe that in terms of the mood of the army, the distribution of resources and the issue of legitimate succession, conditions were then favourable for a conspiracy to replace Alexander by another King. It was recorded that, after Darius was killed, Alexander addressed his whole army urging them to continue their march, in order to destroy the army of Bessus and complete the conquest of the eastern half of the Persian Empire, instead of considering the war to be over with Darius's death and the conquest of the western half. He won the men's ringing endorsement, but the question is: why was this speech necessary? Obviously, there was a widespread wish to end the war then and go home. Indeed, a little earlier Alexander had already paid off the Greek contingents, thus officially ending the war as the Greek nation's revenge on Persia. The continuation of the pursuit of Darius, and the conquest of the eastern empire, were to be a Macedonian king's personal war, in which Greek soldiers enrolled voluntarily as mercenaries alongside Macedonian conscripts.

The speech indicates that, possibly the officers were already unwilling to continue the war, or perhaps the officers might themselves be willing but were not confident they could carry their soldiers along. Hence, Alexander took his case to the men directly and won (though later at river Beas, he played the same game and did not win). Nevertheless, there must be a substantial minority, perhaps even a majority, in the army that yearned to return to Macedonia. The replacement of Alexander by a new King willing to take them home could therefore be welcomed by a large part of the army. Further, as long as Alexander was around, the generals would only be his subordinates. Once he was gone, they would have the opportunities of creating kingdoms of their own, either by carving up the already conquered western empire, or by leading armies east on their own individual expeditions against isolated remnants of the Persian forces. The war of the Successor States showed that, starting with a small band of followers, a capable general could live off the revenues of a territory and recruit soldiers from it, and successfully maintain himself in power. The temptation to do this must be present long before Alexander passed from the scene.

It is useful to mention that Philotas was said to have plotted against Alexander during the expedition to Egypt, but Alexander forgave him out of respect for Parmenio. This was usually dismissed as fabricated slander. But let us link this with an earlier story: During the siege of Tyre shortly before entry into Egypt, a peace offer was received from Darius, which Parmenio advised Alexander to accept. This would have given him a large ransom for Darius's family, and all territory west of the Euphrates, with which the Greeks were already familiar, in return for giving up further attempts to conquer the eastern part of the empire. However, Alexander chose to continue the war, into lands that were quite alien to Macedonians, despite the prospect of having to fight very large Persian

forces. It is reasonable to expect that many men besides Parmenio would have been in favour of immediate peace, and might even have talked about the possibility of getting rid of Alexander and dividing up the conquered territories among themselves. Such feelings must have become even stronger now that Darius was dead, Persepolis had been burnt, all the Persian treasure had been collected, and rich provinces around Babylon and Susa were already conquered.

In short, the situation in the army made it favourable for a group of conspirators to believe that, if Alexander was removed and a suitable replacement installed, the soldiers and officers could be persuaded to acquiesce. However, was a "suitable replacement" available then and there? Alexander of Lycentis seems qualified for such a role. When King Philip was assassinated, it was said that "Macedonians looked to Amyntas and sons of Orus". Amyntas, nephew of Philip, was King before him, but was superseded when Philip showed his generalship. He was therefore seen by some to be a more legitimate claimant to the throne than Alexander. Orus was the father of Alexander of Lycentis. He and his brothers, mentioned in the same breath as Amyntas, must have some claim on the throne too, making them competitors to Alexander. Not surprisingly, Amyntas and the brothers of Alexander of Lycentis were executed shortly after Alexander's accession, but, being the son-in-law of Antipater and one of the earliest courtiers to declare for Alexander, he managed to survive, and was made commander of the Thessalian cavalry under Parmenio, until just before the Battle of Issus. Then, it was discovered that he had contact with the Persian agent Sessines, who offered him 6000 talents with a promise to make him King of Macedonia in return for assassinating Alexander - apparently, even the Persians saw him as a legitimate claimant who could be used for their purpose. He was from there on carried around as Alexander's prisoner, but had so far not been charged with any specific crime, apparently in consideration of the rather flimsy evidence against him and of his high connections.

Next consider the disposition of the army. Just then Alexander's camp had no more than 30,000 soldiers. A contingent under Kleitus was marching to join him at the time but had not yet arrived. Parmenio had some 20,000 men with him in Hamadan. Equally importantly, he had control of the treasury, with some 200,000 talents of bullion. A third part of the Macedonian army was at home under the command of Antipater, the father-in-law of Alexander of Lycentis. A conspiracy involving Parmenio, Philotas and Alexander of Lycentis would be a powerful one. If Philotas did manage to put Alexander away, he would be able to go before the army, with his cavalry supporters behind him, and offer the soldiers the chance either to go home or to continue as their own empire builders, a share of the Persian booty, and a new king with a legitimate claim on the throne, while threatening dissenters with battles against armies commanded by Parmenio the great general, and afterwards Antipater at his Macedonian home base. The chance of successful persuasion would seem high.

Given the army disposition, the notion that Alexander, having born long grudges against Parmenio and Philotas, merely seized upon the opportunity to eliminate them, must be rejected. Grudges certainly there would have been, and given the ruthless nature of Macedonian court politics, trumped up charges against one's enemies would be standard fare. But if that was the case, Alexander chose a bad time to do the job, when his position was not strong and resource disposition was far from favourable. For Alexander to go before the army and charge Philotas with the crime, he must have genuinely felt himself to be under serious and immediate threat. The risk he took was simply too big for it to be a mere dirty trick.

3. A Plausible Story

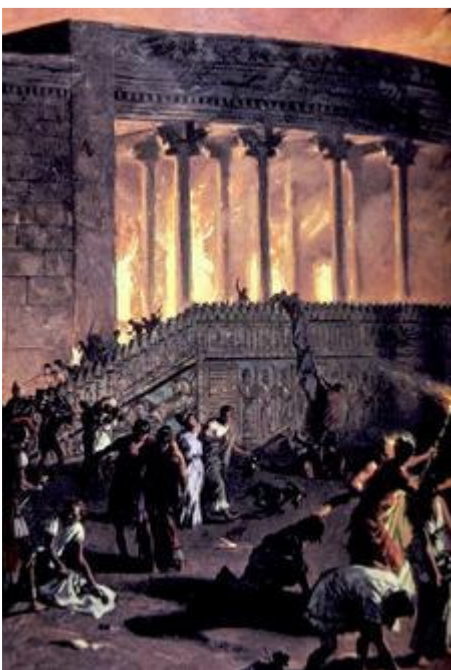
So far it has been argued that among the senior commanders with Alexander, Philotas was in the best position to mount a successful coup, and was probably also the one with the strongest motivation to do so, but the strange story of his behaviour still need to be explained. Consider the situation of Alexander after Demnus's suicide. The informers had given him a confusing list of names and all of these were small fries; yet, it was obviously a major conspiracy with important people behind it, and for the reasons explained earlier, suspicion immediately fell on Philotas. However, accusing the son

of Parmenio would be a very serious and dangerous business, and no concrete evidence was available. So what action was Alexander to take?

It seems to be a good move to call Philotas in for questioning, but instead of being accused of leading the conspiracy, he was merely asked why he knew about it but failed to report it. By mentioning the names of the people already under arrest, Alexander could make it clear that he had real evidence and was not merely fishing for information. Assuming he did this, how should Philotas respond? Let us assume that he did not know about Demnus, the key source of information, committing suicide. Philotas might well feel that it was safer to admit to a lesser crime of having knowledge ("Oh yah; I heard them talk about it, but I thought it was just a joke and paid no attention.") than to deny everything, especially if Alexander promised him that in view of their great friendship, once he gave a quick confession, his failure to report would be forgiven. That would at least give him time to try an escape, destroy evidence or devise some other measures. So he made his admission, and was indeed allowed to go free.

But he had already sealed his fate: his confession confirmed the suspicion of him being the coup leader. In the mean time, the camp exits had been blocked to prevent his escape and his belongings had been searched. Nothing was found except a letter from Parmenio, with words to the effect "look to yourself, and to others, and then we could achieve our purpose", which could be completely innocuous, or could be referring to the conspiracy. Alexander consulted his officers, and despite the flimsy evidence, obtained their support to proceed with the accusation of Philotas, who was then arrested and possibly tortured to extract a confession. Finally, he was prosecuted before the army. To ensure that the army would convict him despite the weak evidence, extraneous matters like Philotas's extravagance and his preference to speak Greek rather than Macedonian were also brought up to maximize hostility and paranoia, which looks bad in hindsight but does not necessarily mean the whole thing was framed.

Writing years later, eye witnesses like Ptolemy could only guess at what was behind it all, and invented details of their own as well as recorded bits of camp gossip they picked up. From the concrete information "Philotas confessed to knowing of the conspiracy but taking no action", it was only a small step to the story "Someone told Philotas, but he did not tell Alexander". Further embellishments got added as stories were told and retold, turning the whole episode into illogical Machiavellian drama.



In 330 BC, the army of Alexander entered Persepolis, the ancient mountain capital of Persia as well as its treasury storehouse and ritual centre. After the soldiers had looted the city and all the treasures were moved to Hamadan, the palace was set on fire and left in ruins. Was this a

deliberate political gesture to avenge Persian sacrilege of Greek places of worship, or an unplanned act of drunken vandalism?

In one colourful version containing all the exciting ingredients of wine, woman and song, the Athenian courtesan Thais was said to have provoked Alexander into the act after a late night drinking session. With typical male chauvinism, later authors eagerly embraced this opportunity to blame beautiful women for disasters of human history, and Thais became the archetype of the wicked yet exciting female intriguer. The Renaissance poet Dante, writing two thousand years later, thought Thais important enough to deserve a prominent place in Purgatory, and the 19th century French novelist Anatole France used her to exemplify the power of female sex appeal: A holy man emerged from his meditative life and chose Thais as his target for redemption, but after converting her from a life of sin, he found himself in love with her and unable to maintain his ascetism, so that he returned to Thais to declare his love, only to see her on her death bed.

For a starter, we can dismiss the crime of Thais as the significant factor. What would be a reasonable motive for her to want the destruction of Persepolis? She was Athenian, and no doubt Athenians had a reason to hate Persians for burning down their Acropolis. But if an Athenian courtesan, who made a living by pleasing men, would still hold a burning hatred of Persia one hundred and fifty years after the invasion of Xerxes, then the soldiers who fought Persians and their Greek agents for generations must have a far greater hatred. If burning down Persepolis pleased Thais, it would have pleased Alexander's men even more, and there would have been a good political reason for the fire.

What about a more personal motive? Perhaps Thais merely wished to show off her allure and power - by inducing Alexander to commit this act of destruction, she demonstrated her influence. This might indeed make a good case if Thais had been Alexander's own mistress - she would have indeed shown herself to be the power behind the throne, able to get Alexander to do what she desired including quite foolish things. But she happened to be the mistress of Ptolemy, and for her to show off any power she might have over Alexander would be a dangerous act, arousing suspicion and jealousy in her patron and perhaps damaging their relation permanently. Since Thais managed to stay with Ptolemy well into his rule as King of Egypt, producing no less than three children, she would have been clever enough not to commit anything so foolish.

One reason so many were ready to blame drunken vandalism rather than deliberate policy is that, subsequently Alexander embarked upon his Persianization venture. He adopted the Persian King's dress and court rituals, encouraged intermarriage, and enrolled oriental soldiers into his army. Surely he should have retained the ritual palace, and perhaps even followed the annual rites? Surely it was a mistake to burn the place down? One could argue about whether Alexander's Persianization was indeed to such a great extent as to make it desirable to embrace the religious rituals, but in any case that was a later question. The important consideration is how the situation looked when he was still in Persepolis. Darius was retreating into Bactria, and there was still ample territory and population over which he could nominally command authority. It was entirely possible for him to try and raise a new army and engage Alexander in another pitched battle, while his supporters might incite revolts and uprisings behind Alexander's lines. High in the mountains, Persepolis was inconvenient as treasury storehouse or administrative centre, but it could easily become a symbolic rallying point for any Persian uprising. To prevent such possibility, the place needed to be strongly garrisoned, but supplying a large army in the location would be difficult. Thus, militarily, there were clear advantages in destroying Persepolis.

Did the burning offend the religious sensitivity of Persians and turn them against Alexander? It is clear from subsequent events that the negative impact had been very minor. The majority of the population of the empire followed other religions, and might even have seen the destruction of Persepolis as an act of religious liberation. For Persians themselves, their army's repeated failure on the battleground against an outnumbered enemy thousands of miles from its home base, was ample evidence that their gods had ceased to be powerful, or at least, ceased to bless the Persians, and the loss of Persepolis merely provided a physical confirmation. A new master, and new gods, were in charge, and the people generally accommodated to the situation. Even the closest family members of Darius found satisfactory situations in Alexander's court. Indeed, Darius's mother starved herself to death shortly after Alexander's demise in the expectation (correct as it turned out) that the world without Alexander would be a worse place.

Even if the palace at Persepolis had been retained, it was at the time impossible for Alexander to have adopted the religious rites, which annually re-united the god Ahura Mazda with his goddess wife. Alexander had not yet found a wife. If Darius's wife Starige had not died, perhaps a ceremony of union between her and Alexander, symbolizing his taking over the kingdom as well as the personal loyalties formerly due to Darius, might have made some sense, but that was not to be.

In short, given the situation at the time, it made military and political sense to destroy Persepolis. Shortly

afterwards, Alexander was to pay off his Greek soldiers and continue his conquest of Persia as his personal campaign. The burning served as a capping of the Greek campaign of revenge on Persia, destroying once for all the ultimate symbol of Persian power.



So much inconclusive research has been done on the question of what and who caused Alexander's death that it would seem futile to add to it. The present discussion would merely skim over a couple of less considered points. It was certainly true that many people had the motive and the means to murder Alexander, but equally, conditions existed for death by sickness: He was severely wounded in the Indian expedition a short time ago, and grief over Hephastian's death accompanied by heavy drinking would have further weakened him. Malaria could have been picked up during his inspections of swampy coastal areas in preparation to invade Arabia.

A parallel has been drawn between the two deaths of Hephastian and Alexander, but the main shared feature seemed to be just high fever, which is such a common symptom of serious illnesses that its presence in both deaths was hardly indicative of a common cause. Hephastian's initial recovery followed by relapse after a big meal pointed to typhoid if the cause was sickness, or to a double dose of some weak poison introduced into his food, whereas Alexander's death following prolonged fever, without reports of vomiting or bleeding, looks more like sickness than poisoning.

Much were also made of the various predictions and omens which occurred around that time. While some of these were no doubt invented after the event, it could well be that Alexander's state of physical and mental health had been causing people much worry for some time. As shown by such events as the killing of Kleitus, the disastrous expedition into the Kirman desert, his own severe wounding in the siege of an Indian fort with negligible strategic value, the purge of the satraps often over minor infractions, the grandiose funeral arrangements for Hephastian, and so on, he had become increasingly reckless in his actions. The possibility that he might not last much longer, and the empire could not hold together without him, would have been on the minds of the thinking people, with no one daring to discuss the issue openly, leaving the field to whispers, rumours and colourful omens.

The idea that Alexander's leading generals conspired to murder him and divide up the empire seems a weak proposition, because the subsequent division was too chaotic and haphazard to indicate a preconceived plan. The initial big winners (Ptolemy, Seleucus, Lysimachus and Antigonos One Eye) were not always those generals who were in the best position to carry out a murder-conspiracy, while some others who were, such as Perdikkas and Eumenes, quickly lost out in the conflict. The story that Cassander, fearing that Alexander intended to purge him and his father Antipater, carried poison prepared by Aristotle in a mule's hoof to Babylon and had it administered by his brother Iollas, who was Alexander's butler, seems a colourful invention in the Olympias and Perdikkas camps. The loyal way in which Antipater tried to protect Alexander's posthumous son, and the very fact that Iollas was trusted to remain in Alexander's household despite his father's replacement as regent of Macedonia by Craterus, made the story seem an unlikely one. Cassander's subsequent fear and hatred for Alexander was well known, but that could be due to superstitious fear over his responsibility for the death of Alexander's mother, wife and son, as well as memories of the humiliation and

threats he might have suffered from Alexander himself. Psychologically, if he had outwitted Alexander by a successful murder, there would be less need to fear and hate the victim after death.

An important consideration was that Alexander himself displayed no suspicion of being poisoned, made no attempt to initiate an investigation into any idea of foul play, either in the death of Hephaestion nor in his own sickness, and showed no disfavour to any of the possible conspirators. Concerning the looming prospect of a succession war he seemed to be more amused than worried, calling it "a great funeral game over me", and when asked "to whom do you bequeath the empire?", he left it open to anyone to prove himself to be "the strongest". The idea that some of the people around him were trying to get rid of him and usurp his power, and that he should do something to prevent it, seemed not to have occurred to him at all. In the absence of better evidence, perhaps it would be wisest to accept Alexander's own judgement on his death.

A product of his time, Alexander was a selfish person who wanted to demonstrate his excellence as an individual, with achievements that surpass heroes of the past including his own father. He might show qualities of magnanimity, chivalry, generosity, concern for good government, etc, but these are just means to a personal end. To credit his desire for the brotherhood of mankind for his desire to conquer the whole world would be just absurd. Alexander was a great military commander and leader of men; by leaving behind a fragmenting empire descending into chaos, he showed himself to be less than a great ruler.



On his deathbed, Alexander predicted a "great funeral game over me", i.e., civil war among his lieutenants, and he was completely prescient. Instead of unanimously standing behind his (unborn) son and the designated regent Perdiccas, the army split into two camps with infantry on one side and cavalry on the other. A reconciliation was patched up by naming his half brother (who also happened to be half-witted) as co-ruler, but this compromise did not hold together for much time either. Even while Alexander was still alive, some effort was needed to keep the regional governors in line; after his death this became impossible. When Perdiccas ordered his soldiers to cross the crocodile-infested Nile river in order to fight the army of Ptolemy, the independent-minded satrap of Egypt, they mutinied and murdered him, and with his collapse any semblance of a unified empire. Soon his son, wife and mother were all murdered by Cassander, the son of Antipater who had maintained the Macedonian home base during Alexander's absence in Asia but was by then too senile to continue his attempt to protect Alexander's family. Cassander, on the other hand, hated and feared Alexander and bore the family no good will, least of all Olympians.

Each general played his own game, some winning and some losing, with spectacular rises and falls. The most noteworthy example was Antigonos One-eye, originally not in the top echelon, being responsible for maintaining communication lines between the army in Persia and the Macedonian base as well as earlier conquered territories of Asia Minor, but finding himself in a favorable central position after the empire's collapse. He soon grew too big for everyone else's comfort however, and found himself facing a coalition of Cassander, Seleucus, Lycimarchus and Ptolemy. His son Demetrius won a great naval battle, successfully deploying the Philip-Alexander oblique flank advance technique, and tried to do the same on land at the battle of Ipsus with cavalry. However, with neither saddles nor stirrups, horses could not be so easily manoeuvred like ships or infantry formations, and he found his horsemen charging forward too far; by the time they returned to the main battle scene, the enemy infantry, assisted by elephants which Seleucus got in exchanging for Indian territory, had broken through the centre commanded by his father, who was killed as enemy javelins rained on him when they got close enough to his command post even as he scanned the horizon waiting for his son's cavalry to return.

After the collapse of the Antigonids at Ipsus, Seleucus defeated and killed Lycimarchus, but was himself murdered by an exiled son of Ptolemy while he was on the verge of conquering Macedonia itself after

reuniting virtually all the Asian conquests of Alexander. His son Antioch managed to hold on to most of the Asian territory, whereas Ptolomy, with the more modest aim of merely holding on to Egypt, enjoyed relative peace, while Macedonia and its Greek territories changed hands numerous times till Antogonos Gonatas, the grandson of One-eye, managed to stabilize control. This rough balance of power was maintained more or less, till the rise of Rome.

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