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# The Remains of Alexander the Great: The God, The King, The Symbol

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# The Remains of Alexander the Great: The God, The King, The Symbol

## **Abstract**

Each site, Siwah, Aegae, and Alexandria, represents a particular facet of Alexander—the god, the king, the symbol—and it is clear who would have benefited from putting forth and standing behind each side of the man. The meanings associated with the three potential burial sites and the intentions of each site's main supporters offer a complex and telling view into Alexander and the post-Alexander world.

**The Remains of Alexander the Great: The God, The King, The Symbol**

Lauren O'Connor

**Introduction**

On June 10, 323 BC, Alexander the Great died of fever in Babylon after battling illness for several days. He had conquered the Persian Empire, traveled farther east than the god Dionysus, and survived a multitude of war wounds. Alexander left no clear successor, though he had a son, Heracles, and another child on the way by his Bactrian wife, Roxane. We are told by Curtius Rufus that Alexander left his kingdom “to the best man.”<sup>1</sup> Shortly after the king’s untimely death, civil war broke out between potential successors, according to Curtius, and when the dust began to settle there was still no obvious heir to Alexander’s great kingdom. The territory he had conquered was divided into satrapies and Alexander’s generals took local commands; the kingdom was split and never reunited. In the meantime, while the attention of the world was focused elsewhere, what happened to the remains of Alexander? Surely his body would have been a powerful symbol even when lifeless. However, despite the potential iconic status of the cold dead king, he was left for days without care, did not receive a proper funeral, and his last wishes were unfulfilled.<sup>2</sup>

Alexander, suffering for several days before his death, knew his end was imminent. This knowledge did not urge him to name an official successor, but he did request a burial site: the temple of Zeus-Ammon in the Siwah oasis in northern Africa, where he was addressed as the son of Ammon.<sup>3</sup> Tradition would have dictated burial in the royal Argead tombs at Aegae in Macedon.<sup>4</sup> Ptolemy, one of Alexander’s trusted generals and a childhood friend, had snagged the satrapy of Egypt, and soon after snatched Alexander’s body in Syria and brought it back to Memphis for eventual and permanent interment at Alexandria.<sup>5</sup> Thus, we are left with three key locations in the aftermath of Alexander’s death. Each site, Siwah, Aegae, and Alexandria, represents a particular facet of Alexander—the god, the king, the symbol—and it is clear who would have benefited from putting forth and standing behind each side of the man. The meanings associated with the three potential burial sites and the intentions of each site’s main supporters offer a complex and telling view into Alexander and the post-Alexander world.

**The End of an Era: Alexander’s Death**

Before launching discussing each of the three key locations, it will be helpful to examine Alexander’s death. Alexander the Great died of an unknown

<sup>1</sup> Quintus Curtius Rufus, *History of Alexander*, translated by John Yardley (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), 10.5.5.

<sup>2</sup> Curt. 10.10.9, 13, 20.

<sup>3</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, translated by Ian Scott-Kilvert. (London: Penguin Classics, 1973) 27, 283; Curt. 4.7.25.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Erskine, “Life After Death: Alexandria and the Body of Alexander,” *Greece & Rome* 49, no. 2 (October 2002), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/826904> (accessed November 15, 2008), 169.

<sup>5</sup> Curt., 10.10.20.

illness in Babylon on his way back west from India—this information is recorded in every extant primary source. However, there are different accounts of the days leading up to and immediately following his death; Arrian and Plutarch are the most detailed, both claiming to have used the Royal Diaries as their source.<sup>6</sup>

Arrian's account begins with a series of omens pointing towards Alexander's impending death. He then goes on to describe in detail the days during which the king's illness worsened. Arrian claims Alexander stayed up late at night drinking with his friends and, when the king decided to retire, he was intercepted and invited to yet another drinking party by Medius. According to the Royal Diaries, Alexander did go drink with Medius, only to bathe, sleep, and wake to eat and drink with Medius again far into the night, "the fever already on him."<sup>7</sup> By morning, he had to be carried out in his bed to perform his daily sacrifices, then remained in bed the rest of the day. The following days were similar—bathing, sacrificing, bathing, sacrificing, and then eating a little and heading back to bed, where he "lay all night in a fever."<sup>8</sup> The king was still issuing orders, though, instructing Nearchus about the upcoming sea voyage; the next day Alexander again bathed and sacrificed, but from then on was in a "constant fever."<sup>9</sup> Arrian asserts Alexander continued his regular duties and commanded his officers, though his body was moved to a nearby swimming pool and he could barely perform his sacrifices. He was moved back to the palace after another two days, at which point he could no longer speak, though "in his eyes there was a look of recognition for each individual as he passed" when the soldiers came to see him.<sup>10</sup> According to Arrian's use of the Royal Diaries, Peithos, Attalus, Demophon, Peucestas, Cleomenes, Menidas, and Seleucus slept in the temple of Serapis. They asked the god if it would be beneficial for Alexander to be carried into the temple where he could pray and possibly be healed, "but the God forbade it, and declared it would be better for him if he stayed where he was. The God's command was made public and soon afterwards Alexander died—this, after all, being the 'better' thing."<sup>11</sup> Arrian mentions many other stories about Alexander's death, but he makes it very clear he does not put much stock in any of them, especially those implying conspiracy and murder; he ends his account of Alexander's life and death with an accusation of those who would judge the king, urging them to examine their own pitiful lives before sentencing Alexander.<sup>12</sup>

Plutarch's detailed account of Alexander's sickness and death reads somewhat more like a journal than Arrian's, though they claim to have both been using the Royal Diaries as their major source on this subject. Much of

<sup>6</sup> Arrian, *Campaigns of Alexander*, translated by Aubrey de Selincourt (New York: Dorset Press, 1986) 7.26, 393; Plut. *Alexander* 76, 332.

<sup>7</sup> Arr. 7.25, 391

<sup>8</sup> Arr. 7.25, 392.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Arr. 7.26, 393.

<sup>11</sup> Arr., 7.27, 394.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 7.29-30, 397-8.

Plutarch's telling is identical to Arrian's, with plenty of bathing and sacrificing, and partying late into the night with Medius. Plutarch also notes Alexander's insistence on instructing his officers about upcoming expeditions.<sup>13</sup> Like Arrian, Plutarch describes Alexander losing his ability to speak, as well as noting the visit to the temple of Serapis. Plutarch, though, mentions only Python and Seleucus stopping by the temple, and the incident is quite concise: they "were sent to the temple of Serapis to ask whether Alexander should be moved there, and the god replied that they should leave him where he was."<sup>14</sup> Plutarch asserts that he was following "the version that is given in the journals almost word for word."<sup>15</sup>

Curtius Rufus does not offer us nearly as detailed an account—a portion of his section on Alexander's death is lost. In what we have of Curtius' version there are some discrepancies from Arrian and Plutarch. Curtius never mentions Alexander losing his ability to speak, and he includes two other important details: Alexander left his signet ring to Perdikkas, and he "gave instructions that [his friends] should have his body transported to Hammon."<sup>16</sup> Curtius also includes a detailed explanation of the civil war erupting after Alexander's death. Some felt Perdikkas was left in charge by receiving the king's ring; some supported Arrhidaeus, Alexander's half-brother through Philip; some wished to remain as stewards until one of Alexander's sons was old enough to claim the throne.<sup>17</sup> In the end, Alexander's Companions divided the empire, with Perdikkas in charge of the king's body and the troops remaining in Babylon.<sup>18</sup> Curtius also points out that Alexander's body was fresh as if he were still alive six days after his death, with no decay, stench, or discoloration.<sup>19</sup> Lastly, Curtius mentions that Alexander's body was taken to Memphis on the Nile by Ptolemy, who had become the ruler of Egypt, and was later taken to Alexandria "where every mark of respect continues to be paid to his memory and his name."<sup>20</sup> Apparently, these respects did not include burial at the king's chosen site.

Justin's epitome of Pompeius Trogus' history of Alexander is similar to the three major accounts described above. Unlike Arrian, Plutarch, and Curtius, though, Justin asserts Alexander was poisoned through the scheming of Antipater—the others, if the poisoning is mentioned at all, seem to feel it is

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<sup>13</sup> Plut., *Alexander*, 76, 332.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 76, 333.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Curt., 10.5.4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.6-10.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.10.4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.10.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.10.20.

improbable.<sup>21</sup> Justin includes Alexander's wish to be buried at the temple of Hammon and the passing of the king's signet ring to Perdiccas.<sup>22</sup>

Thus it appears through source comparison that Alexander knew his death was impending, yet he did not name a clear successor, save "the best man," and he wished for his remains to be buried at the temple of Ammon in the Siwah oasis. However, it also becomes apparent that a clear successor never rose to the occasion and Alexander was certainly not buried at the temple of Ammon in the Siwah oasis. Indeed, his body may have been on its way to be buried in the royal Macedonian tombs at Aegae but was intercepted and taken to Egypt. These locations present different Alexanders, much like our extant sources, and the interests of outside parties can be discerned by examining the significance of each site.

### **Siwah: Alexander the God**

In the winter of 331 BC, Alexander detoured through the desert to the Siwah oasis to visit the temple of Zeus-Ammon.<sup>23</sup> Again, we have multiple accounts of this occasion, but in each one of them Alexander leaves Siwah with the firm belief he is the son of Zeus-Ammon and therefore a god. According to Arrian, after Alexander visited his new territory of Egypt he "suddenly found himself passionately eager to visit the shrine of Ammon in Libya."<sup>24</sup> Arrian asserts Alexander wished to embark on this journey to learn about his heritage, for he "had a feeling that in some way he was descended from Ammon," and wanted to affirm this hunch.<sup>25</sup>

Curtius' account is similar, claiming "after settling administrative matters ..., [Alexander] decided to visit the oracle of Jupiter Ammon."<sup>26</sup> After a hot, dry journey through the desert, Alexander and his party reached the Siwah oasis, site of the temple of Ammon. Curtius describes the priest addressing Alexander as "son" (meaning son of Jupiter-Ammon), and insinuating Philip was not Alexander's father at all. However, Curtius himself, in keeping with his somewhat skeptical view of the king, implies the priest may have merely been flattering Alexander.<sup>27</sup>

Plutarch confirms both aspects of Curtius' account—that Alexander was welcomed as son of the god and that the priest cautioned Alexander against calling Philip his father.<sup>28</sup> Arrian is quite vague, stating only that Alexander asked his question and received "the answer which his heart desired."<sup>29</sup> Recalling Arrian's assertion that Alexander wished to confirm his feeling that he

<sup>21</sup> Justin, *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus*, translated by John C. Yardley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 12.14.1; Arr., 7.27, 394; Plut., *Alexander* 77, 333; Curt., 10.10.18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.15.7.

<sup>23</sup> Arr., 3.3-4, 151-154; Curt., 4.7.5-28; Plut., *Alexander* 27, 283.

<sup>24</sup> Arr., 3.3, 151.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Curt., 4.7.5.

<sup>27</sup> Curt., 4.7.25-27.

<sup>28</sup> Plut., *Alexander* 27, 283.

<sup>29</sup> Arr., 3.4, 153.

was the son of Zeus-Ammon with this side trip, and with Curtius' and Plutarch's accounts in mind, it is obvious in all three sources that Alexander indeed came away set in the knowledge that he was the son of god.

Whether or not it was flattery on the part of the priest, from this point on Alexander believed he was the son of Zeus-Ammon, a divine being with invincibility and greatness beyond that of any human. Further evidence of this belief can be found later in the accounts of Alexander's life. Curtius claims Alexander "did not just permit but actually ordered the title 'Jupiter's son' to be accorded to himself," and later "wished to be believed, not just called, the son of Jupiter."<sup>30</sup> It is clear Alexander valued this title and privileged nature among mankind very highly.

According to Curtius and Justin, Alexander requested shortly before his death to be buried in the temple of Ammon, taking his divine parentage seriously—or attempting to prove his divinity to others even in death.<sup>31</sup> In light of his stern belief in his own divinity, it is logical Alexander would wish to be buried at the temple where he first learned of his lineage and where his own father was housed and worshiped—it would become a dynastic symbol. Burial as a god would also indicate immortality, something Alexander likely hoped for and certainly hoped others would attribute to his memory. Arrian includes an otherwise unmentioned story, one he himself appears not to believe, which describes the dying Alexander at Babylon trying to throw himself into the Euphrates, so it appeared as though he vanished rather than died a mortal death.<sup>32</sup> Even if the story is untrue, its circulation affirms the implication found in the request to be buried at the temple of Zeus-Ammon—Alexander was hoping he would be remembered as more than the king of Macedon or conqueror of Persia. The king was hoping to use his death as one last push to the public to approve of and embrace his divinity: to be remembered as Alexander the God.

### **Aegae (Vergina): Alexander the King**

The most important aspect of Aegae as a potential burial location is its apparent lack of consideration in the aftermath of Alexander's death. This was the site of the royal Macedonian tombs, where Alexander's mortal father Philip was buried. Why not Alexander? Possibly because the king requested to be buried elsewhere, but clearly that location was not the site of his eternal rest either. The logical location for his burial would have been, if not where he himself had chosen, Aegae. We must therefore examine initially the significance of burial at Aegae, then consider the significance of Alexander *not* being buried there.

According to Andrew Erskine's article *Life After Death: Alexandria and the Body of Alexander*, "Macedonian tradition . . . demanded burial at

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<sup>30</sup> Curt., 4.7.30, 8.5.5.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 10.5.4; Jus., 12.15.7.

<sup>32</sup> Arr., 7.28, 395.

Aegae (Vergina) in Macedon.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, tombs have been excavated with evidence they belonged to Philip II and Arrhidaeus. E. N. Borza interprets the findings in detail, claiming the archaeologists’ assumption that the so-called Tomb II belonged to Philip is incorrect. Borza provides excellent evidence that Tomb II actually housed the remains of Arrhidaeus, son of Philip II and half-brother of Alexander.<sup>34</sup> Regardless of which Argead was buried in Tomb II or any of the other excavated tombs, however, it is clear this is where the royal Macedonian families were interred.<sup>35</sup> Borza continues to describe certain artifacts found inside the tomb which he asserts actually belonged to Alexander the Great himself. It is clear from Curtius’ account that some of Alexander’s personal affects were separated from his body—his ring, for instance, was given to Perdikkas, and his crown, royal robe, and arms were displayed to the soldiers.<sup>36</sup> Borza presents evidence that an iron and gold cuirass, a gem-studded iron collar, and even an odd—yet familiar—crested silver helmet found in Tomb II belonged to Alexander the Great.<sup>37</sup>

If these items indeed belonged to Alexander and all of them made it to the royal Macedonian tombs, it may be assumed that one day Alexander was meant to be buried there as well. Erskine implies Aegae may have been a possible destination for Alexander’s body, though he also notes “the intended destination of [Alexander’s] hearse has been the subject of much discussion.”<sup>38</sup> However, where the body ended its journey is not open for discussion; it is clear Alexander’s remains were taken to Memphis by Ptolemy and eventually interred in Alexandria. Erskine, citing Arrian, Strabo, and Aelian, paints the corpse’s trip to Egypt as a hijacking on the part of Ptolemy; though Diodorus describes a peaceful handing-off of the body from Arrhidaeus to Ptolemy, and Curtius never mentions any other figure having possession of the body than the new satrap of Egypt.<sup>39</sup>

Whatever the means of Alexander’s eventual burial in the city he founded on the Nile, the meanings of his non-burial at Aegae are significant. While Alexander’s request to be buried at the temple of Ammon in the Siwah oasis indicated his desire to be remembered as divine, his burial at Aegae in the Argead royal tombs would have stressed his role as King of Macedon. Burial at Aegae, among the tombs of his mortal father Philip and eventually his half-brother Arrhidaeus, would have heavily linked Alexander with his family—and his family with Alexander, strengthening the claim of Arrhidaeus and his

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<sup>33</sup> Erskine, “Life After Death,” 169.

<sup>34</sup> E. N. Borza, “The Royal Macedonian Tombs and the Paraphernalia of Alexander the Great,” *Phoenix* 41, no. 2 (summer 1987) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1088739> (accessed November 15, 2008), 105.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>36</sup> Curt. 10.6.4

<sup>37</sup> Borza, p. 111-115

<sup>38</sup> Borza, p. 111-115

<sup>39</sup> Erskine, 170; Diodorus, *Library of History IX*, translated by C.L. Sherman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), 18.28, 2-3; Curt., 10.10.20.



supporters that he was the rightful successor.<sup>40</sup> It also seems Perdiccas was in support of this burial site; Erskine notes that “Perdiccas is said to have sent troops in pursuit” of Ptolemy and Alexander’s body and later entirely invaded Egypt.<sup>41</sup> E. J. Chinnock, in his concise summary of the primary source evidence for Alexander’s burial site, notes that both Arrian and Aelian mention Perdiccas’ wish to gain possession of the body.<sup>42</sup> A. B. Bosworth concludes “that Perdiccas was made regent at Babylon, so becoming *de facto* head of the Macedonian empire and representing the king himself.”<sup>43</sup> Certainly, taking charge of the body was a concern of Perdiccas, and burying it among the other royal Macedonians in his homeland would have been beneficial to him and any possible hopes of becoming true king in the near future.

Thus, there is credible evidence that Alexander’s body was fought over. Though Diodorus would have us believe the body was en route to Egypt all along when picked up in Syria by Ptolemy, Arrian and Aelian would argue that was not necessarily the case.<sup>44</sup> It must be considered that Aegae would have been a possible burial location. Interment in the royal Macedonian tombs would have benefited Arrhidaeus and the new regent Perdiccas, and it would have noticeably strengthened Alexander’s family ties and the greatness of Macedon. As noted by Borza, it is highly possible many of his personal items were housed in the tombs with his father and half-brother, but it is evident through researching the primary sources, and utilizing Chinnock’s extractions from extant and fragmentary sources, that Alexander himself was taken to Egypt by Ptolemy. The lack of Alexander’s body in the royal Argead tombs must have been a glaring hole in the history of Macedonia as well as a noticeable gap in an otherwise continuous dynasty of rulers. To Macedonians, surely this Alexander-less tomb was a source of frustration, for he was their greatest ruler; to the world, it was evidence that Alexander the (mere) King was no longer a valid interpretation of Alexander the Great.

### **Alexandria: Alexander the Symbol**

Much evidence has thus been compiled showing that Alexander’s remains ended up in Egypt—whether by means of body-snatching or a planned changing of hands is irrelevant. Significant, however, is what Alexander’s burial in Memphis and finally Alexandria may represent.

Curtius notes at the end of his *History of Alexander* that “Alexander’s body was taken to Memphis by Ptolemy . . . and transferred from there a few years later to Alexandria.”<sup>45</sup> It is unclear why the corpse was first taken to Memphis if the lasting resting place became Alexandria, though there are

<sup>40</sup> Curt., 10.7.2.

<sup>41</sup> Erskine, “Life After Death,” 170.

<sup>42</sup> E. J. Chinnock, “The Burial-Place of Alexander the Great,” *The Classical Review* 7, no. 6 (June, 1893), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/691149> (accessed November 15, 2008), 245-6.

<sup>43</sup> A. B. Bosworth, “The Death of Alexander the Great: Rumour and Propaganda,” *The Classical Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (May 1971), <http://www.jstore.org/stable/637824> (accessed November 15, 2008), 134.

<sup>44</sup> Diod. 18.28.2; Chinnock, “Burial-Place,” 245.

<sup>45</sup> Curt., 10.10.20.

several hypotheses. An article by Andrew Chugg provides evidence that a large sarcophagus recovered in Alexandria by Napoleon's men may have originally been entombed in Memphis, and may also have housed the remains of Alexander the Great. Natives at the time of its extraction from Alexandria assured French and English scholars that the sarcophagus was the "tomb of Iscander;" but as the hieroglyphs imprinted on the sarcophagus were translated, it became clear the tomb was meant for Nectanebo II, the last of the Egyptian Pharaohs.<sup>46</sup> Chugg argues that even if the sarcophagus was meant for Nectanebo, it is perfectly possible that it eventually housed another—but surely only one of Pharaoh status.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, at the time of Alexander's death Memphis was the capital of Egypt and there was a large necropolis for Pharaohs of the 30<sup>th</sup> dynasty (including Nectanebo). Therefore, the sarcophagus would have been "in the right place at the right time in a vacant condition," for Nectanebo had fled upon Persian invasion and never given a royal burial.<sup>48</sup> It is also unlikely, Chugg notes, that Ptolemy would have had a tomb prepared for Alexander, for it appears Arrhidaeus had been in charge of the body until met by Ptolemy in Syria. Perhaps connecting Alexander with previous Pharaohs by burial in their Memphite necropolis and even one of their sarcophagi was in Ptolemy's best interest—legitimizing Macedonian rule in Egypt by asserting Alexander's status as Pharaoh.

According to Diodorus, Ptolemy originally meant to transport Alexander's body to Siwah after picking it up from Arrhidaeus in Syria. However, he "decided for the present not to convey the body to Ammon."<sup>49</sup> Though Diodorus does not mention Alexander being taken to Memphis, let alone buried there for any length of time, the prospect of Ptolemy transporting the body to Siwah could be extrapolated onto other accounts as a reason for Ptolemy to have first taken it to Memphis—it may have been a logical stopover, as Alexandria was little more than a camp at the time of Alexander's death. The papyrologist H. Idris Bell also implies Ptolemy may have led others to believe he was obtaining the body for the purposes of obeying Alexander's last wishes. He also mentions what an incredible advantage this possession was to Ptolemy in the following years of civil war and his establishment of the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt.<sup>50</sup>

Bell and Chugg posit that it was Ptolemy's son, Philadelphus, who transferred Alexander's remains to Alexandria from Memphis, though Curtius implies nothing of the sort.<sup>51</sup> Chugg presents convincing evidence that the body remained in Memphis for about 30-40 years, "with the relocation eventually

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<sup>46</sup> Andrew Chugg, "The Sarcophagus of Alexander the Great?" *Greece & Rome* 49, no. 1 (April 2002), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/826879> (accessed November 15, 2008), 13.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>49</sup> Diod., 18.28.3.

<sup>50</sup> H. Idris Bell, *Egypt from Alexander the Great to the Arab Conquest* (Chicago: Ares Publishers, Inc., 1948), 32-3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 32; Chugg, "Sarcophagus," 14; Curt., 10.10.20.

taking place around 290-80 BC.”<sup>52</sup> The body’s residency in Alexandria lasted at least several hundred years as the town grew into a city and eventually a major metropolis in the time of the Roman Empire. Though Alexander founded many other towns, too. He founded other Alexandrias even, including Alexandria the Farthest, about which Arrian says “both its numbers and the splendour of its name would one day turn the new settlement into a great city.”<sup>53</sup> Yet clearly Alexandria in Egypt became the greatest. This Alexandria, more than any other city founded by the king, seems to belong more to Alexander, for it is here that Alexander was to forever lie. Granted, its location on the sea in grain-producing Egypt aided its development and urbanization, but Alexander’s body aided its fame and symbolic value.

A key source to examine while investigating the burials at Memphis and Alexandria, though its historical credibility is questionable, is the *Romance of Alexander*. Credited to Callisthenes and published in modernity under the author Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Romance* presents itself as an accurate history of Alexander’s life. In comparison to our other extant ancient sources, however, its accuracy is dubious. According to J.R. Morgan and Richard Stoneman, the *Romance of Alexander* was written initially in Egypt (there are versions from many other regions as well), and rather than being an alternative history the *Romance* “adds to history in order to explain history.”<sup>54</sup> The Armenian translation features a lengthy section on Alexander’s death and happenings in the immediate aftermath, focusing on Ptolemy—or Ptolemy. In this story, it is Ptolemy who visits the temple of the “Babylonian god” to discover where he should bury Alexander’s body. The god tells Ptolemy to bury Alexander at the Egyptian capital of Memphis.<sup>55</sup> Later, after the funeral procession had made its way to Memphis, “a voice issued forth saying: ‘Take him to his city which he himself built,’” and so Alexander was laid to his final rest at Alexandria.<sup>56</sup> Though the *Romance of Alexander* does not represent nearly as accurate a history of the king’s life as do Arrian, Plutarch, and Curtius, its interpretation of Alexander’s death and the aftermath are equally valid to this research topic.

The *Romance of Alexander* is the only literary source which demonstrates initial possession of the body by Ptolemy, original intent to bury Alexander in Memphis and later Alexandria. It mentions nothing of Alexander’s request to be buried at Siwah, nor does it mention a hand-off of the body to Ptolemy in Syria. Rather, Ptolemy has control of Alexander’s remains the entire time. Morgan and Stoneman’s assertion that the original *Romance* was written in Egypt presents literary evidence that the Ptolemies were hoping to legitimize

<sup>52</sup> Chugg, “Sarcophagus,” 15.

<sup>53</sup> Arr., 4.1, 201.

<sup>54</sup> J.R. Morgan and Richard Stoneman, *Greek Fiction: The Greek Novel in Context* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 122, 118.

<sup>55</sup> Pseudo-Callisthenes, *The Romance of Alexander*, translated from Armenian by Albert M. Wolohojian (Columbia University Press, 1969), 282, 157.

<sup>56</sup> Ps. Call., 283, 158.

possession of Alexander's body, in turn, legitimizing their role as Alexander's successors in Egypt.

Alexander was not laid to rest by Ptolemy in the house of the god Ammon as he had so requested, though some sources imply this was Ptolemy's intent. The king may have been on his way to burial in the royal Argead tombs at Aegae in Macedon when Ptolemy intercepted the body. Alexander's role as a god was thus disregarded, and his place in the line of Macedonian kings was altered for all eternity. Ptolemy's interment of Alexander's body in Egypt reduced Alexander the god, Alexander the king, to Alexander the symbol—a symbol of Ptolemy's own questionable legitimacy.

### The Body

In looking for mentions of Alexander's body in extant literary sources as time goes on, it becomes evident that Alexander's body did not quite turn out to be the justifying symbol of the Ptolemaic dynasty the founder hoped it would become. Alexander's body did continue its rest in Alexandria for at least three centuries, but according to Suetonius the attraction and power of Alexander did not spread to the Ptolemies. Suetonius describes the Emperor Augustus viewing the remains of Alexander: "About this time [Augustus] had the sarcophagus containing Alexander the Great's mummy removed from its shrine and, after a long look at its features, showed his veneration by crowning the head with a golden diadem and strewing flowers on the trunk."<sup>57</sup> This anecdote portrays a powerful moment in which two of the ancient world's greatest rulers came face to face. Augustus, whose rule represented a Golden Age to the Romans, under whom the Empire would grow and be at peace, humbled himself and paid his respects to Alexander the Great. His treatment of the Ptolemies was not so generous. Suetonius writes of Augustus' outright refusal to visit the tombs of the Ptolemies, for he "came to see a King, not a row of corpses."<sup>58</sup> It is evident that though body was still housed in Alexandria and though the Ptolemies did rule Egypt until Cleopatra's suicide just before Augustus arrived, the Ptolemies, despite the first's best attempts, were seen as unimportant dead men in comparison to Alexander—not as his successors.

Years later, in Suetonius' *Life of Caligula*, we find the uniquely-minded emperor in preparation for an expedition, for which he "wore the uniform of a triumphant general, including sometimes the breastplate which he had stolen from Alexander the Great's tomb at Alexandria."<sup>59</sup> According to Suetonius, this was not a loan or a gift from the keepers of the tomb—Caligula had "stolen" the breastplate right out of the burial-place! Without digressing into a description of Caligula's evil, which was obvious, it is still somewhat striking that he was not only daring enough but also able to loot the tomb of Alexander. This robbery may represent Caligula's disrespect, or it may be a sign of the

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<sup>57</sup> Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars: Life of Augustus*, translated by Robert Graves (London: Penguin Classics, 1957) 18, 54.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars: Life of Caligulas*, translated by Robert Graves (London: Penguin Classics, 1957) 52, 178.

waning interest in the tombs of Alexander and the Ptolemies now that Roman rule was enforced. One could assume attention to the body of Alexander the Great would have been a priority—the *Romance of Alexander* describes a priest specifically designated to keep care and watch over the remains.<sup>60</sup> However, sometime between the late 30s AD and modernity the body was apparently lost. Despite Andrew Chugg's efforts to sustain the possibility that the sarcophagus of Nectanebo II actually held the remains of Alexander, scholars are unsure of the location of the tomb within Alexandria. Many suggestions have been made and investigated, but little of substance—let alone a corpse—has yet been discovered.

### Conclusions

Though Alexander's body is now lost to us, the evidence presented in our extant literary sources for its eventual burial site, and potential others, provides us with keen insight into Alexander and the empire he left behind. Unexpectedly and in a rather inglorious form, the king died of fever in Babylon. He fought illness for several days leading up to his death five weeks shy of turning thirty-three years old. Alexander commanded his officers, made elaborate plans for his upcoming expeditions, even requested a particular burial site—the temple of Ammon in the Siwah oasis. Alexander had been addressed as the son of god upon visiting this temple in the winter of 331 BC and he took this role very seriously. Throughout the rest of his life, Alexander requested to be referred to and thought of as the son of Zeus-Ammon, despite the reluctance of many of his men. In death, it seems, Alexander wanted to be remembered as the son of god. Burial at the temple would solidify the king's remembrance in dynastic fashion with Zeus-Ammon. Though Aegae was the traditional burial site for Macedonian kings, Alexander did not desire to be buried there alongside his human father. While his request to be buried at Siwah was not honored, he was not buried at Aegae either. His absence from the burial complex where the tombs of Philip II and Arrhidaeus have been found eternally marks his separation from them, although Borza's assertion that some of Alexander's personal items were buried at Aegae provides a link between Alexander and the Argead kings. Burial of the actual body at Aegae would have emphasized his role as ruler of Macedonia, his role as son of Philip, and half-brother of Arrhidaeus. He did not want to be remembered as such; Alexander, though he was the king, was not and will not be remembered as just another King of Macedon.

Alexander's final resting place became the city he founded in Egypt, Alexandria. Whether commanded to be buried there by a god or not, stolen from his own funeral-train or readily given over to Ptolemy, buried at Memphis for a few years or forty or none, the king's remains were laid to final rest at Alexandria by one of the Ptolemies. The Alexandria in Egypt at the time represented little more than all the other Alexandrias, but it would one day become one of the most powerful cities in the Roman Empire. Although the

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<sup>60</sup> Ps.-Call., 284, 158.

Ptolemies most likely wished to use possession of the king's body to validate continuing Macedonian rule in Egypt, it wasn't seen that way centuries later.

Alexander wished to be remembered as a god by burial at Siwah, but this wish was not fulfilled. He may have been remembered as a great king of Macedon by burial at Aegae, but this possibility too was not realized. Though he was indeed buried at Alexandria, he did not become the legitimizing symbol the Ptolemies had hoped. Not truly god, not merely king, refusal in death to become another's icon, it seems the memory of Alexander as traced through his physical remains is as ancient and distant to us as the body itself.