

Signs and premonitions for Alexander's reign

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ABSTRACT

This work focuses on the analysis of a series of famous episodes that underline the prodigious birth and the exceptional destiny of Alexander the Great. First, the article examines the accounts of the Macedonian king's conception, due to the union of his mother Olympias with the king/magician Nectanebo, or with a snake, or with the god Ammon – depending on the different versions. Subsequently, the stories of the oracles foretelling Alexander's domination over the world and the premonitions that mark his rise to power are analyzed. Finally, the death omens are also taken into account. Summing up, this study deals with the elements related to Alexander's mythology and the reasons why the literary sources of the classical world present him as a being halfway between human and divine.

KEYWORDS

Alexander, divine origin, world's conquest, premonitions, omens

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

If with the term “blessing” we mean the expression of divine favour, we can observe that in classical literature a series of signs, premonitions, oracles and dreams mark the exceptional destiny of Alexander the Great.¹ There is no doubt that the representation of Alexander's power

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¹ Considering the vastness of the material on this topic, what follows takes into account only a significant selection of the ancient authors in which it is presented.

– not only in the texts that are classified as the most “fictional”,² but also in the sources properly considered historical and reliable³ – moves through narratives that underline the singularity and ineluctability of the fundamental events that concern him: his birth, his conquests and his death. These three circumstances provide the ground for some sets of stories that transfer Alexander’s character on a purely symbolic level, which has little to do with history.

ALEXANDER’S BIRTH AND HIS SUPERHUMAN FATHER

The stories related to Alexander’s conception are focused on the union of his mother, Olympias, with the king/magician Nectanebo,⁴ or with a snake, or with the god Ammon.

In the *Alexander Romance*, attributed to Callisthenes,⁵ the Egyptian prophet Nectanebo goes to the queen⁶ because she wants to enquire about her future.⁷ He tells her that she will have to lie with the god Ammon, and that from him she will conceive and give birth to a son, who will avenge her for the wrongs she has suffered from her husband Philip.⁸ During the night the magician Nectanebo causes Olympias to dream of lying with the god Ammon who then tells her that she has generated a male who will be her avenger.⁹ The same expression, followed by the words that he will be “king, lord of the world” (βασιλεὺς κοσμοκράτωρ), is repeated later by Nectanebo when he presents himself to the queen, dressed as the god Ammon, and lies with her.¹⁰

Later, this magician/prophet sends a hawk to speak to her sleeping husband, Philip: he sees the god joining his wife and hears the same words;¹¹ immediately after, he believes he sees himself sewing with a thread the womb of the woman and affixing his seal, which was a gold ring

²In particular, I mean the *Alexander Romance*.

³I am referring to Arrian’s *Anabasis*.

⁴In the text of Pseudo-Callisthenes this character is indicated with the words *προφήτης* and *μάγος*.

⁵The edition of the oldest recension α was published by KROLL, G.: *Historia Alexandri Magni (Pseudo-Callisthenes). Vol. I. Recensio Vetusta*. Berlin 1926. However, in this article I quote the passages from the edition of the recension β by BERGSON, L.: *Der griechische Alexanderroman. Rezension β* . Stockholm–Göteborg–Uppsala 1965, as the recension β contains a more extensive version of the *Alexander Romance*. Moreover, very useful is the good edition by STONEMAN, R. – GARGIULO, T.: *Il romanzo di Alessandro*. Voll. I–II. Milano 2007–2012.

⁶For a historical reconstruction of the figure of Olympias, see CARNEY, E.: *Olympias*. New York – London 2006.

⁷Ps.-Callisth. I 4.

⁸Ps.-Callisth. I 4.

⁹Ps.-Callisth. I 5: *Γύναι, κατὰ γαστρός ἔχεις ἄρρενα σὸν ἐκδικόν γινόμενον*. “Woman, in your belly you carry a male son who will be your avenger”. Where not otherwise specified, the translations of the quoted passages are mine.

¹⁰Ps.-Callisth. I 7: *Διάμεινον γύναι κατὰ γαστρός ἔχεις ἄρρενα παῖδα ἐκδικόν σου γεινόμενον καὶ πάσης τῆς οἰκουμένης κοσμοκράτορα βασιλέα*. “Be quiet woman, in your belly you have a male son who will be your avenger and king, lord of the whole world.”

¹¹Ps.-Callisth. I 8: *Γύναι, συνέλαβες παῖδα ἄρρενα, ὥς ἐγκαρπώσεται καὶ τὸν θάνατον τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκδικήσει*. “Woman, you have conceived a male son, who will be a fruitful fruit for you and will avenge the death of his father.”



with a stone depicting the sun, the head of a lion and a spear.¹² The interpretation of Philip's dream is revealed by a soothsayer, who also explains the images on the seal: a newborn child will make war on all peoples, like a lion, up to the Far East, and submit them with the spear. He also tells Philip that the divine being he saw is the god of Libya, Ammon.¹³ The symbolism, therefore, is clear: Alexander will be king and will rule over all men, conquering the entire inhabited space.

The text of Pseudo-Callisthenes also mentions the prodigy of Olympias' lying with a serpent. Nectanebo explains to the woman that the serpent will appear to her as a premonitory sign of the arrival of the god.¹⁴ However, later he himself turns into a large reptile, suddenly appearing into the room where king Philip holds a banquet; he then kisses the queen, and finally, turning into an eagle, flies away.¹⁵ We find traces of this tradition also in the text of Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*, where it is said that a snake was seen lying beside Olympias when she was asleep, and for this reason Philip withdrew from his wife.¹⁶ More explicitly, the Latin authors attest that Olympias was made pregnant by a snake.¹⁷

The theme of Alexander's *kosmokratia* is present from the very first pages in the *Romance*. In relation to the future birth of the Macedonian king, the first book tells a particularly meaningful episode, which clearly illustrates the heroic dimension that surrounds him. While Philip is sitting in a garden of his palace, a bird jumps into his lap and there lays an egg that breaks; from it a snake emerges, which begins to crawl around him, trying to get back into the shell, but when its head gets back inside it dies. A sign interpreter explains the meaning of what happened: the king will have a son who will travel all over the world, but when he wants to return to his kingdom, despite being still young, he will die; in fact, the snake represents the king and the egg the world.¹⁸ Again, the prediction of Alexander's fate shows what his government of the *kosmos* will be.

Another anecdote reports that at Alexander's birth two eagles rested on the roof of Philip's house for a whole day, as a sign of his future dominion over Asia and Europe.¹⁹

The story of Alexander's coming into the world is that of a planned birth, because he must leave his mother's womb at a predetermined time, so that he comes to life under the best auspices. When Olympias is about to give birth, Nectanebo, standing next to her, scrutinizes the stars and urges her to delay the birth until the best celestial influences are present; finally, when

¹²Ps.-Callisth. I 8: ἦν δὲ ὁ δακτύλιος χρυσὸς ἔχων λίθον, καὶ ἐν τῷ λίθῳ ἐκτύπωμα ἡλίου καὶ κεφαλὴν λέοντος καὶ δοράτιον. "It was a gold ring with an engraved stone, representing the sun, the head of a lion and a spear." Even in the *Life of Alexander* by Plutarch we read that after the marriage Philip dreamed of impressing his seal with the figure of a lion on the belly of his wife (*Alex.* 2). See also the statement of Tert. *Anim.* 46. 5. Regarding the complex tradition of mythical tales about Alexander's birth, read the in-depth study by OGDEN, D.: *Alexander the Great. Myth, Genesis and Sexuality*. Exeter 2011, 7–28.

¹³Ps.-Callisth. I 8.

¹⁴Ps.-Callisth. I 6.

¹⁵Ps.-Callisth. I 10.

¹⁶Plu. *Alex.* 2: in the same passage it is added that Philip did not go to visit her anymore, for fear that the woman would use magic on him, or to avoid intimacy with her who lived with a superior being. Also compare Luc. *DMort.* 13.

¹⁷Liv. XXVI 9; Sol. 9. 18. In Iust. XI 11. 3, Olympias declares to Philip that she conceived her son by a huge snake, but in Iust. XII 16. 2, Olympias dreams of coupling with such a beast. Data are collected by OGDEN (n. 12) 15–27.

¹⁸Ps.-Callisth. I 11: ὁ γὰρ δράκων βασιλικόν ζῷον ἐστὶ· τὸ δὲ ὠδὸν παραπλήσιοι τῷ κόσμῳ, ὅθεν ὁ δράκων ἐξῆλθεν. "In fact, the snake is a regal creature, while the egg, from which the snake came, indicates the world."

¹⁹Iust. XII 16. 5.



the whole sky is balanced at the zenith and the diffused light is like that of the noon sun, he tells her that she can let the newborn go and, again, that she will give birth to a *kosmokrator* king.²⁰ Nectanebo's words are followed by the actual birth of the child, who falls to the ground and immediately afterwards thunderbolts and lightning flashes can be heard and seen.²¹ As to this last detail, the same narrative theme appears in Plutarch's biography, where we read that the night before the wedding, Olympias believed that a lightning struck her on the belly and a great fire rose from the wound, which then spread in various directions.²²

The set of stories told in the *Alexander Romance* and, in a reduced way, in Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* gives us an idea of the image of Alexander's regality that was to be transmitted to the culture of the classical world: an exceptional being like the Macedonian king could not have been born as an ordinary mortal, and therefore the literary tradition emphasizes that his anomalous conception occurred mostly thanks to the intervention of a deity, such as Ammon or Zeus.²³

With regard to the superhuman origin of Alexander, the story of his meeting with Ammon's priest is emblematic. In reading the sources,²⁴ we can observe that there are three focal moments in the episode: a) the prophet greets Alexander and calls him "son" in the name of the god; b) then, the sovereign asks if he is granted to rule over the whole earth and receives an affirmative answer; c) he also wants to know if all of his father's murderers have been punished, and the prophet, after confirming that Philip's death had been totally avenged, declares that proof of the divine origin of Alexander will be his feats, and that in the future he will be invincible. To this last detail we can add the tradition according to which even Pythia declared him *aniketos*.²⁵

In a more or less explicit way, the texts that have reached us underline the divine origin of Alexander.²⁶ Plutarch says that the interpreter of the oracle called him *o paidios*, which in Greek

²⁰Ps.-Callisth. I 12: Βασιλίσσα, ἄρτι τέξεις κοσμοκράτορα. "Queen, you will generate now the lord of the world."

²¹Ps.-Callisth. I 12.

²²Plu. *Alex.* 2.

²³Versions on the generation of Alexander by a god are numerous. For example, we can mention Arrian's remark that the Macedonian was a descendant of Perseus and Heracles and wanted to link his origin to Ammon (*An.* III 3. 2). The theme of his divinity was extensively addressed by BOSWORTH, A. B.: *Conquest and Empire. The Reign of Alexander the Great*. Cambridge 1988, 278–290. On the same theme see also MASTROCINQUE, A.: Alessandro a Menfi. In WILL, W. – HEINRICH, J. (edd.): *Zu Alexander der Grosse. Festschrift G. Wirth zum 60. Geburtstag am 9.12.86*, Amsterdam 1988, 289–307; DI SERIO, C.: La dimensione mitica di Alessandro nel *De Alexandri Magni fortuna aut virtute*. In CLÚA SERENA, J. A. (ed.): *Mythologica Plutarchea. Estudios sobre los mitos en Plutarco*. Madrid 2020, 137–146.

²⁴D. S. XVII 51. 1–4; Plu. *Alex.* 27. 5–7; Ps.-Callisth. I 30; Curt. IV 7. 25–28; Iust. XI 11. 7.

²⁵D. S. XVII 93. 4: τὴν μὲν γὰρ Πυθίαν ἀνίκητον αὐτὸν ὠνομακέναι. "In fact the Pythia had called him invincible." Plu. *Alex.* 14. 7: «Ἀνίκητος εἶ Β παῖ». "Boy, you are invincible."

²⁶About the deification of Alexander see at least BADIAN, E.: The deification of Alexander the Great. In DELL, H. J. (ed.): *Ancient Macedonian Studies in Honor of Charles F. Edson*. Tessaioniki 1981, 27–71; CAWKWELL, G. L.: The Deification of Alexander the Great: A note. In WORTHINGTON, I. (ed.): *Ventures into Greek History*. Oxford 1994, 293–306; BADIAN, E.: Alexander the Great between Two Thrones and Heaven. Variations on an Old Theme In SMALL, A. (ed.): *Subject & Ruler: The Cult of the Ruling Power in Classical Antiquity*. JRA s. s. 17 (1996) 11–26; FREDRICKSMEYER, E.: Alexander's Religion and Divinity. In ROISMAN, J. (ed.): *Brill's Companion to Alexander the Great*. Leiden 2003, 257–278; ANSON, E. M.: *Alexander the Great: Themes and Issues*. London – New York 2013, 83–120. Also interesting is the study on Alexander's descent from Achilles by ANTELA-BERNÁRDEZ, B.: Like Gods among Men. The Use of Religion and Mythical Issues during Alexander's Campaign. In ULANOWSKI, K. (ed.): *The Religious Aspects of War in the Ancient Near East, Greece, and Rome*. Leiden–Boston 2016, 235–255.



means “son of Zeus” (παῖς Διός), instead of *o paidion* (for a pronunciation mistake) and such remained the common belief.²⁷ According to a different version of the *Alexander Romance*, the king turns directly to Ammon to know whether he is his son and has a vision in which the god confirms it,²⁸ while even the Latin tradition attests that he claimed to be recognized as *filius Iovis*.²⁹

With regard to the consultation of Ammon’s oracle, it is worth reiterating here that this is the most important issue among those that seal his rise and success. The event is connected, in almost every literary source, to two fundamental motifs: Alexander’s divine origin, and his conquest of the world. Undoubtedly, these two main points not only constitute the basis for the construction of the narrations on the character, but they are also the ideological-conceptual basis on which the idea of a universal sovereign is founded, whose power is such to dominate all mankind, and whose ability to act knows no limits.

PRODIGIES SURROUNDING ALEXANDER’S CONQUESTS

There are several accounts of the prodigies that announce, or surround, Alexander’s territorial conquests and his rise to power.

Among the most significant episodes on this theme, we can consider a story provided by Arrian. Alexander knew that in the Pieria the statue of Orpheus continuously produced sweat, and the soothsayer Aristander interpreted this as a sign of the fact that epic poets, lyric poets, and composers of odes would have to work a lot to sing the king’s feats.³⁰ According to the *Romance*, the king reached Bebrykia in the city of Hipperia and looked at the statue of Orpheus in a temple, and when this statue started to be covered in sweat, the interpreter Melampus explained that he would have to struggle hard to keep the barbarians and the Greek cities subdued, but then, as the mythical singer Orpheus did with his lyra, he would subjugate them all with his spear.³¹ It is interesting that in this passage Alexander is attributed the superhuman power of an enchanter, like that of Orpheus. Moreover, it should be noted that in the mentioned sources the focus is on the immensity of the Macedonian king’s achievements.

Regarding the expedition against Thebes, according to a tradition, there were numerous signs and unfavourable premonitions.³² Three months before Alexander’s arrival, a thin spider web, as large as a cloak, was seen in Demeter’s temple radiating the colors of a rainbow all around. The oracle of Delphi gave the response that the gods were sending a foreboding especially to the Boeotians, and the sanctuary of the Thebans prophesied that the cobweb meant

²⁷Plu. *Alex.* 27. 9. On Alexander as Zeus’ offspring, see MOSSÉ, C.: *Alexandre. La destinée d’un mythe*. Paris 2001, 99–113.

²⁸Ps.-Callisth. I 30.

²⁹In Curt. IV 7. 25–28 and Iust. XI 11. 7 is presented the identification of the god Ammon with Iuppiter, but the assimilation of the same deity with Zeus is obviously implicit in the Greek sources.

³⁰Arr. *An.* I 11. 2.

³¹Ps.-Callisth. I 42.

³²Read the whole passage of D. S. XVII 10 and the narrative of Ael. *VH* XII 57.



ruin.³³ And as the king approached, the statues in the *agora* were seen dripping large drops of sweat;³⁴ moreover some people said that the Onchestus swamp had emitted a sound as of bellowing, while a blood ripple had appeared on the water of the Dirke spring;³⁵ others, coming from Delphi, said that the temple built by Thebans had a blood-stained roof.³⁶ Finally, the statue of Athena Alalkomeneis was on fire.³⁷ The soothsayers explained the omens as completely unfavourable to the Thebans.³⁸ The common thread of these narratives is connected to the idea that the will of the gods determines the adverse fate of the city.

More than once during Alexander's campaign, it is said that birds appeared, whose actions were then interpreted as omens in favour of Alexander. In the *Anabasis of Alexander* by Arrian there are several of these episodes, and it is useful to examine some of them. As the Macedonian king fleet was moored at the island of Lade, an eagle was seen at the shore, standing on the stern of the ships. Parmenion interprets the omen positively and advises Alexander to fight on the sea, but the sovereign reads the sign in a different way and decides not to engage in a naval battle with the Persians, because the bird had appeared when still on the ground.³⁹ The appearance of an eagle in favour of Alexander's success is an event that can also be found on the occasion of the great clash at Gaugamela: the soothsayer Aristander reported that this bird was hovering on the head of the sovereign and that it flew straight against the enemies, thus infusing much courage in the soldiers.⁴⁰ In another occasion, during the siege of Halicarnassus, a swallow flew over Alexander's head while he was asleep and was trying to shoo her away with his hand; Aristander himself explained then that this indicated a plot of one of his friends, which would however be discovered.⁴¹ During Gaza's conquest, while Alexander was celebrating a sacrifice and was about to slay the victim, a bird of prey flying over the altar dropped a stone on his head, a sign that the king would conquer the city but that he had to pay attention to his person.⁴² A similar anecdote reports that the Macedonian king was hit on his shoulder by a clod of dirt dropped by a bird, which then became entangled in a rope net. Here, too, reference is made to the rightness of the divinator Aristander's prediction.⁴³

In the context of the apparitions of birds as harbingers of omens, there is an event mentioned by many sources.⁴⁴ When the Macedonian army was marching towards the temple of Ammon in a desert area, as it was difficult to see the road in the sand, the guides announced that some

³³D. S. XVII 10. 2–3; Ael. VH XII 57.

³⁴D. S. XVII 10. 4.

³⁵D. S. XVII 10. 4; Ael. VH XII 57.

³⁶D. S. XVII 10. 5: the reference remains obscure.

³⁷Ael. VH XII 57.

³⁸D. S. XVII 10. 5.

³⁹Arr. An. I 18. 6.

⁴⁰Plu. Alex. 33.

⁴¹Arr. An. I 25. 8.

⁴²Arr. An. II 26. 4.

⁴³Plu. Alex. 25.

⁴⁴D. S. XVII 49. 4–6; Plu. Alex. 27; Arr. An. III 3. 5–6; Curt. IV 7. 13–15.



crows were indicating the route to follow and the king also considered this as a positive sign.⁴⁵ Arrian first reports the account of Ptolemy, son of Lagus, that there were two snakes at the head of the army, and then another version, attributed to Aristobulus, that tells about two ravens.⁴⁶ On this occasion, Arrian claims that the divine intervention in favour of Alexander was likely, but the variety of the versions could cast doubts on the exact truth of the narrative.⁴⁷ The discussion on the credibility of these facts, as reported by Arrian, suggests what must have been typical of Greek thought, namely that one could not question that Alexander was predestinated by gods to great achievements or to rule the world.⁴⁸

Regarding the episode of Alexander's visit to the temple of Ammon, there is another premonition that is said to have occurred during his journey in the desert: suddenly a heavy rain fell that quenched the terrible thirst of the soldiers. This fact is also interpreted as a divine sign.⁴⁹

The *Alexander Romance* also informs us of some talking birds that warn the Macedonian king against certain actions. For example, when he arrived on the Islands of the Blessed (*νησοι μακάρων*), two birds with a human face warned him to go back, because that land belonged to the gods.⁵⁰ Another story tells that Alexander, being in the Land of the Blessed⁵¹ and wondering if the boundary of the earth was there and if the sky ended there, fabricated a flying device that he fastened to the necks of two strange, huge, birds in order to be carried up in the air. During this extraordinary flight he met a winged and anthropomorphic being who said to him: "Maybe because you can't conquer the earth you are looking for the heavenly regions? Go back down quickly if you don't want to become a meal for these birds! And look down - he says - towards the earth."⁵² Alexander saw a big snake and in its coils a small disc; the being invited him to throw the spear towards the disc, because this was the *kosmos* and the snake was the sea that revolves around the earth. So Alexander went down to the earth again. Even this story, as we can see, highlights the insurmountable limit that Alexander cannot overcome. In the same perspective there is also another narrative, which is worth mentioning. Near the port of Lyssos in a temple adorned with precious stones, Alexander found a talking bird locked in a golden cage which urged him not to oppose the gods and to return home without struggling to "climb the streets of heaven".⁵³ In both cases, the symbolic value of the narratives is evident: Alexander must not exceed the limits that the gods have imposed on him, nor can he access a dimension that does not belong to him.

⁴⁵D. S. XVII 49. 5–6; Plu. *Alex.* 27; Curt. IV 7. 15.

⁴⁶Arr. *An.* III 3. 5–6. At the beginning of his *Anabasis* Arrian declares that the most truthful stories about Alexander the Great are those of Ptolemy, son of Lagus, and of Aristobulus (*An.* I 1). We can observe that Arrian states that he borrows from sources that follow the truth of the facts, but he also reports many prodigies and premonitions relating to the actions of Alexander, the same way as Diodorus Siculus, Plutarch, Curtius Rufus did.

⁴⁷Arr. *An.* III 3. 6.

⁴⁸Arr. *An.* VII 30. 2.

⁴⁹D. S. XVII 49. 4; Plu. *Alex.* 27; Curt. IV 7. 13.

⁵⁰Ps.-Callisth. II 40.

⁵¹Ps.-Callisth. II 41.

⁵²Ps.-Callisth. II 41: « Ἀλέξανδρε, τὰ ἐπίγεια μὴ γινώσκων, πῶς τὰ οὐράνια καταλαβεῖν ἐπιζητεῖς; ὑπόστρεψον οὖν δὲ τὰ χεῖρας ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν, μήπως ὀρνέοις τοῦτοις κατὰ βρομα γενήσῃ. Καὶ πάλιν, φησί, πρόσχεε ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν κάτω ».

⁵³Ps.-Callisth. III 28.



Many other presages refer to Alexander's victories obtained in the military campaigns. These include, but are not limited to, the extraordinary events that occur during the long and arduous siege of Tyre.⁵⁴ First, when the pier built by the Macedonians to connect the city to the mainland had reached a good length, a large wave cast a huge sea monster on the construction. Both the Tyrians and the Macedonians interpreted this phenomenon as a sign sent by Poseidon to their advantage.⁵⁵ Then, as the Macedonians were eating, the pieces of bread became the color of blood.⁵⁶ Finally, one of the inhabitants of the city reported he saw Apollo saying he was leaving, and so the fellow citizens tied the god's statue with gold chains at the base so as to prevent him – or so they thought – from going.⁵⁷ This latter detail is also told in other versions: one reports that Apollo appeared in a dream to the Tyrians to tell them he wanted to move to where Alexander was,⁵⁸ another specifies that the simulacrum of Apollo was tied with a gold chain to the altar of Heracles, with the belief that the latter deity could retain the former.⁵⁹ In this regard, it should be noted that, for a polytheistic culture, the removal of a god from his seat inside a city inevitably indicates the end of the same city, as it thus loses the sacred guarantor of its existence.

The end of Tyre, however, was led by Heracles himself, who appeared in a dream to Alexander calling him from the walls and shaking his right hand, or even driving him into the entrance to the city.⁶⁰ Among other premonitions, Alexander had a vision of a Satyr who mocked him and fled from him, but was then captured,⁶¹ and the guessers interpreted the term *σάτυρος* as *σὴ γενήσεται Τύρος*, or “Tyre will be yours”.⁶² According to a different tradition, the same extra-human being gave Alexander cheese, and then the king picked it up and trampled it under his foot; a soothsayer then interpreted the vision as the sign that Tyre would be subjected, by playing on the word *τυρός*, which usually means “cheese” but in this case also indicates the name of the city (*Τύρος*).⁶³

Apart from the fictional narrative details, in all these stories we can identify the idea, or the conception, that the conquest of Tyre could not be attributed only to the strategic ability of the Macedonian king, but in some way the divine favour also had a role in it.

DEATH OMENS FOR ALEXANDER

Narratives of exceptional events in the classical tradition about Alexander sometimes contain the representation of fatal omens that can also be interpreted as curses. This is also the case for

⁵⁴D. S. XVII 41. 5–8; Plu. *Alex.* 24. 5–7; Curt. IV 2. 13–14; 3. 21–22.

⁵⁵D. S. XVII 41. 7.

⁵⁶D.S. XVII 41. 7; Curt. IV 2. 14.

⁵⁷D. S. XVII 41. 7–8.

⁵⁸Plu. *Alex.* 24. 6–7.

⁵⁹Curt. IV 3. 21–22.

⁶⁰Plu. *Alex.* 24. 5; Arr. *An.* II 18. 1; Curt. IV 2. 17. See the study of AMITAY, O.: Why Did Alexander the Great Besiege Tyre? *Athenaeum* 96 (2008) 91–102.

⁶¹Plu. *Alex.* 24. 8.

⁶²Plu. *Alex.* 24. 9. The dream is also reported by Artem. IV 24.

⁶³Ps.-Callisth. I 35.



Alexander's ineluctable mortality. In particular, three events, mentioned by various authors, announce his imminent death.⁶⁴

- A) When Alexander was about to return to Babylon, the Chaldean astrologers, after foreshadowing that the king would die there,⁶⁵ revealed to him the danger and suggested that he not enter the city.⁶⁶ Alexander was frightened and wanted to obey, but many Greeks went to him, including the philosopher Anaxarchus and his followers, and they convinced him not to listen to the predictions; so Alexander entered Babylon with the whole army.⁶⁷ Needless to say, he would then have to repent his decision,⁶⁸ because shortly afterwards he died in Babylon.⁶⁹ According to another account, the Chaldeans warned the king not to enter the city facing the west, but to take a tour and return facing eastward; unfortunately he was unable to do so because of the marshy terrain all around.⁷⁰
- B) Just as Alexander had been anointed⁷¹ and the royal robe and the diadem had been placed on his throne, a chained man freed himself and entered the palace, approached the seat and, putting on those garments, sat on the throne for a long time;⁷² when Alexander asked for an explanation, he replied that he did not know;⁷³ so he was killed and the king took back his royal robe and sacrificed to the gods.⁷⁴ Plutarch, however, says that it was Serapis who released the man from his chains and ordered him to act that way.⁷⁵
- C) As Alexander wanted to see the swamp around Babylon, he sailed there with his friends.⁷⁶ His boat stayed there for a few days and he wandered alone, despairing of being able to save himself. When he crossed a narrow channel, covered by trees, his diadem became entangled in them and fell into the mud;⁷⁷ then an oarsman dived into the swamp and in order to secure the precious ornament, he put it on his head and swam back. Meanwhile, Alexander wandered for a few days, but was eventually saved; putting on his diadem again, he asked the

⁶⁴On this topic read O'CONNOR, L.: The Remains of Alexander the Great: The God, The King, The Symbol. *Constructing the Past* 10 (2009) 35–46.

⁶⁵According to D. S. XVII 112. 2 the Chaldeans consulted the stars, while in the account of Arr. *An.* VII 16. 5 an oracle of the god Belos revealed them the misfortune of the entrance into Babylon.

⁶⁶D. S. XVII 112. 2–5; Plu. *Alex.* 73. 1; Arr. *An.* VII 16. 5–6.

⁶⁷D. S. XVII 112. 4–5.

⁶⁸Alexander's critical reflection on the Greek philosophers that had convinced him to enter Babylon is in D. S. XVII 116. 4.

⁶⁹D. S. XVII 117; Plu. *Alex.* 75; Arr. *An.* VII 25–26.

⁷⁰Arr. *An.* VII 16. 6–7. In App. *BC* II 153 there is a similar story with an epilogue according to which after entering Babylon Alexander descended by boat the Euphrates and reached the Pallacotta, but when he returned to town, he died.

⁷¹D. S. XVII 116. 2. Plutarch reports that Alexander undressed to get anointed and started playing ball (*Alex.* 73. 7). In the narrative of Arr. *An.* VII 24. 1 Alexander leaves the throne for thirst.

⁷²D. S. XVII 116. 3; Plu. *Alex.* 73. 7–8; Arr. *An.* VII 24. 2–3.

⁷³D. S. XVII 116. 4; Arr. *An.* VII 24. 3.

⁷⁴D. S. XVII 116. 4. In Plu. *Alex.* 74. 1 we read that the man was eliminated.

⁷⁵Plu. *Alex.* 73. 9.

⁷⁶D. S. XVII 116. 6–7; Arr. *An.* VII 22. 3–4; App. *Syr.* 56.

⁷⁷D. S. XVII 116. 6. Arr. *An.* VII 22. 2 says that the diadem is pushed by the wind and gets entangled in one of the reeds near the tomb of an ancient Assyrian king. See also App. *Syr.* 56.



soothsayers for a prediction about his future.⁷⁸ According to the various traditions reported by Arrian, Alexander gave the sailor a talent as a reward, but ordered the same man to have his head cut off, or to be beaten.⁷⁹

As to the testimonies just reported, it should be noted that the symbolism of objects such as the diadem (*διάδημα*), the royal robe (*βασιλική ἐσθής*) and the throne (*θρόνος*), that are in different ways at risk, either by an accidental fall, or because someone inappropriately takes possession of them, is clear: without his regal insignia and the power he holds the king has no reason to exist. Therefore Alexander, deprived of his headgear, mantel and throne, can do nothing but disappear.

A further series of events that announce the end of the Macedonian king can be found in Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*: a) he sees some ravens who, fighting on the walls of Babylon, fall at his feet;⁸⁰ b) the soothsayer Pythagoras, making a sacrifice to learn about Alexander's fate, points out as a bad sign the fact that the liver of the victim is without lobes;⁸¹ c) a mild donkey kills the king's biggest and most beautiful lion.⁸²

Lastly, we can examine the bad omens mentioned in the *Alexander Romance*. These too refer to the theme of Alexander's mortality and the end of his sovereignty. The most significant of the episodes is the consultation of the talking trees of the Sun and the Moon that predict his death in Babylon at the hands of his companions, and the impossibility of seeing again his mother Olympias who was to be killed after him by his peers along with his own wife.⁸³ This singular event is also reported in the *Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem*, where the prophetic voice of the Sun's tree calls him twice "lord of the world" (*dominus orbis terrarum*).⁸⁴ The invincibility of the king is irrevocably subjected to the condition of the finiteness of human life.

On another occasion, Alexander arrives at the place where the gods presumably dwell and meets the king Sesonchosis⁸⁵ who introduces himself as *kosmokrator* and praises Alexander's luck in obtaining the immortality of his name by founding the city of Alexandria. When Alexander asks him about his death, he adds that it is better not to know the time of the end. He then prefigures the immense fortune of the city where the Macedonian king would live as a dead man, but without being really dead because the city's foundation would be his funeral monument. Once again, the motif of the sovereign's death was linked to the imperishable fame of his deeds.

A terrible prodigy occurred when Alexander arrived in Babylon: a monstrous child, similar to Skyle, was born with a dead face, and the bottom of its body was made up of the heads of

⁷⁸D. S. XVII 116. 7; Arr. An. VII 22. 4; App. Syr. 56.

⁷⁹Arr. An. VII 22. 4. The same passage also reports the version that Seleucus was the one to recover the diadem and this meant the death of Alexander and the prophecy of a great kingdom for his successor (An. VII 22. 5). A similar story is also provided by App. Syr. 56.

⁸⁰Plu. Alex. 73. 2.

⁸¹Plu. Alex. 73. 3–4; Arr. An. VII 18. 3–4.

⁸²Plu. Alex. 73. 6.

⁸³Ps.-Callisth. III 17.

⁸⁴See *Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem*. Ad codicum fidem edidit et commentario critico instruxit W. WALTHER BOER. Meisenheim am Glan 1973, 46 and 51.

⁸⁵Ps.-Callisth. III 24.



lions and dogs. Among the soothsayers, one declared to Alexander that he should consider himself no longer alive.⁸⁶

Finally, before his last sleep a cloud appeared in the air along with a great star that first descended toward the sea and then went up into the sky with an eagle that accompanied it. In the meantime, the statue of Zeus in Babylon moved.⁸⁷ This is the way in which the life of Alexander ends in the long recension β of the *Alexander Romance* by Pseudo-Callisthenes,⁸⁸ whose ideological significance clearly lies in the image of the Macedonian king as winner and ruler of the world, but perishable, like all other human beings.

Diodorus' comment on the divine premonitions about Alexander's death is significant and leads us to believe that this is the correct key to interpret these narratives: when the king appears to have reached the climax of his power and happiness, destiny shortens the time that nature allowed him to live.⁸⁹ A similar remark is found in Arrian's explanation of the oracle of the Chaldeans: the historian says that the *daimonion* led him to where he was to die, and that perhaps it was better for him to disappear at the height of the fame and of his people's admiration, before some human misfortune could happen to him.⁹⁰

The observations in the last chapter of Arrian's *Anabasis* summarize the sense of the figurative, ideal, paradigmatic construction created around Alexander. Let us look again at the conceptual cores: Alexander became the undisputed lord of two continents and achieved the highest fame, his name was known world-wide, and so he had to be born with divine help. This was proved by oracles, visions, and dreams that surrounded his existence, as well as by the honor attributed to him by men and by his lasting memory.⁹¹ The man's greatness lies essentially in the

⁸⁶Ps.-Callisth. III 30. Cf. Isid. Orig. XI 3, 5. The prodigy also appears in the work *De morte testamentoque Alexandri Magni* (chapter 90): see the edition by THOMAS, P. H.: *Incerti auctoris Epitoma rerum gestarum Alexandri Magni cum libro de morte testamentoque Alexandri*. Lipsiae 1966. On the meaning of the omen, read BAYNHAM, E.: *A Baleful Birth in Babylon. The Significance of the Prodigy in the Liber de Morte-An Investigation of Genre*. In BOSWORTH, A. B. – BAYNHAM, E. J. (edd.): *Alexander the Great in Fact and Fiction*, Oxford – New York 2000.

⁸⁷Ps.-Callisth. III 33.

⁸⁸What is commonly called the *Alexander Romance* is actually attributed to Callisthenes, Aristotle's nephew, only in the codes of the β -recension. Read the introduction by STONEMAN in STONEMAN–GARGIULO (n. 5) LII–LVI.

⁸⁹D. S. XVII 116. 1: "After the funeral, the king turned to amusements and festivals, but just when it seemed that he was at the peak of his power and good fortune, Fate cut off the time allowed him by nature to remain alive. Straightway heaven also began to foretell his death, and many strange portents and signs occurred" (Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*. Trans. by C. H. OLDATHER. London–Cambridge, MA 1933).

⁹⁰Arr. An. VII 16. 7: "But fate led to him the way on which he was doomed to die. And possibly it was better for him to die in the height of his fame and of the general regard of mankind before any ordinary disaster befell him" (Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandri. Indica*. Trans. by E. ILIF ROBSON. London–Cambridge, MA 1933).

⁹¹Arr. An. VII 30. 1–2: "but gathering all that Alexander did into a single whole; let such a one consider first himself, his own personality, his own fortunes, and then on the other hand Alexander, what he became, and the height of human prosperity which he reached, having made himself king, beyond all contradiction, of both continents, and having spread his fame over the widest possible span; let such a one, I say, consider of whom he speaks evil; himself being more puny, and busied about puny things, and not even bringing these to success. For I myself believe that there was at that time no race of mankind, no city, no single individual, whither the name of Alexander had not reached. And so not even I can suppose that a man quite beyond all other men was born without some divine influence. Moreover, oracles are said to have prophesied Alexander's death, and visions coming to different persons, and dreams, dreamed by different persons; there was also the general regard of mankind leading to this same conclusion, made the memory of one more than human" (trans. by E. ILIF ROBSON).



vastness of his domains and in his personal success, but this could not have happened without the intervention of a god. Therefore, the importance of the omens is a sign that his actions shift to the dimension of the “otherness”.

We are thus faced with the definition of a figure in which the superhuman nature prevails, and where the limit of mortality is overcome: a) on the ideal level, through the reference to his divine origin; b) on the historical level, through the evocation of a perpetual memory.

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