



ANECDOTE, APOPTHHEGM & THE 'REAL' ALEXANDER

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ὍΜΗΡΟΥ ἸΛΙΑΣ.
Καὶ ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ ἀποφθέγματι ἡ ἀποφθέγματι ὅτι τὸν ἄριστον ἄριστος πολεμικὸν ἄριστον ἄλλῃ αὖτ' ἀποφθέγματι πολεμικὸν ἄριστον.

The 'real' Alexander systematically eludes us. The historical sources, notably Arrian, are explicit that they are out to record the king's achievements, which means primarily his military successes. Alexander may be the central figure, but Arrian tells us comparatively little of what he was like. What we have is a sequence of battle narratives, which give us a vivid impression of his strategic genius but there is little about the man. In particular Arrian is very sparing in his use of *anecdote*, the narrative, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, 'of a single event, told as being in itself interesting or striking'. And, one may add, amusing. I will illustrate what I mean from an episode that took place early in my career, more years ago than I care to remember. The venue was the old University House, a modest building, now demolished on aesthetic grounds. A group of colleagues would get together for lunch and pass judgement on the most recent delinquencies of the then Vice-Chancellor. On the day in question a much loved but somewhat insensitive professor came in late to join the table, and, rubbing his hands, he exclaimed, 'What a wonderful day! I've written 2,000 words already'. Without looking up from his tray, one of the party reacted without a pause, 'O yes, Bert. In any particular order?' Little things perhaps please little minds, but the story became legendary among the participating group, and it is a classic anecdote.

It certainly deals with a detached incident, and it works up to a punch line, what the ancients termed an apophthegm.¹ It also tells us a certain amount about the characters involved, especially the author of the put down but also the butt of the episode, who made a virtue out of prolixity. I may add that there are problems of verification. There is no doubt about the apophthegm; it is the perfect one-liner, which, once heard, is always remembered. There is also agreement on the identity of the victim. No one else would have boasted so openly about his production rate. Where the disagreement arises concerns the author of the witticism. A number of names have been canvassed. I have myself been approached as an eyewitness, although I was not on the scene there, but I do recall one of my colleagues who was a participant approaching me on the day in a state of high hilarity and retailing the entire incident, including the name of the central figure. That is, I fear, as close to the truth as I am likely to come. It does, however, illustrate very nicely a feature of the classic anecdote, that it tends to be transferred from one individual to another at a relatively early stage. The framework is agreed, but the actors are fluid. Arrian, then, rarely resorts to anecdote, but the same cannot be said of Plutarch, who gives us one anecdote after another in his *Life of Alexander*.² In a famous passage he describes the surrender of the Indian monarch

(above)
Etching and text
extract from *The
Iliad of Homer*.

C. C. FELTON (ED.),
(CAMBRIDGE: BROWN,
SHATTUCK & CO, 1833).

Detail from
*The Battle of
Gaugamela*. Relief
inspired by a
Charles Le Brun's
painting on the
same subject. Image
shows Alexander
the Great fighting
and riding his horse,
Bucephalus.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LUIS
GARCÍA, 2008. SOURCE:
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

Porus, insisting that his intention is not to give a narrative history of Alexander's reign, but to record episodes that are valuable as an illustration of character. Inconsequential words and deeds (even jokes) can give greater insight into character than any number of battles or sieges.³ Plutarch does follow a rough chronological framework, but he interweaves a string of anecdotes, which he considers of importance for judging character. For instance, when he deals with the Battle of the Hydaspes (in the spring of 326) Plutarch first gives a brief account of the engagement, derived from Alexander's letters, and then moves to anecdotes, first the solicitous behaviour of the royal elephant,⁴ which defended its master to the last, and then the famous exchange between Alexander and the Indian rajah, Porus.⁵ Alexander met the captured monarch and asked how he should treat him. The answer came as a single word βασιλικῶς ('like a king'). That is the ultimate in one-liners. It means both 'treat me as a king' and 'treat me as a king would'. The implication is that if Alexander mistreats him he is falling short of royal magnanimity, and it is hardly surprising that Alexander acted accordingly, reinstating Porus in his realm as his satrap (provincial governor). The anecdote therefore shows both monarchs acting as true kings. There is no suggestion here or elsewhere that Porus had practically destroyed his own people by his misguided resistance to Alexander.⁶ What is stressed is his fearless and dignified demeanour, which was properly rewarded.

At this point I shall examine a number of anecdotes that circulate around Alexander's concept of his own divinity, a favourite theme for court flatterers. It would seem that Alexander was convinced relatively early in his reign that he was in some way the son of Zeus (or his African manifestation, Ammon), but by the time he had reached the far north-east of the empire his courtiers were actively promoting the view that he was a god in his own right. One of them, Nicesias, went so far as to claim that the March flies then bothering Alexander would conquer the fly world after tasting his blood (Athen. 6.249.d-e). More significant for our purposes is another anecdote, which was attested by Phylarchus,

a third century historian writing a couple of generations after the event (Athen. 6.251.c = *FGrH* 81 F 11). This time Nicesias confronted Alexander when he was racked with pain after taking a drug and observed, 'Even you, the gods, experience pain'. Alexander replied: 'What kind of gods? I am afraid that we may be god hated'. Here Nicesias is associating Alexander with the gods, as a god himself, and Alexander reacts sarcastically; any gods he belongs with must be the enemy of more powerful deities. If he is a god, he is a very weak one. Alexander is sceptical here, but the anecdote belongs in the context of court flattery, which clearly portrayed him as a god who was at least the equivalent of the Olympians.

There is a similar anecdote that shows the same ambivalent attitude to deification. It is located at the siege of Massaga, the principal city of the Swat Valley. While surveying the fortifications Alexander was struck in the ankle by an arrow and again suffered severe pain. There is unanimity in the source tradition that the wound was compared with the famous wound in the *Iliad* (5.335-40) that Diomedes inflicted upon the goddess Aphrodite. He gashed her hand, and her immortal blood flowed. Only it was not blood. Homer states that it was 'ichor such as flows in the blessed gods'. If, then, ichor circulated in Alexander's veins it was the most telling proof that he was not a being of mortal substance. So far there is agreement, but there is some doubt about the author of the apophthegm. According to Plutarch the Homeric quotation came from Alexander himself. He turned to his friends and laughingly showed them the living proof that it was blood that came from the wound. This presupposes that there was some discussion of Alexander's nature – human or divine, and a crucial criterion would be the ichor in his blood. Alexander, it seems, made a joke of the matter, but it was taken very seriously in his court. According to the contemporary historian, Aristobulus of Cassandreia, the comparison was made by the great athlete, Dioxippus of Athens, who was a significant personality at court. This is probably correct, for Aristobulus was a member of staff and perhaps reported the apophthegm at first hand.⁷ In that case, why is the quotation

(right)
The phalanx attacking the centre in the battle of the Hydaspes by André Castaigne, 1899.

SOURCED FROM
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attributed to Alexander and interpreted as a facetious rebuff to flattery?

We should perhaps look more closely at the context of the anecdote. There is something rather disquieting in the Homeric quotation. The goddess who suffers the wound is Aphrodite, the least warlike of all the Olympians, and her weakness and incompetence is stressed repeatedly in the passage. When wounded she shrieks with the

pain and leaves the battlefield to find first aid and comfort in her mother's arms. The passage ends with Zeus himself, greatly amused, advising his daughter to avoid things military, and keep to her own theatre of operations – the marriage bed.⁸ This is a very strange allusion for a flatterer to have made. The greatest conqueror of all time is assimilated to the goddess of love. This is a real sting in the tail, and Alexander could not but be aware of the allusion. He was steeped in Homer, and allegedly collaborated with two of the court

intellectuals in a recension of the text, which he kept embedded in a gold casket.⁹ The passage that Dioxiippus quoted contains the only references to ichor in the *Iliad*, and Alexander could not fail to appreciate the allusion. If he was the stuff of immortality, it was the same stuff as the weakest of the pantheon.

Alexander was unlikely to have been amused, and the future career of Dioxiippus shows a gradual decline in royal favour.¹⁰ He was one of the most formidable athletes of his day, the chief exponent of the all-in thuggery known as the *pankration*, and said to be the strongest man in Greece. So fearsome was he that he won the Olympic event without opposition (*ἀκοντι*); no one would take the lists against him. He joined Alexander, perhaps in 331, and was retained as one of a select band of athletes, who would demonstrate their prowess – and annoy the Macedonians who did the actual fighting that kept them in luxury. By 325 Dioxiippus' stock was evidently low, and at a banquet he was challenged to single combat by a brash, newly promoted Macedonian. Alexander had no objections,¹¹ and may even have set up the encounter. It was a mistake. Dioxiippus, resplendent in heroic nudity, had an effortless victory over his heavily armed Macedonian adversary, and in so doing embarrassed Alexander a second time. Not surprisingly he fell more and more into disfavour, and in the end he was falsely accused of theft and

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committed suicide. The whole story was an object lesson not to provoke or challenge the king. He had a long memory.

Perhaps we can now fill out the historical context of the anecdote. It presupposes two quotations of the same passages: first we have Dioxiippus' use of the Aphrodite episode and then Alexander's reply to it. All sources state that Dioxiippus' quotation and its repetition by Alexander were a reaction to wounds sustained in battle. The second was the wound at the siege of Massaga in winter 327-326. The first is

open to conjecture, but Alexander sustained several wounds in the campaigning season of 329. My preference would be the encounter near Samarkand, in which Alexander was again wounded by an arrow, which supposedly transfixes his leg and shaves the fibula. After that one can make real sense of the exchange. Dioxippus saw Alexander after his wound. That in itself is significant. The pankratiast was a huge man, and at the best of times he would have towered over the Macedonian king, who was of relatively modest stature. The disparity was emphasised by the quotation. For Dioxippus, Alexander may have been divine and have ichor in his veins, but his model was the unwarlike Aphrodite. In contrast Dioxippus must have looked like Zeus himself. What is more, he was *Zeus invictus*, not merely victorious but untouched, a candidate for heroic honours after his death. It made Alexander look insignificant. Two years later, in the Swat valley, Alexander sustained another arrow wound in the leg, and he referred back to Dioxippus' quotation, and did so pointedly. His friends gathered round, and he displayed his wound, stating categorically, 'This, as you see, is blood, not ichor'. This does not mean that Alexander was rejecting any suggestion that he was divine. He was rejecting Dioxippus' implicit comparison with Aphrodite. It was not good enough to have ichor, which could run in the veins of any old god, however unimpressive. His aim was to achieve godhead through achievement on earth, like his great ancestor Heracles, who served as a role model for Alexander to surpass, and his wounds would discharge human blood. After his translation to Olympus it could be changed to ichor.

With Dioxippus we are not faced with a single isolated story. There are two traditions, interrelated by context and punch line, and they can be combined as a narrative. I should like to examine another of these anecdotal strings, which again sheds light on the thorny question of deification. The setting is Tyre, in the early summer of 331. There Alexander held a famous festival, at which the city kings of Cyprus distinguished themselves by attracting the leading actors of Greece to participate in a great dramatic festival. Now, the choice of venue is significant. Alexander had the whole

of Phoenicia at his disposal, yet he singled out Tyre for his celebrations. Tyre had suffered a seven-month siege the previous year and must have still shown the marks of destruction. Large stretches of the walls would have been reduced to rubble, and the interior of the city would have been fired, except for the palace and state temples. Most sinister of all were the remains of the fighting population, which had been crucified along the shoreline. Two thousand of them are reported to have suffered that appalling death, and Alexander would have made sure that some of the whitened bones remained on the crosses as a lasting warning not to challenge his sovereignty. Certainly the Cypriot kings would have been on their best behaviour, well aware that many had served with the Persian navy in the Aegean and only came over to Alexander at the news of his victory at Issus. Particularly sensitive was Nicocreon, king of Salamis, the most powerful state of Cyprus. In the months after the fall of Tyre his father had died (or been deposed), and he had been installed as king. It was in his interest to make the most positive impression on his new overlord, who had enlisted his brother as a companion, and no doubt hostage.¹² To that end he lavished time, effort and money to support the Argead family friend, the actor Thessalus, who was a celebrated tragic actor and a competitor in the dramatic festival.

Nicocreon basked in the limelight, but he was not everyone's favourite. In fact he had a particularly poisonous enemy, the philosopher Anaxarchus of Abdera. Anaxarchus was, to put it mildly, an exotic personage. He was known as the 'Eudaimonist', the pursuer of good life, and his near contemporary, Clearchus of Soli, describes how he had his wine poured by a naked nymphette and made his baker wear gloves and a facemask while he was kneading dough. Such a man would revel in the luxury of Alexander's court, and it is clear that the king found him an amenable companion. Anaxarchus' philosophical doctrine is practically irretrievable. All that survives is a couple of fragments, one of which comes from a treatise *On Kingship*, and stresses the need for moderation. Erudition (πολυμαθία) is all very well, but it must be judiciously exploited.¹³ It can benefit the clever man, but it damages

the person who unthinkingly utters every sentiment before the entire people. Knowledge of what is appropriate (καίρo) is the mark of wisdom. It is difficult to deny that Anaxarchus was aiming at his rival Callisthenes, who spoke out emphatically against Alexander's plan to introduce the Persian practice of ceremonial prostration at his own court. Callisthenes succeeded in having the proposal quashed, but he had fallen fatally out of favour, and shortly afterwards was implicated in a conspiracy, arrested, tortured and executed. If ever there was an object lesson in avoiding unseasonable frankness, that was it. In contrast Anaxarchus was far more adroit, a natural courtier. He was no uncritical flatterer; rather he was an expert in ethical admonition, whose speciality was to mix encomium with criticism. But there was far more honey than vinegar in his admonitions. For instance, he is said to have criticised Alexander for his propensity to flattery, but then turned the moral edification into a joke: flattery is appropriate for the progeny of Zeus, who kept buffoons in their entourage, Dionysus the satyrs, and Heracles the Kerkopes. It was a nice analogy: Anaxarchus' rivals at court were equated with the more grotesque and dissipated figures of mythology, and Alexander was feted as the counterpart of Heracles and Dionysus, both of whom were sons of Zeus and gained divinity through their achievements on earth.

Anaxarchus, then, was a royal favourite and as such dangerous. That emerges clearly from the first part of our anecdotal string. For some reason he had made an enemy of Nicocreon, king of Salamis. We are not told what caused the enmity, but it was deep, bitter and lasting. After Alexander's death Anaxarchus was inadvertently driven into Cyprus by the prevailing wind, and fell into the hands of Nicocreon, who had him pounded to death with iron pestles – a sad end for the pursuer of happiness. The two were enemies at the time of the great dramatic festival in Tyre where the bad blood oozed out openly. At a formal banquet there Alexander asked Anaxarchus, who was (of course) a noted epicure, how he found the meal. The philosopher responded with a memorable apophthegm: 'everything is excellent, o king, but one thing is missing – the head of a certain governor set before us

at the table'.¹⁴ There is real venom here, and Anaxarchus spat it out (ἀπορρίπτων) directly at Nicocreon, making it unmistakable who the target was. It is interesting that Nicocreon is not given his title of king. Like Porus in India he is called satrap, a term that underlines his subordinate status. He might be king to his subjects in Cyprus, but around Alexander there was only one king – himself. For all his display at the festival Nicocreon was no independent ruler, and if he misbehaved could be summarily executed. That is presumably one of the many messages that could be read into the apophthegm. If Nicocreon deserved to be decapitated, then he was guilty, or thought guilty, of insubordination. That would have been a devastating insinuation, given the history of the royal house of Salamis during the Persian Empire, which was an almost unbroken series of rebellions, not least by Nicocreon's father, Pnytagoras. Nicocreon may have been represented as following in his footsteps and planning revolt and domination over the nine cities of Cyprus.

As it turned out, Nicocreon survived the reign of Alexander, and there is no evidence that he fell out of favour. However, Anaxarchus' attack was remembered and exploited, just like Dioxiippus' quotation of Homer, and is evoked in the second strand of the anecdotal string. This anecdote conforms perfectly to type. It is a distinct episode and leads up to a memorable apophthegm, reported with similar wording throughout the tradition. The context is not given. Alexander was with his entourage when there was a huge clap of thunder that shocked the gathering. Anaxarchus was again present, and delivered an ironic challenge: 'Could you, the son of Zeus, do something like that?' There is something distinctly anal in this. Alexander is invited to break wind so violently that it would match the thunderclap. The king facetiously declined the challenge, claiming that 'he did not wish to be an object of fear to his friends, as you would have me do, you who disparage my banquet because you see fish set out on the tables, and not satraps' heads'. Alexander is sending Anaxarchus' apophthegm back at him and intensifying it. Now it is not a single satrap's head at risk but a plurality. The peripatetic scholar Satyrus went

even further. In his version of the apophthegm Anaxarchus urges Alexander to have the heads of satraps and kings brought before him. It reads as though Anaxarchus was suggesting a bloodbath, in which the Cypriot kings would figure prominently. For all the coarse humour there is a very sinister undertone. In the earlier anecdote Anaxarchus had directed his attack at a single individual, Nicocreon. Now the range is wider. Alexander implies that he could institute a purge of his subordinates throughout the Levant. He is not about to do so, but his response hints that he very well could. This is an anecdote that starts as a joke but soon takes on rather darker colours. The urbane, facetious Alexander could become the repressive autocrat. He is also son of Zeus. That is clear from Anaxarchus' challenge, which presupposes

among men. The two concepts could coexist. Alexander could boast divine parentage. As son of Zeus he could expect to enjoy exceptional favour and divine assistance, as his historian Callisthenes had suggested in his account of the Battle of Gaugamela, a few months after the games at Tyre. Alexander called on his divine father 'to defend and encourage the Greeks'. This strongly recalls Aristarchus' burlesque, but it is deadly serious. Alexander is represented invoking the assistance of Zeus, and is duly answered by the appearance of an eagle, confirmation that Zeus would support his son and bring victory. It is the most striking instance of Alexander's good fortune, to have on side a father who was the supreme force of the universe, and he emblazoned it on his coinage. There on his celebrated decadrachms



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that Alexander could match the thunderbolts of his Olympian father. Here anecdote blends into history proper. Alexander had recently been in Egypt, where he had visited the great sanctuary of Zeus Ammon at the oasis of Siwah. The officiating priest had hailed him as son of Zeus, and, according to Curtius (4.7.30), Alexander did not simply assent to being called son of Zeus, he actually demanded it, much to the chagrin of his Macedonians. The anecdote we have examined shows the new convention in operation. Anaxarchus exploited the alarming thunderclap to produce an outrageous piece of flattery. If Alexander could match the explosion he was truly the progeny of Zeus, and deserved recognition as such.

So far we have examined two anecdotal strings separately. In one Alexander is depicted as the son of Zeus: he is confirmed in his belief at Siwah, and Anaxarchus reinforces the notion by suggesting that he could eclipse a thunderstorm simply by his bowel motions. That was superhuman. But it was more than that. As we saw, Alexander could be represented as more than human. He was positively alien, with ichor running in his veins, literally a god

we see him brandishing the thunderbolts so characteristic of Zeus with Victory herself about to crown him as invincible. The son of Zeus appropriately wears the regalia of his father. He also wears a plumed helmet and grasps a *sarisa* in his left hand. This is the visual counterpart to Callisthenes' account of Gaugamela. Alexander assumes the attributes of his divine father, and achieves victory without end, the greatest of all Macedonian monarchs.

That is one aspect of Alexander's relations with the divine. More radical still was his assimilation to divinities proper, divinities whose blood was ichor. There is a famous anecdote that associates the two aspects. It derives from a certain Ephippus of Olynthus, who wrote a treatise on the deaths of Alexander and his favourite Hephaestion. This concentrated upon the more sensational aspects of court life, particularly the prodigious drinking that took place at the court symposia. Ephippus also supplied details about the contemporary worship of Alexander, and was probably an eyewitness. In particular he gave a highly colourful account of a celebration at the Median capital of Ecbatana, held in

(above)
Ptolemy I Soter,
successor of
Alexander the Great.

COURTESY OF
KENNETH SHEEDY FAHA,
AUSTRALIAN CENTRE
FOR ANCIENT
NUMISMATIC STUDIES.

honour of Dionysus during the autumn of 324. Alexander was the centre of attention, the recipient of a vast number of crowns. The highlight of this egregious display of flattery was provided by Gorgus, the guardian of the royal arsenal, who made a formal proclamation, quoted verbatim by Ehippus. Gorgus gave Alexander crowns worth 3,000 gold staters, and promised ten thousand panoplies and the same number of catapults and artillery for the siege of Athens. This was a time of acute tension, when Alexander came close to invading Attica, and Gorgus' offer of munitions would have been a timely one. The proclamation was not only notable for its extravagance. Gorgus hailed Alexander as son of Ammon, as his men had been instructed to do at Siwah. The announcement, moreover, is presented in direct speech as an apophthegm, which would surely have been remembered by all participants in the festival.

Now, Gorgus is a well-known historical personage. He came from the Carian city of Iasus, where he was a rich, respected citizen, and at some stage attached himself to Alexander's court. He was a power broker, whose support could be extremely valuable. There is corroboration in an inscription of the island of Samos, which recorded how Gorgus offered a crown to Alexander on an occasion when he declared his intention of returning Samos to the Samians. This is patronage at work. Gorgus supported the interests of his clients on Samos, and at the same time worked against the Athenians, who had occupied the island since 365, and showed no intention of relinquishing it. Everything fits together, but even so there has been a trend among modern scholars to dismiss the story as fabrication. There is a footnote in Sir William Tarn's *Alexander the Great* (ii.354. n.2) that has the dubious distinction of having every word in it wrong. In his view Alexander objected violently to being called a son of Ammon; 'it always roused him to fury'. 'Always' is pitching it too strongly; there is just one instance of such fury, in the mutiny at Opis, when Alexander had much more than a mocking reference to Ammon to take care of. There is a similar sentiment in Lionel Pearson's respected work on the lost histories of Alexander. He concedes

(64-5) that Gorgus was a historical personage who very probably had an animus against Athens. Nevertheless Pearson regards Ehippus' work as invention: 'It is interesting to note how skilfully Ehippus has built up his story on the basis of certain well-attested facts'. But surely the reverse is true. Everything that can be verified on the strength of existing evidence has been verified. In particular the acclamation of Alexander as son of Ammon (Zeus) occurs in a precise context, in the Dionysiac festival at Ecbatana; the host, Alexander's satrap of Media (Atropates), is also a historical personage, and the general strategic picture is plausible. The Athenians were anticipating an attack at the time. Why not, then, draw the obvious conclusion? The anecdote is true as it stands, and the apophthegm (Gorgus' proclamation) is correctly cited. In that case Gorgus did crown Alexander and proclaimed him son of Ammon. There is no reason to suppose that the story is not correct as it stands, and certainly no reason to think that the acclamation was not to Alexander's liking. On the contrary, it seems that Gorgus chose exactly the wording that he felt would be most effective with Alexander, which was correctly reported by Ehippus.

This takes us to the previous anecdote from Ehippus, which portrays Alexander assuming the cult dress of the Olympian gods. While this is more difficult to believe than his assumption of the title of son of Zeus (Ammon), again there is a match with the material record. According to Ehippus, Alexander took on the dress of Ammon himself, in particular the rams' horns that are the glory of the coinage of Lysimachus. Here art reflects life, and the image on the coins marks out Alexander as not merely his father's son but his father's substance. It became as much an identifying mark as the rams' horns of Ammon himself. Similarly, he 'often' wore the lion skin and club of Heracles. As a Heraclid himself he would honour the founder of the line by assuming his characteristic dress. But there was more. Heracles was notoriously the benefactor par excellence of humanity, and was taken into Olympus as a reward, with a goddess as his consort. As we have seen, Heracles was a model for Alexander, and Heracles' head appeared on the obverse of his imperial tetradrachms, by far the most prolific and

widely circulated of any coinage that the world had seen, so it is hardly surprising that his image gradually fused with that of Alexander. The two looked the same and had the same attributes. One may add that Dioxippus' appearance at his combat with Corrhagus, nude and with a Herculean club, challenged Alexander's monopoly of the image of Heracles, and would not have endeared him to the king.

But Alexander did not simply imitate male divinities: he assumed the attributes of Artemis, something that has provoked outrage, especially with scholars of a Victorian disposition, who rejected the very idea of their manly hero cross-dressing. That in itself was sufficient to dismiss the anecdote: 'Ephippus has nothing to do with history' is Tarn's contemptuous verdict. However, Alexander did have a somewhat tortuous relation with Artemis. He was allegedly born on the day that the great temple at Ephesus was burned down, thanks to the absence of the goddess, who was away in Macedon aiding the confinement of Olympias, and he himself had provided for the prosperity of the rebuilt temple by assigning tribute money for its upkeep. Now, Alexander did not, of course, adopt the persona of Artemis the attendant of childbirth. He took on the appearance of Artemis the huntress, bearing her characteristic bow and hunting spear (σιβύνη). That was logical enough. Alexander was one of the keenest and most assiduous huntsmen of all time, and took every opportunity to be present at the chase. Indeed, along with the symposium, hunting was the characteristic occupation of the Macedonian court, and taking on the dress of Artemis indicated that he was uniquely successful – and uniquely dangerous.

Dressing as a god does not imply divine status: otherwise there would be a plethora of Athenian deities who had played the role of gods at the dramatic festivals. However, there is clearly a suggestion that Alexander took on the functions of the gods, even the sinister role of Hermes, whose major task it was to conduct the dead to Hades, as Alexander would have known well from the finale of the *Odyssey*. Is it too much to see the dress of Hermes as an indication that Alexander was responsible for the transfer of a significant portion of

humanity to the Underworld? If so, it is hardly surprising that he was treated with reverential silence by his courtiers. This is the most potent proof that Alexander was viewed as a god in his own right. He had libations poured before him, myrrh and incense were burned continuously in his honour, and ritual silence was observed, the sign of the presence of a god. The anecdote does not end in an apophthegm, rather a vignette which reflects the sheer terror that Alexander could inspire. He was intolerable and murderous, and was thought to be in a state of violent depression (μελαγχολικός) – perhaps in part a reaction to the death of Hephaestion. Ephippus paints a memorable picture of terror, which, if he witnessed it, would never have been forgotten, just as the dynast Cassander is said to have had a severe anxiety attack when he came face to face with a statue of Alexander at Delphi.

This vivid description has often been discounted. Ephippus is thought to have been hostile to Alexander, and therefore created the blackest picture possible. There is a predisposition to discount it as fiction; it is dismissed out of hand without any serious argument. The great German scholar, Felix Jacoby, found himself at a loss when dealing with the episode. He found it difficult to accept the authenticity of all the details in the first passage (dressing as the gods), but in the second passage (on Gorgus) Ephippus is so well informed that in the first too it is perhaps only the nuances ('Ton und Beleuchtung') that are false. It is better to concede that both passages are correct in detail, and there is no reason to think that Ephippus is writing fiction to blacken the memory of Alexander. He may have had no love for the king (and there is little enough indication of that), but the picture he constructs cannot be faulted. Our attitude to anecdotal evidence should be less sceptical than it has been in the past. Unless it is proven otherwise, we should accept its historicity, assuming that the tradition goes back to some memorable deed or apophthegm. The model and master is Herodotus, who commits himself to recording what is memorable, and provides us with a coruscating array of amusing and informative anecdotes. The material that I have examined here (unlike Herodotus'

anecdotes) has little in the way of narrative context, but internal analysis reveals nothing self-contradictory or implausible. Instead I have traced a line of consistent anecdotes, which illustrate both Alexander's view of his mortal (or divine) status and the reaction of his entourage, showing early conviction that he was the son of Zeus Ammon and a growing conviction that he was a god in his own right, emulating and surpassing Heracles. At the same time his courtiers reacted in different ways, some accepting and promoting the cult of Alexander as god, others rejecting it. And there were those who, like Anaxarchus, chose a middle way, using irony and humour to anchor Alexander to his mortality. This is exactly the detail that is remembered and passed on by contemporaries, and the anecdotes that provide the evidence should be treasured and exploited, not casually ruled out of court. ¶



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1. There is little literature on the anecdote in antiquity. The most comprehensive treatment is still Richard Saller's essay, 'Anecdotes as Historical Evidence for the Principate', *Greece Rome*, 27 (1999), 69-83. As its title suggests, its field is largely confined to the Roman world, whereas my discussion is focused on the early Hellenistic period, where there is an abundance of evidence, but little attempt to exploit it.
2. Plut. *Alex.*.1.3. Compare the similar programmatic statement in Arrian's *praefatio*, which may foreshadow Plutarch. See the excellent discussion of Timothy E. Duff, *Plutarch's Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 14-34.
3. In similar vein Nietzsche is said to have observed that the picture of a person can be constructed from three anecdotes (*Aus drei Anekdoten ist es möglich, das Bild eines Menschen zu geben*).
4. Plut. *Alex.* 60. 12-13. The story is extremely popular and appears widely in the extant tradition. See Arr. 5.19.2 with Plut. *Mor.* 181e, 332e, 458b.
5. It is Porus who steals the limelight. Alexander is practically anonymous, described as the straight man to Porus' Achilles.
6. On this see A. B. Bosworth, *Alexander and the East: The Tragedy of Triumph* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 9-19.
7. Athen. 6.251a = *FGrH* 139 F 47. The quotation is also attributed to the philosopher Anaxarchus, but it is a late tradition (Diog. Laert. 9.60), and is probably affected by Anaxarchus' reputation as a flatterer. Seneca (*Suas.* 1.5) attributes it to Callisthenes, but it occurs in a piece of rhetoric, which conflates Callisthenes and Cleitus in an unholy jumble.
8. 'No, my child, not for you are the works of warfare. Rather concern yourself with the lovely secrets of marriage' (*Iliad* 5.428-9)
9. Strab. 13.1.27 (594); cf. Plut. *Alex.* 8.2. The recension of the text was allegedly the work of Anaxarchus and Callisthenes, both with philosophical persuasion and mutually hostile.
10. According to Curtius (9.7.18) Alexander gave way to popular demand because he could not prevent the contest; the Macedonian inspired terror as if he were Ares, while Dioxiippus excelled in sheer strength and athletic training; still more, because of his club he bore a resemblance to Heracles. For Dioxiippus' athletic pre-eminence note the observations of the orator Hyperides (*Eux.* 78-82).
11. That may be so, but equally there may be some element of drama. Alexander was quite capable of putting on a show of reluctance.
12. Nithaphon, mentioned as a trierarch at the Hydaspes (Arr. Ind. 18.8).
13. The source for this anecdote was the peripatetic philosopher Satyrus, who took advantage of an impressive thunder clap in Syria to make a scurrilous comparison. Alexander happened to be riding with his entourage, when there was a sudden violent storm which made their horses rear. At that Anaxarchus challenged his overlord, pretending that he could rival and surpass Zeus himself when it was a matter of breaking wind (6.250f-251a).
14. The fragments deal with the excessive drinking at symposia, which was hard fact. There is perhaps some hostility in the allegation that it was the wrath of Dionysus that brought his death, because Alexander had stormed his native city of Thebes (Athen. 10.434.b = *FGrH* 126 F 3), but contemporaries might have felt this to be a reasonable inference. There is no basis for Tarn's dismissal of Eppiphus as a 'scurrilous pasquinader'.