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ALEXANDER THE GREAT: CONQUEST AND DIVINITY

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## ABSTRACT

In only a short nineteen years, Alexander the Great managed to bridge two different worlds under one empire that spanned from Greece to India. By bringing the vast Persian empire with the Greek western one under a single ruler-ship he was forced to reconcile the conflicting ideologies of the areas. The reconciliation of these cultures social and religious norms weighed heavily on Alexander and influenced the manner in which he administered his empire as well as how he came to view himself as a ruler. What stands out is the shift in personality and views of his own divinity and its relation to his place as emperor. From the ancient histories of Arrian, Plutarch and Curtius, writing long after his passing, Alexander's changing sentiments about himself and how he should be viewed among his subjects becomes clear, but what is significant is the factors that influenced these changes in perception. I will seek to demonstrate that Alexander's push to confirm his own divinity was at first, a strongly politically motivated move to establish he supremacy over his eastern and western empires, however, as he saw more success and his empire began to stretch further east, his concepts of establishing his divinity turned more ego-driven as he tried to affirm to himself and the empire that he did indeed have divine origins and should occupy a place among the gods for his exploits as a man. The evolution of his views concerning his connections to the divine and how closely they became tied to his position of power in the new empire are demonstrated by four significant events in Alexander's campaign across Asia: the untying of the Gordian Knot, the revelation of the oracle of Siwah, Alexander's request of prostration by his troops and Alexander's speech given at the refusal of his troops to continue the campaign.

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## **Alexander the Great: Conquest and Divinity**

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### **Introduction**

In only nineteen short years, Alexander the Great managed to join two vastly different worlds under one empire that spanned from Greece to India. By uniting the vast Persian Empire with the Greek western one under a single entity he was forced to reconcile the conflicting ideologies of the areas. The clash between the eastern and western worlds was political, cultural and religious. The two sides represent different belief systems and cultural mores that more often than not were on completely opposite sides of the political and social spectrum. What one side saw as vulgar and reprehensible the other saw as socially acceptable and the societal norm. Intertwined with these social ideals were the political histories and customs associated with each. Alexander had to balance the democratic ideals of the Greek west with the kingship and despotism of the Persian and other eastern rulers. Of central importance was the difference between the two areas in their religious belief systems.

The Greeks maintained a tradition of polytheism with anthropomorphic gods who were omnipresent in their lives. Their myths portray the gods as having a significant role in daily life and frequently intervening on behalf of those mortals they cared for. The imagined past of the Greek Heroic Age had within it mortals who achieved god-hood as well as many demigods born of mortal women with immortal fathers. Zeus was the most prolific father of these demigods and sired many children

by mortal women; Alexander in fact was rumored to be one of his sons. However, in order to prove his divine heritage a mortal man had to achieve a level of greatness unsurpassed by his peers. In the east, the massive Persian Empire had a dualistic religion called Zoroastrianism, with two central deities Ahuramazda and Arhiman. Other large groups he brought under his control, like the Egyptian and Indian peoples, too had a religion of polytheism, however the eastern worlds belief system was vastly different than that of the Greeks. The reconciliation of these cultural, social and religious norms weighed heavily on Alexander and influenced the manner in which he administered his empire as well as how he came to view himself as a ruler. What stands out in Alexander is the shift in personality and view of his own divinity and its relation to his place as emperor. From the ancient histories of Arrian, Plutarch and Curtius writing long after Alexander's conquests, Alexander's changing sentiments about himself and how he should be viewed among his subjects becomes clear, but what is significant are the factors that influenced these changes in perception. I will seek to demonstrate that Alexander's push to confirm his own divinity was at first, a strongly politically motivated move to establish his supremacy over his eastern and western empires. However, as he saw more success and his empire began to stretch further east, his concepts of establishing his divinity became more ego-driven as he tried to affirm to himself and the empire that he did indeed have divine origins and should occupy a place among the gods for his exploits as a man. The investigation must begin by examining Alexander's

childhood and the earliest hints made to Alexander concerning his possible divine origins and the extent to which he believed them.

### **I. Alexander's Childhood**

Alexander was the son of Philip II, king of Macedonia, and Olympias, his fourth wife and a princess from Epirus a region west of Macedonia. From the time of his birth he was surrounded by suspicions of divinity. It was said that when he was born, the temple of Artemis at Ephesus burned down and the story goes that Artemis allowed this to happen because she was busy delivering Alexander into this world (Plutarch 3.5-9). Another story was that on the night before their wedding both Philip and Olympias had dreams about the coming of Alexander. Olympias dreamt that of a lightning bolt, the symbol of Zeus, struck her womb, while Philip dreamt that he sealed his wife's womb with a wax seal in the shape of a lion. One final story really exemplifies the mystique around Alexander. The lore goes that Philip witnessed a snake lying next to his wife in bed (Zeus Ammon in disguise) and that following this Olympias became pregnant. (Plutarch 2.6). These stories lay the foundation for the supposed divine heritage Alexander would later try to affirm in the eyes of those he conquered. Along with these tales of divine hands in his birth were the traditional divine bloods-lines that Alexander inherited from his parents. On his father's side he was said to descend from Heracles and Zeus, while on his mother's side his lineage was traced back to Achilles (Worthington 27). The importance of these great heroes to Alexander cannot be

overstated as they formed the basis by which Alexander measured his exploits and success and tried to legitimize his claim to god-hood. Alexander's education under Aristotle, as well as other instructors, impacted the youth's views of the divine's presence in the life of great kings.

Rather than being taught in the capital of Pella, Alexander was instructed by Aristotle in his school in Mieza part of the Gardens of Midas, the legendary king of Phrygia, a location that may have had a great influence on Alexander's future political maneuvers (Worthington 25). Aristotle impressed upon Alexander the importance of emulating the great heroes he descended from, Heracles and Achilles, a sentiment earlier ingrained by prior tutors his mother had selected (Fredericksmeyer 255). Aristotle's emphasis on the heroes deeds of the *Iliad*, his main handbook for Alexander's instruction, placed in Alexander a fire to strive and demonstrate his worth by equaling if not surpassing the exploits of his ancestors and attain the same "hero" status that they held (Fredericksmeyer 255). In his *Politics*, Aristotle, put forth the idea that a true king should be seen as a god among men, and there can be little doubt that under his tutelage Alexander was made aware of these beliefs and that he incorporated them into his own views about kingship and divinity (Aristotle 3.13). With all of the grandeur around him and the stories floating around concerning his divinity there is no doubt that the young and impressionable Alexander felt that there was something unique and special about him, perhaps not enough to warrant considering himself a god or even close to one at such an early age, but nevertheless the foundations had been laid for



how Alexander would perceive himself and his accomplishments in the future. Coupled with the religious familial affiliations thrust upon him was Alexander's own personal adherence to his religion.

While the tales concerning his birth and his divinity sent through dreams and visions were most likely political propaganda passed on by Philip and Olympia, Alexander's parents were strict devotees of their religion, and this too was passed on to the young man. Philip sacrificed to Olympian Zeus after victories, and sought to wage a "Sacred War" against the Persians in the name of the god Apollo, carrying out divine justice for not only for their war against the Greeks, but also for the destruction of Greek temples (Fredricksmeyer 254). To gain divine approval he requested an answer from the Delphic Oracle, the earthly voice for Apollo, who said indeed the gods approved (Diodorus 16.91.2-4). While Philip may have had political aims of avoiding Greek opposition to Macedonian rule by seeking retribution for them, it demonstrated to Alexander the importance of appealing to the customs of those you are seeking to subjugate in order to decrease opposition to ones authority. Olympias too had a considerable hand in developing and directing the path Alexander's personal religious conviction took. It was she who placed the doubt in Alexander's mind that Philip was his real father, and that instead he was Zeus's son. Philip, however, seems to have had the greatest impact on how Alexander may have viewed his place among the divine.

On the day of Philip's assassination, which coincided with wedding day of his daughter, Philip held a procession in which the twelve statues of the gods were carried,

and along with them a statue of Philip himself on the same level and stature as the gods. Perhaps the implication offered by having his statue on the same standing as that of the gods was an allusion to Philip's belief that if not for his achievements already, with a successful campaign against the Persian king he should be honored as a god (Fredericksmeyer 255). Alexander was present for the whole event and he clearly understood the message his father was conveying and the implications for divinity that a successful campaign against the Persian would mean for the king. With this as a backdrop, Alexander picked up the plans left by his murdered father and began the assault on the Persian Empire, framing it as a holy war for the wrongs done against the Greeks and their gods, but also as a campaign to establish himself as a conqueror greater than his illustrious father. The extent to which the religious indoctrination and mythical lineage that made up the psyche of Alexander was at play as he swept across Asia is important, but of an even more central focus is how much these factors were part of his political maneuvering during Alexander's continuation of the campaign after the Persians were defeated and establishment of himself as king of so great a territory.

## **II. Alexander and the Gordian Knot**

The evolution of Alexander's views concerning his connections to the divine and how closely they became tied to his position of power in the new empire is demonstrated by four significant events in his campaign across Asia: the untying of the Gordian Knot, the revelation of the oracle of Siwah, his request of prostration by his troops and his speech

given at the refusal of his troops to continue the campaign. First, I will examine Alexander and the significance of travel to Gordium, whose fullest account is given to us by the author Arrian. Arrian's account says that upon arriving at Gordium a city in Phrygia, and the land of the legendary king Midas and his father Gordius, Alexander was "seized with an ardent desire to go up to the citadel to the palaces of Gordius and Midas," but also to see the Gordian knot, the mythical yoke of Gordius's ox cart. (2.3.1)

The legend behind the knot was related to him in this way:

It was said that Gordius was a poor man among the ancient Phrygians, who had a small piece of land to till, and two yoke of oxen. He used one of these in ploughing and the other to draw the wagon. On one occasion, while he was ploughing, an eagle settled upon the yoke, and remained sitting there until the time came for unyoking the oxen. Being alarmed at the sight, he went to the Telmissian soothsayers to consult them about the sign from the deity; for the Telmissians were skillful in interpreting the meaning of Divine manifestations, and the power of divination has been bestowed not only upon the men, but also upon their wives and children from generation to generation. When Gordius was driving his wagon near a certain village of the Telmissians, he met a maiden fetching water from the spring, and to her he related how the sign of the eagle had appeared to him. As she herself was of the prophetic race, she instructed him to return to the very spot and offer sacrifice to Zeus the king. Gordius requested her to accompany him and

direct him how to perform the sacrifice. He offered the sacrifice in the way the girl suggested, and afterwards married her. (Arrian 2.3.1-5)

Years later an oracle was given in Phrygia, which had fallen into social unrest, that a man arriving in a cart would be their king and bring them stability. Gordius arrived with his son Midas and wife in his ox cart, upon which the eagle had landed, and the Phrygians saw this as the fulfillment of their oracle and appointed Midas as their king. So, to the Phrygians the cart and the yoke came to be markers of the great kingship of Midas. In the years after Midas an oracle was given about the knot on which the eagle of Zeus had landed that said whoever was able to untie the knot was destined to rule over all of Asia. Alexander heard this prophecy and decided to try his hand at the knot and as Arrian reports "Alexander could find out no way to loosen the cord and yet was unwilling to allow it to remain unloosened, lest this should exercise some disturbing influence upon the multitude, he struck it with his sword and cutting it through, said that it had been loosened" (2.3.7). In both Plutarch and Curtius's accounts the both the untying of the knot and the oracle that went along with it are only briefly mentioned. Plutarch's story follows closely to Arrian's saying Alexander cut through the knot ultimately, but Curtius's words offer a slightly different view of Alexander's mindset about the event, namely that he saw a great opportunity to prove himself, a sentiment not as strongly presented in Arrian's account.

Curtius says that after hearing the prophecy that whoever untied the knot would rule all of Asia "the desire entered Alexander's mind of fulfilling that prophecy" (3.15-

16). Further, Curtius's account demonstrates a level of uncertainty present among the Macedonian troops Alexander had with him, who were filled with "anxiety because of the king's rash self-confidence", and among the Phrygians a sense of anticipation to see if indeed Alexander could fulfill the prophecy. All three accounts demonstrate that Alexander did struggle with untying the knot, but only Arrian and Curtius say that he feared it would be seen as a bad omen if he was not successful in undoing the knot. Another interesting feature about Curtius and Arrian's retellings, but not Plutarch's is that the former make clear that there was an ambiguous feeling about whether or not Alexander had indeed fulfilled the knot's prophecy. Arrian says "...at any rate both he and his troops departed from the wagon as if the oracular prediction concerning the loosening of the cord had been fulfilled", while Curtius makes it a little more clear saying the oracle had either been "tricked or fulfilled" (2.3.8)(3.18). Arrian however seems to cement in his reader the fact that Alexander had been successful, saying, "that very night, the thunder and lightning were signs of its fulfillment"(2.3.8). It is clear that until he arrived in Gordium, Alexander had no previous knowledge of the knot's oracle. So then, why did he make the trek to the city of Midas? I believe this stop was a highly intricate political move made not in an attempt to stroke his own ego or add to his own legend, but rather to legitimize himself in the eyes of the new audience, much like Philip had attempted by undertaking a war against Persia to win over the Greeks. By looking at the images surrounding not only the knot, but Midas and his ascension to the

kingship of Phrygia, Alexander's motives become much clearer. Let us first examine what Midas and his legend meant to Alexander and his own people, the Macedonians.

What makes Alexander's choice to untie the knot, a local legend only among the Phrygians, so unique is that the actual knot and its legend is noted only among the accounts of Arrian, Curtius and Plutarch and other Alexander historians (Munn 108). The cart, the knot and the oracle that whoever should untie it would rule all of Asia was not widely known among the Greeks and only became so after Alexander's visit. So, the important question becomes why would he undertake such a task that had no previous relevance to him, his troops or Greek counterparts (Munn 108)? The answer lies in the Macedonian's ties to the Phrygians and the memory of Midas.

Herodotus refers to the gardens of Midas, son of Gordius, being located in the Macedonian heartland, and that this Midas was the same as the Midas of Phrygia. To the Macedonians, the Phrygian people were descended from ancient peoples who were formerly their neighbors, and Midas was king of Macedonia and Phrygia by this ancestry, so there was a common heritage between the two peoples (Munn 110). Further, within the Homeric tradition of history, Midas's kingdom derived from the territory of the ancient Trojans, whom the Macedonians were allies of, and this memory coupled with the notion that the Phrygians were formerly neighbors of the Macedonians, heightened the feelings of kinship between the two areas (Munn 117-118). But, this ancient kinship connection was not the only thing in Alexander's mind when undertaking the journey to Gordium. He was waging war against the Persian

Empire with the hopes of incorporating its people with his Greek empire, and he realized that he need to legitimize himself to these Asiatic peoples with whom he had nothing concrete to relate to. Midas offered this connection. When the Persians took over the area that formerly had been Midas's, his legend was adapted to their history and he became a marker of great kingship. But, other aspects of his legend were adopted among the Persian rulers as signs of legitimacy that Alexander could exploit to legitimize himself in the eyes of the Asiatic people.

Arrian's account details how in the legend of Gordius, Midas's mother was the one who interpreted the oracle Gordius saw. She later became associated with the Phrygian mother goddess, who was known to the Greeks as Cybele, and thus Midas became the son of a goddess. Midas's legend as a great king, given his throne by the mother goddess, became the archetype for great rulership not only among the Macedonians but the Persians as well (Munn 122-123). The association of Midas as the archetype for great kingship and as the son of the mother goddess was ingrained in the Persian people following their conquest of Phrygia, and to the Persians, the mother goddess was a symbol of sovereignty that to gain popular support among those who occupied Phrygia later Persian kings associated themselves with. This can be seen through the proliferation of coins in the Persian Empire, interestingly Macedonian in origin, that depict a man in a cart, clearly Gordius or Midas in the ox cart (Munn 124-125). If Alexander had knowledge of this Persian association with kingship and Midas lore, which I will assume he did, then it becomes even more evident why he chose to

untie the knot. For Alexander, if he was successful in untying it, politically to the peoples of Macedonia who may have doubted him and his brashness and to the vast Asian lands that lay before him, he was playing directly to their notions of rightful and divinely sanctioned kingship. By associating himself with Midas and the mother goddess, two figures whose ties to kingship were well known among his own people, peripherally to the Greeks, and prominently to the people of Asia Minor, he would leave a mark in their minds that he was to be seen as great king, on par with Midas, and that he was destined to rule over Asia according to the oracle he fulfilled. The idea that his legend would be increased and that his divine connection to Zeus would be further legitimized seems to me only to have been an afterthought, or perhaps not even in his mind at all, when he decided to untie the knot. The addition in Arrian of thunder and lightning, symbols of Zeus, signaling that indeed the oracle had been fulfilled were mostly likely additions by the author put on later to add to the mystique of Alexander after the fact.

Alexander's excursion to Gordium presents an image of Alexander as a tactful politician, playing to his future constituents, and one that stands contrary to the brash and overly confident young man that Arrian and Curtius present in their histories. But, it would not be long before a change took place in Alexander that altered this dynamic and led him away from highly thought out, political maneuvering and rather to self-aggrandizement and a mission to confirm that he was indeed more than a mortal man. The next event that I will examine, Alexander's journey to the oracle of Zeus-Ammon at



Siwah in Egypt, shows the initial stage of Alexander's shift away from politically driven motives, to motives driven by his own ego and leave no doubt as to his place among the divine.

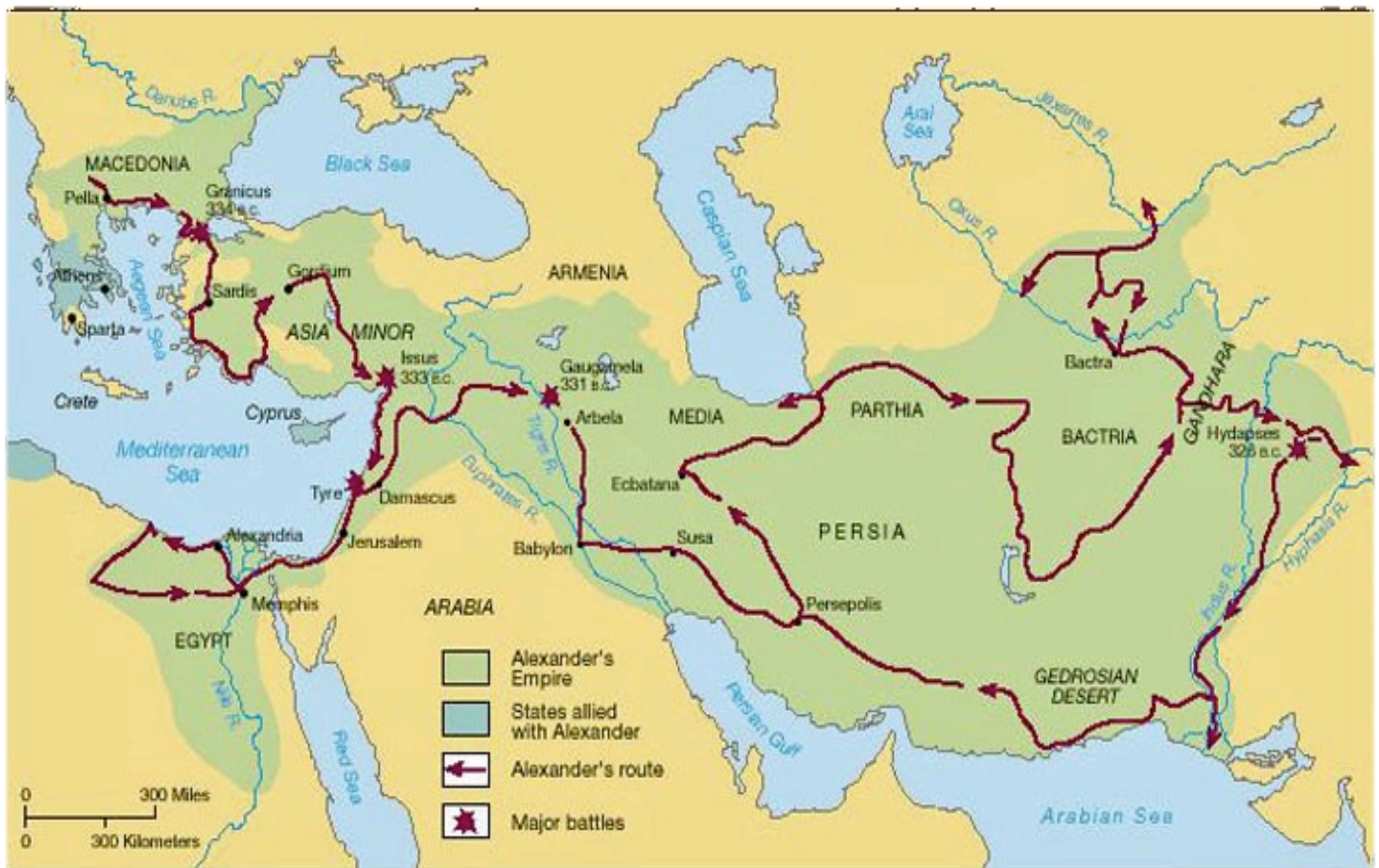
### **III. Alexander's Progress Through Asia**

Before going into detail about the actual events in Egypt it is important to look at the time line in which the event fits. Alexander's campaign into Asia began in 334 BCE with his victory at the Granicus River. He continued to push down the Ionian coast reaching Miletus and Halicarnassus in the same year then moving northeast. It was in this trek north in 333 BCE that Alexander stopped at Gordium and undid the knot. By the year's end, Alexander engaged the Persian king Darius at the Battle of Issus, which ended in a resounding victory and the flight of the Darius and capture of the his family. In the wake of this victory, Alexander turned his troops south and began a march to Egypt, encountering resistance in Tyre and Gaza but ultimately taking them over after long and arduous siege warfare. He arrived in Egypt near the end of the year 332 BCE and was welcomed by its people. It was in the following year, 331 BCE, that Alexander made his journey to Siwah, which would confirm his relationship as the son of Zeus. What is clear from his campaign is that he saw early success and following Gordium it only continued, culminating in the defeat of Darius at Issus and his smaller but hard-earned victories along the Levant on his way to Egypt. Arriving there, both he and his troops must have felt proud of their accomplishments, but also amazed by Alexander uncanny

ability to win as a general. After so many victories Alexander's former image as a brash young man was being replaced by one that saw him as an unconquerable leader, whose vision of controlling all of Asia was becoming a reality. At this point the oracle that he had fulfilled in Gordium must have begun to carry slightly more weight not along its political ideology, but in terms of its affirmation of a connection between Alexander and the divine.

The magnitude of what he had so far accomplished was in no way lost on Alexander nor was the praise he was receiving as a result of it. Perhaps now seeing that his enemy was in retreat and with the celebration that Alexander received in Egypt as a liberator, he saw his political situation firmly established. An important facet of his liberation of Egypt, that is not attested in any of his histories yet seems to only make sense by virtue of Egyptian custom, is that Alexander was seen as pharaoh by the Egyptians and garnered all the honors that came with it, including being seen as a god on earth and receiving worship as such from his Egyptian subjects (Worthington 202). Now that he no longer needed to work as hard to establish his legitimacy among those he liberated from the Persian yoke, he could turn to part of his reason for undertaking the whole expedition, trying to build a reputation that rivaled that of his father or any man known up to that time. If this was indeed his intention, the news from the formerly silent oracle of Apollo at Didyma, proclaiming that he was the son of Zeus, came at the perfect time for Alexander. It coincided with the new Egyptian view of Alexander as a god on earth, and more importantly as the son of Ammon, the Egyptian counterpart to Zeus.

Following this news, which was most likely manufactured by Alexander himself, he announced his travel to Siwah to “confirm” the oracle’s words (Worthington 203). The story behind the oracle itself also gives credence to the position that Alexander was turning his attention away from the political aspect of his campaign and to the establishment of his own mythology, a move made possible because of his multiply victories and the relatively little resistance to his authority that he faced upon arriving in Egypt.



#### IV. Alexander Travels to Egypt

The news of his divine father came from the oracle of Apollo at Didyma, which he had visited two years earlier in 334BCE when he was traveling from Miletus to Halicarnassus, a stop unattested to in Plutarch, Curtius or Arrian and related through Alexander's own historian Callisthenes. Much like Gordium, Didyma was a tangent for Alexander to have taken unless it had some other importance in the larger scheme of his conquest. The oracle there had been silent for many years and it was not until Alexander arrived that it began to prophesize once again, announcing Alexander as the son of Zeus (Strabo 17.1.43). By releasing the news when he did and by reviving the silent oracle, Alexander was demonstrating his personal power. At this point it is relevant to return to the sources to look at what they have to say about Alexander's decision to travel to the oracle at Siwah and through their words I hope to demonstrate that his new mentality was a direct result of the worship he received in Egypt, made possible because of the success of his campaign.

Arrian says that once established in Egypt, Alexander was "seized by an ardent desire to Visit Ammon in Libya, partly in order to consult the god, because the oracle of Ammon was said to be exact in its information, and Perseus and Heracles were said to have consulted it" and that his explicit goal was to learn "his own origin more certainly, or at least that he might be able to say that he had learned it." (3.3.2). Alexander and his expedition set out across the desert toward the location of the oracle and Arrian tells us that it was usually destitute of rain; however, during Alexander's journey there was a

copious amount of rain which Arrian says was attributed to divine influence (3.3.4). Moreover Arrian says that there were no markers on the trail and that Alexander's troops became lost, but that the divine intervened and two serpents appeared to lead Alexander to the oasis and back; he mentions that in other accounts it was two ravens that led the way, but in either case he was "... able to assert with confidence that some divine assistance was afforded him [Alexander]." (3.3.6). Plutarch gives a similar account saying that Alexander headed for the oracle and that the trip was marked by the dangers of lack of water and that the trail was easily lost by travelers. What sets his account apart is that he says "the assistance rendered him by Heaven in his perplexities met with more credence than the oracles which he afterwards received, nay, in a way, the oracles obtained credence in consequence of such assistance." (27. 2). Here Plutarch's account points to the fact that the rain and animal guides were precursors to Alexander's divinity that were further proved by the oracle later on, which stands out from Arrian's account, which seems to operate on the assumption that Alexander's connection to Zeus was something already assumed when the serpents or ravens appeared. By contrast, Curtius relates the story in a more theatrical sense, describing the scorching heat, the desolateness of the desert and the agony the men felt by the lack of water. When it comes to the sudden rain and as for the animal guides, he simply states that they occurred more out of chance than actual divine intervention (4.10-16). What these three different accounts demonstrate is that the overwhelming perception was that with Alexander there was some form of "luck" or divine aid to get him to the

oracle of his supposed father, and that to those hearing the story, Alexander even before the confirmation of his divine heritage, had the divine on his side. Following the story of the journey to the oasis all three authors transition into their takes on the message related to Alexander by the oracle.

In the relation of the message given to Alexander Arrian provides the account with the least amount of detail as to what was said, saying only "Alexander then was struck with wonder at the place, and consulted the oracle of the god. Having heard what was agreeable to his wishes, as he himself said, he set out on the journey back to Egypt"(3.4.5). From his account we find very little information and learn only that what was told to him was what he had wished to hear and he left satisfied by the revelation. Turning to Plutarch and Curtius's accounts we find out more about what was possibly said to Alexander. First I will look at the account of Plutarch. He tells us:

The prophet of Ammon gave him [Alexander] salutation from the god as from a father; whereupon Alexander asked him whether any of the murderers of his father had escaped him. To this, the prophet answered by bidding him be guarded in his speech, since his was not a mortal father. Alexander therefore changed the form of his question, and asked whether the murderers of Philip had all been punished; and then, regarding his own empire, he asked whether it was given to him to become lord and master of all mankind. The god gave answer that this was given to him,

and that Philip was fully avenged. Then Alexander made splendid offerings to the god and gave his priests large gifts of money. (4.6-8)

What Plutarch tells us is that Ammon's prophet acknowledge Alexander as the son of Zeus and told him clearly that Philip was not in fact his true father but instead that his father was divine. Plutarch adds a detail to his story that gives more insight into Alexander's understanding of what he was told. He says, "some say that the prophet, wishing to show his friendliness by addressing him with "O paidion," or *O my son*, in his foreign pronunciation ended the words with "s" instead of "n," and said, "O paidios," and that Alexander was pleased at the slip in pronunciation, and a story became current that the god had addressed him with "O pai Dios," or *O son of Zeus*."(4.8-10). This detail offers us something Arrian does not, that Alexander propagated a story that the oracle of Ammon had in fact addressed him as the son of Zeus, despite knowing that it was a slip of the tongue and not a true greeting. Overall Plutarch demonstrates that what was said to Alexander has the plausibility of being a fabrication made by the conquering king himself, but Curtius goes even further in his relating of the events and cast no doubt on the fact that what was said to Alexander was said to please the king and stroke his own ego.

Curtius's retelling follows closely to that of Plutarch's but he adds in a few crucial pieces of information that cast no doubt on the ego driven motives of Alexander at this stage of his development. He says that the priest did call Alexander the son of Jupiter

and that Alexander accepted it, “forgetful of his human condition” (4.26). Curtius says that Alexander asked if he was destined to rule the whole world, and that the prophet, “equally disposed to flattery” responded in the affirmative (4.26-27). A crucial element of Curtius’s account left out of both Plutarch and Arrian is that Alexander’s friends were allowed to consult the oracle and that all they asked was if they should offer Alexander “divine honours”, to which the prophet said this was acceptable to Jupiter (4.28).

Curtius outright tells his reader that a “genuine and sane appraisal” of these “unquestionably vague response of the oracle would have brought ridicule upon its trustworthiness” (4.29-30). He says that glory went to Alexander’s head and he not only allowed people to refer to him as the son of Jupiter but rather that he ordered it, much to the displeasure of his Macedonian troops “who opposed his claims to immortality.”(4.31-32).

Taken together all three accounts demonstrate that at this point in his conquest Alexander’s personality changed and he became driven by his ego to prove his place among the gods. Starting with the reports from Didyma, it is clear that Alexander had the agenda while in Egypt to prove himself as the son of Zeus. The three accounts related to us point exactly to these motives. All three make clear that what the oracle said to Alexander was exactly what the king wanted to hear and if we take into account what Curtius says about the prophet being prone to flattery what he said to Alexander was done only in an effort to please the king. What is crucial about his encounter with the oracle of Ammon is that it marks the first time Alexander is considered for divine



honors. Alexander's time in Egypt present a distinct point at which we can see a change in his character. From then on it is clear from our sources that Alexander's mindset was changed by his success, but also he was taken in by the manner in which the Egyptians, but more importantly the Persians treated their kings.

### **V. Alexander and Proskynesis**

In regards to his attitude change, Curtius presents an interesting assessment of Alexander not found in Arrian, and only alluded to in Plutarch. He informs us "Alexander gave loose rein to his passions...to haughtiness and wantonness. Disregarding his native customs...wholesomely restrained and democratic...he strove to rival the loftiness of the Persian court, equal to the power of the gods..." (6.6.1-3). At this point of his campaign, Alexander had made his way to Babylon and faced Darius in one last clash, the Battle of Gaugamela. Darius fled and was pursued until one of his satraps murdered him and so ended the Persian Empire. Curtius goes on to describe how since the complete victory over Darius, Alexander began to wear the attire of the Persian kings, and to fill his palace with concubines and eunuch that number equal to what Darius had had in his court. Curtius says that "these practices corrupted by luxury and foreign custom, were openly detested by the veteran soldiers of Philip" and that "he [Alexander] had changed from a ruler of Macedonia to a satrap of Darius" (6.6.9-11). What is clearly presented by Curtius is the fact that at this stage of Alexander's

conquest, with Darius defeated and the whole of the Persian Empire more or less under his control, Alexander took on the appearance and court of the Persian kings, and one can only speculate that it was connected to the fact that he perceived the Persian court as recognizing its leader as a god. What is also made clear is that Alexander began to overlook, and even thought himself above the traditional customs of his Macedonian heritage, customs that marked the reign of his father Philip. This change came in the wake of Alexander's trip to Ammon's oracle that hailed him, or as he would have everyone believe, as the son of Zeus. But Curtius's assessment of Alexander's change in countenance is a prelude to the singular act that defined Alexander's change to egomaniacal ruler, his demand in 327 B.C.E. to have his men prostrate themselves before him in an act called, *proskynesis*. On this issue all three authors present accounts of the events that led up to his demand and those that came in its wake.

Arrian tells us that Alexander at one point decided to require his men to prostrate themselves before him, "as to a god, entertaining the notion that Ammon was his father rather Philip" and that "he now showed his admiration for the customs of the Persians and Medes" by asking his men to do such (4.9.9). Curtius' retelling of the event goes even further saying that Alexander had in his designs a way to "usurp divine honors" and that "he wished not only to be called but believed to be the son of Jupiter [Zeus, Ammon]" by his order to have his men prostrate themselves before him (8.5.5b-6). Plutarch's account leaves these details out entirely and instead presents a picture of Alexander's men out of flattery observing this custom. The event that most clearly

presents the issue at hand concerning prostration is attested to in only Curtius and Arrian and is a debate over whether Alexander should receive this marker of divine honor held between two of Alexander's court members, Cleo and Anaxarchus in the former's account and Callisthenes and Anaxarchus in the latter's. The importance of this debate is that it gives a window into how the Greeks and Macedonians viewed the separation between the divine and human world, and how Alexander was challenging these very strict boundaries.

Arrian says that the debate began when Anaxarchus said "How much more just then would it be to worship him while alive, than after his death, when it would be no advantage to him to be honoured." (4.10.9) Arrian goes on to say that after saying this and other similar things those present around Alexander wanted to prostrate themselves right there, which makes clear that the understanding behind the act was to indeed grant Alexander divine honors. The account goes on to say that the Macedonians were not among this group willing to prostrate before Alexander and it fell upon Callisthenes to speak in opposition. Callisthenes begins by declaring that there were no honors that Alexander was not worthy of, "fit for man kind" because there existed distinct boundaries between those given to men and those given to the gods, and singles out prostration as being reserved for the gods (Arrian 4.10.11). He finished his retort by saying, "It is not therefore reasonable to confound all these distinctions without discrimination, exalting men to a rank above their condition by extravagant accumulation of honours, and debasing the gods, as far as lies in human power, to an

unseemly level, by paying them honours only equal to those paid to men”, a statement that perturbed Alexander greatly (Arrian 4.11.4). Callisthenes cements his argument by saying, “Not even to Heracles himself while still alive were divine honours paid by the Greeks and even after his death they were withheld until a decree had been published by the oracle of the god at Delphi that men should honour Heracles as a god.” (Arrian 4.11.7-8). His speech offers the reader the overall impression that there was indeed no precedent for what Alexander was attempting to do, and that even Heracles, the ancient ancestor of Alexander, was not given divine honors while still alive. Curtius’s retelling is to the same effect.

Curtius says that Anaxarchus’s speech (Cleo in his account) occurred before Alexander had arrived at a drinking party and said that the Persians worshiped their kings among the gods and that he would prostrate himself first if any were in doubt of the kings rights to this honor. Curtius says that Cleo’s speech was aimed directly at Callisthenes who was seen as a defender of public liberty, which appears to have been in jeopardy by Cleo’s remarks. Callisthenes offered in opposition to Cleo’s request that the honors of divinity were not to be conferred by one banquet but by later generations after a man had accomplished as much as he could in his life, and that to give them to Alexander now was premature. Alexander was hiding and heard what was said, and witnessed how Callisthenes words sat well with his older Macedonian’s who did not want to change their traditional customs, and he therefore order the matter to be done with. Both accounts together illuminate the full change that had taken place in

Alexander regarding his view of his status among mortals and also his departure from his traditional Greek customs to accommodate his growing ego. He wished to achieve a level of greatness that had never been given to a mortal man, and one that those of the same tradition as him saw as far beyond his reach. While it may seem of little consequence to be considered a god and be worshiped as such while alive, to the Greeks this was not something to be taken lightly. To understand what it meant to the Greeks to receive divine honors it is necessary to look at those who gained it before Alexander. To do this we must delve into the actual historic record to see whether or not anyone had been worshiped as divine while alive and the extent to which the Greeks and Macedonians wished to maintain the boundaries between the mortal and divine world.

The central issue at hand is whether or not Alexander's consideration for divine honors marked a departure from the traditional honors given to kings and other great figures of his time. As Ernst Badian points out in his "Deification of Alexander the Great", it was not uncommon for mortal men to claim lineage from the gods, it was very much out of the norm for these men to gain divine status during their lifetimes. Heroes, like Heracles, were able to attain a place among the gods, but only after their death, and founders of cities too obtained their own cult worships but that this too occurred after their passing (Badian 2-3). What he makes clear is that it was uncommon, if it even ever occurred, for a living person to be given divine worship. To prove his point Badian uses two key pieces of evidence, both of which are contemporary to Alexander's time, to

demonstrate the Greek sentiment regarding mortal men attempting to receive divine honors while alive and that Alexander's attempts to do so are an anomaly that had no precedent. The first issue he examines is the cult of Lysander on Samos and whether it had been created while he was still living. Badian says that according to Plutarch, Lysander, the Spartan commander who won the Peloponnesian War, was first mortal man to have even obtained divine honors, which were voted to him sometime in the late 5<sup>th</sup> early 4<sup>th</sup> century. Through careful research Badian shows that even with Lysander, while it is difficult to pinpoint with accuracy exactly when the honors were given to him, inscription and dating can plausibly establish that more likely than not, they were conferred after his death and not in fact while he was still alive (Badian 4-5). If we take what Badian says as correct, that in fact within the years leading up to Alexander's rise to power and conquest of Asia there had been no one while alive to have risen to the level of attaining "divine" worship it makes Alexander's attempts to do so following his visit to the oracle of Ammon even more egotistical and out of the norm. The second key piece of evidence that Badian uses is the speech given by Alexander's own historian Callisthenes that gives its reader a glimpse into the average Greek's religious and political view concerning the boundaries between the mortal world and the divine one.

The speech that Callisthenes gives, as mentioned earlier, was a rebuttal to one of Alexander's men's, Anaxarchus according to Arrian and Cleon in Curtius, proposition that the Macedonians should "gratify their king with divine honours, for there was no

doubt about this, that when he departed from men they would honour him as a god.”(Arrian 4.10.9). Callisthenes responds by saying “Anaxarchus, I openly declare that there is no honour which Alexander is unworthy to receive, provided that it is consistent with his being human; but men have made distinctions between those honours which are due to men, and those due to gods...” (Arrian 4.10.11). What he makes clear through this simple statement is that there exist boundaries that mortal men are not to cross, and that Alexander, no matter how great, is not above observing these boundaries. Callisthenes continues by saying Alexander would not be pleased if someone not worthy was simply voted to the same level of distinction as him and that “it was thy duty rather than any other man’s, to become the special advocate of these arguments now adduced by me, and the opponent of those contrary to them...” (Arrian 4.10.11). Badian says that despite having been written much after the event Callisthenes’ argument represents the common Greek’s belief about the separation between the mortal and immortal realm, and specifically relevant to his view that mortal men were restricted from receiving such honors Callisthenes specifically mentions that Heracles while being exalted to divine status only had this honor after his death and with the approval of the Delphic oracle and not by his own hand (Badian 2). Together Badian’s work and the ancient authority’s accounts demonstrate that at this stage of Alexander’s life, as the most successful general and ruler the world had ever seen, the power went to his head.

As can be seen, Alexander fully understood the ramifications of his attempts to disregard the customs of his people and yet went ahead with it anyway. He wished to have his subject bow down to him, in a manner that even to him was seen fit only for the gods, and did so knowing the implications. His attempts to gain divine honor while still alive had no precedents to fall back on and he was trying to become truly the first man to be worshiped as a god while still living as a mortal man. Yet with so great a power it seems that no one could stand in his way if he wished it to be so. When the debate reached Athens in 324 BCE even the great demagogue Demosthenes had to quip, “ Let him [Alexander] be son of Zeus and Poseidon too if he wishes”, speaking directly to the all-too-apparent fact that since his visit to the Oracle of Siwah if Alexander wanted to make himself a god he would do so (*Hyperides in Dem.* 31). What Demosthenes’ statement shows us is that while Alexander was initially halted in his attempts to achieve divine status in 327, he continued to push to obtain that honor. The last place that I wish us to look at is Alexander’s speech to his men in India upon their refusal to follow their king any further in his conquest.

## **VI. Alexander’s Final Push East**

After 327, Alexander’s continued farther east, reaching as far as the Hydaspes River in India before his men refused to push any further and required that Alexander turn back. His speech to his troops in an attempt to encourage them to push further gives us



a glimpse into Alexander's exact reasoning for why he believed he deserved recognition as a god, but in this speech we see his political strategies return. Instead of claiming why further incursions east would add to his greatness, he encourages his men to believe that they too may reach divine status by claiming how much further his army as a collective group, with Alexander at the helm of course, has gone than any men who had eventually achieved a place among the gods. To entice them he says, "the labours of Dionysus were not few, and he was too exalted a deity to be compared with Heracles. But we, indeed, have penetrated into regions beyond Nysa; and the rock of Aornus which Heracles was unable to capture, is in our possession." (Arrian 5.26.5-8).

Alexander, according to Curtius, made this claim even more obvious; he has Alexander saying to his men, "By yourselves and your glory, in which you rise above human height...I beg and implore you not to desert your foster child and fellow soldier, not to say to your king, as he is approaching the ends of the universe." (9.2.28-29). Even to persuade his troops to continue on, Alexander crosses the boundary that Callisthenes established in his speech against prostration. Alexander asks his men, haughty and battle-tested Macedonians eager to return to their homeland, to realize that they have outdone men who now reside with the gods, and that they with their great deeds have earned divine rights, and will earn so even more if they continue with him to the end of the universe. This comparison to Dionysus and Heracles is Alexander's justification for his divine status. He sees that he has surpassed the mythical distances that these men had reached and because of this he deserves to be among them. But, what holds

Alexander back is his belief that he can change the heavily ingrained tradition of his peoples, that to honor men as gods while they are living debases the status of the god's.

## **VII. Conclusion**

This last episode demonstrates the full extent of Alexander's ego-driven pursuit of godhood. He wished to control the entire world and thus to cement his place among the gods by surpassing any hero who had risen to the status of divine. Indeed, in victory and empire he had no rival; he had reached further east than even the great Dionysus and Heracles and had his men not stopped his conquest would have most likely have continued across India. Now it is important to look at the main episodes of Alexander's quest that I have examined and the entire image they give taken together.

Starting with Alexander's travel to Gordium and his fulfillment of the oracle of the Gordian knot it has been clearly demonstrated that it was not at all a by chance happening that he chose to visit the city of a legendary king, Midas, with whom Alexander would welcome any association with. As has been demonstrated, not only among the Macedonian was there an ancient connection to the Phrygian people and king Midas but also amongst the Persians there existed one and any association with Midas was a hallmark of legitimacy to rulership. This must have been Alexander's prime motivation, to demonstrate a connection between him and Midas by visiting the city that would legitimize himself in the eyes of his Macedonian subjects but also the

eyes of the Persian subjects whom he hoped one day to rule over. When the legend of the knot was related to him, he seized the opportunity to make a true connection as the heir to Midas and as the rightful ruler of Asia. This episode occurred early on in Alexander's campaign and was fueled by a desire for legitimacy rather than self-glorification. As Alexander moved on to battle Darius at Issus and to win various campaigns throughout the Levant, a change in his personality began to occur. By the time he reached Egypt and its peoples, known for their divine worship of their kings, he had seen many successes and the oracle given at Gordium was beginning to come true; Alexander began to view himself as possibly not being entirely from the mortal world.

Seen as the king who liberated the Egyptians from the Persian yoke, Alexander received the same worship as Egyptian kings, and oracles, more than likely fabricated by Alexander himself, reached him claiming that his father was in fact Zeus. Alexander, overtaken by the power he now held, decided to consult the oracle of his "father" to decide the matter once and for all. The oracle welcomed Alexander as the son of Zeus and the answers it gave to Alexander's questions confirmed for the young king that Zeus, rather than Philip was his true father. But, it is made clear by the historians recording Alexander's conquest that even Alexander was aware of the flattery he required as king, and that the oracle was simply giving him the answers he desired. Nonetheless, Alexander left the oracle proclaimed as the son of Zeus and as his conquest and eventual complete defeat of Darius showed this notion was perhaps not so far off. His time in Egypt marks the departure from a calculating conqueror that

sought to display himself as legitimate to ego-driven king bent on rising above the mortal world. Alexander began to take on more and more of the Persian lifestyle, to the anger of his Macedonian companions, and with it, attempted to reach the status among his subjects that he believed the Persian kings held, that of a god among men.

Alexander's attempt to require prostration among his men demonstrated to all his over-bloated ego and complete departure from his traditional Macedonian roots. Alexander's historians make clear that the act to Greeks and Macedonians alike was reserved for the gods, and that no man was worthy of attaining this honor while still alive. Alexander's court historian Callisthenes offered a voice for the tradition saying that there existed a boundary between human and divine, and that not even the great heroes were able to cross it until they had departed the living world. Alexander fought this sentiment and believed through his exploits he had risen above even Heracles and Dionysus and rightfully deserved to be worshiped among the gods, even sending heralds and having a cult established to him in Athens. But still, the traditional view was clung to, but Alexander being whom he was got his way. Despite his success Alexander's men knew that the young king would never settle until he had received the honors he felt he rightfully deserved and refused to follow him any further on his never-ending quest for something he would never rightfully gain. With their refusal Alexander's conquest came to an end and he made a return west, but he would not make it back to his home of Macedonia. He met his end in Babylon in 323BCE finally transcending the mortal world.

Through his amazing campaign against the Persians Alexander believed he had

proven his rightful place among the gods. His invincible nature and uncanny ability to always come out victorious no doubt left a lasting impression on his troops and latter generations of rulers. What Alexander's story shows is a man, who wanting to create something for himself that left no doubt to his greatness became overwhelmed by power and sought to elevate himself above all men, and even above those of his religion. From Gordium to India, Alexander transformed from a young man using political tact and appeal to tradition to establish himself to a battle-hardened megalomaniac, unsatisfied with the mortal markers of honor and glory, who disregarded tradition in order to achieve the success he felt he deserved but could never attain.

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**COLLEGE ACTIVITIES**

2007-2012 Men's Varsity Gymnastics Team The Pennsylvania State University

2008 Big Ten Men's Gymnastics Championship Team

2009 Most Improved Gymnast Penn State Men's Varsity Gymnastics

**ACTIVITIES**

2000-2007 Guitar student: Private Instruction at Music and Arts Center

**LANGUAGES**

Spanish (read well and speak moderately well)

**MEMBERSHIPS**

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National College Honors Society

Phi Alpha Theta

National History Honors Society

Phi Kappa Phi

National College Honors Society

**REFERENCES:** Available Upon Request.