

13.4. Plutarch / Death of Alexander

Alexander died even more unexpectedly than his father, when his preparations for a hellenizing kingdom of Asia, Macedon, and Egypt were still very much in progress. With no provisions for succession and his intended heir still in the womb,, Alexander's vast empire quickly became disputed among his generals.

Plut. *Alex.* 73-77. Source: Plutarch. *Parallel Lives*, vol. 7. Translated by by Bernadotte Perrin. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge U. Press. 1919.

73) As he was on his way to enter Babylon, Nearchus (who had joined him again after sailing through the ocean into the Euphrates) told the king that certain Chaldaeans had met him and advised that Alexander should keep away from Babylon.¹ Alexander paid no heed to this, but continued on his march; and when he was arrived at the walls, he saw many ravens flying about and clawing one another, and some of them fell dead at his feet. Again, being informed that Apollodorus the commandant of Babylon had sacrificed to learn Alexander's fate, Alexander called Pythagoras the seer. Pythagoras did not deny the fact, whereupon Alexander asked him what was the character of the sacrifice. And when the seer told that the victim's liver had no lobe, "Ah me!" said Alexander, "a forcible omen!" and did Pythagoras no harm. He was sorry, too, that he had not obeyed Nearchus, and passed most of his time outside of Babylon, either living in his tent, or sailing about on the Euphrates. And he was troubled by many omens. For instance, the largest and handsomest lion in his menagerie was attacked by a tame ass and kicked to death. Again, he once took off his clothes for exercise and was playing ball, and when it was time to dress again, the young men who were playing with him beheld a man seated on the king's throne, in silence, wearing the royal diadem and robes. When the man was asked who he was, he was speechless for a long time; but at last he came to his senses and said that his name was Dionysius, and that he was a native of Messenia; in consequence of some charge brought against him, he said, he had been brought thither from the sea-board, and for a long time had been in chains; but just now the god Serapis had come to him and loosed his chains and brought him to this spot, bidding him put on the robe and diadem and sit on the throne and hold his peace.

74) On hearing of this, Alexander put the man out of the way, as the seers directed; but he began to be low-spirited, and was distrustful now of the favour of Heaven and suspicious of his friends. He was particularly afraid of Antipater and of his sons, one of whom, Iolas, was his chief cupbearer; the other, Cassander, had only recently come to Babylon, and when he saw some Barbarians doing obeisance to Alexander, since he had been reared as a Greek and had never seen such a sight as this before, he laughed boisterously. But Alexander was enraged, and clutching him fiercely by the hair with both hands dashed his head against the wall. And at another time, when Cassander would have said something in opposition to those who were bringing charges against Antipater, Alexander interrupted him, saying: "What meanest thou? Would men

come so long a journey if they had not been wronged and were making false charges?" And when Cassander declared that this very fact of their coming a long distance away from the proofs showed that they were making false charges, Alexander burst out laughing and said: "These are the famous sophisms of Aristotle's disciples for either side of the question; but ye shall rue the day if it appear that ye have done these men even a slight wrong." And in general, as we are told, Cassander's spirit was deeply penetrated and imbued with a dreadful fear of Alexander, so that many years afterwards, when he was now king of Macedonia and master of Greece, as he was walking about and surveying the statues at Delphi, the sight of an image of Alexander smote him suddenly with a shuddering and trembling from which he could scarcely recover, and made his head swim.

75) Alexander, then, since he had now become sensitive to indications of the divine will and perturbed and apprehensive in his mind, converted every unusual and strange occurrence, were it never so insignificant, into a prodigy and portent; and sacrificers, purifiers, and diviners filled his palace. So, you see, while it is a dire thing to be incredulous towards indications of the divine will and to have contempt for them, superstition is likewise a dire thing, which, after the manner of water ever seeking the lower levels, filled with folly the Alexander who was now become a prey to his fears. Notwithstanding, in consequence of oracular responses regarding Hephaestion which were brought him, he laid aside his grief and betook himself once more to sacrifices and drinking-bouts. He gave a splendid entertainment to Nearchus, and then, although he had taken his customary bath before going to bed, at the request of Medius he went to hold high revel with him; and here, after drinking all the next day, he began to have a fever. This did not come upon him after he had quaffed a "bowl of Heracles," nor after he had been seized with a sudden pain in the back as though smitten with a spear; these particulars certain writers felt obliged to give, and so, as it were, invented in tragic fashion a moving finale for a great action. But Aristobulus says that he had a raging fever, and that when he got very thirsty he drank wine, whereupon he became delirious, and died on the thirtieth day of the month Daesius.

76) Moreover, in the court "Journals" there are recorded the following particulars regarding his sickness. On the eighteenth of the month Daesius² he slept in the bathing-room because he had a fever. On the following day, after his bath, he removed into his bed-chamber, and spent the day at dice with Medius. Then, when it was late, he took a bath, performed his sacrifices to the gods, ate a little, and had a fever through the night. On the twentieth, after bathing again, he performed his customary sacrifice; and lying in the bathing-room he devoted himself to Nearchus, listening to his story of his voyage and of the great sea. The twenty-first he spent in the same way and was still more inflamed, and during the night he was in a grievous plight, and all the following day his fever was very high. So he had his bed removed and lay by the side of the great bath, where he

¹ According to Arrian (*Anab.* VII.16.5), the Chaldaeans besought Alexander in person to suspend his march to Babylon. It was in the spring of 323 BCE.

² June 323 BCE.

conversed with his officers about the vacant posts in the army, and how they might be filled with experienced men. On the twenty-fourth his fever was violent and he had to be carried forth to perform his sacrifices; moreover, he ordered his principal officers to tarry in the court of the palace, and the commanders of divisions and companies to spend the night outside. He was carried to the palace on the other side of the river on the twenty-fifth, and got a little sleep, but his fever did not abate. And when his commanders came to his bedside, he was speechless, as he was also on the twenty-sixth; therefore the Macedonians made up their minds that he was dead, and came with loud shouts to the doors of the palace, and threatened his companions until all opposition was broken down; and when the doors had been thrown open to them, without cloak or armour, one by one, they all filed slowly past his couch. During this day, too, Python and Seleucus were sent to the temple of Serapis to enquire whether they should bring Alexander thither; and the god gave answer that they should leave him where he was. And on the twenty-eighth, towards evening, he died.

77) Most of this account is word for word as written in the "Journals." And as for suspicions of poisoning, no one had any immediately, but five years afterwards, as we are told, upon information given, Olympias put many men to death, and scattered abroad the ashes of Iolas, alleging that he had administered the poison. But those who affirm that Aristotle counselled Antipater to do the deed, and that it was entirely through his agency that the poison was provided, mention one

Hagnothemis as their authority, who professed to have heard the story from Antigonus the king; and the poison was water, icy cold, from a certain cliff in Nonacris; this they gathered up like a delicate dew and stored it in an ass's hoof; for no other vessel would hold the water, but would all be eaten through by it, owing to its coldness and pungency. Most writers, however, think that the story of the poisoning is altogether a fabrication; and it is no slight evidence in their favour that during the dissensions of Alexander's commanders, which lasted many days, his body, although it lay without special care in places that were moist and stifling, showed no sign of such a destructive influence, but remained pure and fresh.

Now, Roxana was with child, and on this account was held in honour among the Macedonians; but she was jealous of Stateira, and therefore deceived her by a forged letter into coming where she was, and when she had got her there, slew her, together with her sister, threw their bodies into the well, and filled the well with earth, Perdiccas being privy to the deed and partner in it. For it was he who was at once in the greatest authority, dragging Arrhidaeus around after him to safe-guard, as it were, the royal power. Arrhidaeus was Philip's son by an obscure and common woman named Philinna, and was deficient in intellect owing to bodily disease. This, however, did not come upon him in the course of nature or of its own accord, indeed, it is said that as a boy he displayed an exceedingly gifted and noble disposition: but afterwards Olympias gave him drugs which injured his body and ruined his mind.