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Sema Hasan

Riverdale High School

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Sema Hasan

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18 March, 2014

Alexander's Empire

As one of the greatest military leaders in history, Alexander the Great believed and exemplified the idea that “there is nothing impossible to him who will try” (Patrick). Alexander was confident, intelligent, and strategic, allowing him to conquer as much as he could in his life time, stopping only when he was advised by his soldiers. Until his death at the age of thirty-three, Alexander led his soldiers to victory and created one of the largest empires the world has ever known. While Alexander was able to create such a large empire, most do not consider those who influenced his conquests and ambitions, women. Alexander's use of marriage as a political tool contributed to his success as a conqueror and stabilizer.

Born in the ancient Macedonian capitol of Pella in 356 BCE, Alexander was the son of King Phillip II of Macedon and his wife Olympias. As a child, Alexander was taught by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, whose introduction of ancient Greek literature inspired Alexander's admiration of Achilles. Under Aristotle's tutelage, Alexander was taught “a noble life” and became eager to learn (Plutarch). After his father's death, Alexander inherited a powerful kingdom and then set out to conquer the Persian Empire. During his reign, Alexander achieved this goal by creating a unified empire that stretched from Greece to India as he lead his army through Asia Minor, Syria and Persia without defeat (“Alexander the Great”). The young king established over thirty-five cities, while simultaneously crowning himself Pharaoh of Egypt and becoming king of Persia at the age of twenty-five. Alexander is often perceived as a military

genius who led his army over eleven thousand miles and conquered over two million square miles (“Alexander the Great: 356-323 BC”). No mortal had ever accomplished such a feat, and even during his own lifetime, Alexander was venerated as a god.

While some aspects of Alexander’s historical persona have faded away, his legend continues to live on through the centuries. Perhaps the most famous legend recorded by Plutarch is that of Alexander’s birth. The legend states that on the night of her wedding, Olympias dreamt of a thunder bolt falling upon her womb and creating a fire “which broke into flames that traveled all about” (Plutarch). Considered to be a reincarnation of the Greek hero Achilles, this legend reinforces the idea that Alexander descended from gods. The use of lighting evokes images of one of the most powerful Greek gods, Zeus (Mossé). According to Plutarch, on the same night, Alexander’s father, Phillip, dreamed that he put a seal upon his wife’s womb bearing the figure of a lion, which had “long been a symbol of Heracles,” (or Hercules) son of Zeus (Mossé).

Centuries later in the medieval world, European Christian literature portrayed Alexander as an “ideal knight [and] an exemplary king” whose legend was exploited during the Crusades to serve as a political symbol of the West’s dominance over the East (Muller). Popular myth surrounding Alexander came to symbolize “heroic virtues” such as courage, clemency, generosity and chastity (Muller). From a western theological perspective, women act as “an index of Alexander’s morality” (Muller). In the twelfth century, women are given minor roles in Alexander’s legend. French author Gautier de Chatillion portrayed Alexander as a noble hero who exhibited self-restraint, chastity and loyalty to one wife. In contrast, Persian history depicts Alexander as a young and handsome polygamous character who was attracted to beautiful

women (Muller). In order to understand the greatness of Alexander's military conquests, however, one must examine the roles of royal women both before and during his reign.

History shows that most royal women were used as pawns in the power struggles of male rulers, but unlike Ancient Greece, women played a part in the political history of Macedonia. In the divided life of Athens, "women had little place" in the public world of politics (*Women and Monarchy* 3). Women could not achieve political rights, nor could they act without having connections to a male member of their family. The social ideal (particularly for the wealthy) was that women spend most of their time at home and indoors, creating less opportunity to mix socially ("Women, Children and Slaves"). While ancient Macedonia was not a society in which men and women had equal roles, the degree of inequality was not as extreme. Although no woman ever ruled in Macedonia, Professor Elizabeth Carney states that the "wives, daughters, and sisters" of kings were able to participate in the monarchy to some degree. Women like Alexander's mother Olympias, and his sisters, Cynnane, and Thessalonice are a few examples of powerful women who worked "behind the scenes." While women did not have much say in the political aspect of the kingdom, one must not assume that they did not have influence.

Sources suggest that when they attempted to exert their power, women were often criticized for being "manipulative" (*Women and Monarchy* 12). Such women include Alexander's mother, whose role in the death of King Phillip is often debated. Both ancient and modern scholars suggest that Olympias was behind the murder of her husband, an act considered by some to have been "more like that of a woman rather than a ruler" (*Women and Monarchy* 13). Although of royalty, Olympias fell under the same category as other women in the sense that she was considered to be of the weaker sex, and thus incapable of careful thought like a male ruler. While some consider Olympias' actions to have been "more like that of a woman" than a

ruler, Olympias is arguably one of the most influential women in Alexander's reign, without whom, he may not have been king. Unlike other women in his family, Olympias and Alexander established an incredibly powerful bond due, in part, to the polygamous lifestyle of the king.

In ancient Macedonia, many rulers including Alexander and his father used polygamy as a political tool. With the use of polygamy in monarchies, the likelihood of a king producing more sons increased compared to a monogamous king. Women in polygamous relationships focused primarily on producing an heir. In many cases, the impending need to produce an heir created a competitive atmosphere among wives, for they made it their intent to have their son crowned as heir. Polygamy meant that no woman had permanent status as mother of the "designated heir" (*Women and Monarchy* 25). Because having a son was the most important aspect of a woman's status, polygamy tended to create mother-son alliances. In Macedonian monarchy, mothers and sons were "natural alliances" while royal fathers and sons were "natural enemies" (*Women and Monarchy* 31). One such mother-son alliance was that of Alexander and his mother.

As his mother, Olympias was responsible for her son's survival and did all that she could to ensure that Alexander inherited his father's throne. As the first woman to help him, Olympias did not simply accept the disadvantages of polygamous monarchies. Instead, Olympias used the tools that she had to her advantage to guarantee her son's succession, and even hired someone to kill her husband and his other wives. In the cutthroat world of Macedonian politics, Olympias and Alexander had "more reason to trust the other than virtually anyone else" (*Women and Monarchy* 85). Furthermore, Olympias' role in subsequent deaths including King Phillip's suggests that she was willing to commit murder so see her son king.

Many ancient texts suggest that Alexander and his mother were dependent, emotionally and politically, on one another. Prior to Alexander's birth, Olympias had reoccurring dreams that

led her to believe that she would produce a powerful heir (Plutarch). Before sending him off to war, Plutarch states that Olympias told her son of the “secret” of his birth and “bade him [to] have purpose worthy of his birth.” Greek and Macedonian myth surrounding Alexander explains that he needed no woman besides his mother. Under her care, Alexander grew up “profoundly religious” and with a readiness to believe in the “manifestation” of the gods (“Olympias”). As the relationship between his father and mother degraded, Alexander took his mother’s side and historians speculate that they planned Phillip’s murder together.

Some historians like Carney believe that Olympias warned her son against individuals or groups she considered dangerous to his interests, both before and after he became king. Later, when Alexander was king, his bond with his mother was so great that “one tear of his mother cancelled innumerable accusations” described in letters from Alexander’s companions (Muller). Despite her strong influence over her son, Olympias did not dominate his life. Alexander gave his mother many presents, but he relied primarily on his judgment regarding political decisions. Similarly, some sources say that Alexander did not allow his mother to participate in public or military affairs. Regardless, Alexander’s long absences gave permanent importance to the women in his family.

As his “official family,” his mother Olympias and his sister Cleopatra immediately benefitted from Alexander’s absence (“The Sisters of Alexander”). The longer he was gone, the more his mother and sister were recognized as the royal family and the king’s representatives. Alexander also used Olympias and Cleopatra to create a “more or less” domestic piety for the Macedonia and Greek public (“The Sisters of Alexander”). Not only did Alexander use the women of his immediate family, but he also used women of other dynasties to gain more power.

As shown in Ancient Greece, male dominance and sexual possession is depicted as a powerful symbol of victory and power. In Greek literature, rape was an inherent part of victory and conquest. Because Macedonia was considered the height of civilization, Alexander's capture of Asian women would be considered a victory of civilization over barbarism (Ansari). Thus, Alexander's ability to control women of the Persian royal family after the Battle of Issus in 333 B.C.E. meant that he had acquired a "potent set of symbols" of victory that he could manipulate to his own ends ("Alexander and Persian Women).

Yet, unlike other military leaders, Alexander is often viewed as an admirer of sexual self-restraint and did not personally exercise the "brutal control over captive women, sexual or otherwise" that was typical of other conquerors (*Women and Monarchy* 94). While most conquerors treated captured women terribly, Alexander transformed the traditional views of captive women when he "singled out the women of King Darius' family" ("Alexander and Persian Women"). He spared them the horrors of other captured females and allowed them to retain their status. Alexander had all of the women of Darius's family educated in Greek and he treated Darius's mother like she was his own. These women were critical to establishing Alexander as ruler because Greek tradition insisted that royal women were an important aspect of Persian monarchy. Thus, Alexander's marriages to royal Persian women allowed him to further his goals.

In his lifetime, Alexander wasn't interested in the thought of marriage and he did not use marriage the same way his father did. Phillip II married seven times, producing two sons and four daughters while Alexander married only three times and quite late in his reign. Unlike his father, who used polygamy purely to produce an heir, Alexander used royal women throughout his empire to maintain or intensify an existing unity rather than create a new one. Persian poet,

Nizami, portrays Alexander as a romantic hero who adored strong and independent women, but in the end it is Alexander who “saves them or whom they fall in love with” (Muller). Whether or not Alexander fell in love with them, his marriages with Persian women, Roxane, Stateria and Parysatis did allow him to unite his empire. His marriages to these three women were part of his propaganda and served as “domestic tokens” (Muller). His marriage to Stateria, particularly, allowed him to take the place of the Persian king, Darius III within the Achaeminid family. Alexander’s long term political goal was to conquer the Persian Empire, while his long term propaganda aim was to appear as ruler of that empire “without losing the loyalty and support of his European Empire” (“Alexander and Persian Women”). Darius’ offering of his eldest daughter, Stateria, in marriage to Alexander emphasizes the idea that women began to be used as bargaining chips.

While the political aspect of marriage was to produce an heir, Alexander’s death left his empire without a king. As a young man, Alexander was warned by Aristotle to not “let his heart be broken by love” (Plutarch) and it is for this reason that Alexander prolonged his marriage, and feared to choose a spouse from his subjects. Furthermore, based on the marriage of his mother and father, Alexander viewed marriage as a source of trouble. As much as the concept of marriage displeased Alexander, he also appeared similarly uninterested in making marriage arrangements for his sisters. Perhaps Alexander did so to eliminate other eligible heirs to the throne and prevent having powerful brothers-in-law. While Alexander did marry in the end, he chose to marry a woman whom he knew his Macedonian subjects “would never accept” (“Roxane”). Although hesitant at first, Alexander eventually married the Bactrian princess, Roxane.

Ancient and modern scholars often question Alexander’s motives for marrying Roxane.

Roxane became the first wife of Alexander in the spring of 327 B.C.E, ending Alexander's ten years as a bachelor. Most ancient sources claim that Alexander fell in love with her at first sight, but modern writers suspect that his marriage was motivated by policy as well. In regard to their relationship, Plutarch writes that "it was indeed a love affair, yet it seemed at the same time to be conducive to the object he had at hand." Alexander used his marriage to Roxane as a way to unite the Persian and Macedonian culture, Alexander needed to "conciliate the remaining resisters" (Muller). The marriage also symbolized Alexander's victory over the Persian Empire. Alexander's marriage gave him the opportunity produce an heir, but his marriage to Roxane was also critical to his strategic success. Prior to his marriage, Alexander had been faced with great military and political problems with the revolts of Bactria and Sogdiana. Alexander's marriage to Roxane, the daughter of a prominent member of the elite, resulted in the involvement of Roxane's father, Oxyartes, to end the revolts. Furthermore, Alexander realized that only by "merging local and Greek peoples and traditions" could he forge a lasting empire (Kishlansky). It is for this reason that Alexander led the way in uniting the empire by encouraging his military commanders to take Persian wives.

Unlike other historical figures, there are several limiting factors unique to studying the roles of female rulers in ancient Macedonia, one of which being the scarcity of available information. A lack of information is present when considering even the most well-known and best documented women such as Alexander's mother, Olympias (Carney). Although there is a certain amount of information about the lives of upper and lower class men, documentation regarding the lives of ordinary and elite women is scarce. Most primary source documents available that address the role of women in ancient Macedonia come from Plutarch and Arian in their biographies of Alexander. Because of this, one could argue that women had little influence

on Alexander, for information about Alexander tends to state very little about his childhood and goes immediately into describing his military campaign. While there is a lack of available information, as Professor Elizabeth Carney states, one must determine the significance of silence when considering the roles of women in the Macedonian monarchy. In other words, one must not mistake a woman's silence for a lack of influence.

In the 21st century, women are still working towards equal representation and influence. Women continue to work for acknowledgement and equality, politically, economically and socially. In many cases, the roles that women play are still traditional ones; however, the willingness of leaders, political figures, and business founders to recognize the contributions of the women in their lives to their success is standard. Some of the greatest leaders and thinkers, like Alexander the Great, or a more modern figure like Barack Obama, have been influenced by the women around them. While they have different accomplishments, both President Barack Obama and Alexander were able to overcome different obstacles with the help and influence of women. Additionally, even though the vast amount of world leaders have been and still are male, women have begun to enter the world of politics. Some of the most populated and economically successful countries in the world have been led by women including: Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, Pratibha Patil, President of India and Dilma Rousseff, President of Brazil. In addition to ensuring peace, freedom and justice, female leaders work hard to improve the lives of ordinary women. Despite this, most do not consider the roles that these women play in society. While it is often said that behind every man is a great woman, in the 21st century there are more available opportunities for women to break away from this "behind the scenes" role that Olympias and many other women were forced to have. In today's society while not every woman

desires to become a political figure, it is important to remember that women are just as capable and influential as men, regardless of their location, history, or socioeconomic status.

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