

# BECOMING GOD

DEIFICATION FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE PRESENT

LECTURE 4: ALEXANDER THE GREAT

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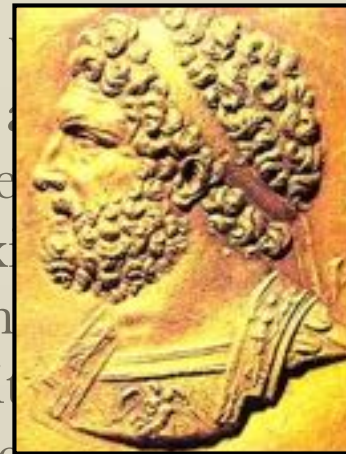


# ALEXANDER THE GREAT



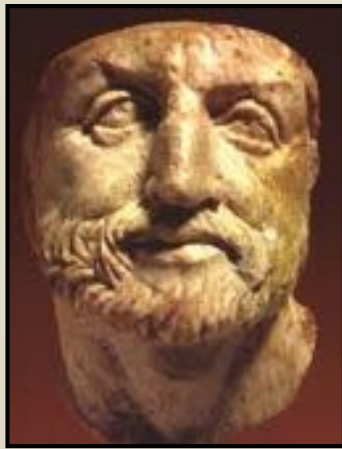
## In the Beginning: Son of Zeus?

That Alexander, on his father's side, was a descendant of Heracles by Caranus, and on his mother's a descendant of Aeacus by Neoptolemus, has never been called into question... The night before they confined Olympias in a chamber, thunder and lightning fell on the bride, and she dreamed that a bolt fell on her belly and that fire, which burst forth like a great fire, which darted everywhere, died away. Some time after she dreamed he was affixed to his wife's belly and the device carved on the image of a lion. All the courtiers viewed the dream with alarm and urged Philip to keep more careful watch over his marriage, but Aristander of Telmissus declared that Olympias was pregnant (since empty things are not sealed) and that she had conceived a son naturally courageous and lionlike.



Plutarch, *Alexander* 2.1-2

# A Father's Son



Philip II (382–336 BCE; r. 359–336 BCE)

‘Among the splendid accompaniments he paraded statues of the twelve gods extravagantly fashioned with the most magnificent workmanship and wondrously adorned with the gleam of precious metal. Along with these a thirteenth was carried in procession, a statue fit for a god, one of Philip in person, who was displaying himself as enthroned with the twelve gods.’

Diodorus Siculus, *Historical Library* 16.92.5

# The Conquests



## The Desire of Hero-ship: Alexander as ‘New Achilles’

- \*Alexander’s favorite line supposedly came from the *Iliad* (Plut. *Mor.* 331c): “Both things is he: both a goodly king and a mighty warrior” (Hom. *Il.* 3.179)
- \*Deep attachment to the *Iliad*. He kept a special copy, annotated by Aristotle, underneath his pillow wherever he slept (*Alexander* 8).
- \*The visit at Troy
- \*Dealing with the dead as Achilles did



# Looking Towards the Gods: Egypt & Siwa



A sudden desire now seized Alexander to visit and consult Ammon in Libya, both because the oracle of Ammon was said to be truthful and because Perseus and Heracles had consulted it... Alexander marveled at the place and consulted Ammon. When he had heard all that could satisfy his heart's desire (as he said), he led the army back to Egypt, returning by the same road, according to Aristobulus, though Ptolemy says they took another, a road that led straight to Memphis.

Arrian, *Alexander* 3.1-3

## Plutarch's Version (1)

When Alexander had passed through the desert and was come to the place of the oracle, the prophet of Ammon gave him salutation from the god as from a father; whereupon Alexander asked him whether any of the murderers of his father had escaped him. To this the prophet answered by bidding him be guarded in his speech, since *his was not a mortal father*. Alexander therefore changed the form of his question, and asked whether the murderers of Philip had all been punished; and then, regarding his own empire, he asked whether it was given to him to become lord and master of all mankind. The god gave answer that this was given to him, and that Philip was fully avenged. Then Alexander made splendid offerings to the god and gave his priests large gifts of money.

Plutarch, *Alexander* 27.3-4



## Plutarch's Version (2)

This is what most writers state regarding the oracular responses; but Alexander himself, in a letter to his mother, says that he received certain secret responses, which he would tell to her, and to her alone, on his return. And some say that the prophet, wishing to show his friendliness by addressing him with 'O paidion,' or O my son, in his foreign pronunciation ended the words with 's' instead of 'n,' and said, 'O paidios,' and that Alexander was pleased at the slip in pronunciation, and a story became current that the god had addressed him with 'O pai Dios,' or O son of Zeus.

Plutarch, *Alexander* 27.5

## Alexander the Pharaoh



- Sacrificed to the Apis bull (a ritual that the Greeks believed to be important for the Egyptians).
- Royal Titles: “beloved by Amun”, “chosen by Ra” & “son of Ra” (might be translated as both “son of Zeus” and “son of Helios” (because Ra was a solar deity).
- Alexander belonged to a dynasty that claimed to descend from Zeus’ son Heracles

## The *Proskynesis* Episode: Between two cultures (1)

It had been agreed between Alexander and the sophists and the most illustrious Persians and Medes in his suite to introduce the topic at a drinking party. Anaxarchus opened the discussion by saying that Alexander would more justly be considered a god than Dionysus or Heracles, not only in view of his many extraordinary exploits... there could be no doubt that once he had departed the human sphere they would honor Alexander as a god. Would it not be more just to honor him while he lived than after his death, when the honor would be of no benefit to him? When these and similar remarks were made by Anaxarchus, all who shared his opinion applauded his speech and were indeed ready to begin making obeisance. But the Macedonians, who were for the most part vexed at his speech, kept silent. Callisthenes now interrupted and said, “Anaxarchus, I declare that Alexander is unworthy of none of the honors that are due a human being. *But the honors accorded to men have been distinguished from those accorded to the gods in a great many ways: the building of temples and the setting up of statues and precincts have been given to the gods, and hymns are composed in their honor, whereas eulogies are composed for human beings.*

## The *Proskynesis* Episode: Between two cultures (2)

But nowhere is the distinction more plainly marked than in the custom of obeisance. For human beings greet one another with a kiss, but divinity, I suppose because it is seated on high and must not be touched, is honored with obeisance, and choruses are established for the gods, and paeans are sung to them. And this is not at all surprising, since even the gods themselves receive a variety of different honors; and, in fact, other honors, distinct from those paid to the gods, are paid to heroes. It would therefore be unreasonable to confound all these things and cast human beings in an arrogant light by offering them excessive honors, or to degrade the gods unduly (if that is conceivable) by according them the honors paid to human beings.

Arrian, *Alexander* 4.10-11

## Understanding Persian Customs

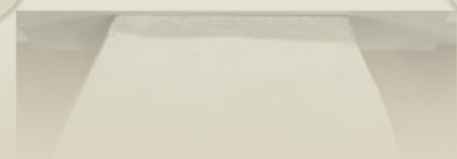
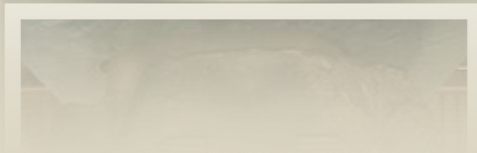


‘Amongst our many excellent customs, this we account the best, to honour the king and to worship him (*proskynein*), as the image of the god of all things (*eikōn theou*). If then you approve of our practices, fall down before the king and revere him, you may both see him and speak to him; but if you think otherwise, you will need to use messengers to intercede for you, for it is not our national custom for the king to grant audience to any man who does not pay him obeisance’... When Themistocles was led into the king’s presence, he kissed the ground in front of him and waited silently. Plutarch, *Themistocles* 27.4–5; 28.1

# Means of/for Deification



# Deification Amplified



# From Human to God to Myth





## Alexander's Aim?

- Was Alexander's deification his own achievement?
- Who owns Alexander?
- Why 'The Great'?
- Olympias' Influence
- Philip's Influence
- Between three worlds

## General, Murdered, Hero, or God?

- Who gets to decide?
- Does deification function under pressure?
- The Greek viewpoint
- The enemies' viewpoint
- The imagination
- The role of Persia
- Ante and Post Mortem deification

## The function of deification

- Political stability?
- Historical continuation?
- Social cohesion?
- Natural order?
- Public imagination and/or reality?
- The role of myth?

## From Alexander to Alexander the Great

- Whose Alexander?
- Why Alexander matters?
- What would have happened?
- The body of Alexander
- The power of Alexander
- The myth of Alexander



## Next: Jesus of Nazareth

