PTOLEMY OF EGYPT
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Walter M. Ellis
A member of Alexander’s bodyguard and a first-rate soldier, Ptolemy was even more talented at, and better known for, the civilian rather than military skills. His manner was modest and unassuming, and he was superlatively generous and approachable, having assumed none of the pride of royalty.


Upon the king! let our lives, our souls,
Our debts, our careful wives,
Our children and our sins lay on the king!
We must bear all. O hard condition,
Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath
Of every fool, whose sense no more can feel
But his own wringing! What infinite heart’s-ease
Must kings neglect, that private men enjoy!

Shakespeare, *Henry V*
For my beloved aunt
Mildred Bainbridge
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Although we know a great many facts about Ptolemy I, his personality is beyond recovery. I see him, on the basis of an inference from Curtius (9.8.23, quoted above) and my conclusions from all these facts, as a practical, methodical, patient, and hard-working, public servant. I see him in the mold of a Vespasian or a Harry Truman. He was a man of insight, but he was not a man of charisma.

He did notexcite the mass of men the way that Alexander the Great did or even Demetrius Poliorcetes. But he was shrewd. He understood what neither of those men did, nor any of the other leaders of that generation. He understood, at some level, consciously or unconsciously, that Alexander’s empire would not survive as an entity.

Ptolemy chose Egypt as his satrapy, perhaps long before Alexander died. He concentrated all his considerable skill and intelligence on the preservation, the development, and the promotion of Egypt: of a new Hellenized Egypt, centered in the Alexandria which still bears his leader’s name but which, likewise, still bears Ptolemy’s stamp.

Alexandria! Is there any other city in the world that conjures up such a rich, exotic, mental image? Antony and Cleopatra, Arius and Athanasius, Amr ibn al-As, Saladin, Cavafy, the Thais of Anatole France and of Jules Massenet, the Justine of Lawrence Durrell.

I wish my book were more about Alexandria, Ptolemy’s greatest achievement, and less about the interminable wars of the Successors. But I am limited by the surviving sources and by the preferences of the ancient historians, who seemed to think that the art of war was more important than the arts of civilization.

We could wish that Plutarch had left us a life of Ptolemy. But if the sources seem insufficient in the early years for his life, at least we have the connected chronicle of Diodorus. After that, from about 301 until his death in 283, there is almost nothing. We would like to know more about his relationship with his wives and children.

We would like to know more about the growth of Alexandria, the operation of the Museum and its library, the social and economic life of this brave new world. But unless the sands of Egypt yield new evidence, we must be content with what we have. I have reserved for the epilog a brief discussion of Ptolemy’s administration of his empire, since it is built on the sands of conjecture. The hard
ground of evidence does not exist. There is much evidence for administrative practices in the reign of his successor, but hardly anything for that of the first Ptolemy.

I have tried to limit my discussion of the Successors to a minimum. The sheer number of these competing generals is daunting to the uninitiated. Also, trying to distinguish between such names as Antipater, Antigonus, Antiochus, Alcetas, and Attalus, Polyperchon, Peucestas, and Perdiccas, not to mention the endless number of gentlemen named Demetrius, can be a challenge even for the expert.

For the same reason, I have employed a conservative approach to spelling in the belief that the reader has enough problems, without having to decipher Kassandros as Cassander, or to struggle with the notion that Korinthos is the city of Corinth or Kupros is the island of Cyprus. Likewise, I have held on tightly to surnames and nicknames like “the One-Eyed,” in the hope that it will aid the reader through some notoriously difficult territory. In case this proves to be not enough, I have also added a glossary of personal names at the end of the book.

I fear that I have not been wholly consistent in my use of the term “Macedonian.” For the record, let me state that I believe Macedonians, ancient and modern, are Greeks. But it is also a fact that ancient Macedonians distinguished themselves from Greeks, as the Greeks distinguished themselves from Macedonians. A Texan is an American, but many Americans see Texans in a class by themselves. The Welsh and the Cornish stand in an ambiguous relationship with the English, as do Ukrainians with Russians, Austrians with Germans, Alsatians with the French. The list is endless. Americans of English ancestry speak the same language as the English, only differently. They admire English culture, but grudgingly. They want to be English in some situations, but not in others.

The “backward” Macedonians were suddenly thrust into a position of leadership over the Greeks, who, from the Macedonian point of view, had not done a very good job of governing themselves. The Macedonians embraced Greek culture and their own role as leaders, but, at the same time, they must have felt slightly superior to the mighty Greeks, who had fallen so far so fast. These contradictions may not be rational, but nor are they unusual.
I would like to thank the following for their contributions, direct and indirect: Jerome Tweton, Mortimer Chambers, Ronald Mellor, Matthew Dillon, Larry Tittle, Ralph Gallucci, Stan Burstein, Belinda Lesser, Peter Green, Al Berger, Darel Engen, Marcia Mohr, Milton Randel, Sharon Elkington, Felix Bourriot, Marilyn Lowery, Jack Cargill, Ken Aubens, Ann Shaftel, Cara DeVito, Gidget, and Zoe.
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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>AIA</td>
<td>American Journal of Archaeology</td>
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<tr>
<td>AJPh</td>
<td>American Journal of Philology</td>
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<td>CAH</td>
<td>The Cambridge Ancient History</td>
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<td>CP</td>
<td>Classical Philology</td>
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<td>CQ</td>
<td>Classical Quarterly</td>
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<td>CW</td>
<td>Classical World</td>
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<tr>
<td>FGrH</td>
<td>F.Jacoby, <em>Fragmente der griechischen Historiker</em> (Berlin, Leiden 1923–58)</td>
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<tr>
<td>HSCP</td>
<td>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</td>
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<td>JHS</td>
<td>Journal of Hellenic Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>OGIS</td>
<td><em>Orientis Graeci Inscriptions Selectae</em>, ed. W.Dittenberger, 2 vols (Leipzig 1903–5)</td>
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<td>PACA</td>
<td>Proceedings of the African Classical Association</td>
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<td>PEleph.</td>
<td><em>Elephantine Papyri</em>, ed. O.Rubensohn (Berlin 1907)</td>
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<td>SEG</td>
<td><em>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum</em></td>
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<td>Step. Byz.</td>
<td>Stephen of Byzantium, sixth-century Byzantine Grammarian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suda</td>
<td>Greek lexicon (c. tenth century) formerly known as Suidas</td>
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<td>TAPA</td>
<td><em>Transactions of the American Philological Association</em></td>
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<td>Tzetzes</td>
<td>Johannes Tzetzes, Byzantine writer of the twelfth century</td>
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ANCIENT SOURCES

Ael.  Aelianus

VH  Varia Historia

Amm. Marc.  Ammianus Marcellinus

App.  Appian

Syr.  Syrian Wars

Apul.  Apuleius

Met.  Metamorphoses also known as The Golden Ass

Ar.  Aristotle

Ath. Pol.  Athenaios Politeia  
(The Constitution of Athens)

[Ar.]  Pseudo-Aristotle

Oec.  Oeconomica or Economics

Arr.  Arrian, without further citation, this always refers to the Anabasis or The Campaigns of Alexander

Indica  Book of India

Met’ Alex.  refers to the fragments of the Events after Alexander also known as the Successors

Athen.  Athenaeus, The Deipnosophistai  
(The Learned Banquet)

Cic.  Cicero

De Div.  De Divinatione  
(On Divination)

Curt.  Quintus Curtius Rufus  
The History of Alexander

Callim.  Callimachus

Iambi  Poems in the iambic meter

Dio Cass.  Dio Cassius

Diod.  Diodorus of Sicily  
The Library of History
The Library of History

Diog. Laer.  Diogenes Laertius
    Lives of the Eminent Philosophers

Galen  Galen of Pergamum

Hdt.  Herodotus, The Histories

Hom.  Homer

Od.  Odyssey

Joseph.  Josephus

Antiq. Jud.  Antiquitates Judaicae
    (Jewish Antiquities)

Bell.Jud.  Bellum Judaicum
    (Jewish War)

Just.  Justinus, Epitome (of Trogus)

Letter of Aristeas  also known as “Aristeas to Philocrates” (ed. M. Hadas 1951)

Luc.  Lucian
    Historia  “How to Write History”
    (Macrobr.)  Macrobius
    (The Long-Lived)

Paus.  Pausanias
    Guide to Greece

Plin.  Pliny the Elder
    Natural History

Plut.  Plutarch

Alex.  Life of Alexander

De Ira. Cohib.  De Cohibenda Ira
    “On the Control of Anger”

Is. et Os.  “On Isis and Osiris”

Demetr.  Life of Demetrius

Pyrr.  Life of Pyrrhus

Polyaen.  Polyaenus
    Stratagems

Romance  The Romance of Alexander exists in several versions, including the Greek and the Armenian. Also known as Life of Alexander by Pseudo-Callisthenes

Strabo  The Geography of Strabo

Suet.  Suetonius

Aug.  Life of Augustus

Tac.  Tacitus

Hist.  The Histories
When Alexander the Great died in 323, Ptolemy, one of his field marshals, was about 44 years old. His impact upon the world at this time could hardly be described as profound. He had lived most of his life in the shadow of his great contemporary. Ptolemy could not have been expected to do otherwise. While Alexander was alive, Ptolemy and all his fellow generals could only play their supporting roles in the revolution that was changing the face, not only of Greece and the eastern Mediterranean, but of western Asia as well. With Alexander’s death the rules of the game changed drastically, but no one fully understood the situation or what to do about it.

In less than twelve years Alexander conquered the Persian empire, a region that included the modern countries of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of former Soviet Turkestan and Uzbekistan. His empire also included a relatively united Greece, the work of his father, Philip II. The Greek city states had by no means willingly or knowingly relinquished their independence to the king of Macedonia, but the great age of Hellenic independence was over. The various city states would continue to pursue the illusion of freedom, but Macedonian hegemony was a fact and would remain a fact until it was superseded by Roman hegemony two centuries later.

The creation of this magnificent empire was an astonishing achievement. It had, however, a disastrous flaw. It was the personal achievement of one man: Alexander the Great. Alexander improvised as he went along. If he adopted Persian or other local customs for governing the new provinces of his vast empire, it was perhaps because it was easier than inventing new systems for control.

As long as Alexander was alive, the strength of his character was able to hold together the disparate regions and their varying administrative systems. Even this was done with great difficulty, and Alexander himself was frequently faced with rebellious satraps. So, after his death, his successors inherited Alexander’s problems as well as those of the later Persian emperors. Paramount among these problems was the centrifugal tendency of the empire, the tendency toward decentralization, toward the separation of the provinces into independent kingdoms under autonomous dynasties. Egypt had only recently been reconquered by the Persians, at the time of Alexander’s invasion, and India (that part of historic India which corresponds roughly to modern Pakistan) had long since been lost.
Ptolemy, son of Lagus, seems to have been the first of Alexander’s successors to understand that the empire would not last as an entity and could not be governed by one man. He alone of the major figures in the first years after Alexander’s death seems to have intuitively grasped the idea that this vast creation of the charismatic general would splinter into smaller kingdoms. He chose Egypt as his personal satrapy and never gave way to the temptation to risk his hold on Egypt for a larger share of the empire. It is true that he conquered regions both to the east and west—but only in the interests of a greater Egypt, not in the attempt to gain all of Alexander’s empire.

If none of the Diadochi or Successors were as remarkable as Alexander, it does not mean that they were not extraordinary men. The two generations of Macedonians who grew up under Philip II and Alexander the Great included a remarkable number of talented and ambitious men. The death of Alexander without an obvious heir created a situation where many of these men could rise to heights far beyond what they might ordinarily have expected. Had there been fewer of these men of talent and ambition, the struggle for power might have been less destructive.

Macedonia had been ruled by the same dynasty for over three hundred years. It was unthinkable that anyone not of this Argead dynasty should rule the lands of Macedonian conquest. Yet the only candidates from this family were the as yet unborn child of Alexander by the Sogdian princess Roxane and Alexander’s feeble-minded half-brother, Arrhidæus.

Macedonia, unlike the poleis of classical Greece, was a true monarchy. The king, however, was not invariably chosen by the law of primogeniture. The Macedonians needed their king as the commander-in-chief of their army and could not afford the luxury of a lengthy minority. Philip II himself had come to the throne by a rather indirect route. He had been the guardian of his brother’s young son, but had then assumed the kingship with the approval of the army.

PTOLEMY IN MACEDONIA

Ptolemy was often rumored to be the illegitimate son of Philip II. His mother Arsinoe was probably the king’s cousin, and it is entirely possible that her marriage to Lagus was a marriage of convenience, since Lagus seems to have been from a relatively obscure family. The Suda preserves the legend that Lagus, angry over the child’s paternity, exposed him. Ptolemy then, according to this story, would have died had he not been saved by an eagle.

On the other hand, it is possible that Ptolemy, or one of his admirers, deliberately encouraged the rumor to enhance his reputation and his claim to the title of king by allowing people to believe that he was Alexander’s half-brother. Ptolemy (or Ptolemaios, to use the Greek form) was a common Macedonian name, one just recently held by a king, Philip’s stepfather, King Ptolemy (368–365).

Justin’s suggestion that Ptolemy’s position was obscure, and that Alexander raised him from the ranks of the common soldiers is clearly false. Ptolemy, if not
his father, was part of the Macedonian court, a member of the Royal Pages, and a close companion of the young Alexander, even though he was about ten years his elder.

The Royal Pages or Grooms were the sons of Macedonian nobles whom Philip brought together for the purpose of training future leaders and generals. They were, perhaps, also hostages to prevent the nobles from rebelling. They sat with the king at dinner, handled his horses, accompanied him on the hunt, and generally performed duties for him as his servants and bodyguards.8

In addition to Ptolemy, the Royal Pages probably also included Hephaestion, Nearchus, Harpalus, and Philotas.9 Hephaestion was Alexander’s closest friend and probable lover. Alexander reacted to his death in 324 with extravagant grief, which hastened his own death a few months later. Nearchus became Alexander’s admiral and accompanied his disastrous march through the Gedrosian Desert (325–324) by sailing the fleet on the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf from the Indus river to the Tigris.

Nearchus, a Cretan by birth, wrote an account of his voyage that is preserved, in part, in Arrian’s *Indica*. Harpalus became Alexander’s untrustworthy treasurer, who twice fled his king—apparently to avoid suffering the punishment for extortion. Philotas was the son of Philip’s general Parmenion, who later became the commander of the Companion cavalry, the elite, aristocratic inner core of the Macedonian army. He was later implicated in a conspiracy and was executed in 330.

These same individuals probably formed the nucleus of the group who studied with Aristotle at Mieza from c. 342.10 The studies by Aristotle and his pupils probably did not continue after the year 340, at which time Alexander became regent of Macedonia while Philip was on campaign, besieging the cities of Perinthus and Byzantium.

By this time Philip was in control of Thessaly and most of Thrace west of the Chersonese. He had secured a foothold in central Greece, and he had also secured his rear by placing his brother-in-law on the throne of Epirus. Philip II had created a powerful and unprecedented empire out of northern Greece.

By attacking Perinthus on the Sea of Marmara and Byzantium on the Bosphorus, Philip had threatened the Athenian grain route. The Athenians, spurred on by the agitations of Demosthenes, were finally roused into action. They sent aid to the besieged cities and frustrated Philip’s efforts there. The Athenians were eventually able to win Thebes over to their cause, but when the decisive battle came at Chaeronea in 338 the Macedonians were victorious.

No surviving, ancient author tells us whether Ptolemy was present at the Battle of Chaeronea, but given that he was probably 29 years of age at the time and that he had a long and distinguished military career ahead of him, it seems overwhelmingly likely. Perhaps it was in the aftermath of that battle that Ptolemy first made the acquaintance of the notorious Athenian *hetaira* Thais who later became his mistress and later still encouraged a drunken Alexander to burn down the palace of Xerxes in Persepolis.
Alexander had won great credit for himself at Chaeronea, but he soon found himself in a bitter domestic squabble with his father. Philip had remarried. The Macedonian kings were polygamous, but this new alliance threatened, to some extent, Alexander’s inheritance of the throne.

Alexander, perhaps in response to this threat, began to intrigue behind his father’s back. He made overtures to Pixodarus, the satrap of Caria, concerning a possible marriage between himself and the satrap’s daughter. Philip had planned to marry off his retarded son Arrhidaeus to the girl, and, according to Plutarch, he did not wish Alexander to marry “the slave of a barbarian king.” Whatever his motive, Philip became angry about this incident and banished Ptolemy and three other of Alexander’s companions. Alexander had already left Macedonia and was living in Illyria. Perhaps Ptolemy joined him there.

Philip was assassinated in 336, and Ptolemy was soon recalled by Alexander, now king of Macedonia. Ptolemy probably took part in Alexander’s campaign against Thebes in 335. Arrian cites him as his source for the events surrounding the sack of Thebes, and his circumstantial handling of the episode suggests that Ptolemy had firsthand knowledge. Perdiccas, later Ptolemy’s enemy, led the assault and was seriously wounded in the battle.

THE MACEDONIAN OCCUPATION OF EGYPT

In 334 Alexander crossed the Hellespont and began the conquest of Persia. Ptolemy does not appear to have played a major role in the early campaigns in Asia. We cannot even be certain that he accompanied Alexander in his descent into Egypt, but it is entirely possible. In 323 Ptolemy wasted no time in choosing Egypt for his province. This fact would be easier to understand if the satrap had already had firsthand knowledge of the region. In addition, Arrian cites Ptolemy for certain details which suggest his presence in Egypt.

Except for relatively brief periods of independence, Egypt had been dominated by foreign rulers for six centuries. Libyans, Ethiopians and Assyrians had, in turn, ruled over the valley of the Nile. The Persians under Cambyses conquered Egypt in 525, but had lost control of the province by 410. The Persians made several attempts to reconquer Egypt, but did not succeed in doing so until 343, only twelve years before the country fell to the Macedonians.

Alexander had already defeated the Persians in two decisive battles, at the Granicus River in 334 and at Issus in the early fall of 333. In the latter battle the Great King of Persia, Darius III, had fled from the battlefield. Rather than pursue him into Persia itself, Alexander decided to secure Syria, Phoenicia, and Egypt. The Persians depended primarily upon the Phoenicians for their navy. Alexander’s plan was that, in taking the eastern Mediterranean coast, he would not only be securing his rear, but would also be destroying Persian naval power. Alexander’s most celebrated exploit in this campaign was the siege of the Phoenician city of Tyre, which required most of the first half of the year 332. After he took Tyre, only the border fortress of Gaza stood between Alexander and Egypt.
Gaza, which was held by a Persian governor and Arab mercenaries, also required a siege, this one lasting two months. The siege was unusually brutal and did not end until the entire male population, mainly Persian and Arab, had been killed and the women and children sold into slavery.

The Macedonians also suffered heavy losses, and Alexander himself was twice wounded. But after the fall of Gaza Alexander’s conquest of Egypt was merely a victory parade. He first marched to Pelusium at the eastern edge of the Nile delta. This is the site where invasions of Egypt were often won or lost. The army of Artaxerxes III had defeated the army of Pharaoh Nectanebos (both armies being dominated by Greek mercenaries) here in 343, thus finally winning Egypt back into the Persian empire after over sixty years of independence. Alexander met no opposition here. The Egyptians turned out to welcome him; many doubtless believed that the Macedonians represented a considerable improvement on the Persians.

Alexander garrisoned Pelusium, and the site remained an essential element of the Macedonian control of Egypt. He proceeded to Memphis by way of Heliopolis. Memphis, one of the oldest cities in the world, had been the capital of the earliest Pharaohs, including those Fourth Dynasty Pharaohs who had built the great Pyramids at nearby Giza. The city stood near the southern extremity of the Nile delta on the western bank of the river, somewhat to the south of present-day Cairo. It was a convenient site then to control both Upper (i.e. southern) Egypt and Lower Egypt (i.e. the delta). Under the Persians, Memphis had once more become the capital city.

The Great King of Persia was formally considered the pharaoh of Egypt, but the country was governed by a satrap. The previous satrap, Sabaces, had taken what native forces there were in Egypt and led them to aid Darius at Issus. Sabaces, who was killed in that battle, left behind him Mazaces as the last Persian satrap of Egypt. Mazaces, who was left without any forces or any hope of Persian support, had little choice but to welcome Alexander and to turn over his capital city and his treasury to him. No reliable ancient source states that Alexander was crowned as Pharaoh while in Memphis, although it is mentioned in The Romance of Alexander. This source should not ordinarily be taken very seriously, but it is entirely possible that Alexander did assume the title and duties of the king of Egypt. Inscriptions on Egyptian temples later proclaimed Alexander as Pharaoh, and it is certain that the Egyptians would have accepted him as their Pharaoh whether or not he underwent a formal coronation.

Alexander’s most celebrated exploit while in Egypt was his trip to the Temple of Ammon at Siwah in the Libyan Desert. Ammon (or Amon) was the principal deity of the city of Thebes and had been of paramount importance in Egyptian religion since the beginning of the Middle Kingdom (c. 2050 BC). At Siwah the Theban god was probably merged with a local god Amun, a god with ram’s horns on his head.

Ammon was introduced into the Greek world most probably by way of Cyrene, a Greek colony in Libya. Ammon became associated with Zeus and was depicted
as a Greek god with ram’s horns. In the fourth century, there were temples to Zeus-Ammon in the Piraeus and at Aphytis in Chalcidice, and the Athenians had named one of their state triremes after the Egyptian god.\textsuperscript{23} Alexander went to the oracle at Siwah, some five hundred miles from Memphis, for no known military objective. The priest at the temple apparently addressed the Macedonian as the son of the god. Alexander may have gone to Siwah for precisely this reason: to reinforce an image, perhaps already introduced in Macedonia, of himself as the son of Zeus.

As the successor to the Pharaohs, Alexander could rightfully claim to be a living god, but this tradition was foreign to Greeks and Macedonians alike. But the god of Siwah had already been praised by Pindar and Herodotus and was thought to be much closer to the Greek concept of divinity. Perhaps Alexander was stumbling toward some view of himself as a semi-divine ruler over a vast empire of diverse peoples and cultures. If so, the lesson was not lost on Ptolemy who would later institute the Greco-Egyptian cult of Isis and Sarapis, and who came to rule Egypt as the first Pharaoh of the last dynasty.

Whether Alexander planned the future capital city of Egypt before or after visiting Siwah is disputed by our sources.\textsuperscript{24} Arrian and Plutarch both say that he picked the site for Alexandria first, but Justin, Diodorus, and Curtius maintain that he went first to the oracle of Zeus—Ammon.\textsuperscript{25} But all of our sources agree that Alexander took an active interest in the planning of the first and greatest of the many cities that would bear his name. He built the city near the Canopic mouth of the Nile between Lake Mareotis and the sea, just behind the island of Pharos. He designed the shape of the town and even the pattern of the streets. Diodorus says that he designed the streets in such a way as to maximize the effect of the etesian winds, so that the city would stay relatively cool.\textsuperscript{26} Alexander indicated the appropriate places to build walls, a palace, temples to the Greek gods, and even a temple to the Egyptian goddess Isis.\textsuperscript{27}

Before leaving Egypt, Alexander attempted to organize the government of the country. He did not choose a satrap, as he usually did for the other former provinces of the Persian empire. Instead he chose two nomarchs (one of whom declined the office), two garrison commanders and two overseers, among other officers, with the apparent intention of dividing the country into two parts. Arrian thought that Alexander divided the command in Egypt in this unusual manner in order to prevent a separatist movement in such a rich province;\textsuperscript{28} just as later the Romans avoided appointing a governor of the region from the senatorial class for fear of the same eventuality. If this was Alexander’s motive, he was not successful, for one man did come to dominate Egypt. Cleomenes was a Greek from Naucratis, the Greek trading center in Egypt. Alexander made him the treasurer of the entire country, the man to whom all the tribute was paid. Cleomenes was also put in charge of the desert regions east of the Nile and of the building of Alexandria, but it was by his position as head of Egypt’s finances that he came to dominate the country.
THE MACEDONIAN OCCUPATION OF PERSIA

Alexander next met Darius in 331 at Gaugamela, in the decisive battle of the Macedonian conquest. Darius fled the field of battle and left the way open for Alexander to enter the Persian capital cities of Babylon, Susa, and Persepolis. The Great King had often resided in Susa in the winter, but Persepolis was the spiritual center of the Persian empire. Perhaps it is not so strange that it was here that Alexander allowed looting and even encouraged the burning of the palace of Xerxes.

Ptolemy’s own account of Alexander the Great has come down to us only indirectly, through the work of Arrian. Arrian’s account of the burning of the palace at Persepolis is quite brief. In this account Alexander ordered the destruction as a deliberate act of policy; it was in retaliation for Xerxes’ burning of Athens in 480. The other versions of this story are quite different and center around Thais, the mistress of Ptolemy. Thais was an Athenian hetaira, and it is possible that Ptolemy met her in the aftermath of the Battle of Chaeronea or perhaps later, after the destruction of Thebes in 335. She complains of her many hardships in wandering through Asia, which may mean that she had been with Ptolemy since the beginning of the campaign.

At a drinking party immortalized through the poetry of John Dryden and the music of George Frederick Handel, Thais was allowed to make a speech in praise of Alexander. All of the difficulties of the campaign had been justified in her estimation by the joy she felt in reveling in the royal palaces of the Persians. The only joy that could exceed this one, Thais continued, would be to set fire to the building and watch it burn. She would feel great personal satisfaction if she, an Athenian woman, could do what no Athenian general had ever done and finally take vengeance on Xerxes for the destruction of Athens in 480. Her speech was greeted with wild applause, and Alexander himself, excited by wine and the enthusiasm of the occasion, led the way.

And the king seized a flambeau with zeal to destroy;  
Thais led the way,  
To light him to his prey,  
And, like another Helen, fired another Troy.

This episode, so rich in drama and detail, should not be dismissed lightly. Epigraphy attests to the historical reality of Thais, who bore Ptolemy three children. If Ptolemy’s own account of this event did not stress the role of Thais, we should not be surprised, since the act is hardly a credit to Ptolemy’s mistress. His version of the story adds that Alexander repented his action. The burning of Persepolis, now Alexander’s, not Darius’ city, makes more sense as a foolish impulse performed by a group of drunken revelers than it does as a deliberate act of policy. The circumstantial detail in this version also argues in its favor. Even the sober Arrian, after giving Ptolemy’s version of the story, feels compelled to
add that he personally believes that it was not a good policy, and that one could not really punish Persians who had been dead for over a century.35

About two months after the burning of Persepolis, Darius was murdered by a group of his followers led by Bessus, the satrap of Bactria. Bessus was related to the royal family, and the handful of leaders who still planned to resist the Macedonian conquest no longer put any faith in Darius’ ability to rule. Bessus assumed the role of Great King and claimed to be the successor of Darius.

Alexander set out to pursue Bessus and, at the same time, to secure the eastern provinces of the Persian empire. While pursuing these goals, Alexander was faced with a conspiracy that seemed to compromise the integrity of one of his most important officers.

Philotas, the commander of the Companion Cavalry and the son of Parmenion, Alexander’s most prestigious and powerful general, failed to report a conspiracy to Alexander. Parmenion was apparently innocent, and the degree of Philotas’ involvement is difficult to judge at this late date, but Alexander had both father and son put to death, as well as several other individuals who were implicated in the affair. One of these individuals was Demetrius, a somatophylax or member of the Royal Bodyguards. The Royal Bodyguards formed the inner core of the Companion Cavalry and represented the king’s closest advisers.

Ptolemy succeeded Demetrius and so became, by the fall of 330, a high-ranking leader in the Macedonian army. This is not surprising considering Ptolemy’s close personal relationship with Alexander. In fact, it may seem a little strange that it took him so long to get promoted.36 One factor may be that Alexander had to mediate between the claims of two different generations. Many of the high-ranking generals like Parmenion belonged to his father’s generation and had fought many campaigns under Philip. In the aftermath of the Philotas—Parmenion affair, Alexander split Philotas’ position as commander of the Companion Cavalry between two men: Clitus, of Philip’s generation, and Hephaestion, Alexander’s own best friend.

It has also been suggested that, in an age of great generals, Ptolemy showed no “early display of military genius.”37 This view is consistent with Curtius’ characterization of Ptolemy as a fine soldier who was nonetheless modest and unassuming.38 Steadfastness to duty and level-headedness were his virtues, not brilliance. Ptolemy, according to this portrait, was a man of the people who never lost the common touch or assumed the affectations of the powerful.

In his history, Curtius is often guilty of moralizing and creating dubious characterizations in order to make his narrative more interesting, but in this case the portrait has the ring of truth. Ptolemy was about 37 years old at this time. His rise to the top had been slow, if judged by the standards of his day. Curtius may even be using Ptolemy as a deliberate foil to Alexander, whom the historian believed to have been corrupted by rising too high too fast.

Ptolemy’s absence, in the ancient sources, from the often acrimonious debates of the generals under Alexander argues for his modesty and steadfastness. The one time he did get involved in an altercation was when he attempted to restrain
Alexander from killing Clitus. Also, his long and successful rule in Egypt suggests that he was not a mercurial figure like Alexander or Demetrius Poliorcetes, but rather a cautious, temperate man of few whims who had full control of his emotions and few illusions about his exalted state.

Alexander pursued Bessus into Bactria. Bessus retreated into Sogdiana, across the Oxus River, and Alexander followed him there also. Messengers from two of Bessus’ leading generals, Spitamenes and Dataphernes, told Alexander that they would hand Bessus over to him if he sent a small force ahead to receive the captive.

Alexander chose Ptolemy to lead the expedition. Ptolemy’s account of this incident may have exaggerated his own role. According to Ptolemy, Spitamenes and Dataphernes either changed their minds or lost their courage. Ptolemy was forced to surround the village and to promise the inhabitants that they would not be harmed if they would simply hand Bessus over. The village accepted Ptolemy’s offer, opened their gates to him, and gave him Bessus as a prisoner.

Ptolemy then sent a message to Alexander asking him what to do with Bessus. Alexander said that Bessus should be bound, forced to wear a wooden collar, and made to stand naked by the side of the road where the king and his army would pass. Ptolemy did as Alexander wished, and when the king came across Bessus he asked him why he had killed Darius. Bessus claimed that he was trying to win Alexander’s favor. Alexander, who now thought of himself as Darius’ successor, was not pleased with Bessus’ answer and sent him first to Bactria and later to Ecbatana, where he was executed.

Arrian, after giving us Ptolemy’s account of this incident, adds that Aristobulus, another of his sources, emphasized the roles of Spitamenes and Dataphernes in leading Bessus bound and naked to Alexander. None of the other accounts mentions Ptolemy in connection with the capture of Bessus. At the time that Ptolemy wrote his history of Alexander’s campaigns, there were certainly still veterans alive who could remember such a dramatic event. It seems unlikely that Ptolemy would have created this episode out of nothing. He probably was sent by Alexander to arrest Bessus, but it is certainly possible that Ptolemy exaggerated the difficulty of his mission. Spitamenes and Dataphernes probably did betray Bessus, and Ptolemy’s role consisted more in retrieving the prisoner than it did in besieging the village.

Alexander remained in the northwestern regions of Bactria and Sogdiana for about two years, from 329 to 327. It was here, in a fit of drunken anger, that he killed Clitus, a general who had been close to his family and who had saved his life at the Battle of the Granicus River. Here too he married Roxane, a Sogdian aristocrat who bore his only heir, Alexander IV.

Sometime between these two events, European people made their first recorded encounter with petroleum. Proxenus, one of Alexander’s servants, was pitching his master’s tent near the Oxus River when he discovered a spring of oil bubbling up from the ground. Ptolemy heard about this event and reported it to Alexander. Alexander thought that it was a favorable omen and wrote to Antipater, his regent in Macedonia, that it was one of the best signs that the gods had ever sent him.
Aristander, his seer, said that it boded difficulties to come, but also eventual victory.

**PTOLEMY’S ROLE IN THE INDIAN CAMPAIGN**

If Aristander was foretelling the outcome of the Indian invasion, his prophecy was reasonably accurate. In these campaigns Ptolemy took a more active part, distinguishing himself particularly at the siege of the Aornus Rock in the winter of 327–326. The Aornus Rock, which has been identified as Pir Sar in northern Pakistan, was seemingly impregnable, and Alexander’s capture of it was one of his most impressive achievements.

The rock is sheer on all sides and tapers like a cone to a sharp peak. Neighboring tribesmen offered to lead the Macedonians to a place on the rock from where the resisting Indians could be successfully attacked. Alexander chose Ptolemy to lead a group of soldiers and to go with the tribesmen in order to secure the position. Ptolemy did secure the position and built a stockade to defend himself.

On the next day, Alexander tried to storm the rock from a different angle but was unsuccessful and was forced to retreat. The Indians then attacked Ptolemy and tried to tear down his stockade. Ptolemy held his ground, and the Indians were forced to retreat. The next day Alexander tried again, and this time he was able to join forces with Ptolemy. From this position Alexander began to build enormous mounds, in an attempt to reach the level of the peak of the rock. Fearing Alexander’s resolution and his superior forces, the Indians sued for peace, but they planned to escape during the negotiations. Alexander found out about their intentions and attacked them while they were retreating. In this manner Alexander and Ptolemy succeeded in taking the rock that Heracles himself, according to one story, had failed to capture.44

Curtius and Diodorus report a curious story about an attack upon the Brahmin city of Harmatelia that would have occurred about a year later.45 The city was taken without great difficulty, but the Brahmins used a poison derived from snake venom on their swords. All of the men who were wounded, whether their wound had been large or small, were dying a painful and terrible death.

Ptolemy was one of the wounded, and Alexander was particularly concerned about his welfare. He had a bed brought into Ptolemy’s tent and personally watched over him. While sleeping on this bed, Alexander had a dream in which a snake appeared, carrying a plant in its mouth. The snake indicated that the plant was an antidote and showed him where it grew. Alexander awoke, found the plant, and applied it to Ptolemy’s body. He also had a liquid prepared and gave it to Ptolemy to drink. Ptolemy recovered, and the antidote was then given to the other wounded men, who recovered as well.

The accuracy of this episode has understandably been called into question. It presents a number of difficult and intriguing problems. Does such an antidote exist? Is it possible that Alexander ever had such a dream, and, if not, what was the fictional dream meant to signify? Why is this episode, apparently favorable to
Ptolemy, not to be found in the pages of Arrian, the extant writer who most closely follows him? The location of Harmatelia is also a problem. Diodorus and Curtius place it in the lower Indus, but its exact site remains a mystery.

H.Bretzl has identified the plant in Alexander’s dream as *Nerium odorum Sol.*, a type of oleander. It is possible then that such an antidote could have been used against snake poison. Alexander’s dream, however, has usually been dismissed as fiction. Tarn considered the dream Ptolemaic propaganda. He identified the snake with Psois, an Egyptian snake god who had associations with both Ptolemais, a city founded by and named after Ptolemy I, and Sarapis, a god who was capable of assuming a snake form. At first glance this theory seems unlikely, since Arrian, who most closely follows Ptolemy, omits the story altogether. However, it is entirely possible, as Tarn himself admits, that the story originated not in Ptolemy’s history, but in some later Ptolemaic source.

P.H.L.Eggermont’s study of this episode is both fascinating and sound. Not surprisingly, he finds both historical and fictional elements in the narrative. Eggermont concludes that Alexander did besiege Harmatelia, but that this town was in Baluchistan (i.e. Gedrosia), not in the lower Indus region. He accepts Bretzl’s idea that the plant in question is *Nerium odorum Sol.*, and demonstrates that it is native to Gedrosia and is mentioned by the ancient sources exclusively in connection with that region.

**PTOLEMY AND THE LAST TWO YEARS OF ALEXANDER’S LIFE**

If Eggermont is right, and I think he is, then Ptolemy must have taken part in Alexander’s disastrous march through the Gedrosian Desert. Here, Alexander’s army suffered more from heat and thirst than it had ever suffered from human enemies. The beasts of burden died also. The men ate these animals eagerly and even killed them on purpose to prevent starvation.

This, however, made the situation worse. It became impossible to rescue stragglers, and so the army had to abandon the sick and exhausted. When water was available, the men often drank excessively and died of overindulgence. The desert trip lasted about two months, and by the fall of 325 Alexander and the survivors returned to the heart of the empire.

Ptolemy remained one of the Royal Bodyguards, a group that was expanded at this time from seven to eight. Alexander added Peucetas, who had saved his life in India, to the group that also included Hephaestion, Lysimachus, Perdiccas, and Pithon among others. Peucetas later became the satrap of Persis and shocked some of his fellow Macedonians by speaking the Persian language and wearing Persian attire.

During this period (325–323), there were not many military campaigns. Alexander was concerned with administering his empire, which had fallen into great turmoil while he was away in India. Many satraps and other officials had either rebelled or participated in flagrant misconduct. Harpalus, Alexander’s
treasurer and boyhood friend, was one of these officials guilty of misconduct. He fled to Athens and from there to Crete, where he was eventually killed by one of his own officers.

One of Ptolemy’s most unusual duties at this time was his supervision of the building of a funeral pyre for an ascetic Indian sage named Calanus. When Alexander was near Taxila in India he came upon some Hindu wisemen. These gurus wore no clothes and so were called Gymnosophists or Naked Philosophers. Alexander admired their self-control and persuaded one, Calanus, to accompany his expedition back to Persia.

Calanus became sick after he reached Persia and requested a funeral pyre on which he could commit himself to the flames while still alive. Ptolemy arranged an elaborate ceremony, complete with trumpeters and elephants, which was attended by the entire army. Calanus, too sick to walk, was carried in on a litter. Chanting in his native language, Calanus met his end, we are told, without displaying any outward signs of pain.

An even more elaborate ceremony took place in Susa in the spring of 324. Alexander married Darius’ oldest daughter, Stateira, and Parysatis, the youngest daughter of the previous Great King, Artaxerxes III. In addition, he persuaded eighty or ninety of his leading officers to take Persian wives in this elaborate marriage feast to which thousands of guests were invited. In this ceremony, Ptolemy married Artacama, the daughter of Artabazus.

Although we do not know much about Artacama, we know a great deal about her father. Artabazus (c.387–c.325) was the son of Pharnabazus, the satrap of Hellespontine Phrygia, who, at the request of Lysander, had ordered the assassination of Alcibiades in 404 at the end of the Peloponnesian War. Artabazus was appointed as satrap to the same region as his father by Artaxerxes II. He rebelled under Artaxerxes III and sought refuge for a while in Macedonia during the reign of Philip II. Barsine, another of Artabazus’ daughters, may have been the mistress of Alexander. Artabazus served as satrap of Bactria under Alexander, but resigned in 328 and was probably dead by the time of this marriage.

Since nothing else is heard of Artacama, it seems likely that Ptolemy repudiated her shortly after Alexander’s death. On the other hand, it seems probable that he continued his relationship with Thais, which may even have taken on some quasi-legal status. Thais bore Ptolemy at least three children, none of whom seems to have been rejected by their father, although they were probably not legitimized. Lagus, named after his grandfather, won a chariot race in the Lycaea, an Arcadian festival, in 308/307. Since Ptolemy himself went to Greece at that time, it is highly possible that Lagus accompanied him. Leontiscus was another of the children of Ptolemy and Thais. He was taken prisoner in Cyprus by Demetrius Poliorcetes in 307 or 306 and later sent home to his father. Thais also had a daughter by Ptolemy, Eirene, who was married to Eunostus, the king of Soli in Cyprus.

In Ecbatana, a few months after the wedding feast, Alexander’s best friend and probable lover Hephaestion died. Alexander’s grief was extreme. He stayed with
the body for two days and refused to eat during that time. Alexander ordered mourning throughout Persia. He would not, at first, appoint anyone to Hephaestion’s position as chiliarch or grand vizier. This position eventually went to Perdiccas, and it may be that at this time Alexander appointed Ptolemy as edeatros or steward.62

Alexander continued to grieve throughout the fall of 324. Finally, in the winter, he launched a campaign against the Cossaeans, a group of mountaineering bandits who lived southwest of Ecbatana. Ptolemy took a prominent role in this campaign. Plutarch says that they exterminated the Cossaeans as a tribute to Hephaestion.63 Arrian, however, says that Alexander built them cities and tried to encourage them to live in a civilized manner.64

After the Cossaean campaign, Alexander returned to Babylon. On the way back and later, after he arrived there, he received delegations from the Greeks and from other western powers. There can be no doubt that Hephaestion was still very much on his mind. Alexander designed a great monument and a lavish funeral in his honor. He sent messengers to Siwah to inquire what homage should be paid to the dead Hephaestion. The answer came back from Ammon that he should be worshiped as a hero or demigod.65

About this time, according to Arrian, Alexander wrote a letter to Cleomenes, now the virtual satrap of Egypt.66 Alexander instructed Cleomenes to create two shrines in honor of Hephaestion: one was to be in the city of Alexandria and the other on the island of Pharos. The letter continues that, if Alexander is happy with Cleomenes’ work, he will forgive all his wrongdoings, both past and future. This seems like such an outrageous promise, and one so untypical of Alexander, that it rouses suspicion. Arrian, probably following Ptolemy, paints a very negative picture of Cleomenes. Since Ptolemy had him put to death after he went to Egypt, he would have had good reason to publicize any information that tended to worsen Cleomenes’ reputation. This and other questions of bias in the work of Ptolemy the historian will be discussed in the next chapter.

In May of 323, not long after he received permission from Siwah to initiate a cult to Hephaestion, Alexander joined Medius, one of his officers, in a drinking party that apparently went on for two straight nights. The next day he had a fever. He might have caught malaria, but we cannot know for certain what disease it was. After less than two weeks he was dead. Arrian records, not on the best testimony (that is, not according to Ptolemy or Aristobulus), that Alexander made two statements before he died. When asked to whom he would leave his empire, Alexander replied, “To the strongest.” He also reportedly said that after he died there would be great funeral games.

These statements are probably apocryphal, but they are appropriate. The funeral games, to decide the best man, would last for over twenty years. Even after this long period, no single best man would emerge. After much of the empire had been lost, and many of Macedonia’s ablest men had died in the contest, what was left of the empire was divided among the victors and an uneasy and fragile peace was declared.
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