

Death and successors of alexander



Alexander: His Death and Successors

Alexander III of Macedon, popularly known as Alexander the Great, was arguably one of the most influential leaders in history. His empire, at its peak, stretched from Greece all the way to the Indus River.[1] This empire was built during the short 13 years he was in power. Alexander's life was met with an abrupt end at the young age of 32. This unexpected and untimely death led to a fierce power struggle which would last many years. Many people overlook the Greek Empire after the death of Alexander. This is unfortunate because during this period of time, the empire that Alexander had built continued to have a great deal of influence on the world. This paper will take a close look at the events leading up to Alexander's death, as well as the eventual demise of the empire after Alexander's death.

The death of Alexander

The demise of Alexander began in the Royal Palace of Babylon at the end of May, in the year 323 BC. Alexander, like his father, was known to be a heavy drinker. He was cited on many occasions drinking through the night and not appearing until the next day was nearly over.[2] On the night of May 29th, there were two lavish drinking parties Alexander attended. First, he attended an official banquet for the departing of Admiral Nearchus. After this, he was invited to a private party by one of his close friends, Medius of Larissa. It is at this party where Alexander falls abruptly ill. The famous and well respected ancient historian, Diodorus Siculus, discounts any type of foul play. However, he describes Alexander as rapidly changing from healthy and vibrant to screaming in hideous pain.[3] There are many theories as to what caused Alexander's death. These theories range from intentional poisoning to

natural causes. We will likely never know the true cause, but we do know how the final days of Alexander's life played out.

Over the course of the next few days, Alexander's health continued to decline. He developed several well documented symptoms. These included shock, pain, weakness, and great discomfort.[4] As the illness progressed, Alexander was eventually unable to speak. His armies feared, at this point, that he may already be dead and the generals were concealing his body. They demanded to see him and the generals relented. Each soldier filed past Alexander. Alexander, while unable to speak, acknowledged, with movements, each soldier who passed.[5]

On an evening in early June, 323 BC, Alexander took his last breath. This came as such a surprise that it took some time before the Greek Kingdom would believe the news. Alexander's generals, however, had seen their king grow gravely ill and were somewhat expectant of his demise. Now, they were faced with the monumental task of choosing a successor. This task was complicated due to the fact Alexander did not have a Greek wife. He had an illegitimate child, Heracles, and his Persian wife, Roxane, was expecting a child. [6]

Alexander's generals convened to discuss possible successors. They decided that no final decisions would be made until Alexander's Persian wife, Roxane, gave birth. In the meantime, Alexander's infantry, led by their commander Meleager, pushed for Arrhidaeus to be named King in the interim. Arrhidaeus was Alexander's half brother and was mentally challenged. Alexander's infantry was successful and Arrhidaeus was known from that point on as

Philip III. Soon after Arrhidaeus was appointed interim King, Roxane gave birth to a son, Alexander IV. He was declared a joint king with Philip III.[7]

During this time, the council of Alexander's generals had named Perdiccas as regent due to the infancy of Alexander IV and the mental state of Philip III. Perdiccas proved to be a capable, but dividing ruler. His first actions as acting ruler were to quell any opposition to his rule. This included executing all those in his armies who spoke out against the regency of Perdiccas, including Meleager. Perdiccas then divided the empire among his supporters, appointing them as satraps (similar to a governor).[8]

This begins the period of time known as the Wars of the Diadochi. The Diadochi are the collective group of Alexander's possible successors. The Wars of the Diadochi were a set of four full scale wars which were fought with the purpose of settling the questions of whether the empire should remain united and who should be the ruler of this empire.[9]

First War of the Diadochi

The regency of Perdiccas did not last long; he had made many enemies in a short amount of time. He was loyal to Philip III and Alexander IV, but he lived as a proud and scornful ruler which eventually led to generals questioning his true intentions. Also, Perdiccas had married Alexander's sister, Cleopatra. This was viewed as an attempt to take total control of the empire and caused several satraps to join together in rebellion.[10] Perdiccas' most outspoken enemy was Ptolemy. Ptolemy was one of Alexander's most trusted generals. Perdiccas was angered that Ptolemy had taken Alexander's body for burial and thought that he was trying to gain control for himself and launched an

attack on the land the Ptolemy controlled. This attack ultimately ended in disaster with most of Perdiccas' army deserting to join the well respected Ptolemy. Ptolemy welcomed these deserters with handsome rewards. Perdiccas was ultimately murdered by his own generals. [11] This left an opening for a new regent, and Antipater was selected as guardian of Alexander IV and Philip III as well as regent of the empire.

Second War of the Diadochi

In the Spring of 319 BC, Antipater died. He was seventy years old and had battled illness for an extended period of time. He was revered as both a political figure as well as a soldier and his death was a national tragedy. Since Antipater's death did not come unexpectedly, he had given much thought to his successor. He did have a son, Cassander, but he was not seen as old enough to become the regent. Antipater decided on Polyperchon, a great strategist, to become his successor.[12] Polyperchon did not prove to be a competent regent and soon fell into conflict with Cassander. Cassander had support of many of the satraps and because of this, Polyperchon declared all Greek cities loyal to Cassander free; launching them into a state of anarchy.[13] Polyperchon then allied with Eumenes and Olympias (Alexander III's mother). Eventually, Cassander's forces prevailed and killed Olympias.[14]

Third War of the Diadochi

The Third War of the Diadochi began due to one of the satraps, Antigonus, becoming too powerful in the eyes of the other rulers. Ptolemy and Cassander, along with Lysimachus, allied to put a stop to Antigonus' growing power. In response, Antigonus allied with Polyperchon creating a formidable

opposing force. The war began with Cassander suffering setbacks, but ultimately he prevailed against Antigonus' forces.[15] During this same time, Alexander IV reached the age of thirteen. Many argued that it was finally time for Cassander to let the young king assume his rightful rule as agreed upon by the council of Alexander III's generals immediately following his death. Sensing that he was about to lose his power, Cassander had Alexander IV as well as his mother, Roxane, killed.[16] This brought to an end any sense of a regency or overall ruler. The empire was now completely a set of independent territories.

Fourth War of the Diadochi

Again, conflict arose during the Fourth War of the Diadochi. The Fourth War can be viewed as essentially a continuation of the Third. Antigonus was at war with Ptolemy, Seleucus, and Lysimachus simultaneously. After a long drawn out series of battles, Antigonus was defeated and his territory was split between Seleucus and Lysimachus. This left four remaining generals: Ptolemy, Cassander, Seleucus, and Lysimachus in charge of the empire.[17] Even though they all claimed that they were the rightful king, some relative stability settled over the region.

The Fall

The next period of time is marked by the struggle for control of Macedon after the death of Cassander. These struggles lasted until 275 BC when the territory was split between descendents of Ptolemy, Seleucus, and Antigonus. These divisions held through the Syrian Wars and then they collapsed at the hands of Rome and Persia.[18]

Conclusion

In contrast to the way many history classes are taught, the empire of Alexander the Great did not end with Alexander's death. There is a rich history full of power struggles, wars, and political turmoil before the Romans enter the picture. These conflicts continued to have an effect on those who lived in the empire, as well as those who were influenced by their culture. Hopefully this paper has offered some insight as to what events occurred during this often forgotten time period.

[1] Kincaid, C A. Successors of Alexander the Great. Chicago: (Ares Publishers Inc., 1980), 189.

[2] Doherty, Paul C. The death of Alexander the Great : what-or who-really killed the young conqueror of the known world?. (New York, NY: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2004), 69.

[3] Ibid., 80-90

[4] Ibid., 83

[5] Lendering, Jona. " The Death of Alexander the Great." n. d. http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander_t28.html (accessed Oct. 12, 2009).

[6] Kincaid, Successors of Alexander the Great, 11.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Shipley, Graham The Greek world after Alexander, 323-30 B. C.. Routledge history of the ancient world. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 41-43.

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[9] Lendering, Jona. “ Alexander’s successors: the Diadochi.” n. d. <http://www.livius.org/di-dn/diadochi/diadochi.htm> (accessed Oct. 12, 2009).

[10] Kincaid, Successors of Alexander the Great, 12-16.

[11] Ibid., 16

[12] Ibid., 18-19

[13] Ibid., 19

[14] Rickard, J. “ The Diadochi.” 4 June 2007. http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/concepts_diadochi.html (accessed Oct. 13, 2009).

[15] Shipley, The Greek world after Alexander, 116.

[16] Kincaid, Successors of Alexander the Great, 26.

[17] Shipley, The Greek world after Alexander, 43-45.

[18] Lendering, “ The Death of Alexander the Great.”

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