Alexander the Great's Use of Myth on Campaign
Chad Leitch

Chad Leitch is a senior history major from Marshall, Illinois. He wrote this paper for Dr. Lee Patterson's HIS 4865: Alexander the Great. After graduation Mr. Leitch will be attending law school through enrollment in a JD program.

Who is the most famous person in all of history? That question remains up to debate, but an argument could easily be made for Alexander the Great. At the age of 20, Alexander was able to become king of Macedonia following the death of his father Philip II. While he might not be the youngest monarch in history, it is what Alexander did after becoming king that made him so famous. He carried out his father's planned invasion of the Persian Empire, but he did not stop there. Before Alexander defeated the Persians, he ventured into Egypt, and after he defeated the Persians, he went on to India. Conquering all of these lands allowed Alexander to create one of the largest empires ever seen in the ancient world by the time of his death at the age of 32. In such a relatively short amount of time, Alexander the Great accomplished so much. How was Alexander the Great achieved this especially considering his young age throughout the campaign? Obviously, there are many reasons why Alexander accomplished what he did, but a notable reason was his use of myth.[1]

Alexander learned much about myth as a boy and was enamored with it. He was fascinated by the heroes of myth and the accompanying stories of adventure. With this in mind, it is no surprise that Alexander made use of the myth he loved so much while he was on military campaign. One device used by Alexander was kinship myth. What is kinship myth? Figures that today we know to be mythical, such as Achilles or Heracles, were believed to be historical figures in the areas from where they originated, in this case Ancient Greece. Tribes and kingdoms of Ancient Greece would embrace myth and claim descent from these figures believed to be historical. Often times this was to achieve political gain. Ancient Greece is not the only society to do something like this, but the focus here will remain on Greek figures, because these were invoked by Alexander when he used kinship myth. Another way that Alexander made use of myth was to guide the travels of the campaign. Alexander used myth in determining routes that the army took during his campaign. For some reason there was a gap of several years between Alexander's uses of myth. He used it frequently at the beginning of the campaign until he reached the non-Greek world. Then we do not see any instances of myth use until he reached India where the myth he employed was dubious to say the least. In India, it becomes apparent that Alexander developed a new agenda for using myth in his campaign. A turning point occurred when he began to use myth, perhaps myth that he has created, to enhance his personal status and to further his personal goals rather than using already existing myth primarily as a tool for strategic political gain.

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[1] Historians have written a lot about Alexander the Great and his campaign from many different angles. In particular, Alexander's use of myth has been discussed often because of how integral it was to some of Alexander's decision. The discussion is prominent in Lee E. Patterson, *Kinship Myth in Ancient Greece* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010). It is also necessary to look at some of the Macedonian uses of myth before Alexander's time to put some of his possible motives for later uses of myth into context. Here, the discussion of the Argead king list in William Greenwalt, "The Introduction of Caranus into the Argead King List," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 26 (1985) is crucial. Many other authors have also made contributions to this discussion in order to understand Alexander's uses of myth during his campaign. For more information on Alexander and his campaign see *Alexander the Great: A New History*, ed. Waldemar Heckel and Lawrence A. Tritle, (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) and *Alexander the Great: A Reader*, ed. Ian Worthington, (London, UK: Routledge, 2003).

In order to examine Alexander's use of kinship myth, one must understand how Alexander was supposedly descended from the figures he invoked. Two figures stand out among the myths used by Alexander. The first one is Heracles. Alexander was purportedly descended from Heracles through his father. Alexander, a member of the Argead royal house of Macedon which was founded by Caranus, was descended from the Temenids of Argos themselves descended from Heracles (Diod. 17.4.1). The second notable figure was Achilles. Alexander was descended from Achilles through his mother. He was a descendent of the Molossian kings of Epirus whose founder Molossus was the son of Neoptolemus, himself son of Achilles (Justin 11.3.1). Heracles and Achilles were the most evident figures in Alexander's use of kinship myth. However, it is known that he invoked Andromache once and possibly invoked Dionysus towards the end of the campaign.

An early and notable example of Alexander's use of myth occurred just before the start of his campaign into Asia. Alexander needed to thwart resistance from the rest of the Thessalian League in order to bring them back into the fold. To do this, he began marching to Larissa, the seat of the Aleudae, but the Thessalians had blocked the route because they controlled the Tempe Pass. Alexander worked around this by climbing Mount Ossa and coming down on the Thessalians from the rear thus ending the resistance.[2] He then rode on to Larissa to hold a meeting of the Thessalian League where the Thessalians agreed to Alexander inheriting his father Philip's title as archon of the Thessalian League. Even though the Thessalians rejoined him, Alexander decided to go ahead and invoke kinship diplomacy with them. Diodorus says, "First he dealt with the Thessalians, reminding them of his ancient relationship to them through Heracles and raising their hopes by kindly words and by rich promises as well, and prevailed upon them by formal vote of the Thessalian League to recognize as his the leadership of Greece which he had inherited from his father" (Diod. 17.4.1). Alternatively, Justin says, "On his way he had offered encouragement to the Thessalians and reminded them of the services rendered to them by his father Philip and of his kinship with them on his mother's side because of her descent from the Aeacids" (Justin 11.3.1).

It is unclear if Diodorus, Justin, or both are correct about which connection Alexander used, but it is clear that Alexander used kinship diplomacy for political purposes. Certainly Alexander needed the Thessalian League for its impressive cavalry in order to bolster his military might which had already been impressive enough to secure the Thessalians and its cavalry on sight, but he may have also used it to appear more appealing as a leader. According to Patterson, "Alexander saw kinship myth as a way of making his leadership more palatable and we have no reason to reject Thessalian credulity on this point."[3] By establishing a common ancestor between the two, Alexander used kinship myth to re-secure an alliance with Thessaly where the Thessalians accepted Alexander as their leader because they want to believe they shared this common ancestor. Early on, Alexander was clearly using myth as a political tool to increase his power in the Hellenistic world.

As Alexander began his campaign, we see his use of kinship myth when he reached the famed city of Troy. Alexander employed kinship diplomacy with the Trojans by using a connection with them through Andromache, from whom he was descended through his mother. Strabo says that Alexander "provided for them on the basis of a renewal of kinship and because of his zeal for Homer….On account of this zeal and of his kinship through the Acacids, who had been kings of the Molossi, of whom Andromache, Hector's wife, as the story goes, was also queen, Alexander treated the Ilians kindly" (Strabo 13.1.27). The kind treatment referenced by Strabo may have been an exemption from paying tribute according to Patterson.[4] Because Alexander loved myth, and Troy was a major part of the story of Achilles, one of the heroes Alexander tries to emulate, the Trojans,

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[2] Ian Worthington, *Alexander the Great: Man and God* (Harlow, UK: Pearson, 2004), 51.

[3] Lee E. Patterson, *Kinship Myth in Ancient Greece* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 89-90.

[4] Patterson, *Kinship Myth*, 90.

were treated well. This love of myth, especially of the Trojan War, also influenced Alexander's other actions while in Troy.

At Troy, Alexander offered a sacrifice to Priam, the king of Troy during the Trojan War. Arrian says, "He is also said to have offered sacrifice to Priam on the altar of Zeus Hercius, to avert his anger against the family of Neoptolemus, whose blood still ran in his own veins (Arr. 1.11). He also said that Alexander sacrificed at the Temple of Athena where he found several weapons preserved from the Trojan War, so Alexander left his armor at the temple and, in exchange, took some of the weapons that were there (Arr. 1.11). According to Diodorus, Alexander also visited the tombs of Achilles and Ajax among other heroes and "honoured them with offerings and other appropriate marks of respect" (Diod. 17.17.3). Historian Ian Worthington advances the argument that Alexander sacrificed to Priam in order to appease him so as not to jeopardize the Macedonian campaign. Worthington also claims that it cannot be ruled out that Alexander sacrificed to Priam to quell the fears of his men.[5] Regardless, this action and all these others truly shows the hold myth had on Alexander. It influenced him greatly and can be seen in key decisions he made.

Another interesting case of Alexander's use and non-use of kinship diplomacy came at Soli and Mallus, two ancient cities in Cilicia near Issus where Alexander would defeat Darius for the first time. Soli and Mallus were very similar in that they were both of Argive origin. There are no reports of Alexander employing kinship myth when he arrived at Soli. In fact, Arrian says that Alexander "installed a garrison and imposed upon the town a fine of 200 talents of silver for its support of the Persian cause (Arr. 2.5). However, further to the east at Mallus, Alexander did make use of kinship myth. Arrian says, "In this latter place he found political troubles in progress, and settled them, remitting the tribute which the town paid to Darius on the ground that Mallus was a colony of Argos and he himself claimed to be descended from the Argive Heracleidae" (Arr. 2.6). The only differences between these two cities mythically speaking is that Mallus was of Heraclid origin and Soli was not.

The Heraclid origin of Mallus was what makes all the difference because of Alexander's emulation of heroes. Heracles, perhaps the most famous hero of all, was an idol to Alexander, a figure who set an example that Alexander tried to follow. Another difference between the two that may explain why Alexander sought kinship diplomacy with Mallus and Soli was that Mallus was farther east as noted by Bosworth.[6] Alexander knew that he and Darius would fight their battle somewhere near Issus. Because it was farther east, Mallus was closer to Issus than Soli. This made it an ideal ally to thwart alliances with the Persians which would allow Darius to summon reinforcements to attack Alexander's rear. Thus one sees just how practical Alexander could be when using kinship diplomacy. If he did not need to use it or it benefited him in no way as with Soli, he did not bother with it. However, when myth proved useful, he used kinship diplomacy.

As Alexander began to move into the non-Greek world as he made his way into the Levant, Egypt, and on to Persia, there was a significant decrease in his use of kinship myth. In fact, Alexander did not use it again until India. Not that there were not opportunities for Alexander. At Tyre, the Tyrians worshipped a god named Melcart, who was widely equated with Heracles by the Greeks. In fact, Diodorus refers to him as the "Tyrian Heracles" when describing the incident where Alexander wished to sacrifice to him and he was barred from the city (Diod. 17.40.2). The Egyptians worshipped the god Ammon, who was believed by the Greeks to be their god Zeus. Alexander even claimed that the oracle at the Temple of Ammon at Siwa had declared him son of Zeus according to Plutarch (Plut. Alex. 27). Despite all of this, there is no evidence that Alexander made use of kinship diplomacy while in Egypt. Alexander even had ties to the Persians he could have used once he

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[5] Worthington, *Alexander the Great*, 72-3.

[6] A. B. Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire: The Reign of Alexander the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 58.

defeated Darius. Both had ties to Perseus, a descendant of Heracles, yet Alexander did not use mythological tools.

Most likely Alexander changed tactics because the mythological figures he would have been invoking meant nothing to these people. The Tyrians had no interest in allowing Alexander into their city because he wanted to worship Heracles (he assumed Melcart was a manifestation of Heracles). However, since Heracles meant nothing to the Tyrians, they just assumed he wished to worship Melcart. Only the ruler of Tyre had the privilege of sacrificing to Melcart at this time, so the Tyrians banned Alexander. After this, Alexander had no interest in using kinship diplomacy with them because he had been offended. He did not need to use kinship myth in Egypt because once he freed Egyptians from Persian control, they were ready to accept him as their ruler. He did not have an existing tradition to work with in Egypt, but it did not matter: he had already achieved his goals without kinship diplomacy. As for Persia, it was similar to the situation in Egypt. Despite their connection to Alexander through Perseus, the Persians did not believe in these figures; so trying to use kinship diplomacy would have done no good. Instead, Alexander tried to connect with the Persians by different means. He began combining Persian and Macedonian garb, he married the daughters of Darius and Artaxerxes III, and he even attempted to introduce proskynesis among other things. Alexander understood that kinship diplomacy would not work if the people he was trying to connect with did not understand, know, or care about whoever Alexander tried to invoke. Much as at Mallus and Soli, Alexander showed his practicality in using kinship diplomacy.

Following the death of Darius, but before Alexander defeated the Persians for good, there was an incident involving a plot to kill Alexander. Philotas, a friend of Alexander and son of Parmenio failed to report this plot because he did not view it as a threat. This ultimately led to his execution along with Parmenio. According to historian Lowell Edmunds, this represented a turning point in Alexander's campaign. Prior to this event, the campaign was in the Graeco-Macedonian phase, during which Alexander's reasons for the campaign can be attributed to avenging the Greeks for the wrongs the Persians committed against them during Xerxes' invasion. However, following this event, the campaign moved into the heroic phase.[7] Now the driving force behind this campaign was simply Alexander's *pathos*, as Arrian puts it, his desire to keep going (Arr. 1.4). The notion of a turning point at this particular moment is important because soon Alexander would be moving into India where signs of kinship myth begin to show up again. However, this shift should be placed slightly earlier, when Alexander dismissed the troops of the League of Corinth. The dismissal came because the mandate of the League of Corinth had been filled despite Bessus still causing problems and claiming to be the Great King. In dismissing these troops, Alexander acknowledged that he had accomplished what he set out to do, at least in the eyes of the League of Corinth, and anything from here on out was simply unnecessary. Alexander was doing this for himself now which is why kinship myth makes a reappearance in this campaign and is different from before.

As Alexander moved into India, there is evidence in the ancient sources that he engaged in kinship myth with the Nysaeans. According to Arrian, "In the country on Alexander's route between the river Cophen and the Indus lay the city of Nysa, supposed to have been founded by Dionysus, at the time of his conquest of the Indians" (Arr. 5.1). Supposedly the people of Nysa approached Alexander and they invoked kinship myth with Dionysus. The evidence for this alleged connection with Dionysus is that the city of Nysa was named after his nurse Nysaea and that nearby Mount Merus (Merus is Greek for thigh and Dionysus was born from Zeus's thigh) was the only place in India where ivy grew. Arrian remained skeptical of this and maintained neutrality on the matter. Regardless, Arrian says that Alexander went to Mount Merus, saw the ivy, and then the Macedonians began to celebrate.

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[7] Lowell Edmunds, "The Religiosity of Alexander," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 12 (1971): 363.

The notion that the Nysaeans engaged in kinship diplomacy with Alexander by invoking Dionysus is problematic. It is very unlikely that Indians would know enough about these Greek figures at all to be able to invoke them. According to Patterson, there is evidence of Greeks in the Indus Valley before Alexander arrived, but there is no proof that they had any contact with the Nysaeans or any other Indians.[8] This makes it likely that Alexander invented this myth of Dionysus in India. Patterson says that the influence of Euripides' plays *The Bacchae* and *The Cyclops* could have influenced Alexander by allowing for Dionysus to have potentially traveled to India and for Alexander being able to claim descent from Dionysus respectively.[9] By creating this myth that Dionysus founded this city in India, Alexander was able to claim he has surpassed a god once he goes further than this city. This is particularly notable considering Alexander was potentially believing in his own divinity at this point. Creating this myth allowed Alexander to enhance his own status by surpassing Dionysus.

There is precedent for the creation of myth to aid an agenda in Macedonian history. Caranus, the supposed founder of the Argead royal house, was introduced into the Argead king list sometime during the fourth century. Scholar William Greenwalt suggests that Caranus was introduced as a way to diminish the importance of Perdiccas I without compromising the prestige of the entire royal house.[10] There was a rivalry between three branches of the Argead royal house who were descended from the three sons of Alexander I. The introduction of Caranus would have been used by the descendants of Menelaus and Amyntas to prevent Perdiccas II's namesake from being used to justify a superior claim to the throne. Greenwalt also suggests that the eventual rise of Amyntas III, grandson of Amyntas to the throne would have solidified the acceptance of Caranus as the founder of the Argead royal house.[11] Regardless of how Caranus was introduced, it is clear he was a fabrication introduced later. While Alexander would not have known this, it is evidence that introduction of new myths were possible—meaning it is likely Alexander fabricated his use of kinship myth in India.

Another instance of Alexander's use of kinship myth in India came when he encountered the Sibi. An aboriginal tribe in the Indus, the Sibi sent an envoy to Alexander to surrender and invoke kinship diplomacy much like what happened at Nysa. According to Diodorus, "It is said that Heracles of old thought to lay siege to this 'rock' but refrained because of the occurance of certain sharp earthquake shocks and other divine signs, and this made Alexander even more eager to capture the stronghold when he heard it, and so to rival the god's reputation" (Diod. 17.85.2). Curtius says "The Sibi claim that their ancestors were members of Hercules' army, that these had been left behind when they fell ill and had settled where they themselves were now living" (Curt. 9.4.2). Despite these two accounts, some of the ancient sources, such as Plutarch, make no mention of these claims of kinship or even the visit to Aornus.

The claim of kinship through Heracles with the Sibi was another instance where Alexander may have fabricated kinship myth. In relation to this incident and at Nysa, Strabo says, "That these are fabrications of the flatterers of Alexander is clear, especially because the historians do not agree with one another, with some speaking about but others simply not recording them" (Strabo 15.1.9). However, Patterson notes the possibility that Alexander was reminded of Heracles by the characteristics of the local culture and is happy to promote his presence there for his own glory.[12] By doing this, Alexander would be able to succeed where Heracles failed if Diodorus' account is to be

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[8] Patterson, *Kinship Myth*, 98-9.

[9] Patterson, *Kinship Myth*, 100.

[10] William Greenwalt, "The Introduction of Caranus into the Argead King List," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 26 (1985): 48-9.

[11] Greenwalt, "The Introduction of Caranus," 49.

[12] Patterson, *Kinship Myth*, 103.

believed. Alexander would have once again surpassed a god, as he did when he reached and then went beyond Nysa. However, the dubiousness of these events suggest they were created simply to enhance Alexander's status particularly in the matter of Alexander's own supposed divinity.

Alexander would be forced to turn back towards home while in India following a revolt by his men. Much to his displeasure, Alexander began leading the army towards home even though he had no original intent of doing so. In fact, an invasion of Arabia had been one of his goals as he traveled back westward. However, these plans would be cut short, as would Alexander's life. In such a long campaign that covered a long period of time and such vast distances, many factors drove Alexander's success. Myth, which was such an important part of Alexander's life before the campaign, remained so as Alexander journeyed across the world.

Clearly Alexander used myth as a political tool during the beginning of the campaign, just as others before him had done. However, as time wore on, Alexander increasingly invoked myths for which there is existing tradition and, as such, this seems to only serve to enhance the status of Alexander. His campaign would not have become what it was or became as famous as it is had Alexander not made use of myth during the campaign.