Alex, then at the University of Melbourne, was one of the winners of the Classical Association of Victoria's 2019 Undergraduate Essay Prize.

Introduction

The status of women in the Macedonian Court consisted, generally, in their being means to further the political goals of their male counterparts, either: by cementing or establishing alliances (or smoothing tensions); or by legitimising men’s claims to power.\(^1\) However, Macedonian traditions were not averse to women taking an active political role given favourable circumstances. In times of succession conflicts, and/or the absence, or scarcity, of Argead men, royal women were important in ensuring the defence and perpetuation of basileia because they were part of the ruling clan. Characterisations of Macedonian women in ancient sources are somewhat negative, largely due to Roman or Greek perspectives about the inappropriateness of women involving themselves in politics. Positive depictions stem from accounts which view women’s political forays as deriving from a more acceptable gendered motivation: the protection and advancement of their children.

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1 This essay will treat ‘women of the Macedonian Court’ as synonymous with ‘royal women’ of the Argead period, i.e. members of the Argead clan, either by birth or marriage, and, most often, the wives and daughters of kings.

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\(^2\) More will be said later on the direct political role taken by some individual Macedonian women, of whom Eurydice was the first.

\(^3\) Macurdy (1927), 204.


\(^5\) See Plutarch, Life of Alexander 9.4–10 for details of the incident.
limited to their being married off to found political ties or ameliorate tensions. Women of the right blood or position (e.g. as widow of a previous king) were sought as brides by men attempting to add to the legitimacy of their claims. After Perdiccas II's death, his nephew, Archelaus, seized regency of the throne and later murdered the legitimate, infantile, heir. Perdiccas's widow was named Cleopatra, as was Archelaus's wife — and they were, likely, the same person — with Archelaus choosing to marry her as a means of cementing his claim. Then there is Eurydice who, after the death of her husband (Amyntas III) and son (Alexander II), was pursued and, allegedly, married to Ptolemy who became regent. Ptolemy may have used the fact of his marriage (if it did actually occur) — to both Amyntas's widow and the mother of the surviving, juvenile, legitimate heirs (Perdiccas and Philip) — to procure the regency. Next, come Philip II's daughters, Cleopatra and Thessalonike. During the power vacuum that ensued after Alexander III's death, Cleopatra was heavily sought-after: Cassander, Lysimachus, and Ptolemy (amongst others) were all her suitors (Diodorus XX 37.4). Though none were ultimately successful, Cassander eventually married Thessalonike (Diodorus XIX 52.1), whose shared blood with both Philip and Alexander legitimised 'the seizure of the regency and, later, of the throne'. Cassander, through Thessalonike, ‘presented himself as a continuation of the Argeads,' and demonstrated the importance of his wife’s role in his ascension by founding a city in her name.

This brief snapshot demonstrates that a Macedonian woman’s primary role within the political sphere was that of a passive pawn; a commodity whose ties to the Argead family were used either to: a) ‘confirm or establish political alliances’ or to b) legitimise an ambitious male’s claim. Largely, Macedonian women were ‘merely pawns in the game [of men].’

b) Active Political Actors

Some individual Macedonian women were able to buck the general role in which women were cast; the structure of Macedonian politics was not such as to necessarily exclude women from playing an active part.

Eurydice’s involvement in politics heralded a ‘change to greater prominence for royal women’. After Amyntas III's death, Macedonia was faced with a characteristic power-struggle. Alexander II, Amyntas’s and Eurdyce’s eldest son, was murdered by Ptolemy soon after taking the kingship. The murderer assumed the regency of their middle son, Perdiccas, and although evidence surrounding Ptolemy is scarce, he must have been at least a threat to the succession of Eurydice’s remaining sons. Add to this that a ‘pretender’, Pausanias, was angling toward the monarchy himself, and was gaining...
popularity amongst the Macedonians, and one can grasp the volatility of Eurydice’s position. She was ‘forced to enter the world of diplomacy’ to ensure the succession of her sons (and, her own, and their, survival), and she achieved this by suing for help from the Athenian general, Iphicrates. Eurydice’s decisive political action was of the utmost significance: not only did it ensure eventual stability in a society in which ‘dynastic confusion’ often reigned supreme for years after a king’s death, but also that all of her three sons eventually became king. Her legacy was the delivery of direct dynastic continuity. Philip II honoured his mother with a statue in his Philippeion at Olympia, seemingly apotheosising Eurydice, since the statue was chryselephantine (Pausanias V 17.4), i.e. made of ivory and gold, materials usually reserved for the gods.

Alexander’s mother, Olympias, was also honoured in the Philippeion. Further, both women clearly had considerable access to disposable wealth, likely from state funds, evidenced by dedications they commissioned. Eurydice funded two marble statues, one depicting the goddess Euclidean; Olympias ‘made dedications at shrines in Athens and Olympia’. And Alexander III clearly was not opposed to his female relatives being safe repositories for, and masters of, wealth he had won. Alexander dispatched ‘great quantities of spoils home to Olympias and Cleopatra’ (Plutarch, Life of Alexander 25.4).

This evidence of individual women both holding significant quantities of wealth and authorising its outlay, and the fact that they were, simultaneously, performing the role of architects, in shaping public spaces, demonstrates that Macedonian women were not necessarily merely passive pawns in men’s political machinations.

Olympias was clearly politically active. Along with Alexander, she remains a key suspect in Philip’s assassination, given the tenuousness of Alexander’s succession after Philip’s marriage to Cleopatra. Ancient sources suggest that Olympias was also the mastermind responsible for the death of Cleopatra and her child, to cement Alexander’s legitimacy. It seems apparent that she wielded significant political power, alongside Antipater, after Alexander’s departure for Asia, which led to a power struggle between the two. Although Plutarch, writing at the start of the 2nd century C.E., doubts that Olympias was ever a significant political player (Life of Alexander 39.7), it seems clear that she was heavily involved in the public sphere: she was the recipient of ‘grain shipments in times of scarcity’ and, in being responsible for their management and distribution, acted as a ‘head of state’. A contemporary writer, Hyperides, describes her as acting from some official position (In Defense of Euxenippus 19–20).

After Alexander’s death, Olympias continued to involve herself in political affairs and, toward the end of the Argead dynasty, ‘women increasingly appeared in public themselves’ with Olympias, Cynane (Alexander III’s half-sister), and Cynane’s daughter Adea Eurydice all appearing at the head of armies. Olympias continued

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18 Bowden (2014), 25.
19 Ibid., 25.
20 Ibid., 25–6.
22 Carney (2010), 416.
23 Ibid., 416.
24 Who the other statue represented is uncertain; it may have been Eurydice herself (Ibid., 416).
25 Ibid., 416.
26 Pausanias VIII 7.7; Plutarch, Life of Alexander 10.6–8. See also Carney (2012), 310. Olympias’ involvement seems quite likely, given the Macedonian penchant for the quick elimination of rival claimants after the death of a previous king.
27 Carney (2012), 310.
28 Ibid., 200.
29 Tetlow (2005), 177; Carney (2010), 417.
to fight for the succession of her grandson, Alexander IV, until her death in 315 B.C.E.

However, just as we should not be hasty to underestimate the potential of Macedonian women in politics, we should also not to overestimate it. Both Eurydice’s, and Olympias’s, positions relied upon their relationships to their male relatives (whether by marriage or blood). Provided that they were within the inner sanctum of the Argead clan, women were part of dynastic basileia; and membership of that clan denoted a, usually modest, political role. But this role could expand to decisive, when dynastic succession was at issue, and especially when Argead men were both absent and scarce. Women were not institutionally excluded from political power, however, their scope for action was contextually-dependent: ‘in practice, royal women functioned as the reserve troops of the dynasty…called into service when no male Argeads were available’.

The Representation of Macedonian Women in Ancient Sources

Largely, the ancient sources do not paint key female players kindly. Justin in his Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus claims that Eurydice plotted her husband’s regicide because she lusted for Ptolemy, and was jointly responsible for the death of Alexander II, her first-born son (Justin VII 4.7–5.8). Ptolemy, despite allegedly being a co-conspirator, escapes Justin’s condemnation:

> Indignum prorsus libidinis causa liberos a matre vita privatos.

Justin, Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus VII 5.7

> Horrible, indeed, was it, that children should have been deprived of life by a mother, to gratify her lust.

(Trans. J. S. Watson)

It is interesting to note that despite intention-based co-culpability for the alleged plot being shared between Eurydice and Ptolemy, Justin’s pejorative judgment is reserved exclusively for the female Eurydice.

Some redeeming accounts of Eurydice, however, exist. Aeschines in his speech On the Embassy, delivered in 343 B.C.E., describes her as a fiercely protective mother who desperately sought to ensure the well-being, and succession, of her sons (Aeschines 2.26–32). In Roman times, Eurydice is named as a model mother in Plutarch’s On the Education of Children (20).

Justin paints Olympias as a resentful and evil figure who masterminds, and commits, her husband’s regicide because she lusted for Ptolemy, and was jointly responsible for the death of Alexander II, her first-born son (Justin VII 4.7–5.8). Ptolemy, despite allegedly being a co-conspirator, escapes Justin’s condemnation:

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When referring to Macedonian women generally, the sources represent an attitude

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31 Carney (1995), 391
32 Ibid., 391.
34 Carney (1995), 381.
35 Debate rages on whether this text, the first essay in the Moralia of Plutarch, was in fact authored by Plutarch himself.
of distaste for women’s involvement in politics. Alexander III is supposed to have said the Macedonians would not submit to female-rule (Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 68.3); and Diodorus (XIX 11.9) reports that Antipater exclaimed that a woman should never be allowed to rule Macedonia. The fact that neither historian disputes the idea of the odiousness of female-rule suggests their unspoken agreement.

What might have influenced these representations of Macedonian women? Justin’s account should be viewed in the context of two factors. First, Justin was writing many hundreds of years after the events which he was purporting to record.36 It is likely, therefore, that there were significant gaps in knowledge which Justin may have taken poetic licence to fill. Our second factor may well explain how Justin filled these gaps. Romans were generally of the attitude that women’s involvement in politics was highly undesirable and a ‘cause of evils which afflicted the Empire’.37 It makes sense that, when writing for a contemporary Roman audience, Justin may have ‘been influenced by a Roman’s distaste for women intervening in political affairs’.38

What of relatively contemporary depictions of Eurydice? Hyperides passes no negative judgment; and Aeschines, in fact, praises her.39 The seemingly negative appraisal of women’s political potential, allegedly from Alexander himself, as quoted in Plutarch (*Life of Alexander* 68.3), may be merely a factual statement regarding the parasitic nature of women’s power upon linkage to male members of the Argead clan, or an expression of an attitude toward women designed to make him appear more Greek.

When women do receive positive accounts, as in Aeschines’ speech *On the Embassy* and Plutarch’s *On the Education of Children* (see above), it is in the context of them as mothers who ensure the safety and advancement of their children. Action from such a motive would have been ubiquitously praiseworthy in antiquity, due to it conforming to the paradigmatic womanly role of nurturing carers. And it is likely that the praise for Macedonian women who found themselves to be political actors is relatively limited due to the Greek and Roman writers, whose accounts form the vast majority of these women’s descriptions, being alien and opposed to women taking such an active public role. The relatively liberal Macedonian attitude toward women would have appeared odd to them, and Occam’s Razor’s explanation of this oddness, for these historians, would have been malevolent or questionable women, rather than the existence of a system which permitted women to function actively in politics, given the appropriate circumstances.

Conclusion

Carney sums up the status of women of the Macedonian Court well: ‘a few...managed to act independently of the king...a larger number became pawns in the intrigues of others’.40 Those who did act independently did so because it was required by their membership of the ruling clan: to ensure dynastic succession and perpetuation in times of volatility, and in the absence and/or scarcity of male Argeads. For these actions, Macedonian women are painted...
largely negatively by the ancient sources, but this is likely to be a result of Roman or Greek attitudes towards women’s involvement in politics being more negative than those of the Macedonians. Where women are painted in a positive light, it is for their conformity to a more ubiquitous gender motivation that met with approval in antiquity: nurture and advancement of progeny.

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