

Macedonian Bread at the wedding of Alexander and Roxana^{*}

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Abstract: Despite the main importance of this event in the attempt to understand the uses and features of Alexander's conquest, the episode of the wedding between Alexander and Roxana has deserved little attention by Scholarship. However, a close observation of the implications of the details described by our unique extant source on this episode, Curtius, allows to reconsider some features concerning ritual traditions in Ancient Macedonia.

Keywords: Alexander the Great, Roxana, wedding, Perdikkas I, bread, μάχαυρα

In his famous best-seller book on Alexander the Great, Robin Lane Fox describes the wedding of Alexander and Roxana in the following terms:

Rich in supplies, Alexander arranged a lavish wedding banquet on the summit of Sisimithres's sky-high fortress. His sense of style had not deserted him and the occasion had a decided touch of chivalry, for Alexander and Roxane symbolized their match before their guests by cutting a loaf of bread with a sword and each eating half as bride and groom. The sharing of the loaf was the Iranian custom which is still practiced in Turkestan, though the sword was a military detail which could be Alexander's own.¹

Despite the major importance of the event, historians have dedicated little attention to the wedding. In fact, the seminal, foundational book by Johan Gustav Droysen on Alexander sought to describe the event in a brief handful of words:

Alexander entered the fortress, where he found the rich booty, including many wives and daughters of Sogdian and Baktrian noblemen, among them Oxyartes's beautiful daughter Roxane. For the first time in his life, Alexander fell in love. He disdained to exercise any conqueror's right

^{*} I am in debt with Guendalina Taietti, who helps me with the English translation, and my colleague at the UAB, Jordi Pàmias, who provides some useful bibliography on diet and ritual. All faults likewise are no one but mine.

¹ Lane Fox 1974: 317.

to his enemy's daughter; their marriage was to seal his peace with the region. Roxane's father accepted gratefully and was granted clemency in return.²

The reason for the limited interest and attention that scholarship has traditionally paid to Roxana and her wedding with Alexander likely stems from the fact that the ceremony is recorded by just one of our sources, Curtius Rufus:

Roxane's father was transported with unexpected delight when he heard Alexander's words, and the king, in the heat of passion, ordered bread to be brought, in accordance with his ancestral tradition, for this was the most sacred symbol of betrothal among the Macedonians. The bread was cut with a sword and both men tasted it. I presume that those responsible for establishing the conventions of their society used this modest and readily available food because they wanted to demonstrate to people uniting their resources how little should be enough to content them. Thus the ruler of Asia and Europe married a woman who had been introduced to him as part of the entertainment at dinner – to produce from a captive a son to rule over her conquerors! His friends were ashamed that he had chosen his father-in-law at a dinner-party and from subject peoples but, with the suspension of free speech following Clitus' murder, they signified their approval with their facial expressions, the feature of a man most prone to servility.³

As I have recently suggested elsewhere,⁴ the fact that Curtius is the only source on Alexander that offers many details on the Persian traditions allows us to argue that one of his own sources had extensive knowledge of information concerning the Persian side in relation with Alexander's conquest of Asia. This may be the reason why he introduces these details that, although scarce, allow us to infer how the ceremony of Alexander's royal wedding to Roxana looked like and, even more, what symbolic value and significance the action of cutting bread into two pieces by a sword held.

There has been a tendency to connect the ritual of cutting the bread with some Asiatic traditions. Indeed, this is what readers find in the work of Lane Fox, who suggests that such a ritual originated in Turkestan.⁵ Here, Lane Fox was probably following Helmut Berve's prosopography,⁶ who in turn followed the ideas of von

² Droysen 2012: 278. The original date of publication of Droysen's *Geschichte Alexanders des Grossen* was 1831, but there was no English translation since 2012. On Droysen's *Alexander*, see Antela-Bernárdez 2023a: 14–15, with bibliography.

³ Curt 8.4.27, translation by Yardley [and Heckel] 1984. Bardon's Latin text: "Insuperato gaudio laetus pater sermonem eius excipit; et rex in medio cupiditatis ardore iussit adferri patrio more panem – hoc erat apud Macedonas sanctissimum coeutium pignus – quem diuisum gladio uterque libabat. Credo eos, qui gentis mores condiderunt, parco et parabili uictu ostendere uoluisse iungentibus opes, quantulo contenti esse deberent" (Bardon 1965, II: 302).

pignus

⁴ Antela-Bernárdez 2023c.

⁵ Cf. The harsh review Badian (Badian 1976) dedicated to Lane Fox's book, challenging its value.

⁶ Berve 1926, II: 347.

Schwarz and Schachermeyr,⁷ as Bosworth pointed out.⁸ But the idea predates Lane Fox, Berve, and the other authors mentioned; Marcel Renard and Jean Servais⁹ had already traced the Asiatic attribution of the ritual of Alexander cutting the bread to Birt,¹⁰ via Bardon,¹¹ although they also concluded that the Turkestan' origin came from von Schwarz. Indeed, there was a reason to attribute the ritual of the bread and the sword to an Asiatic origin: the episode in Curtius is followed by a series of details about Alexander's changing behavior in his process of Orientalization.¹² To link both the wedding ritual and the Orientalization that would eventually transform Alexander's nature into that of an Asiatic despot, scholarship has emphasised the sources' reports of Macedonian refusal to accept Alexander taking a barbarian as a legal wife.¹³ However, this is a weak argument, since Curtius' record of the possible refusal by the Macedonians of Alexander's choice of a barbarian wife clearly contrasts the Argead policy of marriages – or at least that of the kings we know best, Philip II and Alexander himself, who married women from many different origins, as did the Successors. Thus, this opinion against marrying barbarian women seems more likely to have come from a Greek author writing for a Greek audience.¹⁴

Returning to Curtius' detailed account, one may be deeply concerned by the limited attention scholarship has paid to non-English papers, and wonder how a

⁷ von Schwarz 1893: 82; Schachermeyr 1973: 354.

⁸ Bosworth 1995: 131.

⁹ Renard / Servais 1955: 45.

¹⁰ Bardon 1965, II: 301 n. 25; Lucarini 2001: 256. Atkinson (Atkinson / Gargiulo 1998, II: 204) makes no mention of the Sogdian/Macedonian possible readings

¹¹ Bardon 1965, II: 300 n. 2 (although he quotes von Swartz naming him von Sway).

¹² Renard / Servais 1955: 45.

¹³ Curt. 8.4.29-30 "Thus the ruler of Asia and Europe married a woman who had been introduced to him as part of the entertainment at dinner - to produce from a captive a son to rule over her conquerors! His friends were ashamed that he had chosen his father-in-law at a dinner-party and from subject peoples but, with the suspension of free speech following Clitus' murder, they signified their approval with their facial expressions, the feature of a man most prone to servility" [translation by Yardley]. Cf. Bosworth 1995: 131-132, on this topic.

¹⁴ This assumption against marrying Barbarian women by Macedonian kings is also stressed by the Attalus' words in the famous toast on the union between his niece Cleopatra and Philip II, hoping the union can result in the birth of a legitimate son (Plu. *Alex.* 9.7-10; Ath 13.557d; cf. Just. 9.7.3-4). Again, the idea that any Macedonian can guessed other Greek community (i.e., the Epirot Olympias) as a 'Barbarian' is actually a non-sense, and only can emerge in the mind of someone who felt a *real* Greek. However, scholarship had overemphasize the quarrel and the foreign origin of Olympias and her role in the Macedonian court, stressing the depiction of her as a foreigner: Cf. Antela-Bernárdez 2020; 2022. At the light of the charisma, wide support from the Macedonian elite and the respect the Macedonians at court showed to her in episodes like the Battle of Evia (Zaragoza 2015; Antela-Bernárdez 2025: 67-68, 137-138) or her last days, the idea that Olympias was considered by the Macedonians as a foreigner and refused by cause of her origins is a common feature in many scholar researches, but false and with no real basis at the light of the sources (cf. D.S. XIX.49-51).

brilliant, finely argued paper like that of Renard and Servais has remained almost unknown and generally unquoted, despite its strong contribution to the understanding of the ritual and ceremony of Alexander's wedding.¹⁵ In their precise dissection of Curtius' text, Renard and Servais identified three main issues in the wedding ritual: the bread, the sword and the origin of the performed tradition. For the sword, the Latin *gladius*, Renard and Servais noted the importance of a knife or (as I prefer) a sword in the ritual, and offered many examples of similar rituals in other cultures and eras, even emphasizing iron's role in superstitious rites and ceremonies. They concluded that there was a link between the iron tool (the knife/sword) and the protection against demons, evil spirits, and even death itself.¹⁶ On the bread, they connected the ritual to other known cases of sharing cereal meals or bread across many cultures in time and space, from the Roman *confarreatio* to more modern traditions.¹⁷ Moreover, Renard and Servais were particularly concerned with the nature and form of the bread Alexander cut with the sword. Following different sources, they concluded that the ritual bread that Alexander used in the wedding ceremony was not already at the table, since bread in ancient communal meals and symposia was usually pre-cut. Finally, they followed the Curtius' literal mention that the ritual was made according to homeland customs (*patrio more panem*).

Although bread is almost unmentioned in the sources on Alexander's conquest (despite its fundamental importance as the most common food), another episode features it prominently. During the siege of Tyre, Macedonian soldiers found pieces of bread with blood. The episode is recorded briefly by Diodorus,¹⁸ and in more detail by Curtius,¹⁹ though omens are generally included in siege accounts.²⁰ The phenomenon is likely related to Macedonian religious concerns,²¹ and despite the soothsayer Aristander's interpretation to solve Alexander's (and probably that of the army's) alarm, I cannot but note that the bloody bread resembles a Catholic

¹⁵ Bosworth 1995: 131 quotes it, breaking the usual silence on this paper.

¹⁶ Renard / Servais 1955: 41-44.

¹⁷ Renard / Servais 1955: 34-36.

¹⁸ D.S. 17.41.7. Bradford Welles 1963' translation for the Loeb says "the broken pieces of bread had a bloody look".

¹⁹ Curt. 4.2.14-15: "Apud Macedonas quoque cum forte panem quidam militum frangerent, manantis sanguinis guttas notaverunt, territoque rege Aristander, peritissimus vatum, si extrinsecus cruor fluxisset, Macedonibus id triste futurum ait: contra, cum ex interiore parte manaverit, urbi, quam obsidere destinassent, exitium portendere". Yardley translation: "On the Macedonian side, too, while some soldiers happened to be breaking bread they noticed drops of blood oozing from it. Alexander was alarmed at this, but their most accomplished soothsayer Aristander claimed it would have been a bad omen for the Macedonians if the blood had run on the outside of the bread, but since it had run from the inside, it actually portended destruction for the city they had determined to besiege" (Yardley [and Heckel] 1984: 55).

²⁰ Atkinson 1980: 297.

²¹ Anson 2022 offers a great general overview on the matter.

Eucharist. However, given the sparse information in our sources,²² and the impossibility of a clear explanation, I can only speculate that this bloody bread is somehow linked with a mysteric cult, about which we hear nothing more. We do know of later traditions connecting Tyre with Dionysos.²³

However, to my knowledge, no one has connected the elements of this wedding ritual to another episode in Macedonian history that could shed light on the question: the story of Perdiccas and his brothers, and the robbery of the sunlight at the court of the king of Lebaea, as recorded by Herodotus:

Three brothers of the lineage of Temenus came as banished men from Argos to Illyria, Gauanes and Aeropus and Perdiccas; and from Illyria they crossed over into the highlands of Macedonia till they came to the town Lebaea. [2] There they served for wages as *thetes* in the king's household, one tending horses and another oxen. Perdiccas, who was the youngest, tended the lesser flocks. Now the king's wife cooked their food for them, for in old times the ruling houses among men, and not the common people alone, were lacking in wealth. [3] Whenever she baked bread, the loaf of the thete Perdiccas grew double in size. Seeing that this kept happening, she told her husband, and it seemed to him when he heard it that this was a portent signifying some great matter. So he sent for his thetes and bade them depart from his territory. They said it was only just that they should have their wages before they departed. When they spoke of wages, the king was moved to foolishness and said, "That is the wage you merit, and it is that I give you," pointing to the sunlight that shone down the smoke vent into the house. Gauanes and Aeropus, who were the elder, stood astonished when they heard that, but the boy said, "We accept what you give, O king," and with that he took a knife which he had with him and drew a line with it on the floor of the house round the sunlight. When he had done this, he three times gathered up the sunlight into the fold of his garment and went his way with his companions.²⁴

First, the word Herodotus uses for the sword is μάχαιρα (*machaira*), exactly the type of knife or short sword that Renard and Servais supposed Curtius found in his Greek source and translated as *gladius*. This became the standard translation from Polybius and Livius onward.²⁵ Although we know the Macedonian army used the μάχαιρα,²⁶ this type of sword is also attested in ritual sacrifices.²⁷ While other words for sword (ξίφος, φάσγανον)²⁸ appear in religious contexts, these are generic terms,²⁹ whereas μάχαιρα denotes a specific single-edged blade, better for

²² Cf. Prandi 2013: 67-68, who also connects the bloody bread omen with the previous sentence by Curtius (4.2.13): "It is said that when the metal that was to be forged had been set in the furnaces and the bellow-blasts were fanning the fire, streams of blood appeared beneath the flames, which the Tyrians interpreted as an omen unfavourable to the Macedonians" (Yardley [and Heckel] 1984: 55).

²³ Hirt 2014; López Sánchez / Triñanes Dieste 2025.

²⁴ Hdt. 8.137; translation by Godley 1920 for the Loeb.

²⁵ Niemyski 2024: 125.

²⁶ On the general use of *machaira* in Greek warfare, see Lee 2013: 149.

²⁷ For example, Eur. *Supp.* 1206.

²⁸ On the uses of these words, see Quesada Sanz 1994.

²⁹ On the names of tools for Greek sacrifices, see Bruit Zaidman 2014.

chopping than stabbing,³⁰ and often linked to sacrifice as ritual tool.³¹ In Perdiccas' case, the sword (and Herodotus names it μάχαιρα, too), it is unclear whether the sword was a military weapon (his own?), or a ritual tool emphasizing his symbolic act. This mirrors the ambiguity of the sword (*gladius*, i.e. *machaira*) Alexander uses to cut the bread at his wedding.

Second, bread plays clearly a religious role in Perdiccas' story – or at least a role that is considered by the king of Lebaea as an omen, a dangerous one. The information Herodotus offers in his account is too short for firm conclusions, but one may wonder why the wife of the king of Lebaea, i.e. the queen or at least a prominent woman at that court, is cooking the meal of the *thetes*. It seems plausible that something extraordinary is occurring in the tale and we lack the full context.³²

Some authors have traced the connections between the tale of Perdiccas and the Macedonian practices of the cult to Dionysos.³³ In fact, after Perdiccas and his brothers' flight from the court of the king of Lebaea, Herodotus' account mentions the connections between them and Midas, who is also connected with Orpheus³⁴ (or with Orphism?), closely tied to the cult of Dionysos in Macedonia.³⁵

Do these coincidences in Macedonian history suggest clear connections? Any conclusion would be speculative and unproven, but I must first emphasize that what scholarship attributes to an Asiatic custom – the bread cut at the wedding – was correctly ascribed by Curtius to a Macedonian tradition (*patrio mores*). From this point, then, if the cutting of the bread by Alexander with a *machaira* (= *gladius*) is part of a wedding, we can infer that at the court of the king of Lebaea we witness a ritual that may involve a wedding (and the main role played by the wife of the king as ritual cook of the breads,³⁶ raising suspicions about the bride's identity).

Likewise, a passage by Plutarch in the *Moralia* is also relevant here:

³⁰ Parnell 2010.

³¹ Bonnechere 1999.

³² I am tempted to guess here that the sun in Herodotus' tale on Perdiccas is also somehow present in Alexander's wedding through the name of Roxana, which means radiant or sunshine...

³³ Greenwalt 1994; Fredricksmeyer 1997: 103. See also Fulinska 2014: 47-48.

³⁴ Just. *Epit.* 11.7.

³⁵ Antela-Bernárdez 2025: 52-53, 139-140 and 2026. The clear reference linking both religious figures is Plu. *Alex.* 2.5, in relation with women rituals and concretely with the role Olympias played there. On this passage, see also Antela-Bernárdez 2023b.

³⁶ The fact that Olympias is the one who addresses herself to ask for the purchasing of a cook-slave, Pelignas (Ath. 14.78, 659F, 660A), who can perform the ancestral rites of the Macedonians (cf. Fredricksmeyer 1966), allow me to stress the main role the royal women had in the Macedonian tradition concerning the arrangements on cooking the ritual meal (i.e., the bread, at least in our case) in the royal entourage of the court. I have also guessed elsewhere that Pelignas is, actually, in charge of cooking bread.

Certainly one may observe that in Alexander the warlike is also humane, the mild also manly, the liberal provident, the irascible placable, the amatory temperate, his relaxation not idle, and his labours not without recreation. Who but he combined festivals with wars, campaigns with revels, Bacchic rites and weddings and nuptial songs with sieges and battle-fields? Who was ever more hostile to wrongdoers or kinder to the unfortunate? Who more stern to his opponents or more indulgent to petitioners?³⁷

Despite the text's aim to highlight the balance in Alexander's actions, character and behavior, it is significative to me that Bacchic rites and weddings appear here in parallel, reinforcing the connection between the solar Dionysiac rite in Perdiccas' tale and the rites performed with the bread cut at the wedding of Alexander and Roxana. In the end, despite accusations of speculation in this proposal may arise, I firmly believe coincidences are rare when analyzing ancient sources.

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³⁷ Plu. *Mor.* 332D-E. Translation by F. C. Babbitt at the Loeb.

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