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## Assessing Alexander

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It cannot be denied that Alexander III of Macedon, more commonly referred to as Alexander the Great, is one of the most famous (and infamous) rulers of all time. His legendary campaign of conquest extended from the Greek peninsula to the edges of India, ultimately leading to the creation of one of history's largest empires. Even more incredible is the fact that he could achieve these feats before reaching his thirtieth birthday.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it should come as no surprise that in death Alexander has, in the eyes of many throughout history, acquired the title of "the great." Although this titular honor is generally used as if it is an innate fact, it is worth questioning if the moniker is truly deserved. Was Alexander truly one of history's great military minds and ancient rulers? This paper postulates that although he is unquestionably one of the more famous rulers in ancient history, he does not deserve the title of "the great." This project cannot claim to be a complete damnation of Alexander. His achievements are truly incredible, and the fact that he accomplished them in a relatively brief reign is a testament to his being one of history's most significant and accomplished leaders. However, this paper seeks to "humanize" the legendary legacy of Alexander, and show that he does not truly deserve the moniker of "the great." This project analyses both the military career of Alexander and his conduct with his peers to advance the argument that we must humanize and contextualize the legend that is Alexander the Great.

The first issue to address is Alexander's military prowess. It cannot be doubted that a large part of the reason Alexander has been held to be "great" in the minds of many is his famous exploits in military tactics. However, upon analyzing Alexander's career, it becomes clear that although he was indeed a brilliant tactician, in many ways, he made several strategic blunders that significantly diminish his military record. In terms of battlefield tactics, this project will look specifically at two examples to show that Alexander was not the impeccably brilliant battlefield general that he is often portrayed. This first example will be Alexander's victory at the famous battle of Issus over Darius III (which this paper will argue was more based on luck than brilliant leadership on Alexander's part) and the second shall be his actions at the Persian gates (which, although ultimately ending in his victory, offers an example of Alexander's brash attitude causing him to suffer a defeat on the battlefield). However, even more important than these, this project will also analyze some of his larger strategic moves, among them his siege of the city of Tyre and his "pilgrimage" to the oracle at Siwah. These actions represent a clear-cut case of very poor strategic manner, allowing for Darius III to grow stronger and more formidable after placing him in a very desperate military situation following the battle of Issus. It can be argued that Alexander was in many ways a military mastermind. However, these examples show that his military profile is far from the lauded impeccable record that many claim. Primary sources shall be used to describe these events and provide some overall tactical analysis, while secondary sources shall be used heavily to provide scholarly opinion on the tactics and strategy of Alexander.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Green, *Alexander The Great* (London: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 13-16.

The second main point that will be used to reevaluate Alexander's moniker is his conduct during the "Philotas Affair," the pages conspiracy, and the death of Cleitus the Black. These three incidents undoubtedly cast a great shadow on Alexander's legacy, showing his true character as that of a jealous, paranoid, and drunkard ruler. Unlike the examination of Alexander's battlefield tactics, which will rely more on secondary sources than primary sources, these incidents will be examined largely through the primary sources to show that Alexander possessed a fierce dark side, one that in many aspects outshined his more benevolent traits. By using mostly primary sources (in conjunction with some secondary sources), this study establishes that in both the "Philotas affair" and the pages conspiracy, Alexander used false pretexts to have innocent men (Philotas, Parmenion, and Callisthenes) put to death for his own paranoid political ambitions. The infamous dinner party resulting in the death of Cleitus the Black manifests Alexander's paranoia; additionally it reveals a very dark narcissistic Alexander, so self-obsessed that he murdered the man who had saved his life at the battle of Granicus.<sup>2</sup> A detailed examination of these three events placing emphasis on the primary sources shows us that Alexander's personality was far from great. Instead, they reveal a paranoid, insecure, and downright cruel Alexander.

As stated previously, Alexander's military record is an important (if not the most important) reason for his perceived greatness, for Alexander is often lauded as one of history's greatest military masterminds. In fact, historian J.F.C. Fuller argues that as a tactical genius, Alexander belongs in the "common brotherhood" of the greatest generals in world history.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Barry Straus argues that Alexander should go down as one of the most skilled generals in history, arguing that he was a brilliant tactician, and that "only a handful of generals in history...made conquests on the scale of Alexander."<sup>4</sup> The historian N.G.L. Hammond is even more direct than these previous scholars in his praise. In regard to Alexander's brilliance, Hammond marvels that "the range and quickness of his (Alexander's) intellect are remarkable, especially in his conduct at warfare."<sup>5</sup> Clearly, many scholars hold Alexander to be a truly legendary general and one of history's greatest commanders. However, does closer scrutiny of Alexander's battlefield tactics support such grandiose claims? Should the tactics of Alexander be so universally revered and proclaimed? A closer look at some specific examples shows that although Alexander was indeed one of history's better commanders; he was not infallible on the field of battle and made some tactical mistakes.

One major instance that shows that Alexander did indeed make some mistakes on the battlefield was Alexander's actions at the battle of Issus. Plutarch describes the events of the battle in his biography of Alexander. The early Greek biographer describes how Alexander took advantage of Darius' poor choice of troop deployment (deploying his troops on a narrow battlefield rather than a larger, more flat plain that would accentuate his numerical advantage) to outmaneuver and defeat the Persian emperor. Plutarch states "the result of this battle was a brilliant victory for Alexander" (Plut. *Alex.* 20). However, do the actual actions of Alexander at Issus show him acting as a "brilliant" tactician? The answer, for Plutarch, is no.

Alexander made two major tactical blunders at Issus. The first of these blunders was significant enough that if not for sheer luck, Alexander would have likely lost the battle itself. Alexander was so eager to engage Darius himself, that Alexander rushed his cavalry in ahead of the rest of the Macedonian force. This opened up a significant gap in his lines that Darius' mercenary troops were able to exploit. They charged the gap and attacked Alexander's Macedonian phalanx troops from the side of their formation. Anyone familiar with the basic premise of a Macedonian

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<sup>2</sup> Waldemar Heckel and J.C. Yardley, *Alexander the Great: Historical Texts in Translation* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 93.

<sup>3</sup> J.F.C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Alexander the Great* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1960), 281-282.

<sup>4</sup> Barry S. Straus, "Alexander: The Military Campaign," in *Brill's Companion to Alexander the Great*, ed. Joseph Roisman (Boston: Brill, 2003), 134.

<sup>5</sup> N.G.L. Hammond, *The Genius of Alexander the Great* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 200.

phalanx realizes that this would be a potentially fatal attack, for the Macedonian phalanx was almost completely defenseless to attacks on its flanks due to its use of extremely long spears, which could not be easily turned and re-deployed to protect a flank. Therefore, Alexander's line actually was severely compromised due to Alexander's actions. The historian Ian Worthington rightly claims that if the Persians would have pressed their advantage, they likely would have broken Alexander's lines and forced Alexander to face a crushing defeat. However, Alexander got extremely lucky, and the Persian troops did not press their advantage.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, we see that Alexander committed a serious, potentially disastrous tactical blunder at Issus, and if not for an incredible stroke of luck, his blunder would likely have led to his demise. Unfortunately for Alexander's legacy, Alexander's failure to accomplish his primary goal at the battle shows us another "blunder on Alexander's part."<sup>7</sup> It cannot be denied that capturing Darius was Alexander's main goal at the battle of Issus. Quintus Curtius Rufus' account says Alexander was above all else "seeking for himself the rich trophy of killing the king (Darius)" (Curt. 3.11.7). Similarly, Diodorus Siculus describes how at the beginning of the battle of Issus, Alexander "cast his glance in all directions in his anxiety to see Darius" and that Alexander wanted "not so much to defeat the Persians as to win the victory with his own hands" (Diod. 17.33.5). Clearly, Alexander's main goal was to capture Darius. We cannot question such a goal, for the capture of Darius would likely have crippled if not completely ended Persian resistance. Darius of course recognized that if Alexander was to achieve this goal, he would be defeated permanently. Therefore, when he felt the battle was lost he "took flight to avoid capture."<sup>8</sup>

However, the fact that Alexander utterly failed at this goal had serious repercussions for his campaign. His failure allowed Darius to "regroup his forces, bringing Alexander into a costly battle again two years later at Gaugamela." Simply put, if Alexander had accomplished his main strategic goal at Issus, he would almost certainly not have had to fight the battle of Gaugamela in the first place. Therefore, at Issus we clearly see two major tactical blunders/failures on Alexander's part. By charging ahead of his men, Alexander placed the core infantry of his army in an extremely vulnerable position which, if not for a stroke of extreme luck, would likely have caused Alexander to face defeat. Similarly, by failing to achieve his main goal of capturing Darius, Alexander's imperfect tactics set him up for a massive battle in the future that he likely could have completely avoided. As Peter Green says, "so long as Darius himself remained at large, there was no question of the war being over."<sup>9</sup>

Alexander's initial actions at the Persian Gates also reveal less-than-perfect battlefield tactics. In late 329 B.C.E. Alexander was making his way to the ancient Persian capital of Persepolis. To get there, he had to go through a mountain pass known as the "Persian gates."<sup>10</sup> According to second century AD historian Arrian, the Persian satrap of the region (Ariobarzanes) had already taken up fortified defensive positions to counter Alexander's potential assault. However, Alexander decided to attack the fortifications in a direct frontal assault. As Arrian explains, the attack "proved a hard task, as the enemy were in a commanding position," the Macedonians "suffered severely from missiles hurled or catapulted from above, and Alexander was compelled to make a temporary withdrawal to his original position" (Arr. 3.18). Simply put, Alexander charged recklessly into a frontal assault on a heavily fortified position. Alexander suffered decisive defeat in the attack, so much so that he was actually forced to leave his dead behind on the field of battle, a burden that was "an unthinkable situation for him and his army." Alexander would eventually lead a force around the

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<sup>6</sup> Ian Worthington, *Alexander The Great: Man and God* (London: Person Education Limited, 2004), 97-98.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>8</sup> A.B. Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire: The reign of Alexander the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 62.

<sup>9</sup> Green, 129.

<sup>10</sup> Worthington, 146.

Persian defenses at night and surround and defeat his enemy.<sup>11</sup> However, much like at Issus, although Alexander would ultimately win the battle, his actions in parts of the battle reveal a leader prone to serious tactical blunders. Alexander was capable of good strategic decisions, for it would be impossible for a commander to accomplish the feats he did on the field of battle purely on good fortune alone. However, these examples of poor decisions clearly show that Alexander was far from being completely impeccable and purely “great” on the battlefield. Instead, Alexander was capable of and did indeed commit several tactical blunders in his career, marring his seemingly impeccable military record as a battlefield commander.

We can clearly see that on the field of battle, Alexander committed several errors that call into question his reputation as “the great.” However, what about Alexander’s larger sense of strategy? Did Alexander always make the right strategic move in terms of the “bigger picture” in his campaigns? Looking at three specific examples, we can see that Alexander made several very crucial mistakes that hindered his campaign and call into question his commonly believed “master strategist” status. The first of these examples is Alexander’s unsound besieging of the Phoenician city of Tyre. Following the battle of Issus, Alexander made his way down the Mediterranean coast, eventually coming to the Phoenician city of Tyre. At first, it seemed Alexander would win the Phoenicians over with simple diplomacy (a tactic he had used many times before, often with much success). Even Arrian states that “In general, they (the Phoenicians) were willing enough to accede to Alexander’s wishes” (Arr. 2.17). Still, there was one demand that the city would not grant. Alexander had a strong desire to sacrifice at Tyre’s temple to Melqart, whom he (and all Greeks/Macedonians) believed to be Heracles. However, due to the Tyrian’s belief that such an act would be sacrilegious, the delegation they sent to Alexander refused this particular request, and instead proposed an alliance only on condition that he sacrifice at a different temple. Not surprisingly, Alexander found such an answer unsatisfactory. He then laid siege to the city, eventually conquering it after seven months of hard fighting (it would be the longest siege of Alexander’s career).<sup>12</sup> Alexander displayed very capable and excellent skills in the art of siege craft in terms of taking the island city; such an assertion cannot be realistically challenged.

However, the very besieging of the city itself shows Alexander acting as a flawed military commander who failed to see the bigger strategic picture. The city had been willing to enter into an alliance with Alexander—but only on condition that he honor their religiously based request. Therefore, Alexander’s taking of the city was not really a matter of strategic necessity, for he could have secured the city’s allegiance by simply agreeing to sacrifice at a different temple. Instead, he decided to waste the men and money necessary for the siege by taking a city he could have simply won with words and a minor concession. Classics scholar A.B. Bosworth sums up the shortsightedness well simply saying, “Strategically, this [The Siege of Tyre] was unnecessary.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, historian Ian Worthington adds, “for him [Alexander] the more important reason was personal.”<sup>14</sup> Not only was this personal stubbornness damaging in terms of men and money lost, it was even more damaging in terms of time. This siege occurred shortly after Darius had lost to Alexander at Issus. During this time, Darius was regrouping and rebuilding his army to face Alexander again on the field of battle. As Green says, the prolonged siege at Tyre gave Darius seven months to “mobilize a new army.”<sup>15</sup> A general who recognized the bigger strategic picture would likely have realized that spending six months besieging what was essentially an already subdued (or at least neutralized) city while their main enemy was rebuilding would be a fool’s endeavor. However,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 146-147.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 105-106.

<sup>13</sup> Bosworth, 65.

<sup>14</sup> Worthington, 106.

<sup>15</sup> Green, 135.

Alexander clearly acted without taking the bigger strategic picture into account, instead acting for the sake of his pride and vanity, an action that can hardly be ascribed to one of histories supposed “great generals.” Ian Worthington sums up Alexander’s actions at Tyre well: “it would have been the mark of a wise and diplomatic king to retract his demand to sacrifice in the Tyrian temple, but reason gave way to emotion.”<sup>16</sup>

Alexander’s besieging the city of Tyre shows a critical failure on his part to act as the “master strategist” that is often attributed to him due to his moniker. Another such example, for nearly identical reasons, would be Alexander’s sojourn deep into Egypt. Shortly after conquering Tyre, Alexander moved down the coast and eventually proceeded to Egypt, where he “liberated” the native Egyptians from Persian control. Then, he proceeded to the oracle of Siwah.<sup>17</sup> This oracle was a highly revered religious site for ancient Greeks, who believed that the “Libyan Ammon was a local manifestation of Zeus.”<sup>18</sup> Alexander did not go to Siwah for any sort of strategic reason, rather, he went purely on his own desire to go there and speak to the oracle. Arrian describes how Alexander “suddenly found himself passionately eager to visit the shrine of Ammon in Libya.” He also further describes how Alexander’s main goal in going was to ask about his descent: if he was the son of the god himself (Arr. 3.3). Similarly, Curtius describes how Alexander was “dissatisfied with elevation on the mortal level” and desired to visit the oracle to firmly establish and legitimize his claims to divine ancestry (Curt. 4.7.8). It is clear that Alexander had no strategic reasoning for going to Siwah and did not attempt to disguise his ambitions in a “tactical guise.” As Worthington concludes, “Alexander then, really longed to go to Siwah for his own reasons, not because the Macedonian army needed to go there.”<sup>19</sup>

This action was clearly unsound in terms of the bigger strategic picture. This is not to say that the act of conquering Egypt itself was not necessary. As J.F.C. Fuller says, there can be no doubt that in order to challenge Darius, Alexander had to secure his rear and make certain that he would not face Persian resistance while he shifted his focus to defeating his main enemy.<sup>20</sup> However, having already secured Egypt, Alexander had no sound strategic reasons to go to Siwah, which required an extensive journey through difficult terrain. Instead, as established above, Alexander undertook his pilgrimage for completely personal reasons, simply ignoring the fact that this allowed for his main enemy Darius to grow stronger and gather more troops. Clearly, Alexander’s personal quest to establish his own divinity hardly counts as an instance of “great” generalship. Again, much as in his besieging of the already subdued city of Tyre, we see Alexander acting not as a master strategist, but as a commander who either failed to see or simply ignored the far more sound strategic options available to him.

It has become clear up to this point that Alexander—in terms of both battlefield tactics and his overall command of the strategic “big picture”—was far from perfect. In fact, he made several battlefield blunders at Issus and the Persian Gates that, if not for great luck, would likely have cost Alexander his empire and his legacy. Furthermore, at both Tyre and Siwah, we see that Alexander often placed his own personal pride over far more sound strategic decisions, a mode of thinking that we would hardly attribute to a “great general.”

These critiques cast a great shadow upon Alexander’s often lauded military record, which is for many the main reason why he has earned the moniker in the first place. However, if we look outside of a purely military context, can we find more examples of Alexander acting in a “non-great” way? Specifically, did Alexander have a personality and personal ruling style that we would

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<sup>16</sup> Worthington, 106-107.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 116.

<sup>18</sup> Bosworth, 71.

<sup>19</sup> Worthington, 117.

<sup>20</sup> Fuller, 107.

characterize as “great?” The answer is no. Several events and episodes show that he often proved to be a tyrannical, paranoid, and downright cruel ruler of men.

The first of these events which proves this point correct is the “Philotas affair.” The basic narrative of the “Philotas affair” was as follows: After Alexander arrived at Phrada, some of his soldiers hatched a conspiracy to murder Alexander. The conspirators asked a certain Cebalinus to join, however, Cebalinus refused. Due to his low place in the Macedonian army’s hierarchy, Cebalinus did not have access to Alexander directly, and asking for such access would likely have tipped off the conspirators to his plans to warn Alexander. Therefore, instead of seeking out Alexander directly, he decided to attempt to indirectly inform Alexander of the conspiracy through his general Philotas. However, upon hearing of this conspiracy, Philotas decided not to warn Alexander about it. Several days later, when Alexander was warned of the conspiracy directly by Cebalinus (who was smuggled into his chambers by a royal page) Alexander was furious at Philotas. He had him tried for treason before the assembly of Makedones, and subsequently executed (he also sent assassins to execute his father Parmenion, a traditional custom following ones conviction of treason in Macedonia). Upon a cursory explanation of the events, it may be one’s gut instinct to declare that Philotas was indeed guilty of treason and part of the conspiracy (as Alexander claimed).<sup>21</sup> Certainly Arrian vehemently proclaims Philotas’ guilt. Arrian describes how at the trial those who testified brought forward “irrefutable proofs of his own [Philotas’] guilt” (Arr. 3.26). However, Plutarch’s account of the affair is much less incriminating of Philotas. Essentially, Plutarch contended that Philotas was not likely directly involved in the conspiracy. Instead, he was a victim of his own success and arrogance, for he “displayed an arrogance” that made him many enemies at Alexander’s court. Plutarch holds that it was these courtier enemies who convinced Alexander that Philotas was a part of the conspiracy (even though they lacked direct evidence) and convinced him to execute him and his father (Plut. Alex. 49). With ancient sources divided on the subject of Philotas’ guilt, how can one determine which side was correct?

Logic and reason would lead us to believe that although it is obviously impossible to prove for a fact, it is far more likely that Philotas was innocent of any direct involvement in the conspiracy (as Alexander claimed). If he had been involved, then why would he have allowed Cebalinus to live and keep trying to contact Alexander after revealing to him that he was trying to warn Alexander of the conspiracy? If he was directly involved, then such an action makes no sense, for Philotas must have known that upon discovery of the plot, Alexander would have had all of the conspirators executed. This simple conclusion makes it difficult to fathom that Philotas was guilty of direct involvement in the conspiracy, and it is far more likely that he did not bring news of the plot to Alexander because he did not deem the threat credible. Therefore, it is far more likely that Philotas was guilty of foolishness, rather than treachery and conspiracy.<sup>22</sup> Scholars Waldemar Heckel and J.C. Yardley make this argument when describing the odds of Philotas “actually conspiring against the king is unlikely, and the evidence shows only that he was guilty of negligence.”<sup>23</sup>

With Philotas’ highly probable innocence established, the question arises, why did Alexander act the way he did, and what are the takeaways in terms of better understanding Alexander’s character? Alexander clearly used the conspiracy as a pretext to oust two members of his entourage who had criticized his policies. As Worthington concludes, Philotas had “expressed concern about Alexander’s continued progress and non-Macedonian practices.” His father Parmenion had also been a member of the “old guard” under Alexander’s father, and he was also critical of Alexander’s “oriental” changes.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Green says that Philotas’ “worst fault seems to have been his

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<sup>21</sup> Worthington, 164-165.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 166.

<sup>23</sup> Waldemar Heckel and J.C. Yardley, *Alexander the Great: Historical Texts in Translation* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 227.

<sup>24</sup> Worthington, 167.

outspoken bluntness” in regards to Alexander’s policies.<sup>25</sup> Simply put, Alexander used a false pretext (the assassination conspiracy) to “legitimately” oust both Philotas and Parmenion in a single blow. Even Philotas’ trial was “stage-managed” by Alexander, who filled the ranks of the troops at the trial (who acted as a de-facto jury) with phalanx soldiers, and made sure that cavalry soldiers (whom Philotas commanded) were an extreme minority.<sup>26</sup> In terms of how this “affair” reflects on Alexander’s character, Worthington put it best: the event marks a “gross example of his [Alexander’s] ruthless and growing paranoia.”<sup>27</sup> Alexander executed Philotas and his father even though there existed no direct evidence of his involvement in the conspiracy, and as we have discussed (and as Alexander almost certainly must have known himself) even the indirect evidence would most certainly lead anyone to doubt his involvement in the conspiracy. Instead, Alexander acted not as a wise or great monarch, but rather as a paranoid and tyrannical ruler who used false pretexts to relieve himself of two officers who had been on occasion critical of some of his policies. As Peter Green says, Alexander had Philotas “liquidated on trumped-up evidence which, incidentally, also implicated Parmenion.”<sup>28</sup> In conclusion, Worthington offers an appropriate coda: “Alexander must be condemned for how and why he acted against Parmenion and Philotas.”<sup>29</sup>

Certainly, the “Philotas affair” allows us a clear straightforward example of Alexander acting as an immoral and tyrannical ruler. Another episode illustrating the ugly side of Alexander is the event known as the pages conspiracy. Essentially, while Alexander campaigned in Bactria, a conspiracy developed among his royal pages to murder Alexander after he punished one of the pages for killing a boar he desired for himself during a hunt. Due to the fact that the royal pages had a great deal of personal access to the monarch, the conspiracy was a serious threat. However, on the night of the planned assassination, Alexander stayed out at a drinking party rather than returning to his bed, thereby inadvertently foiling the plot. When Alexander discovered the plot, he immediately arrested the pages in question and had them executed. He also arrested the man who was responsible for the pages’ education, the court historian Callisthenes, even though some of the sources state that the pages did not name him as the conspirator.<sup>30</sup> This begs the question, if he was not named as a conspirator or as the leader of the conspiracy, then why was he implicated and put to death?

The answer lies in his vocal opposition to Alexander, specifically regarding Alexander’s attempt to enforce the process of *proskynesis* upon his Macedonian court. This practice (which essentially entailed bowing to a ruler) was a common habit in Persian custom and some of Alexander’s Persian subjects already used this custom towards Alexander. However, in the belief system of Alexander’s Macedonian and Greek subjects, such an action was to be reserved for the gods, and therefore performing this action toward a living ruler was considered sacrilegious. Alexander had to have been aware of this belief among his men, so his attempt to install this practice must clearly be seen as an attempt to be worshiped as a living god by his Macedonian and Greek subjects. It should come as no surprise that this move generated a great deal of opposition among his men. The most vehement and vocal opposition came from Alexander’s court historian Callisthenes, and many of the ancient sources directly attribute Callisthenes’ downfall to his opposition of Alexander’s desire to be worshiped as a god.<sup>31</sup> As Plutarch concluded “he [Callisthenes] alone listed openly the objections secretly harbored by all the best and oldest of the

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<sup>25</sup> Green, 187.

<sup>26</sup> Bosworth, 102-103.

<sup>27</sup> Worthington, 187.

<sup>28</sup> Green, 187-188.

<sup>29</sup> Worthington, 169.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 192-194.

<sup>31</sup> Heckel and Yardley, 178.

Macedonians” and that by opposing Alexander’s *proskynesis* so vocally Callisthenes had “precipitated his own destruction” (Plut. Alex. 54). Similarly, Curtius determined in his account of the “proskynesis affair” that although the men heralded Callisthenes as the “champion of public freedom” Alexander was greatly angered by this opposition, and that his “resentment was more persistent” (Curt. 8.6.6). Not surprisingly, the ancient historian Justin agreed that Callisthenes was the “most outspoken of the objectors” to Alexander’s proskynesis policy, and that his opposition directly resulted in his execution “ostensibly for treason” (Justin 12.7.1).

Clearly, Callisthenes was a vehement opponent of Alexander’s policies regarding proskynesis. However, what is even more telling is that all of these ancient historians do not name the pages conspiracy as being the main cause of Callisthenes’ downfall. Instead, they all point to Callisthenes vocal opposition as being the main factor that brought about Alexander’s wrath. Therefore, it is safe to say that Alexander merely used the pages conspiracy as a pretext to attack Callisthenes, behavior that should not seem unfamiliar to us after reviewing how he used a similar tactic of false pretexts to remove Philotas and Parmenion. Worthington sums the affair up well: “Whether Callisthenes was implicated in the plot was immaterial. The moment he resisted the king’s will he was a dead man.”<sup>32</sup> A review of the primary sources confirms this quote to be true. Callisthenes opposed Alexander’s policies, and, in the same fashion as the “Philotas affair,” Alexander was willing to use false pretexts to remove an opposition figure. Again, we see in Alexander not a benevolent or wise kingship, but a paranoia and tyrannical streak that clearly puts a black stain on Alexander’s personality. Alexander would not tolerate opposition, no matter how fair or peaceable it was, and he was willing to use any means necessary (including fabrication and false pretexts) to enforce his often tyrannical rule.

The “Philotas affair” and the pages conspiracy clearly show Alexander acting as a tyrant, crushing any sort of opposition from any one around him by any means necessary. Another famous example illustrates this even further, showing that Alexander could not bear criticism to any extent, even from a man who had saved his life. This brings us to the infamous dinner party which resulted in the death of Cleitus the Black. While Alexander was in the city of Maracanda he and his companions undertook a thanksgiving sacrifice which, like many sacrifices before it, turned into a drinking party. At some point, some began to praise Alexander at the expense of his father Philip, declaring Alexander’s achievements to be far greater than those of his father.<sup>33</sup> As Arrian says, many courtiers began to say that in comparison to the deeds of Alexander, what Philip had done was simply “ordinary and commonplace.” Cleitus, a member of the old guard who had served under Philip, did not take kindly to this, and he began to “magnify Philips achievements and belittle Alexander’s” (Arr. 4.8). Needless to say, Alexander did not take kindly to this criticism of his achievements. Accounts differ on exactly how the next few moments played out. However, in all accounts, the argument escalated to the point where Alexander became blinded in drunken rage and, as Plutarch says “seized a spear from one of his guards, faced Cleitus as he was drawing aside the curtain of the doorway, and ran him through” (Plut. Alex. 51).

It would be unfair to Alexander to not mention that he was reportedly immediately remorseful for killing Cleitus. In fact, Plutarch stated that Alexander would have taken the spear he used on Cleitus and “plunged it into his own throat if the guards had not forestalled him” (Plut. Alex. 51). Alexander is said to have supposedly shut himself up in his private room for three days as a sign of his remorse. However, there are doubts as to how much of this was actually genuine sorrow. Green argues that although initially filled with sorrow, Alexander’s grief “began to merge

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<sup>32</sup> Worthington, 195-195.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 184.



into calculated play-acting.”<sup>34</sup> Regardless, even if we are to disregard this potential “play-acting” and accept that Alexander was truly remorseful for his actions, Alexander’s supposed remorse and subsequent grief cannot truly pardon him for the murder of an unarmed man who had not threatened him with physical violence, but rather voiced vocal (albeit very boisterous) opposition to Alexander’s flatterers. Even the ancient historians who discuss the affair recognized this. Arrian wrote that the event showed Alexander as a “slave of anger and drunkenness” (Arr. 4.9). Similarly, Curtius described how Alexander had not only killed a man who had saved his life, but had “assumed the abominable role of executioner” (Curt. 8.2.2).

Obviously, Cleitus did indeed go too far in his confrontation with Alexander, and he should have known better than to be so vocal in his criticisms and directly challenge Alexander in the way he did. However, Alexander is obviously more at fault for his extreme response to this criticism. The only potential excuse one could claim for Alexander’s actions is his drunkenness, however, most would hardly pardon a drunk man or woman for committing a murder, robbery, or arson. Alexander, as a monarch, failed to act as a much wiser king would have done. Instead of recognizing the situation and attempting to deflate it, Alexander responded with the most extreme form of violence. Again, we hardly see Alexander’s personal behavior as being that of a “great” king. Instead, he appears a paranoid, drunken, tyrannical ruler, who could not handle criticism or nonviolent opposition—traits which appear in Alexander’s life with such consistency that we must seriously call into question any claims to greatness made for Alexander’s legacy in terms of his personality or kingship.

All in all, this project cannot claim to be a complete damnation of Alexander. His achievements are truly incredible, and the fact that he accomplished them in the brevity of a few years as king is a testament to one of history’s most significant and accomplished monarchs. However, this paper seeks to “humanize” the legendary legacy of Alexander. By looking at some of his tactical decisions on the battlefield at Issus and the Persian Gates, we see that although he won many battles, he was not an infallible battlefield commander. If not for extreme luck, his career as a conqueror would likely have been cut short dramatically. Similarly, when looking at his overall awareness of “big picture strategy” (by analyzing his decision to besiege Tyre and travel to Siwah), we see that Alexander placed his pride and self-obsession over far more sound strategic decisions, allowing Darius to grow much stronger instead of pressing the advantage when he had it. Again, Alexander conquered such a vast amount of territory that to say he was not a good general would be ludicrous. However, Alexander clearly did make several mistakes in terms of both battlefield tactics and overall “big picture strategy.” These mistakes make us question in part Alexander’s overly lauded military record, and force us to recognize that he was not an infallible general, but rather a good general who was prone to make serious errors on occasion. Similarly, by analyzing Alexander’s personality, we see that Alexander exhibited characteristics few would associate with a “great” king. By using false pretexts to remove Philotas and Parmenion during the “Philotas Affair” and Callisthenes during the Pages Conspiracy, we see Alexander acting as a tyrant willing to use false pretexts to remove those who had expressed vocal opposition to his policies. In his murder of Cleitus the Black, we see Alexander as a self-obsessed drunkard who could not handle criticism on any level. Certainly, these traits are not the mark of a “great” kingly personality, but rather someone who was all but human, with a tendency towards paranoia, self-obsession, and tyranny.

In conclusion, Alexander will remain one of history’s most famous and influential leaders in perpetuity. However, Alexander is not deserving of the moniker “the great.” Rather, he should be recognized for the ruler he truly was. A battlefield general who, albeit successful, was far from perfect and displayed a disturbing tendency to put his personal pride and goals over that of more

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<sup>34</sup> Green, 199.

sound strategic decision. In terms of his personality, it is hard to argue that “the great” can be applied to Alexander here. He may not be one of history’s most evil or psychotic rulers, but he was indeed paranoid and prone to treat those who opposed him with outright tyranny and oppression. Alexander deserves to be studied, analyzed, and discussed as one of history’s more influential rulers. However, he does not deserve to be called “the great,” for such a moniker distorts the truth surrounding the man himself.