
Alexander the Not So Great

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“It is perhaps Ptolemy who first coined the title ‘Great’ to describe Alexander, an epithet that has stayed with him to this day.”¹ Whether or not this is true, somewhere along the way Alexander inherited the title “Great,” but is it one that he deserves? Alexander is responsible for expanding Macedonian territory significantly and it is something that he could not have accomplished alone. Since the backing of the army was crucial, why did some of Alexander’s generals not live past the life of Alexander? Although some of the generals and other army personnel inevitably died while in battle, others did not receive such a glorified death. Under Alexander’s rule numerous people in his army were murdered or died under suspicious circumstances. The death witnessed while Alexander ruled did not end there, because the army as a whole often suffered due to poor decision making on Alexander’s part. Whether direct or indirect Alexander ordered or caused the deaths of many because of anger, suspicion, or by poor choices. Alexander does not deserve the title “Great,” because of the deliberate killing under his command of both individuals and his army.

Before embarking on the journey of tearing down Alexander’s title, it is important to understand the transition from Philip II to Alexander. Before Alexander inherited the throne, his father Philip ruled for twenty-four years until his assassination.² During a festival Phillip was murdered by Pausanias, who after stabbing the king attempted an escape to waiting horses. Ultimately, Pausanias was chased down and quickly brought to justice.³ Philip died of his wounds; the legacy he had established was one of the greatest kingdoms in the Greek world which he accomplished through diplomatic and military means. A young Alexander took the reins and attempted to continue what his father had started.⁴ What is suspicious about the rise of Alexander is the waiting horses for Pausanias, so the possibility for a conspiracy is there. However, it has never been proven whether Alexander knew of such plot or not.⁵ If one were to look at Justin, then the thought of a conspiracy is not out of reach. Alexander’s mother, Olympias, had Pausanias under her thumb and Alexander himself knew of the plot.⁶ If Alexander knew of such a plot why did he not stop it? The historian Nicholas Geoffrey Lemprière (N.G.L) Hammond also summarizes the events surrounding the death of Philip and Olympias’s involvement drawing further on Justin 9.7.10-11. Olympias is the one that placed the awaiting horses for Pausanias to make a quick getaway. After the death of Philip, Olympias is said to have run to the funeral of Philip. Not only did Olympias run to Philip’s funeral, but she also crowned the assassin’s corpse and held an annual sacrifice in honor of the assassin. Once Philip was gone Olympias compelled Cleopatra to hang herself for breaking apart the marriage of Philip and Olympias thus completing her revenge against Philip and Cleopatra.

¹ Ian Worthington, *Alexander the Great: Man and God* (Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2004), 271-1.

² Diod. 16.95.1

³ Diod. 16.94.1-4.

⁴ Diod. 16.95.1-5.

⁵ Worthington, *Alexander the Great*, 29.

⁶ Just. 9.7.1.

Although Hammond dismisses this as historically inaccurate it begs the question if any part of Justin's account could be true, however unlikely.⁷ If the conspiracy were true then from the very start of his reign there was a dark cloud accumulating around Alexander and it would only continue to grow. Justin makes a valid argument because Alexander's campaign saw numerous conspiracies in Asia, so why not in the Greek world?

Since Alexander had established himself as the new King of Macedonia, the next step he took was to ensure his kingship. One of Alexander's first victims was Attalus, a general in his army. Once Alexander came to power the thought of revolt had crossed Attalus's mind, but he quickly reversed that thought and attempted to pledge allegiance to Alexander. Alexander would have none of that and quickly had Attalus put to death.⁸ Was the killing of Attalus justified? Before Alexander had come to power around the time Philip married Cleopatra, there was a disagreement between Alexander and Attalus. At the wedding banquet of Philip, drink was flowing, which ended in harsh words between Attalus and Alexander. Philip ended up pulling his sword on Alexander.⁹ The historian N.G.L Hammond also makes note of the disagreement between Attalus and Alexander drawing upon Justin 9.7.1-8 and 9.7.9-14. Similar but slightly different to the previously mentioned Plutarch account. Attalus and Alexander got into an argument at a wedding banquet when Philip stepped in and pulled his sword on Alexander. Philip began to chase Alexander around with his sword only to be persuaded with difficulty by friends watching the unfolding events.¹⁰ Philip chasing Alexander with his sword is far more violent than Philip just drawing his sword on Alexander.

Philip was protecting the honor of his general Attalus, but had that left Alexander with some deep-seated hatred towards Attalus? If so, then Alexander would have used any number of reasons to get back at Attalus. Also, Alexander had one of his best generals killed, which the importance of well commanded troops in the upcoming invasion of Asia would have been crucial. Personal feelings aside, Alexander's decision making process was second-rate at best. Another reason Alexander had Attalus killed may have been due to growing paranoia, which grew as Alexander pushed on into Asia.¹¹ Attalus may have been one of the first in Alexander's army to be executed, but he sure would not be the last.

As Alexander pressed on into his Asia campaign the next unfortunate persons to get in the crosshairs of Alexander were Philotas and Parmenio. Arrian and the court historian view of the incident starts with Philotas on trial. Philotas had been made aware of a plot against Alexander's life and said nothing to the king even though Philotas visited the king's tent two times a day. Philotas was quickly dealt with, but was not the only one affected. Parmenio, who was Philotas's father, was also sought out and put to death. Alexander believed he too shared in the conspiracy.¹² On the other hand the vulgate tradition states that Philotas knew of the plot and did not inform Alexander of it, so his guilt laid in his silence of not reporting such a crime.¹³ However, the vulgate also expresses that Dimnus, who was involved in the plot, did not speak of Philotas's involvement in the plot.¹⁴ Furthermore, Nicomachus, Metron and Cebalinus, who knew of the plot against the king and how the situation unfolded, never mentioned Philotas as a coconspirator.¹⁵

⁷ N.G.L. Hammond, *Three Historians of Alexander the Great: the so-Called Vulgate Authors, Diodorus, Justin and Curtius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 89.

⁸ Diod. 14.5.1-2.

⁹ Plut. *Alex.* 9.

¹⁰ Hammond, *Three Historians of Alexander the Great*, 89.

¹¹ John D. Grainger, *Alexander the Great Failure: The Collapse of the Macedonian Empire* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007), 68.

¹² Arr. 3.26-27.

¹³ Curt. 6.9.10-11.

¹⁴ Curt. 6.9.16.

¹⁵ Curt. 6.9.7.

From information above it would seem that Philotas was not involved in the conspiracy, but did fail to report such a plot to Alexander.

The complete lapse in judgement of Alexander, especially in the killing of Parmenio, only furthers the argument for Alexander to not maintain the title “Great.” After taking the Persian capital of Persepolis, and while Alexander was continuing his pursuit of Darius after Persepolis, Parmenio had the task of making sure the vast amounts of wealth. Around 180,000 talents of gold and silver, had to arrive safely to Ecbatana. On Alexander’s orders, Parmenio took a contingent of troops and made sure the deed was accomplished.¹⁶ Within a fairly short time period Parmenio would be executed, which begs the question why? How could Alexander have someone he trusted with transporting the 180,000 talents have executed? The reason why the execution of Parmenio is baffling is the cargo that Parmenio was protecting. If Parmenio was dead set on taking the throne from Alexander, he could have accomplished it by other means. Parmenio could have used the 180,000 talents that he was protecting and paid mercenaries to fight with him, who would have dwarfed any army Alexander held. Other historians even go as far as attributing the Philotas affair as an aim to assassinate Parmenio, so Philotas just happened to be in the way.¹⁷ This would flip the conspiracy against Philotas on its head. The conspiracy would not have originated in the depths of the army, but rather at the top with Alexander himself leading the charge.

Another reason why the killing of Philotas and Parmenio was not a wise decision is because of their military experience. Philotas was the commander of the Companion Cavalry, which meant he was a valuable military asset to Alexander. Parmenio was a general in Alexander’s army and he too was crucial to Alexander’s campaign in Asia. Why would a supposed “Great” man kill his army commanders while in the depths of a campaign?¹⁸ As Alexander was drawn deeper into Asia, wouldn’t he have needed well-trained commanders? Alexander had made something great all right, a great error.

The next victim of Alexander’s rage, Cleitus the Black, was also in Alexander’s army. The demise of Cleitus began with a banquet that was held where of course much drink was flowing. The night wore on when Alexander boasted that Philip’s victories were because of him, which left the Old Guard uneasy.¹⁹ Cleitus did not stand by idly and voiced his opinion about the king, while not being the soberest himself.²⁰ The short fuse known as Alexander was not one to take criticism. So he grabbed a spear and thrust it into Cleitus, killing him.²¹ Alexander had killed one of his commanders in a fit of rage.

Cleitus had spoken out because he believed that the army as a whole should take credit for victories thus far, not just Alexander. Cleitus was enraged even further when Alexander ordered a Greek singer to entertain his army, while specifically targeting some commanders, such as Cleitus. After Cleitus continued to speak openly, Alexander could not take the insults any longer, grabbed a spear and struck Cleitus dead. Cleitus had been killed for openly expressing criticism against the king.²² This view on the events that unfolded seems to point towards Alexander intentionally setting the scene for dissenters. If this interpretation were true, then the paranoia that Alexander is exhibiting by this stage is quite noticeable. Paranoia however seems to be a common theme. Previously mentioned in the interpretation of the events surrounding Philotas and Parmenio, some historians have been led to believe that the real target was Parmenio. Ernst Badian is not alone in

¹⁶ Worthington, *Alexander the Great*, 151-2.

¹⁷ Ernst Badian, “Conspiracies,” in *Alexander the Great in Fact and Fiction*, ed. A. B. Bosworth and E. J. Bayham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 69.

¹⁸ Worthington, *Alexander the Great*, 169-70.

¹⁹ Curt. 8.1.22-3.

²⁰ Curt. 8.1.28-9.

²¹ Curt. 8.1.52.

²² Peter Green, *Alexander the Great* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 198-9.

this interpretation, because Peter Green also attributes Philotas's demise to fabricated charges.²³ If both the Philotas and Cleitus views on Alexander are true then Alexander is paranoid at the highest level if not borderline delusional and the title "Great" need not apply.

Although Cleitus had spoken out against the king, Alexander had let his emotions get the best of him. Cleitus was not the enemy. In fact, it is Alexander who owes his life to Cleitus. At the Battle of Granicus River, Alexander was moments away from being slain, when Cleitus cut the hand of the enemy off. Cleitus had proven his loyalty to Alexander and also under Philip where he had demonstrated himself in battle numerous times.²⁴ Why kill such a loyal soldier and excellent commander? Alexander was not his father; Philip controlled his anger while Alexander had a short fuse and once started could not be stopped. Both were very fond of having a good time at banquets or festivals, while sometimes consuming too much drink it often led to outburst of anger. Philip focused his anger on the enemy, but Alexander turned his anger on his own men.²⁵ An intoxicated Alexander let his emotions get the best of him, which cost him a respectable commander.

Another notable person that witnessed the wrath of Alexander was Callisthenes. The events that led up to Callisthenes execution begin with prostration. Alexander adopted a Persian custom of prostration, which was not done by the Greeks; Anaxarchus encouraged prostration however. Alexander believed that he deserved such praise, but the Greeks believed it was blurring the line between man and god. One night when Alexander was talking to Hephaestion, Callisthenes did not perform the prostration and went unnoticed by the king until Demetrius spoke up of the disgrace. Although Callisthenes may not have had the finest manners, Alexander's growing arrogance was clearly shown.²⁶ The historian Arrian even believes that Alexander should not have lashed out in anger as he did. Alexander remembered this moment in time and that is why he was quick to believe Callisthenes involvement in the royal pages plot.²⁷ If Arrian is correct in Alexander believing Callisthenes should have performed prostration, because Alexander believed he was a god, then he was completely delusional. Callisthenes like many of the other Greeks would most likely have not responded well to such a custom, but keeping quiet meant keeping your life. Unfortunately for Callisthenes he was not willing to bend his will to such madness and it cost him dearly.

The prostration issue is in the backdrop of the pages plot against Alexander. The young bodyguards that were supposed to be protecting the king hatched an idea to take his life. The plan for the bodyguards were to kill Alexander while he was sleeping, luckily for him a woman told Alexander to stay up and drink the night away, which he obliged. Thus, Alexander's drinking problems saved his life and foiled the plot of the royal pages. The royal pages were quickly rounded up, tortured and confessed there were others involved. The boys mentioned Callisthenes was involved, but the truth behind that accusation is shaky at best. Alexander was willing to accept Callisthenes involvement whether he actually was or not because of his dislike of Callisthenes from the prostration incident. All of the parties there were involved were put to death.²⁸

The death of Callisthenes is unfortunate, but it is also not surprising because Alexander secured the death of Philotas, Parmenio, and Cleitus. So it is clear that Callisthenes never had a chance of escape. Alexander knew how to play on other people's emotions and set the scene for Callisthenes to fall into his trap. He accomplished this by allowing Callisthenes to orate about the greatness of the Macedonia then asked him to counter his own argument on how Macedonia was not great, which he did. Macedonians that heard the oration did not enjoy Callisthenes bad

²³ Ibid, 187. See also Badian, "Conspiracies," in *Alexander the Great in Fact and Fiction*, ed. A. B. Bosworth and E. J. Bayaham, 69.

²⁴ Curt. 8.1.20.

²⁵ Just. 9.8.14-15.

²⁶ Arr. 4.11-13.

²⁷ Arr. 4.13.

²⁸ Arr. 4.14.

mouthed the Macedonian state.²⁹ Another historian by the name of Lionel Pearson also mentions Callisthenes' thoughtlessness drawing on Plutarch *Alex.* 54. Callisthenes was evidently not liked by Macedonian officers and his oration of Macedonia would not have improved those relations. Callisthenes' brilliant oration regarding Macedonian greatness was challenged by Alexander by him taking the opposite side and detest Macedonia, which he did. This was proof that Callisthenes held anti Macedonia feelings. Callisthenes may have thought he was showing his skill as a great orator when in reality Alexander found his own court was filled with anti-Macedonian sentiments, such as Callisthenes.³⁰ Alexander could then use the right occasion to rid Callisthenes of his court and he did just so.

Another death that occurred under Alexander was Coenus and the suspicious circumstances surrounding his death. Tensions between Alexander and Coenus arose at the Hyphasis River. Coenus spoke on behalf of the common soldiers, who had journeyed with Alexander to the ends of the earth. The soldiers had been through numerous battles, had fought off sickness and had stood by Alexander's side the entire time. The men yearned to see their homeland again, which they were thousands of miles away from. After Coenus delivered his speech the common soldiers were thrilled for the possible journey home. Alexander had no other choice but to turn around and cut his dream of further expansion eastward.³¹ Alexander must have felt some resentment towards Coenus, because the last one that spoke out against Alexander, Callisthenes, paid the price for doing so. Alexander withdrew to his tent and after a few days of weeping he emerged and admitted defeat. He turned his troops around due to "unfavorable omens" about continuing east.³²

Once the decision was made Alexander turned his army around, but Coenus did not live to see Macedonia again. Not long after the army had turned around Coenus fell ill and died.³³ The death of Coenus seemed very sudden and for Alexander not to stir up any suspicion he held a rather grand funeral for Coenus.³⁴ Coenus was a loyal commander and Alexander said he had earned a fine funeral.³⁵ The timing of Coenus's death seems rather suspicious. Coenus had travelled many a mile with Alexander and only after Coenus voiced his opinion and the army turned around he passed. As has been demonstrated, Alexander has run into those who could not hold their tongue, such as Cleitus and Callisthenes, both resulting in death. Although the theory that Coenus died from other than illness cannot be proven, it is still a note worth mentioning.

So far this paper has examined numerous individuals that were unfortunate enough to land on the wrong side of Alexander. Another aspect that affected more than an individual or two is the Gedrosia Desert incident. As Alexander and his men approached the Gedrosia Desert the horrors that lay ahead were ghastly, a journey of which would take sixty days. Whatever the men had withstood throughout Asia was no comparison to the hardships faced in Gedrosia. Alexander heard of previous notable figures, such as Semiramis and Cyrus, who attempted the crossing only to come out barely alive. Alexander was not one to be outshined, so across the desert Alexander went.³⁶ Alexander had the army following him as well as numerous women and children in tow. Along the way these women and children set camp near a stream, unknowing to them that heavy rain had fallen upstream. The heavy rainfall turned into a flash flood and travelled downstream engulfing most of the women and children.³⁷ Morale was low, and Alexander tried to encourage the men by

²⁹ Alexander attempted to discredit Callisthenes Philip Freeman, *Alexander the Great* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 264-5.

³⁰ Lionel Pearson, *The Lost Histories of Alexander the Great* (New York: American Philological Association, 1960), 24.

³¹ Arr. 5.26-28.

³² Arr. 5.29.

³³ Curt. 9.3.20.

³⁴ Badian, "Conspiracies," In *Alexander the Great in Fact and Fiction*, edited by A. B. Bosworth and E. J. Bayaham, 74.

³⁵ Arr. 6.2.

³⁶ Arr. 6.24.

³⁷ Arr. 6.26.

dumping water out of his helmets to appear strong and undaunted by the harshness of the desert.³⁸ Eventually Alexander was able to make it out of Gedrosia, but at an enormous cost.

When Alexander and his army came out on the other side of the desert only one quarter of the army remained. The blame lay entirely on Alexander's shoulders, because of his large ego. Alexander was not one to be outdone by anyone, hearing the stories of Semiramis and Cyrus's failure, led him to make that fateful decision.³⁹ Worthington seems to attribute the crossing of the Gedrosia Desert as a deliberate act relating to Alexander's ego, whereas Grainger is more cynical. The Gedrosia Desert was punishment for the army and their mutiny at the Hyphasis River. This puts Alexander in a much darker mindset rather than chalking it up to ego. Alexander wanted absolute power, which his supposed faithful army stabbed him in the back, or that's the way Alexander may have seen it. Alexander's frame of mind was one of paranoia, suspicion, and filled with anger.⁴⁰ Alexander has killed close friends for speaking out against him, so it is not out of the question for him to punish his army for the same.

However, not all sources describe the horrors of the Gedrosia Desert, such as Justin. The historian N.G.L. Hammond briefly mentions the Gedrosia Desert and draws upon Justin 12.10.1 and 12. 10.7. Justin does not elaborate on the crossing and the hardships that Alexander's men experienced. In fact, there seemed to be little difficulty in finding water after which Alexander returned to Babylonia. Justin had been so vocal on other aspects of Alexander, so why not here? Hammond believes it has to do with the sources that Justin utilized and that the sources Justin used made little of Gedrosia thus so did Justin.⁴¹ Alexander the Great is a notable individual in history, but is not deserving of his title of "Great." A prominent feature of Alexander's rule is the massive expansion of Macedonia's territory, however at what cost? As the territory under Alexander expanded so did his paranoia.

One of Alexander's first victims was the general Attalus, who was dealt with before Alexander set out for his Asia campaign. Attalus was one Alexander's first victims, but certainly not the last. Philotas and Parmenio, both high ranking commanders in Alexander's army were wrongly executed; even longtime friends were not safe under Alexander. Alexander often let his anger get the best of him and the influence of alcohol did not help the situation, such as in the case of Cleitus the Black. Cleitus spoke of Alexander's father Philip II and in a bit of rage Alexander killed Cleitus on the spot. Alexander seemed to be acting as a barbaric warrior rather than a noble king. Another individual who ended up on the wrong side of Alexander was Callisthenes. The court historian Callisthenes failed to perform the Persian custom of prostration, Alexander resented that and waited until the right opportunity presented itself to rid Callisthenes of the court and his life. The opportunity came in the form of the pages plot, which Alexander quickly had Callisthenes executed. One of the most suspicious deaths is that of Coenus. Coenus had spoken bluntly to the king telling him the men would go no further. Shortly after the army turned around Coenus died due to some sort of illness. Alexander had a common theme of ridding those who spoke out against him, so it would not be hard to believe that Alexander may have had a hand in Coenus's demise. Lastly, the Gedrosia Desert crossing led not individuals to their death, but tens of thousands. Crossing the Gedrosia was Alexander's response to the mutiny at the Hyphasis River. If Alexander could not achieve his goal of going to the ends of the Earth then his men needed to be punished for crushing his dream. One important factor to take into consideration is the sources writing of Alexander. No sources during the time of Alexander remain, so we will never truly know the real Alexander.

³⁸ Arr. 6.26.

³⁹ Worthington, *Alexander the Great*, 231.

⁴⁰ Grainger, *Alexander the Great Failure*, 84. See also Green, *Alexander the Great*, 239.

⁴¹ Hammond, *Three Historians of Alexander the Great*, 106.

However, from what has been gathered the picture painted of Alexander is not of a “Great,” but of an angry and paranoid king willing to kill however he saw fit.