

OLYMPIAS “THE GREAT”: THE SOURCE OF ALEXANDER’S SUCCESS

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Political advancements in Macedonia almost certainly began with arranged marriages as a political tactic to gain power¹. Philip II of Macedonia primarily used this method of marriage to obtain his control over a promising future Empire². In joining with the kingdom of Molossi, Philip took a bride, named Olympias, who would ultimately bring him a promising heir as well as an untimely death³. Philip was prosperous in his years of ruling and continually combined his skill of marriage with his ever-growing war campaigns⁴. The polygamous nature of the Macedonian kingdom grew upsetting for Olympias and thereby shaped her progressive anger towards her husband, Philip. After the death of Philip in 336 B.C.E., Olympias struggled to maintain her matriarchic status in Macedonia and Epirus as well as guide her relatives to the powerful positions they deserved (e.g., Alexander the Great, Alexander IV)⁵.

This paper will argue that during her life, Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great was a prominent figure in Macedonia, while holding official positions of power and guiding Alexander towards success over his future Empire. Argumentatively, Olympias (1) was responsible for Alexander’s political and personal attributes, (2) held positions in Macedon that extended beyond the role of a matriarch, and (3) was critically portrayed by

¹ MacUrdu, G. H., “Queen Eurydice and the evidence for woman power in early Macedonia,” *The American Journal of Philology* 48 (1927) 201-214.

² MacUrdu (1927) 201.

³ MacUrdu (1927) 201. (Just.9.7.1-14), Justin portrays the event of Philip II’s death as being set upon by Olympias herself, while the deed was officially committed by one of Philip’s bodyguards, Pausanias.

⁴ Badian, E., “The death of Philip II,” *Phoenix* 17 (1963) 244-250.

⁵ Badian 244.

biased ancient literary sources as a hostile trouble-maker who is unworthy of any official power.

Olympias and Alexander the Great

As a princess of Molossi, Olympias had been accustomed to being treated as a high class individual and holding power over others. Known as a “tigress princess” of the House of Macedonia, Olympias was among those who were considered the super-women of the third century B.C.E⁶. Her status as a super-woman is accredited to her passionate, possessive, cruel and jealous personality that upholds her uninvited influence over men in power (e.g., Philip, Antipater, Cassander)⁷.

Being from Epirus, Olympias was an avid practitioner of the orgiastic rites of Dionysus⁸. Her knowledge of sacrificial rites and dedications are evidently passed on through Alexander. In many of his expeditions, Alexander makes use of his mother’s religious influence such as with the battle at Issus⁹ and the consultation of the Oracle at Siwah¹⁰. In continuous correspondence with his mother (Plut. *Alex.* 25.6), Alexander sent generous dedications to Macedonia, for transfer to Delphi from the spoils won at the battle of Issus in 331 B.C.E.¹¹. Alongside the previous example of religious influence, Alexander’s expedition to Egypt to consult the Oracle of Siwah included the performance of sacrifice to the gods of the Oracle (Diod. 17.51.4; Curt. 4.7.28; Plut. *Alex.* 27.7), as a

⁶ MacUrdu (1927) 202, the author describes these super-women as being those who can fight with enemies on the battlefield, command garrisons and defy those in power when they disagreed of their methods.

⁷ Hamilton, J. R., “Alexander’s early life,” *Greece & Rome* 12 (1965) 117-124. Olympias’ influence over Antipater is established over the Macedonian throne after Philip died. Olympias was determined to have her children rule the Macedonian throne, which was against Antipater’s wishes.

⁸ Hamilton 117.

⁹ Hammond, N. G. L., “Some passages in Arrian concerning Alexander,” *The Classical Quarterly* 30 (1980) 455-476.

¹⁰ Fredricksmeier, E. A., “Alexander, Zeus Ammon, and the conquest of Asia,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 121 (1991) 199-214.

¹¹ Hammond (1980) 474-5.

gratuitous expression for the positive response Alexander received (Arr. 3.4.5; 6.19.4).

As a result, the religious beliefs practiced by Alexander may evidently be the product of Olympias’ influence.

Alexander’s father, Philip may have been capable of similar passions to those of his mother, Olympias; however, he managed to control himself when it came to military issues and state affairs¹². The military and political skill of Philip is evidently inherited by his son Alexander when considering both of their methods of attack and plans to conquer over the Persian Empire¹³. However, greater influence for Alexander’s personal behaviours most likely came from Olympias, especially due to Philip’s absence during Alexander’s early years¹⁴. In the absence of Philip due to his multiple marriages and expeditions, Olympias and Alexander grew close and established an intimate connection. According to Freudian philosophy, Olympias’ affectionate and devoted personality enacted onto her son, a ‘mother-fixation’, which may have developed into an Oedipus complex¹⁵. This ‘mother-fixation’ can be analyzed and suggested with the investigation of Alexander’s interaction with women during his life, besides his mother¹⁶. According to Arrian (3.6.5) and Justin (9.7.1), Alexander was exclusive to Olympias, stating that the only woman that Alexander was able to love was ‘his terrible mother’¹⁷. Alexander’s failure to establish a planned successor to the Macedonian throne suggests a possible

¹² Hamilton 117, this self control that Philip portrayed may have been his downfall in the end. The power to do what is necessary for his greater good (e.g., kill Olympias) may have increased his life, rather than letting his wife aspire to kill him.

¹³ Hamilton 117.

¹⁴ Hamilton 117.

¹⁵ Walcot, P., “Plato’s Mother and Other Terrible Women,” *Greece & Rome* 34 (1987) 12-31, the absence of Philip in Alexander’s early life is considered a ‘textbook’ case of a remote father who is distant from his son, emotionally and physically. Alexander depended on his mother rather than two parents.

¹⁶ Walcot 21.

¹⁷ Fredrickmeyer, E. A., “Alexander and Philip: emulation and resentment,” *The Classical Journal* 85 (1990) 300-315.

confliction with him and the opposite sex¹⁸. From the primary evidence mentioned, Alexander most likely developed a close relationship with his mother when Philip was remote.

The cruel nature of Olympias that is depicted in most ancient and modern literary sources can be recognized in Alexander's behaviour throughout his reign as king of Macedonia¹⁹. In order to maintain her family's power, Olympias butchered many that may interfere with Alexander's accession to Philip's throne²⁰ (e.g., Philip's widow Cleopatra and her baby²¹, Philip Arrhidaeus and wife Eurydice²²). Stemming from his mother, Alexander began his cruel behaviour roundabout the death of Philip²³. When Philip came to the throne, Amyntas had been the rightful king of Macedonia²⁴. In fact, Philip usurped the throne from the son of Perdiccas and did so without killing²⁵. In contrast to his father's accession, Alexander immediately appointed the extermination of those who may interfere with his succession of the throne, including Amyntas (Just. 12.6.14). It is doubtful that Alexander was acting in accordance with his father, especially under the constant influence of Olympias when he was younger.

Alexander's hatred toward his father was not entirely Philip's doing; Olympias explicitly made her own contribution to the dislike of Philip (Plut. *Alex.* 9.5). With the growing tension between mother and father, Alexander became conflicted with his love

¹⁸ Walcot 21, the author states that Alexander may have developed distaste for sex with the opposite sex according to the Oedipus complex suggested earlier.

¹⁹ Carney, E. D., "Olympias and the image of the Virago," *Phoenix* 47 (1993) 29-55. Hamilton 117.

²⁰ Carney (1993) 36-42.

²¹ Just. 9.7.12.

²² Diod. 19.11.2-7.

²³ The word "roundabout" is used since it is uncertain if Alexander had been involved in his father's death.

²⁴ Badian 249.

²⁵ Badian 249.

for Olympias and his admiration for Philip²⁶. As a key figure in Alexander’s life, Olympias’ influential loathing of Philip had a greater impression on Alexander²⁷; however, Philip added to the fire. In addition to Philip’s absence in Alexander’s life, Philip also discouraged Alexander’s involvement in the future of Macedonia²⁸. The already diminished relations between father and son began to shatter further in 337 B.C.E. when Philip decided to once again marry²⁹. The wedding between Philip and the full-Macedonian girl Cleopatra prompted slander toward Alexander regarding the possible birth of a ‘legitimate’ heir to the throne³⁰. Alexander became angry with the union and verbally attacked his father who drove out Alexander and his mother, Olympias from Macedonia³¹. Adding insult to injury, Philip also exiled many of Alexander’s friends (Arr. 3.6.5-6)³². Arrian (4.8.6) reports that Alexander continued his grudge against his father and jumped at the chance to insult Philip whenever possible³³. In reviewing Philip’s resistance towards Alexander’s future in Macedonia, it appears that Olympias only plays a minor role in her son’s hatred toward his father; however, she does not deter Alexander from being generally hateful.

²⁶ Hamilton 124.

²⁷ Fredricksmeier (1990) 300-1.

²⁸ Hamilton 120-1.

²⁹ Hamilton 120-1.

³⁰ Hamilton 120-1, the slander against Alexander was made by Cleopatra’s uncle Attalus, which led to a brutal outburst from Alexander against the union and implications it drew. Fredricksmeier (1990) 301-2, the author discusses the love match between Philip and Cleopatra regarding her young age and Olympias distaste toward the union.

³¹ Hamilton 120-1, Alexander accompanied his mother to her native country Epirus and eventually fled to Illyria where he remained till his succession to Philip’s throne in 336 B.C.E. (although it is suspected that Alexander may have been involved in his father’s assassination, Just. 9.7.1-4).

³² To correct for the injustice to his friends, Alexander appointed his exiled friends to official positions when he took the throne in 336 B.C.E.

³³ Badian 250.

Justified by her hatred toward Philip and her self-proclaimed ancestry to Greek heroes, Olympias influenced Alexander to thinking he was the son of Zeus³⁴. Plutarch provides an adequate account of Alexander's correspondence with his mother and the endeavours to the Oracle of Siwah for consultation of his true father³⁵. En route to Asia, Olympias informed Alexander the "secret" of his birth while encouraging his curious mind to seek the truth (Plut. *Alex.* 3.3). Olympias' devious plan to link her son with Zeus was reasonably thought out in order to establish Alexander as the success he deserved. Following his visit with the Oracle at Siwah, Alexander secretly corresponded with his mother (Plut. *Alex.* 27.8) and later states that he had received the answers his heart desired³⁶. Thereafter, Alexander wished to be referred to as the son of Zeus Ammon and gained the prestige of being related to a god³⁷. As expected, Olympias appears to play a large role in the success and greatness of her son.

The assassination of Philip in 336 B.C.E. raises a great deal of speculation regarding those involved, particularly Olympias and Alexander³⁸. Both Olympias and Alexander may share the blame of the murder due to their personal vendetta against Philip; however, there is a lack of evidence proving either verdict. Indeed, Philip died at the hands of one of his bodyguards Pausanias (Diod. 16.93f) but an instigator is believed to have governed the incident³⁹. Alexander's involvement is a reasonable conclusion; however, the fear of his father's blood on his hands (patricide) would exceed the relief of

³⁴ Badian 244; Fredricksmeyer (1991) 200-6. It has been suggested by modern scholars that Olympias was actually distant from Philip when Alexander was thought to be conceived.

³⁵ Fredricksmeyer (1991) 200-1.

³⁶ Fredricksmeyer (1991) 206.

³⁷ Fredricksmeyer (1991) 200.

³⁸ Hammond, N. G. L. "The sources of Justin in Macedonia to the death of Philip," *The Classical Quarterly* 41 (1991) 496-508, the author discusses the accounts of Justin pertaining to the assassination of Philip and the possible involvement of Alexander and/or Olympias.

³⁹ Hammond (1991) 498-502.

Philip’s death. On the other hand, if Olympias had a role in Philip’s assassination along with Alexander, the concern of pollution caused by killing within the family would be immaterial since Olympias believed that Alexander was the son of Zeus and not Philip⁴⁰. Yet again, Olympias is viewed as an influential character in Alexander’s life that promotes his well-being.

Olympias: More than a Matriarch

The roles of women in the ancient world were mainly valued for marriages developed to establish alliances or producing male heirs to the throne⁴¹. However, in times of political stress caused by the death or exile of the king, queens tended to act as regents in the absence of male power⁴². Characteristically, women that held power in the place of men were usually strong-willed and unscrupulous with a hint of masculinity⁴³. At times, these powerful women were also involved in battle⁴⁴.

As ruler in both Epirus after her brother’s death⁴⁵ and Macedonia after the death of her husband, Olympias became fortunate to act in their place of ruling. Olympias’ strong and ambitious personality contributed to her role as acting regent, however also made her a target for those who felt threatened by her control (e.g., Antipater, Cassander)⁴⁶. Plutarch (*Alex.* 68.3) reports that Olympias had arranged factions against her rival, Antipater when Alexander was absent from the throne during his expeditions. Constant correspondence between Olympias, Alexander and Antipater demonstrated the

⁴⁰ Fredricksmeyer (1991) 200-6.

⁴¹ MacUrdu (1927) 213.

⁴² MacUrdu (1927) 201.

⁴³ MacUrdu (1927) 203.

⁴⁴ Carney (1993) 47-50, Olympias is reported to have appeared in front of armies alongside men in battle (Diod. 19.11.2; Just.14.5.5); however, her lack of military training limited her involvement.

⁴⁵ Hammond (1980) 472, Alexander the Molossian king died in 331 B.C.E., which allowed for Olympias to gain control of Epirus.

⁴⁶ Carney, E., “Women and Basileia: legitimacy and female political action in Macedonia,” *The Classical Journal* 90 (1995) 367-391.

political tension of the Macedonian kingdom during Alexander's reign as well as Olympias' important role in political matters⁴⁷. Antipater continuously complained to Alexander regarding his dissatisfaction of Olympias' involvement in political matters; however, Alexander disregarded Antipater's comments and rarely interfered (Plut. *Alex.* 39.7; Arr. 7.12.6-7). Therefore, it is evident that Alexander did value his mother's role as a ruler in his absence and recognized Olympias as more than a matriarch.

Along with the recognized approval from Alexander discussed above, Olympias was also recognized by a fellow Macedonian official, Polyperchon. After the death of Alexander, the struggle of successors for the Macedonian throne brought much stress on the kingdom. Antipater was first to gain acting control of the throne, which displeased Olympias and caused her to flee to Epirus (Diod. 18.49.4). In the death of Antipater, Polyperchon was made acting ruler of Macedonian affairs⁴⁸ and eventually sought out Olympias to act as guardian to Alexander IV, her grandson and next rightful heir to the Macedonian throne (Diod. 18.49.4; 18.65.10; 19.11). In addition to her return to Macedonia, Olympias performed strategic political decisions to eliminate any resistance to the succession of her grandson: the arranged murder of Philip Arridaeus and Eurydice (Diod. 19.11; Just. 14.5)⁴⁹, and the murder of one hundred Macedonian supporters of Cassander, including his brother Nicanor (Diod. 19.11.8-9; Just. 14.5.1-10). The cruelty of Olympias' actions is depicted barbarically in ancient sources⁵⁰; however, similar events by Macedonian generals have been reported, such as the killing of hundreds by

⁴⁷ Carney (1995) 372-8.

⁴⁸ Diod. 18.52.2, Antipater's son, Cassander was passed over for acting regent of Macedonia in the death of Antipater. Polyperchon realized the friction that may occur due to his succession rather than Cassander's, and sought out Olympias to establish the true blood line of Alexander in the Macedonian throne through Alexander IV.

⁴⁹ As the brother of Alexander, Philip Arrhidaeus could potentially produce the next rightful heir the Macedonian throne. Killing Philip Arrhidaeus and his wife would eliminate this possible obstacle.

⁵⁰ Carney (1993) 37-49.

Perdiccas’ in the opposition of his rival, Meleager (Curt. 10.9.11-18). Once more, Olympias’ involvement in the struggle over successors and ruthlessness in political affairs support her advancement beyond the role of a matriarch.

In final review, it is evident that Olympias’ success in Macedonian power far exceeds the role of a matriarch. In the last days of her life, Olympias continued to oppose the control of Antipater’s family lineage and evidently died at the hands of a man who must have viewed her as a constant threat⁵¹.

Olympias and Ancient Literary Sources

The majority of ancient literary sources that discuss Olympias portray her as a hostile trouble-maker who is unworthy of any power. However, most ancient sources that discuss her attributes or contributions to politics or military issues are riddled with personal bias and opinion such as those from Aristotle, Plutarch and Diodorus⁵².

Aristotle provides a direct insight into the early lives of Olympias, Philip and Alexander. Being a tutor to Alexander, Aristotle had a first-hand account of the possible relationship between Olympias and her son⁵³. Commonly, Aristotle (*Pol.* 2.9.7) described war times without the involvement of woman as acting rulers. Similarly, Plutarch a biographer writing over 400 years later than the time of Olympias⁵⁴ depicts women as not ruling within Macedonia, but instead being involved only under the control of men in charge (*Alex.* 68.3). Aristotle and Plutarch most likely represent the account of women involvement based on their negative opinion of female influence on men in power.

⁵¹ Diod. 19.35.5; 19.52.4, describes the fleeing of Olympias and Alexander IV to Pydna when Cassander arrived in Macedonia.

⁵² Carney (1993) 29-30.

⁵³ MacUrdu (1927) 201-2.

⁵⁴ Hamilton 123.

In contrast to these opinion based accounts, Diodorus alludes to third century B.C.E. contemporary sources who discuss Antipater's political views, especially those describing his hatred towards opposing forces. Diodorus (19.11.8-9) explicitly recalls the warning made by Antipater on his death bed claiming that the involvement of women in power will only lead to problems. The slander against Olympias is obvious from this passage, while illustrating Diodorus' promotion of his personal opinion on the matter. In summary, it is essential to scrutinize the ancient sources discussing Olympias with caution, bearing in mind any possible opinions or propaganda that may be evident.

Conclusions

The accomplishments of Olympias throughout her life successfully depict her powerful role in politics beyond the scope of a matriarch. Alexander's success to the Macedonian throne after Philip died is a direct result of his mother's craftiness and skill. The constant struggle within the Macedonian kingdom contributed to the slander placed on anyone seeking power regardless of gender.

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