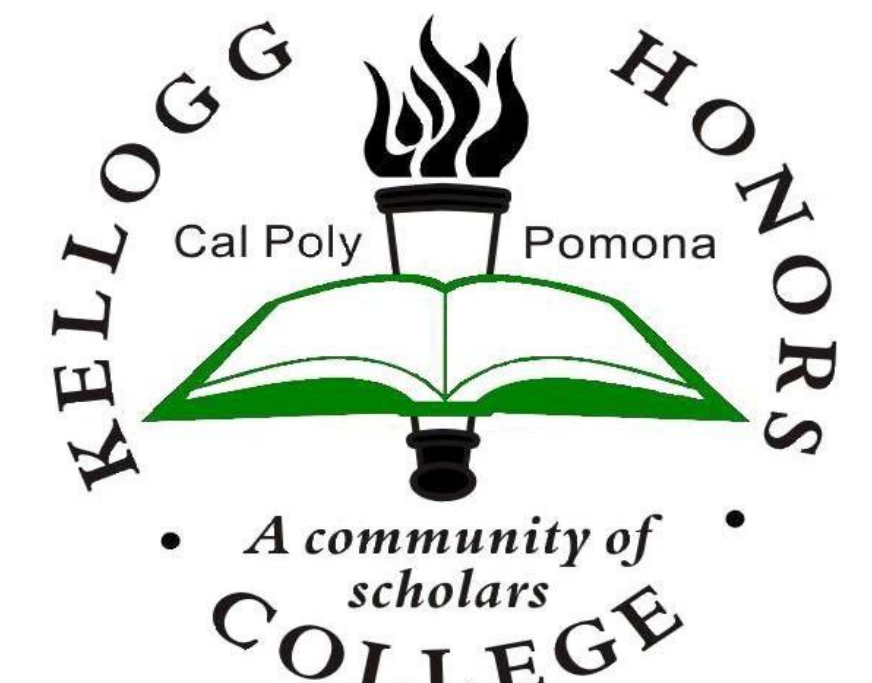
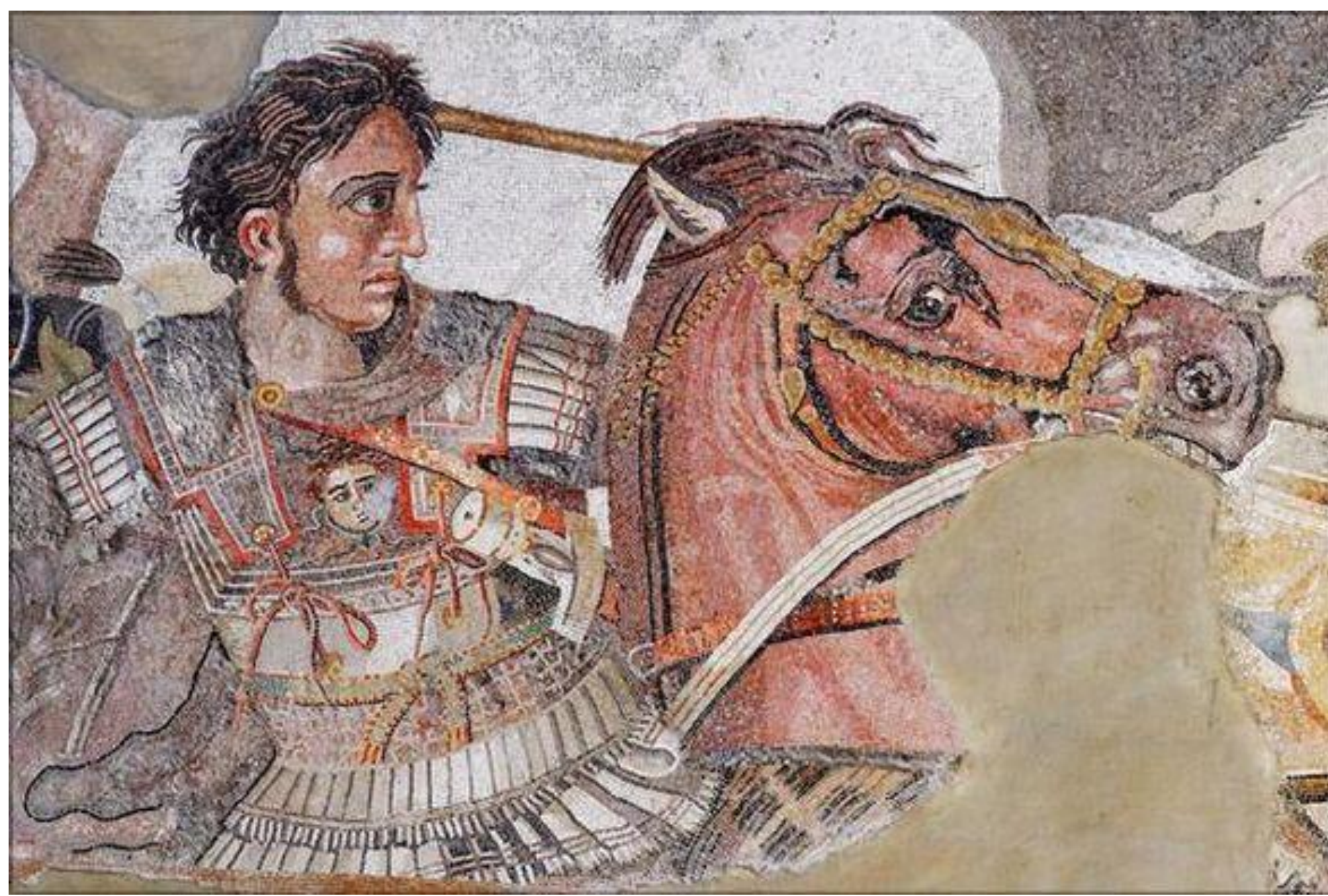


The Power of a King: How Alexander the Great Used Persian Culture to Change his Court



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336 BCE: Alexander Ascends Throne

333 BCE: Alexander Marches through Levant, Battle of Issus

Alexander the Great has inspired generations of writers and dreamers with his conquests into the Near East. In a ten year span he conquered most of the “known world” and left a massive empire to his successors on his death. One of his greatest contributions was the unique culture he created by fusing Macedonian and Persian cultures together. Many scholars have debated the purpose behind this fusing of cultures, but this thesis argues that it was to create a new structure within his court. Alexander adopted certain aspects of the Persian culture to create a hierarchy within his court and elevate the status of kingship.

Major Players:

Alexander III of Macedon: Son of Philip II, known as Alexander the Great
Darius III, King of Achaemenid Empire: The last king of Persia
Parmenion: General under both Philip and Alexander, Commander under Alexander
Philotas: Son of Parmenion, Commander of Companion Cavalry until 330 BCE
Hephaestion: Childhood Friend of Alexander, Commander of Cavalry 330-325 BCE
Ptolemy Soter: Childhood Friend of Alexander, Edeatros 330-323 BCE



325 BCE: Conflicts with Army

330 BCE: Philotas Affair, Executions of Parmenion and Philotas

331 BCE: Return to Mesopotamia, Battle of Guagamela

334 BCE: Alexander Marches into Persia

332 BCE: Campaigns in Egypt

Late 331 BCE: Named King of Asia

326 BCE: Alexander's army turns around after crossing Indus River

323 BCE: Alexander Dies in Babylon

Macedon Before Alexander:

The traditional structure of the Macedonian court was informal. The monarch technically had absolute authority over policy but the ablest men from his aristocracy were brought in to advise him. These men were often referred to as the *hetairoi*, or the king's companions who rode and ate with the king and held great influence within the country. This absolute power had limits though. For example, before Philip was able to launch his attack on Paeonia, he gave a speech to convince his soldiers and generals that the fight was worth it: “having quickly called an assembly and exhorted his soldiers for the war in a fitting speech.” In this instance, Philip is not asking for permission from his troops as he technically has the power to launch the attack, but their support is also an important part so therefore he works to achieve it. While the king could technically decide whatever he wished, he was in actuality limited by the opinions of his aristocracy. This was the structure of the court that Alexander inherited wherein the king was not the ultimate authority but limited by his officials.

Ascension Crisis 336 BCE:

Alexander's ascension to the throne was not smooth, even before his father's death. As he was the son of Olympias, a foreigner, there was a movement among the Macedonian nobles for a pureblooded Macedonian to be named as heir instead. Parmenion was the leader of this movement, believing that Alexander was unqualified to take the throne following his father due to his mixed blood. Over the course of the succession crisis, many powerful nobles with claims to the throne would be assassinated by the young king, and other aristocrats would only avoid this fate by pledging loyalty to Alexander. Alexander's ascension to the throne was full of blood, and to stand against him meant death. This was a completely radical movement within Macedonian court, wherein the king was clearly placing himself above his nobles. The way to succeed within these few months was not through belonging to a powerful noble family as was the traditional model, but through loyalty to the king. The chaos created by the succession crisis allowed Alexander to briefly flip the traditional relationship, but once order had been restored, the old relationship reemerged.

Beginning of Campaigns 334-331 BCE:

At the beginning of the campaigns, the traditional structure of the court reasserted itself. This period of time is a great tool to highlight the structure and relationship of Alexander's court before he began to introduce Persian culture to flip the structure. As he was on campaign for the majority of this time, the only aristocrats involved in this court were his generals and *hetairoi*. From the beginning, these men can be divided into two groups: the traditional older aristocrats, and the younger emerging culture of generals who earned their position through kingly appointments. At this point in the campaigns, the younger generals held little power as most of the official positions were held by the traditional families.

These older generals were quite vocal in their protests against Alexander's plan. Their position within court was assured by their family name, and their traditional role was to act as a check upon the king's power. Over the course of the campaigns, Parmenion remained the most vocal opponent to Alexander's plans. Before the battle of Guagamela in 331 BCE, Darius sent a letter with peace terms to Alexander, which Alexander brought before his advisors. Upon seeing the terms,

“Parmenion said, ‘I would accept those terms if I were Alexander.’ ‘So would I, by Zeus,’ retorted Alexander, ‘if I were Parmenion!’”

- Plutarch 29

The generals are able to speak against the king without fear of retribution. This conflict over decisions did not lessen the position of power and prestige Parmenion held within the court. The older generation of generals held their power due to family lines in the traditional structure of the court. These generals were not subservient to the king and held their own semi equal power separate from the king. They were not subject to the whims of the king, allowing them to retain power and position after Alexander's ascension and to feel safe enough to openly speak out against the new young king.



Persian Aristocrat Discussing the Power of Macedonian Aristocrats:

“In the past, sire, there was only one Darius, but now you have made many Alexanders”

- Plutarch 39

Clothes:

From 330 BCE onward, Alexander fused Macedonian and Persian clothes. He adopted a Persian tunic that was mainly white with a purple band around it. He refused to adopt the pants as only barbarians wore pants, and a new diadem modeled off the Persian crown

“the Persian diadem and dressed himself in the white robe and the Persian sash and everything else excepts the trousers and the long sleeved upper garment.”

- Diodorus 17.77.5

Clothes

Persianization

Food

Food:

Upon entering the city of Babylon, Alexander is said to laugh at the extravagance of the dining customs of the Persian king. Starting in 329 BCE, Alexander began to host more extravagant dinners for himself, eating more luxurious foods and more intricate eating rituals.

Offices

Offices:

Offices were adopted from the Persian court and given to high ranking officials, usually the younger generals. Edeatros meant “superintendent of the Royal table” and was given to Ptolemy Soter as a sign both of increasing Persianization and the increasing power of the younger generals

Philotas Affair 330 BCE:

Following the decision to increase the Persian culture within his court, the event known as the Philotas Affair played out within Alexander's camp and acted as the turning point for the relationship between the king and his aristocracy. Over the course of this event, and the subsequent smaller executions that followed, Alexander removed the major voices of the older generation who opposed the new relationship with the king, while the younger generation who were willing to submit themselves to the king gained power.

This event started with a simple rumor of an assassination attempt and ended in the execution of two of the most powerful aristocrats at the court: Philotas and Parmenion. The Philotas Affair began with the Macedonian *hetairoi* enlisted his lover and a bodyguard of the king to kill Alexander. This plot became known when the brother of one of the conspirators attempted to tell the king and ran into Philotas exiting the tent instead. He passed the message along to Philotas, who did not in turn pass it along to the king. Philotas' choice not to pass along the information he was given was taken by others to mean he was a co-conspirator or at least was slow to act despite the possibility of the king's death. Philotas was tortured until he gave a confession, and he was executed by stoning in 330 BCE. After the execution, Alexander ordered the death of Philotas' father, Parmenion, and several other high ranking and outspoken generals of his court.

From this point on, it was dangerous to speak out against the king, and the way to power was by flattering the king. Not even a year after the Philotas Affair, the general known as Cleitus got annoyed with the sycophants surrounding Alexander at a dinner and spoke against it. When he realized the conversation was not going his way, he declared,

“He was Cleitus and that he was leaving the banquet. As he said this Alexander plunged the spear into his side.”

- Curtius VIII.1.51-52

Cleitus spoke out against the king safe in the knowledge that he was a powerful aristocrat and, under the traditional structure, the king lacked the power to harm him. The proclamation of his name would have been enough to stop the argument in Macedon, but at this point the court had changed to adopt Persian beliefs. The ‘persianization’ had lessened the power of aristocrats to the point that speaking against the king was dangerous and must be carefully considered. The relationship between the king and aristocrats had majorly changed from the beginning of Alexander's reign to this point due to the partial adoption of Persian culture.

Conclusion:

By his death in 323 BCE, Alexander was the supreme authority of his court, leaving only a little power in the hands of his friends. Over the course of his reign, this massive dynamic shift occurred, mainly driven by the influx of Persian culture. Alexander used the physical images of kingship in Persia to create a distance between himself and his subjects. As more Persian culture became infused in the court, Alexander took more power away from his aristocrats. Alexander's choice to incorporate Persian culture within the Macedonian court was partly driven by his desire to change the power dynamics between the king and the aristocrats.

“The great King with his unparalleled worldly success, the undisputed monarch of two continents, who spread the power of his name over all the earth”

- Arrian VII.30.5

