

How Alexander's Relationship with Olympias Impacted His Achievement and Ultimate Downfall

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Abstract: Inspired by previous researches on the family heritage of Alexander the Great, this paper will focus on the relationship between Alexander and his mother, Olympias. It examines the influence Olympias has on Alexander in aspects of his virtuous qualities, political and military records, religious beliefs, and pioneering opinions about society, in chronological order. This paper is divided into three sections: Olympias' influence on Alexander in his early years (from birth to ascendancy to the throne in 336 B.C.), the years of campaign (from 334 to 327 B.C.), and the last years of his life (from 327 B.C. to 323 B.C.). This paper highlights Alexander's precocious achievements, such as his military conquests, and factors leading to his ultimate demise, such as hubris and unrelenting exertions to promote ethnical integrations. Unlike most documentaries that place Olympias in the background, this paper recognizes her importance to Alexander as a source of his education and decision-making, and a woman ahead of her times with eminent aspiration and ability to achieving success.

Keywords: Alexander, Olympias, Macedonians, religion, hubris, immortality

1. Introduction

When we eulogize the accomplishments of Alexander the Great, the King of Asia, the invincible warrior, and one of the most controversial figures in history, we are gazing at the creation of his mother and his most prominent influencer—Olympias. Whether “a woman of a jealous and vindictive temper” described by Plutarch in *Age of Alexander* or a matriarch in the eyes of contemporary scholars, she had lived a life no less legendary than that of Alexander [1]. Olympias was the daughter of King Neoptolemus I of Epirus and a Molossian princess who had descended from the son of Achilles. After marrying Philip II, she became the Queen of Macedonia; a year after their marriage, she gave birth to Alexander. This essay will examine three stages of how Olympias' relationship with Alexander impacted his future achievement and ultimate downfall: Olympias's early influence over Alexander, her influence from 334 to 327 B.C., and during the last years of Alexander's life.

2. First Stage: Early Years

At a young age, Alexander was ensured a quality education and exposure to virtues such as intelligence, audacity, and ambition, conditions for attaining later military successes. Under the support of Olympias, Alexander received the tutoring of Aristotle and began studying the *Iliad* by

Homer, grasping the bestowment of military masteries and heroism within. According to historian Plutarch, “[Alexander] regarded the Iliad as a handbook of the art of war and took with him on his campaigns a text annotated by Aristotle...and which he always kept under his pillow together with his dagger” [1]. A poem that recounted the final weeks of the Greek-Trojan War, it depicted themes of “human emotions, values, and the complex relationships between mortals and gods” [2]. A figure which stood out from the Iliad was its tragic hero Achilles—it was likely that Olympias used her linkage with Achilles to inspire her son to emulate, or even surpass, the latter’s heroic deeds. However, Alexander identified with Achilles not just on family lineage, but also on their shared pursuit of glory and understanding of the inevitability of death. Historian and scholar Guy Rogers writes, in *Alexander: The Ambiguity of Greatness*: “Alexander too seems to have been willing to accept death, at a time of the gods’ choosing, in exchange for the everlasting glory that came from achieving great deeds of arms...Like Achilles, to gain all, Alexander was willing to risk all. In combat, that was his great advantage over those who wanted to live longer—and therefore were destined to live shorter and less glorious lives” [3]. In other words, his bravery and unrelentingness towards death promised him the fruits of victory.

3. Second Stage: From 334 to 327 B.C.

From 334 to 327 B.C., Olympias demonstrated her influence on Alexander in political affairs, military combats, and religious beliefs. First, she had an immense political impact on him in maintaining his power and interfering with his relationship with his subordinates. When Alexander succeeded his father to become King of Macedon, Plutarch describes the situation that the young half-Macedonian prince and his mother faced: “formidable jealousies and feuds, and external dangers on every side” [1]. It was a crucial time for Alexander to establish his authority facing internal and external enemies. Attempting to extinguish Attalus’ plan to overthrow Alexander, it was rumored that Olympias had killed Attalus’ niece, Cleopatra, whom Philip II had married before he died, and Cleopatra’s baby. Justin states in *Epitome of the Philippic History*: “...she forced Cleopatra, for whose sake she had been divorced from Philip, to hang herself, having first killed her daughter in her lap, and enjoyed the sight of her suffering this vengeance” Carney, in her book *Olympias*, states that even though Olympias’ murders were considered brutal and vengeful by some sources, she was “no more than the rest of the Macedonian elite”; in this way, Olympias had demonstrated a reason for her contemporaries to fear betraying her or her son [4]. To her, arousing “fear” in enemies was their first step to achieving dominance.

After Alexander set off in his campaigns, Olympias continued to communicate and influence him through letter-writing. A famous example of her impact on Alexander was the rivalry between herself and Antipater. Unsatisfied with Olympias’ political involvement and strong-willed nature, Macedonian regent Antipater wrote Alexander a “long letter finding fault with her” [1]. However, in return, Alexander exclaimed, “Antipater did not understand that one tear shed by his mother would wipe out ten thousand letters such as this” [1]. The truth was, Olympias had written him numerous letters accusing Antipater as well, and as Rogers summarizes, blamed him for his “arrogance...his forgetting who had put him in his position, and...his expecting to assume every kind of precedence among the other Macedonians and Greeks” [3]. Although there could be a potential exaggeration in this account, the dialogue between Alexander and Antipater suggests the close relationship between mother and son, and reveals Alexander’s attitude towards his mother’s letters of interference: he was not ignorant towards them, and though he had shown opposition to her involvement, it was probable that he listened to at least a few of her suggestions which made sense to him. Later, Alexander ordered Antipater to come to Babylon (some speculated to keep him away from Olympias); however, Antipater sent his son Cassander instead. Angered by this act, Alexander treated his son with great hostility. The way he treated the latter was largely due to the Antipater’s disobedience towards his

command, but it was also possible that he had begun to think negatively of Antipater after Antipater's dissent with Olympias. Nevertheless, the relationship between Alexander and Antipater was never as close as before [3].

Secondly, Alexander manifested the military prowess cultivated from Iliad, the "handbook of warfare" in the Battle of Hydaspes in 326 B.C., when he used diversion attacks and strategies of outflanking and "pinning and turning" to achieve success. His acceptance of death is also demonstrated on the battlefield. In the speech he later made on the Hyphasis River, the Greek author Arrian of Nicomedia records he had claimed: "Remember that labor and danger have their reward in glory: remember how sweet it is to live courageously and die with a legacy of immortal fame" [5]. A similar description in the Iliad is when Achilles weighed immortal fame and glory over a long life. Richmond Lattimore translates the following verses in his book *The Iliad of Homer*, adapted by Thomas Martin in his article: "If I stay here and fight beside the city of the Trojans, my return home is gone, but my fame shall be immortal; but if I return home to the beloved land of my fathers, my distinguished fame is gone, but there will be a long life left for me, and my end in death will not come to me quickly" [6]. This comparison, made genuinely and passionately by Alexander, could date back to his mother's expectations of him when he was a child. In this way, Olympias' great effort in preaching to Alexander his divine heritage and making sure the young boy took her expectation to heart seemed worthy: Alexander did later capture Troy, which his hero Achilles had failed to do so, and eventually conquered a large portion of Asia, much of the known world at that time.

Thirdly, Alexander's religious belief was a critical factor that prompted his hubris before a sudden and premature death. Olympias' influence on him can be examined from the life experience of Olympias and the way she nurtured Alexander. Plutarch comments on Olympias' behavior as a participant of the "deviant" cult of Dionysus: "It was Olympias' habit to...surrender herself to the inspiration of the god with even wilder abandon than the others, and she would introduce into the festal procession numbers of large snakes, hand-tamed, which terrified the male spectators" [1]. Philip II began to distance himself with his wife after such behavior, but after a serpent was seen on her bed "stretched out at Olympias' side as she slept," Philip lost his erotic interest in her [1]. A serpent could be interpreted as a sacred animal of Zeus, the Olympian God, so it was likely that Olympias had shared a bed with him. Olympias' dream that a thunderbolt, the symbol of Zeus, had struck her womb before Alexander was born further attests to the truth of the myth, suggesting Alexander was the son of a God. The precise time Alexander discovered his purported birth was debatable, but it was about when he succeeded Philip II's throne and set off his campaign to the East at around 334 B.C. Plutarch reports: "According to Eratosthenes, Olympias, when she sent Alexander on his way to lead his great expedition to the East, confided to him and him alone the secret of his conception and urged him to show himself worthy of his divine parentage" [1]. The reason for Olympias to disclose to him at this time was significant: if she had told Alexander earlier, it could endanger his relationship with his father; telling him before his campaign gave Alexander more right to be confident in his future conquest.

After Alexander marched into Egypt, Arrian records that "...Alexander was taken with a yen to visit the shrine of Ammon in Libya. One reason was to consult the God, as the oracle of Ammon was regarded as infallible...a further reason was that he was beginning to attribute part of his paternity to Ammon" [5]. At this point, he was captured by a longing to know his identity and had begun early signs of establishing Zeus as his father. Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, in *Library of History* edited by Bill Thayer, recounts that Alexander had asked the Oracle if the murderers of his father had all been punished. The prophet replied, "...There is no mortal who can plot against the one who begot him. All the murderers of Philip, however, have been punished" [7]. This answer implies that Zeus was Alexander's father, as he was a God no mortal could conspire against. Although Arrian does not specify what question Alexander asked the Oracle, it was certain that he had heard "all the answers

he had hoped for” [5]. After this incident, with his hypothesis at last certified, Alexander proclaimed himself as the son of a God. His condescending behavior led to disagreements among the soldiers who had served during Philip’s reign and believed Alexander was gaining all the credit for himself, with Alexander’s friends and followers. The dissent peaked when Cleitus the Black, one of Alexander’s older officers who had saved his life in the Battle of Granicus, publicly denounced Alexander by exclaiming that it was by the blood of all Macedonians that he had attained triumph. He was now thinking so greatly of himself that he disowned his father Philip [3]. The argument ended with Alexander’s murder of Cleitus through a spear. Though the Macedonians soon justified Alexander’s behavior, supporters of Cleitus did not forget; it was a mistake of the many Alexander had made due to his increasing pride in siding with the Gods.

4. Alexander’s Last Years

In Alexander’s last years, he launched a revolution of beliefs in ethnics and culture. Like Olympias, who overturned traditional stereotypes of women, Alexander overturned the expectation of a king who had just conquered the Persian Empire and the “inferior” Persian people. Despite denouncing Persians as natural slaves at the Battle of Issos, in 324 B.C., he declared that Macedonians and Persians would rule together, and even assembled a mass wedding in Persian style for his soldiers and himself to marry Persian or Asian women [3]. In military aspects, to prepare for future conquests, he rearranged the infantry soldiers so that in one single file, Macedonians lined up in the first two places and the last place, with Persian soldiers in between. The most significant change was his introduction to prostration (proskynesis). While prostration existed in the Persian court as a form of tribute, Greeks, due to their disparate cultures, opined that mortal men did not deserve such a signal of worship. Curtius Rufus, in the *History of Alexander*, provides a motivation for Alexander: “He wished to be believed, not just called, the son of Jupiter, as if it were possible for him to have as much control over men’s minds as their tongues” [8]. Alexander decided that he was worthy of divine honors. However, other reasons may be that prostration could also promote unity between nations, as everyone was now required to pay the same respects to the king (depending on their ranks, bowing, kneeling, or kissing him), and respecting Persian customs allowed the Macedonians and Persians to establish an alliance.

Alexander’s actions of self-deification and promoting cultural integration created unrest among his followers. Callisthenes, a Macedonian historian who had accompanied Alexander on his expeditions, condemned him for the way he confused the boundaries between mortals and gods, inflicted the Macedonians with orientalism, and deviated from his intent in setting off this campaign. The reactions of Macedonians after Callisthenes’ speech hugely differentiated from that of Alexander; while the latter was “greatly irritated,” the former was “pleased to hear them” [9]. The contrast in their attitude reflects Alexander’s disagreement with Macedonians; his high regards for people of different ethnicities and persistent exertions on orientalism were the main reasons for the Mutiny of Opis three years later, in 324 B.C.. With continuous communications with Olympias over the years, it is plausible that Olympias had supported him in the background. As a strong-minded and eager mother, her pioneering opinions and involvement in politics had impacted his son’s decision to implement enforcement on a matter that would change the lives of many and end cultural segregation at that time, but also one that would mark his demise.

5. Conclusion

Throughout Alexander’s life, Olympias played an important role, not only on the cultivation of his virtuous qualities and military prowess, which suited him for a victorious warrior and leader, but also the promotion of his hubris in believing he was a descendant of famous heroes and God himself. In

addition, his attempts at orientalism and revolutionary spirit were also impacted by Olympias, either in her actions or in their blood. Alexander once famously remarked that she had charged a “high price for his nine months’ lodging in her womb” [3]. In some aspects, it was not easy having a headstrong mother whose wave of expectation and advice followed him throughout his life; but in the end, he preserved gratitude and devotion for her. According to Curtius Rufus, after Alexander had received a dangerous wound in India, he asked his friends to grant Olympias immortality, to make her a God like him: “...the greatest reward for my efforts and my labors will be if my mother Olympias be granted immortality on her departure from life. I shall see to this personally, if I am allowed to do so but, if destiny forestalls me, remember that I have entrusted it to you” [8]. He had not forgotten his mother when he thought he had reached the end of his life. If there was something Alexander’s father, Philip II, failed to provide him in his absence, Olympias had given him, if not in excess, what he needed to become a legendary figure.

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