

## Prologue

Olympias, daughter of Neoptolemus king of Molossia, wife of Philip II king of Macedonia, and mother of Alexander III (the Great), king of Macedonia and conqueror of the Persian empire, was the most powerful woman of her era, a model (as well as a kind of cautionary tale) for all future Hellenistic royal women. She lived and died in the world of succession politics, playing the “game of thrones.” Olympias tirelessly advocated for her son’s succession and continued rule and, after his early death, for that of her grandson Alexander IV. Like her husband and son, though hardly on the same scale, she employed violence to gain her ends and ultimately died a violent death, one that made the subsequent murders of her grandsons (Alexander IV and Heracles) inevitable. Like her husband and son, she was brave yet brutal.

Extant ancient sources relevant to her life, with a few critical exceptions, come from the Roman era, four to five centuries after her death, and preserve the values of that later era, particularly those of the intellectual movement we call the Second Sophistic. Luckily, some contemporary speeches survive, and a few inscriptions of relevance. The main problem, in trying to understand Olympias’ career, however, is Plutarch’s *Life of Alexander*.

Plutarch demonstrates more interest in Olympias than other ancient authors but uses her (and Philip to some degree) to depict bad character traits (primarily irrationality, lack of restraint, lack of moderation) in contrast to Alexander. Plutarch insists (implausibly in my view) that Alexander, in contrast to his parents, did exercise restraint and modelled moderation, at least until late in his life. For Plutarch, however, Olympias, was clearly worse than Philip because she was a woman, one who, on occasion, acted in the world of men and committed violent acts. Plutarch’s Olympias is more frightening, more dangerous than her husband and son. She embraces religious experiences and practices that frighten her husband and men more generally. She is extreme. This portrayal of Olympias would not matter so much if Plutarch were not such a good writer and story-teller: his version of Olympias (and of many other people and events) has dominated. Though much of his heavily anecdotal material is factually dubious, some of it, however sensationalized or based on his misunderstanding of practices in this period, may have considerable basis in lived events and provides information we would not otherwise possess. This is the source situation about Olympias that Borja Antela-Bernárdez, in the articles collected here, confronts. Granted how problematic much of the ancient source material about Olympias is (by no means is the problem simply Plutarch), let me begin with

a brief account of her life, limiting myself to events many, if not all, consider historical.<sup>11</sup>

Olympias was born in the later 370s BCE. Her family, the Aeacids, had ruled Molossia for centuries and, by Olympias' day, claimed descent from Achilles and Andromache. Olympias' father died before she had reached the age of marriage, so it was her uncle Arybbas, now sole king, who negotiated her marriage to Philip II. The betrothal happened at Samothrace when all three became initiates of the mysteries on the island. Olympias became the fifth (or possibly fourth) of Philip's seven wives; his marriages, including that of Olympias, were related to internal or external political alliances. Olympias bore Alexander in 356 and soon after a daughter, Cleopatra. Olympias sponsored religious festivals for women. Philip's other son, Arrhidaeus, was understood as somehow mentally challenged; Philip began to treat Alexander like his successor by the time Alexander was in his early teens. In keeping with this situation, in 336 Alexander fought in the battle of Chaeronea, the victory for Philip that confirmed his control of the Greek peninsula and enabled him to organize the League of Corinth as part of his planned Macedonian/Greek invasion of the Persian Empire. Soon after his victory Philip married his last bride, a Macedonian girl whose guardian, her uncle Attalus, proposed a toast at the wedding banquet that implied that Alexander was not legitimate (whether literally, politically, ethnically not clear) but that the new bride would produce legitimate heirs. When Alexander expressed outrage at the toast, Philip either supported Attalus or, at the least, failed to defend Alexander. Alexander left Macedonia with his mother for her brother's court (her brother had become king of Molossia). The breach was quickly patched over, but Alexander, apparently at the urging of Olympias and some of his close associates or companions, inserted himself into negotiations for the marriage of his half-brother to the daughter of a powerful ruler in Asia Minor, a man who could have been a critical ally in the now imminent invasion; thanks to this intervention the alliance collapsed. Philip exiled Alexander's friends but planned a splendid wedding festival for the marriage of Olympias' daughter to Olympias' brother. During these festivities, Philip was assassinated and the assassin quickly killed. Olympias and/or Alexander were suspected of involvement because of recent tensions, though, granted Philip's planned invasion of the Persian Empire, if the assassin did not act alone, the Persian king or various Greek cities might easily have been involved. In any event, Alexander became king, blamed some political enemies for the murder and eliminated them, defeated assorted rebellious forces, and was able to lead the expedition his father had planned to Asia Minor in spring of 334. Before Alexander's departure for Asia, during his absence on one of the campaigns to stabilize his control of the peninsula, Olympias probably murdered Philip's most recently married wife and her baby; similarly, Alexander worked to have Attalus killed off.

1. For a lengthier overview of her length and scholarship about her, as well as ancient references to the events of her life, see Carney 2006. See also the bibliography in this volume. See discussion and references in Carney 2019 for Plutarch's treatment of Olympias, with full bibliography.

He left his father's general Antipater in charge of Macedonia and the Greek peninsula generally. At the time of Alexander's departure, Olympias was still in Macedonia. Tradition says that Olympias and her son corresponded frequently. He sent her some of his booty and she gave frequent advice about court affairs. Increasingly, she and Antipater were at odds, most likely over the limits of each one's authority. Antipater, however, was essential to Alexander until, at the very least, the death of Darius and Olympias, apparently frustrated by Antipater's power and her lack of it, left Macedonia for her Molossian homeland. By the time she did this, her brother had died on campaign in Italy, and her now widowed daughter seemed to rule Molossia in practice, though not, so far as we know, formally. Mother and daughter both played a role in grain patronage, quite possibly with Alexander's support; his campaigns helped to create persistent grain shortage over much of the eastern Mediterranean. During this period Olympias became embroiled in a controversy with Athens when she objected to Athenian renovations at the shrine of Dione in Dodona in Molossia and yet she gave a cup to the shrine of Hygieia in Athenian territory. An Athenian speech dealing with this controversy associates Olympias' policy and that of Alexander. After years in central Asia, Alexander returned to western Asia. Matters were tense in both his Asian empire and in the Greek peninsula. His treasurer absconded with vast wealth and fled to Athens where he used his wealth to buy some Athenian support. Meanwhile, Alexander had ordered Antipater to yield up his position to Craterus and come to Babylon (Alexander's apparent imperial capital) but Antipater had not moved. Plutarch, apparently speaking of this period, says that Olympias took Molossia and Cleopatra Macedonia and they formed a faction against the now much weakened Antipater. At this moment, in June of 323 in Babylon, Alexander suddenly died, probably of natural causes. At the time of his death, he had an illegitimate son by Barsine and his first wife, Roxane, was pregnant and within a month or two after his death bore him a son, Alexander IV. Alexander's half-brother Arrhidaeus was also present with the troops at Babylon. After upset and violence, ultimately both Alexander's half-brother—called Philip Arrhidaeus by historians—and Roxane's son became co-kings, though neither was able to rule in his own right and a series of regents were in official charge. In practice, the generals of Alexander (the Successors) squabbled over the empire; a number of the most prominent were killed off early in events.

Olympias remained in Molossia after her son's death. Cleopatra, her daughter, negotiated with various of the Successors about a marriage alliance and departed for Asia, intending to marry Perdikkas, the first of the kings' guardians. Perdikkas was killed and Cleopatra stayed on in Asia, apparently controlled by Antigonos and, many years later, murdered on his orders. Olympias believed that Antipater and his sons had poisoned her son, but she distrusted all the guardians/regents of the two kings. In 319, Antipater, who had become the latest guardian of the kings, brought both kings to Greece, along with Alexander IV's mother Roxane and Philip Arrhidaeus' wife, Adea Eurydice (a granddaughter of Philip II). Antipater then died and Polyperchon became regent; he, possibly twice, asked Olympias to return to Macedonia and hold some sort of official position in terms of her grandson. She hesitated, but ultimately decided to return to Macedonia with forces led by Polyperchon and

her nephew Aeacides, now king of Molossia. Adea Eurydice (who seemed to act as regent for her husband) had made an alliance with Cassander, the son of Antipater, but he was absent in the Peloponnese when the forces supporting Olympias arrived. In fall of 317, Adea Eurydice (who had military training) and her husband led an army out to meet the invading forces at Euia. She may have dressed as a soldier and Olympias as devotee of Dionysus. When the home army saw Olympias after so many years, it went over to her forces. She had the royal pair killed as well as many of the supporters of Cassander. Her success did not endure: Cassander, an excellent general, returned and Polyperchon and Aeacides were unable to come to Olympias' aid. She and her court were besieged at Pydna and she ultimately surrendered. Cassander had her killed (in 316 or 315), married a half-sister of Alexander's, kept Alexander IV and his mother under house arrest and ultimately had them, and somewhat later, Alexander's other son Heracles killed. Olympias' last-ditch effort to preserve the Argead dynasty had failed.

Borja Antela-Bernárdez, in this collection of articles, takes an imaginative, less conventional political approach to the career of Olympias. In "Terrible Olympias" he examines the tradition about her in German and British scholarship, demonstrating that it remained not only sexist and hetero normative, but also retained assumptions about royal marriage grounded in modern monogamous unions, despite Philip II's undeniable polygamy. "Dreaming of Olympias" mines one of the rare contemporary pieces of information about Olympias, Hypereides' speech in defense of Euxenippus, in which Olympias is said to have objected to Athenian dedications at the sanctuary of Dione at Dodona in her Molossian homeland on the grounds that Molossia belonged to her and yet to have dedicated a cup to Hygieia (Health) in Athenian territory; he connects the speech to a number of issues, among them a series of grain shortages in the eastern Mediterranean, Olympias' gain patronage, and her possible attempt to co-opt the Hygieia cult for her own ends, by linking her image with that of the goddess. "The Good Wife" examines the ways—use of *pharmaka* (drugs or magic) and her association with snakes—in which Olympias' religious role in various cults has been misunderstood or oversimplified by ancient and modern writers. He suggests that many of these misunderstood features originate in Olympias' Aeacid origins and identity. "God Save the Queen" examines the role of her religious practices and of female power in Macedonia (and influence outside it, particularly in Athens). He examines her religious authority in Macedonia. "Olympias the Mimallon" argues that Olympias' public presentation at the battle of Euia in 317—the decisive defeat that briefly put her in effective control of Macedonia—relates to earlier Macedonian religious action by groups of women.

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October 13th, 2022

