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### **At the deathbed of Alexander the Great.**

Josiah Ober. [jober@stanford.edu](mailto:jober@stanford.edu)

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The last days of Alexander the Great have been obsessively studied since antiquity and much is known; the numerous Greek literary sources can be complemented by precious cuneiform texts and the evidence of archaeology. We know when and where he died: June 11, 323 B.C., between 4 and 5 p.m., on the banks of the Euphrates River in the fabled city of Babylon, in a palace built by the great and notorious Nebuchadnezzar a quarter millennium before. At the moment of his death, Alexander was surrounded by his lieutenants, soldiers, wives, eunuchs; by Macedonians, Greeks, Persians, and Babylonians; along with petitioners, ambassadors, admirers, and gawkers from across three continents. The cause of death was fever. The symptoms began several days before, after a long night of heavy drinking. The fever abated briefly, then became increasingly severe. At the end Alexander could barely move and could not speak clearly, but he retained enough strength to press his signet ring into the hand of one of his generals. When asked to whom his spear-won realm should pass the King, it was said, managed to whisper “to the strongest.”

Few ancient death scenes are as well documented, yet so much remains mysterious. Upon Alexander’s demise a rumor circulated that he had been poisoned. Fingers pointed to Antipater, the veteran commander who had been left in charge of Macedonia when the 20 year old Alexander set to conquer Asia. Antipater’s son Cassander arrived in Babylon just a few days before the onset of the King’s fever, and had quarreled violently with Alexander. Cassander’s brother, Iolaus, was the King’s cupbearer – The story held that Cassander had smuggled into Babylon a poison so deadly that it corroded all metal and could only be contained by a mule’s hoof. Had Cassander passed a hoof-full of death to Iolaus, fearing that the King planned to strip Antipater of his command? But if so, what was the poison? Ancient and modern pharmacologists have struggled to correlate the reported symptoms with the action of poisons known in Alexander’s day.

The rumors about the cause of Alexander's death are intertwined with reports of his plans for the future: Having conquered Greece, Egypt, and Asia as far east as India, what lands would the Undefeated God, as the King had recently designated himself, choose to conquer next? A massive fleet of warships had recently gathered at Babylon and the rivers had been cleared of obstructing dams: The waterway was open to the Persian Gulf. At the least, it seemed, Alexander's plans included the circumnavigation of the Arabian Peninsula. That would be a notable feat of navigation -- and would allow him to acquire the spice and incense-producing coastal zones of Arabia. But those in the know said that the King had his eye on restive city-states in Greece, and on fresh conquests in Africa, Italy, and even Spain. Close to hand, the city-state of Athens had recently (if only briefly) offered asylum to Alexander's one-time chief treasurer, Harpalus, who had absconded with thousands of talents of silver. Further west, on the northern shore of Africa lay the hugely wealthy Afro-Phoenician state of Carthage, and then there were the luxury-loving Etruscans of central Italy, and their neighbor, the fast-rising state of Rome. Mineral riches were there for the taking in Spain. To the north, lay Thrace and Scythia, rich in gold and grain. According to the rumor mill, no part of the civilized world lay outside the King's ambit of desire. Which of those rumors were true?

And by what system of governance and what social policies did Alexander intend to rule his vast kingdom? Would he continue to reign as his father Philip had before him, as King of the Macedonians and constitutional hegemon of the Greek city-states? Would he bring all of his realm under one government, lording over the world from Babylon as the legitimate successor of a long line of Persian Kings of Kings, on the model of Cyrus, Xerxes and Darius? Had he re-invented himself as the greatest of the central Asian warlords during the challenging Indo-Bactrian campaigns of the last several years? Would he return to Egypt, to rule as a divine conqueror-Pharaoh on the model of Ramses the Great?

We could frame an answer to those questions if only we could observe how Alexander chose to dress in public and private. Dress mattered a lot in the ancient world: how you dressed was an indication of who you were. It is certain that the King had taken to wearing selected items of Persian garb, at least on certain occasions: gorgeous purple robes, but not trousers; the diadem, but not the tiara. How often and in what circumstances did Alexander choose to costume himself as Persian royalty? As Macedonian soldier or rough-riding warlord?

How widely and deeply were oriental court customs being adopted by his Macedonian followers? Some were happy to adopt Persian protocol by prostrating themselves before the King. Other men, who openly scorned the Persian custom of *proskinesis*, had recently lost their lives: Callisthenes, the philosopher and nephew of Alexander's teacher Aristotle died in prison. Cleitus the Black, whose quick work with a sword who had saved Alexander's life at the start of the Asian adventure, had been stabbed to death by Alexander in a drunken quarrel. The squabble had been over the

King's growing passion for the trappings of what Cleitus despised as orientalism. How important was it to the son of Philip of Macedon that he be humbly acknowledged by one and all by obsequies traditionally accorded the Persian Great King?

Even more pressingly: How would he treat his subjects – and how would they relate to one another? A few months before his death, Alexander had held a military review of thirty-thousand Persian youths who had just completed four years of training in the arts of fighting in the Greek style. Apparently Macedonians and Greeks would no longer hold a monopoly on military service; Persians were being incorporated into the cavalry and into the infantry phalanx. Were these the first moves toward a unified empire, whose diverse ethnic groups would be equal in the eyes of their King?

Perhaps the key to understanding the King's intentions lay with the new cities populated by mustered-out veterans, recently founded by and named for Alexander. Many new cities had been planned, but were they to be culturally purely Greek, as the King's old tutor, Aristotle, advised? Or semi-Greek? Or some exciting hybrid form as yet unknown? The port city of Egyptian Alexandria was becoming a cosmopolitan center of trade, culture, and government. But what of the others? At the furthest northeast frontier of the empire, at the modern site of Ai Khanoum on the Afghan border, archaeologists were amazed to discover a major town, featuring a startling mix of Hellenic and Asian cultural features; it was apparently founded by Alexander during his Afghan campaign. How many *other* new cities had been planned for the lands between Egypt and India? What role were they to play in the King's schemes for governing his vast realm?

The answers to at least some of these questions must have been known and recorded. For modern historians, some of the most tantalizing mysteries about the last days of Alexander concern documents. What records were being kept and by whom? Authors of the Roman era believed that Royal Diaries were maintained by Alexander's official staff. The Diaries supposedly recorded the details of what the King did and said day by day, from the beginning of his reign to the end. What would a modern historian give to travel back in time, to study those records at leisure perhaps with a helpful archivist nearby to pull the papyrus scrolls from their cedar-wood cabinets? Did Alexander have the foresight to prepare a final testament that would clarify the succession and the distribution of power among the many ambitious and able men who had fought by his side and who now must now manage the gigantic and diverse empire? A detailed version of Alexander's will has come down to us, but it is attached to the fantasy-filled "Romance of Alexander." The will seems to be earlier than the rest of the Romance, but does it have any bearing on the King's actual intentions?

Every historian wants to know what really happened in the past. That means -- at a minimum -- gaining access to records, the more detailed and accurate, the closer to the actual events, the better. But in our hearts we always want more than we can ever have: we want to read documents that are lost forever; to interview people long dead; to be eye witness to the great events that changed the course of history. We want that in part

because we want to solve mysteries, we do want to know the truth about the past. But in honesty, the search for the truth about events and historical trends is only one of the reasons I would choose to experience *this* moment of past time above all others. What I really want to know is what it *felt like* to be at the center of the world, at a moment when human history had reached one of its great turning points.

A turning point it certainly was: Thirty years before, when the baby Alexander was just beginning to walk and talk, the world had seemed set in its course. The Greeks would fight endless wars over the meaningless question of which city-state would exercise brief hegemony. An ossified but operational Persian empire would continue to dominate an extensive core. People at the fringes of the Empire – western Anatolia, Egypt, and India – would continue to find ways to avoid Persian domination and ambitious local governors would periodically assert a tenuous independence. Macedon would continue in its role as underperforming giant with great human and natural resources but lacking effective central government.

Some of those assumptions began to change as Alexander's father, Philip, consolidated royal power in Macedon, brought the mainland Greeks under his control, and laid plans for an Asian expedition that would add the rich provinces of western Anatolia to his burgeoning Macedonian empire. But in the dozen years since Alexander had inherited the throne of Macedon the pace accelerated wildly. So much had changed for an unimaginable number of people across Europe and Asia: Long-entrenched systems of government had been suddenly over-turned. The treasure houses of the Persian empire, packed with the carefully hoarded loot of two centuries of plunder and efficient taxation, had been thrown open. Tons of silver and gold spilled into the Euro-Asian economy. The Greek language, and the rich cultural heritage it brought with it, was becoming the new lingua franca. Everything, it seemed, would be made anew.

In the days before the news of Alexander's death was broadcast, everything was still possible. I want to experience the vertigo of gazing at the unlimited horizons that had opened virtually over night. Alexander had done the unthinkable by toppling the greatest empire in the Mediterranean and western Asian world in three great battles. He burned down the great Persian capital of Persepolis, giving the Greek world revenge for all the temples burned by Xerxes during the Greco-Persian wars of a century and half past. Then he had ruthlessly hunted down the killer of his enemy, Persia's last Great King. He went on to defeat the bellicose tribes of central Asia and honored the pride of the Afghans, his toughest opponents, by taking as his first wife Roxane, the daughter of a local warlord. Alexander had met the challenge of the giant rajah Porus' war elephants on a tributary of the Indus River, survived the extraordinary rigors of a desert crossing upon his return from the East.

I want to hear the war stories of soldiers who had answered the call of a teen-aged King, marched out as raw recruits from their home villages in the Macedonian highlands, and were now wealthy, weary, battle-scarred veterans of the greatest expedition in human

history. By their terrifying prowess with spear and sword, many tens of thousands of Greeks and Asians had died. But, meanwhile, once-insular worlds of thought were opened to one another as Indian religious adepts, priestly Egyptian temple archivists, Babylonian astronomers and mathematicians, Greek historians and philosophers rubbed shoulders in the imperial capitals. I want to listen to their conversations, to attend the birth of a new and cosmopolitan world of knowledge.

The conviction that everything had changed and anything might be possible was intensified by the blurring of the boundary between the realm of the gods and mortals. After his conquest of Egypt, Alexander had been welcomed as a divine Son by the great god Ammon in the desert oasis at Siwah. He had enthusiastically been adopted by the native populace of Egypt as a legitimate successor to the dynastic God-Kings of the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms. Shortly before his death Alexander sent a request (which was taken as an order) to the Greeks assembled for the Games at Olympia: they were to offer their King divine rights, as if he were a living god. The divinity of the man Alexander was only one new religious idea among many that now cascaded through the world. The Greeks, long used to offering sacrifices to a wide pantheon of anthropomorphized deities found themselves confronted by highly sophisticated philosophical-religious traditions founded by the Persian Zarathustra and by the Indian Gautama Buddha; they were astonished by the practices of the Indian “naked philosophers” and by the complex ritual rules of Hinduism. Bold new religious syncretisms were blossoming; new ways were found to explore and honor the unseen world of the divine. I want to hear tales of enlightenment, conversion and spiritual rebirth.

I want to be in Babylon in the spring of 323 B.C. to breathe in the potent atmosphere of hope mixed with dread. The hope was stimulated by the miraculous return of Alexander from the dead. Along with most of the Macedonian army, he had set out from his base in India with the plan of crossing what he supposed would be a reasonably well inhabited zone to the west. Instead he had found the nightmarish Gedrosian desert. Coordination between Alexander’s land army with his fleet broke down as the desolation of the coastal zone became apparent; both fleet and army were cut off, assumed lost. With the King’s disappearance, the imperial order began to break down: Men Alexander had set up as local governors began tentatively at first, to consolidate authority in their own names: Without Alexander they knew there could be no unified empire, but only spoils. Each was positioning himself to grab his share.

When Alexander had emerged from the desert with most of the army intact, and his admiral Nearchus appeared with the fleet, the hope for a new world was reborn, and the celebrations were extravagant. What were people hoping for? Alexander had already helped Greek cities in western Anatolia to replace corrupt oligarchies with democracy. Some people would have been looking forward to lives as free citizens in democratic towns; others were imagining the cultural opportunities offered by the many new

Alexandria's. Yet others anticipated the hugely expanded potential for long-distance trade that would emerge with the expanded empire.

Yet Alexander had emerged from the desert with his dark side to the fore. He had always been volatile, but his displeasure now grew more violent. Governors who had shown too much independence were summoned to the King – some were summarily executed. Meanwhile, Alexander issued high-handed orders commanding Greek cities to accept back within their walls all persons who had been sent into exile. For democratic city-states this could mean introducing terrorists and revolutionaries: embittered oligarchs who could be expected to plot against the existing government.

More reasons for dread: The newly formed regiments of Persian youths had been a rude shock to the veterans. The Macedonian soldiers feared that they would now be summarily dismissed from service and rose up in vehement protest. They were brought back into the fold with munificent mustering-out bonuses, a splendid feast in which their ethnic pride was catered to, and their King's expansive declaration that he regarded all of his Macedonian soldiers as his kinsmen. But the unease remained – the veterans were more than ready to go home; they dreaded what would happen if they did.

Then, en route to Babylon, Alexander's closest friend and most trusted companion, Hephaestion, suddenly sickened and died. Alexander's grief was terrifying. The attending physician was crucified. The King's misery was nightmarishly expressed in a series of ferocious, near-genocidal military raids on horse-stealing tribal peoples in the Iranian highlands. What did this new level of combat savagery portend for the grand expeditions in the works?

I want to walk the steaming midsummer streets of Babylon in June of 323 B.C. to know what it feels like to live in a wildly heterogeneous society at the brink of a strange and wonderful and terrifying new world that had been opened by a man whose life now hung by a thread. But I also long to visit Babylon when it was, for the last time, the center of the world. After Alexander's death Babylon was never again a grand capital. Most Greek emigrants to Mesopotamia were attracted to an upstart town named for another of Alexander's lieutenants. Eventually, the great city's temples, palaces, gardens and houses disappeared under the sand. They would remain invisible until the 19<sup>th</sup> when modern archaeologists began excavations; in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein added insult to the injuries of time when he attempted to restore the ruins of Babylon as a ludicrous monument to himself.

But In 323 B.C. Babylon was still the greatest and most populous city in the world, and its history was unthinkable long by Greek standards – it had been a great urban center at the dawn of the second millennium B.C., when Hammurabi had made it the capital of his empire. With its huge and unruly population, and its venerable religious tradition, Babylon had spelled trouble for the Assyrian empire during the early first millennium; it had been sacked by the Assyrian Kings Sennacherib and Assurbanipal. When the Assyrians were overthrown by a new Babylonian dynasty, the city was

splendidly rebuilt by Nebuchadnezzar II -- King Nebuchadnezzar of Biblical infamy. Beginning at the turn of the sixth century B.C., Nebuchadnezzar dedicated much of his long reign to reconstructing the city in a fashion worthy of its long and glorious history. The massive old ziggurat temples were restored and new temples of staggering opulence were dedicated to the Babylonian gods. Superb gardens (the famous Hanging Gardens recorded by Greek historians and geographers) imitated a mountain landscape in the midst of the flat and fertile plain. A stone bridge now spanned the Euphrates, connecting the two halves of the city.

In June 323, Alexander's attendants carried him over this bridge to a cool bathhouse on the west bank of the river in an attempt to quell his raging fever. At the center of the city, near the river, lay Nebuchadnezzar's palace – it was here that Alexander died.

How would Babylon strike the senses of a traveler in midsummer of 323 B.C.? The first impression would surely have been one of immensity: the mighty fortification walls, wide enough at the top for two chariots to pass, enclosed some two hundred square miles according to the measurements of the Greek historian Herodotus. After the fall of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty to the Persians, Babylon had become one of the capital cities of the Persian Empire, but the Babylonians had not lost their stubborn independence of spirit: King Xerxes destroyed the great temple of Marduk to punish them for a revolt in 482 B.C. Later Persian kings made periodic visits, but preferred to spend their winters at Susa near the Persian Gulf and their summers at the pleasantly cool royal residence at Ecbatana. By contrast, Alexander had announced great plans for ancient city.

After his final and decisive defeat of the Persian King Darius III at Gaugamela in 331 B.C., Alexander had taken over Babylon without a fight. The Macedonian invader earned the affection of the Babylonians by forbidding his soldiers to enter private homes without permission. Moreover, he had promised to rebuild the great temple of Marduk. When Alexander left Babylon to head east, he arranged for the city to serve as a primary resupply center, and left it under control of his chief treasurer Harpalus. Before his treasonous defection in 324 B.C., the treasurer had set to work planting familiar Greek plants in the royal gardens and building a notoriously expensive monument to his favorite concubine.

Had Harpalus also been preparing the city to become a worthy capital of the world empire—restoring the palace so that it would once again be fit for a King of Kings, repaving the boulevards for the victory parades to come? Alexander's plans for the city became even more extravagant in the early months of 323: After Hephaestion's untimely death, planning began for a gigantic tomb. Thousands of craftsmen flooded into the city eager to work on the mausoleum that everyone expected would be one of the grandest architecture enterprises in human history.

In anticipation of Alexander's triumphant return to Babylon, we must suppose that the public areas, and especially the palace were given a facelift. But did the

generations of Persian neglect show through? Was the ancient city's degeneration disguised by a new coat of stucco and paint? Where and when did the decay show through? Was the magnificent Ishtar Gate still splendid, with its brilliant blue and golden tile mosaics of lions and winged griffins? What of the famous gardens – were they newly planted and irrigated by the ambitious Harpalus? Or overgrown tangles of weed and vine, only partially masked by potted plants? What of the ancient temples, and the private homes and workshops and wharves? Did Babylon smell of river, or of dust? Of animal and human waste, or perfume, incense, and scented oil? Of ambition or desire? Walking through the crowded city at night, guided by the flickering orange light of naphtha-torches, would I hear the cough of a captive lion, the shriek of an ostrich, the bark of jackals amidst the babble of multitudes of men and women speaking in myriad foreign tongues?

Who would I meet if I could move freely through the streets of the city, through the palace, into the private royal quarters and the homes of the great and the ordinary? Who was there in Babylon, at the center of the world, at the moment of Alexander's final breath? Along with the local Babylonians, there were camp followers, captives, and emissaries from all the lands Alexander had conquered: Anatolians, Cilicians, Syrians, Phoenicians, Jews, Egyptians, Medes, Persians, Bactrians, Indians, and a thousand other ethnicities. Ambassadors had flocked to the new capital from around the world, hoping for a private moment with the Great King. There were Greeks of course: Athenians to complain about the exiles decree, Thebans to urge the rebuilding of the first great Greek city to be sacked by the young Alexander, Rhodians with plans for how their island could become a center of Mediterranean trade. But the Greeks were outnumbered by envoys from more distant and exotic lands: Scythians and Thracians, Italians – including, it was said, Roman senators – Carthaginians, Spaniards.

Dominating the throng, were thousands of hard-fighting and hard-partying Macedonians. These included the great field marshals, regimental commanders, and generals each with their retinue: men of extraordinary talent and ambition, the steely-eyed specialists in violence who excelled in the arts of war, and diplomacy, treachery, and survival, all learned in the hard school of Alexander's camp. And with them were their concubines and Asian wives. In Susa, en route to Babylon, Alexander had officiated over a mass wedding: scores of commanders were given huge dowries when, at the King's urging, they agreed to marry the daughters of Persian and Bactrian aristocrats. Alexander himself had added to his polygamous family: It was in Bactria that he had first married, and Roxanne, was now visibly with child - it would be a boy, although no one knew that yet. More recently Alexander had wed the daughters of two former Persian Kings, Artaxerxes III and Darius III. If the rumors were true, Alexander had far exceeded his father's total of seven wives. It was said that the Great King had followed Persian royal practice by gathering a proper harem and now had as many beautiful concubines as there were days in the year.

Thousands of ordinary Macedonian soldiers had taken camp wives on the long march across Asia. Alexander blessed these unions by offering his soldiers dowries and discharging the debts they had contracted in the course of the expedition. The King's apparently keen interest in legitimizing cross-cultural unions seemed to point to a vision of the future that transcended the narrowly Greco-Macedonian horizon of many of his closest associates. What was going through the minds of Alexander's veterans and their newly legalized wives, and the countless others who anxiously awaited news from the palace in the long hot days while the King's illness worsened?

Finally, the suspense undid the veterans. They demanded to see their King. And here is the moment I most long to see: Alexander was taken from the palace on a litter, which was set up in a high place in the city. His men filed by for a last moment of communion with the commander who had led them to glory. The communion was silent: the King could not speak but acknowledged each of them with his eyes or a slight gesture. They had seen him so often before, but never like this, never in silence, never with the recognition that the adventure was over. It would end here, in Babylon, and I want to be there to see that moment as the curtain gently came down, as the members of the audience realized that they would soon be alone in the vast and crumbling theater. I long for that last, intimate glimpse of Alexander, reduced to his human essence, slipping away into legend.

If I could be there would I know if what the Roman chronicler Quintus Curtius wrote was true: "Wandering about and as if crazed, they filled that city, great as it was, with grief and sorrow, ... those who had stood outside the royal quarters, Macedonians and foreigners alike, rushed together. And in their common sorrow the vanquished could not be distinguished from the victors...." Did Macedonian and Persian, Babylonian and Greek weep together? Were they mourning the man Alexander, their all-to-mortal King and former master? Or had some of them already begun to grieve for the loss of their own dreams, and for a stillborn world in which an expansive Alexandrian identity might have overcome the deadly entrenched distinctions between Greek and barbarian, between Iranian and Babylonian, between pagan and Jew?