
Alexander the Great, the royal throne and the funerary thrones of Macedonia*

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ABSTRACT There is no evidence in either Greece or Macedon in the archaic and classical periods that the throne functioned as a symbol of royalty. Thrones were for the gods and their priests. Only the king of Persia used a royal throne and even had portable thrones for his campaigns. This paper argues that after his conquest of the Persian Empire, Alexander the Great adopted the throne as a royal symbol; after his death, his throne became a token of his invisible presence. Philip III Arrhidaeus is known to have used a royal throne after his return to Macedonia. By implication, the marble thrones found in three tombs at Vergina–Aegae are here understood as symbols of royalty and the tombs are interpreted as royal.

KEYWORDS Throne; priest; Persian king; tomb; marble; gold and ivory.

Among the symbols of royalty in the kingdom of Macedon, the throne requires special investigation. We will try to show that its introduction as the seat of power may be traced to the new world order created by Alexander the Great's conquest of Asia; we will subsequently investigate the impact of the royal throne on the funerary furniture of Macedonia.

In archaic and classical Greece thrones were reserved for the gods and by extension, their priests and priestesses. Zeus, father of the gods, was often depicted enthroned. There are two obvious sculptural examples from the fifth century, the east frieze of the Parthenon¹ and the cult statue created by Phidias for the temple of Zeus at Olympia. Zeus' statue at Olympia is now known only from coins and literary sources². Herodotus' (5.72) account of the priestess of Athena rising from her throne when Cleomenes I of Sparta entered the adyton of Athena's temple on the Athenian Acropolis, indicates that thrones could also be used by priests and priestesses. The

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¹ London, British Museum. NEILS 2001, 106 fig. 76.

² LAPATIN 2011. Coins: LAPATIN 2011, 80-84. Source: Paus. 5.11.1-11.

hierophant of the Eleusinian mysteries also had the use of a throne³. In the fourth century we have several examples of priestly thrones in marble set up in sanctuaries, mainly in Athens and Attica. A pair of thrones was dedicated by Sostratos to Nemesis and Themis in their sanctuary of Rhamnous⁴. The cult had only one priestess but each throne was dedicated under a different priesthood (Phidostrate and Callisto). A priest's throne is preserved inside the temple of Apollo Zoster in Vouliagmeni (Fig. 1)⁵. A throne dedicated to Dione, who had a cult near the Erechtheion, was set up on the Athenian Acropolis⁶. Thrones for the priests of Hephaistos and Boutes also came to light on the Acropolis and must be related to the cults in the Erechtheion⁷. Dead women on Attic grave reliefs of the fourth century are sometimes depicted sitting on thrones like Pamphile on the stele of Demetria and Pamphile from the Kerameikos⁸. The significance of these thrones has never been adequately explained; one wonders if they suggest that the women died while serving as priestesses. Marble thrones were also dedicated by members of the Spartan Gerousia in the sanctuaries of Laconia in the fourth and third centuries B.C., e.g., the sanctuaries of Apollo Amyclaeus, Athena Alea and of Cassandra/Alexandra⁹.

Royal thrones in classical Greece are only mentioned in drama, attributed to heroes of the remote past¹⁰. Pausanias (2.19.5) saw a throne in the temple of Apollo in Argos, which was attributed to King Danaus, mythological founder of the sanctuary. As for the historical kings of Sparta and Macedon, there is no evidence that the kings of Sparta ever used thrones. The concept of the throne among the Greeks was reserved for the Great King of Persia¹¹. We have very little information about the daily life and rituals of the kings of Macedon before Alexander the Great. No royal throne is attested in Macedonia, and the first possible instance of enthronement of a Macedonian king involves Philip II. Diodorus (16.92.5 and 95.1) describes a procession in the theatre of Aegae on the occasion of the wedding of Philip's daughter, Cleopatra, in 336. The procession included statues of the twelve gods, and alongside them Philip added his image as *synthronos* of the gods¹². The wording is ambiguous. It could mean either that Philip was shown enthroned or that he was equal to the gods. But Philip's throne, even if it existed, was not intended as a symbol of royalty but rather as a manifestation of godlike status (*isotheos*).

The concept of the throne as a seat of royalty was at home in Persia. The Great King's throne was moreover invested with divinity and nobody but the king was allowed to sit in it¹³. Two audience reliefs from the Apadana staircase in Persepolis show the enthroned king at court towering above the standing courtiers.¹⁴ His throne is placed on a platform under a canopy, surrounded by armed guards. Two incense burners are placed before him.

³ CLINTON 1974, 20; CLINTON 2008, 374-375, no. 500.

⁴ Athens National Museum 2672 and Rhamnous 618 N. PETRAKOS 1999, 100-102, nos. 121-122.

⁵ KOUROUNIOTIS 1927/28, 28, figs. 20-21.

⁶ Athens, Acropolis Museum 4047. PALAGIA 2002a, 176, 178, figs. 10-11.

⁷ Athens, Acropolis. PALAGIA 2002a, 178, fig. 14.

⁸ Athens, Kerameikos Museum I 257-P 687. STROSZECK 2014, 177-178, fig. 33.2.

⁹ Sparta Museum. LANÉRÈS 2012; ZAVOU 2013.

¹⁰ E.g., Soph. *OT* 399.

¹¹ Pl. *Rep.* 553c.

¹² BADIAN 1996, 13; PASPALAS 2005, 86-87.

¹³ FREDRICKSMEYER 2000, 159-160 with n. 72.

¹⁴ GABELMANN 1984, 7-16, pl. 1, 1-2; PASPALAS 2005, 73-74, fig. 1. For an extensive discussion of images of the enthroned Great King of Persia and their significance, see PASPALAS 2005, 72-76.

The Greeks familiarized themselves with enthroned Persian kings in battlefields, e.g., when Darius I surveyed the bridge of boats built at Abydus by Mandrocles of Samos ca. 513 B.C.¹⁵. In 480 Xerxes watched the battles of Thermopylae and Salamis from a safe distance sitting on a throne¹⁶. His throne on Mt. Aigaleos overlooking Salamis was set up under a golden parasol¹⁷. Xenophon (*HG*. 1.5.4) informs us that during the Peloponnesian War, Cyrus the Younger granted an audience to Lysander at Sardis sitting on a gold and silver throne (no doubt in a ritual recalling the audience reliefs of Persepolis). In Greek art, the Great King of Persia was represented enthroned: two examples are offered in the fourth century by the statue base of Pulydamas by Lysippus in Olympia, showing Darius II Ochus at court¹⁸, and an Apulian volute krater by the Darius Painter, dating from the period of Alexander's Asian campaign, showing Darius III at Persepolis¹⁹.

The two worlds finally came together after the battle of Gaugamela in 331, when Alexander sat on the throne of Darius III at Susa²⁰. The throne was set under a golden canopy; its footstool was apparently too low for Alexander's feet to reach and it had to be replaced by a table. Plutarch's anecdote (*Alex*. 37.7) of the emotional response of old Demaratus of Corinth, who burst into tears upon seeing Alexander on the throne implies the novelty of seeing a Macedonian king on a throne. Alexander had his enthronement immortalized by the painter Apelles, who painted him holding the thunderbolt of Zeus²¹. Alexander dedicated his portrait in the temple of Artemis at Ephesus because East Greek cities were less likely to have been offended by the king's divine attributes. A wall-painting in the House of the Vettii in Pompeii showing Alexander in a purple cloak in the guise of Zeus is thought to reflect the portrait by Apelles²². Alexander's throne is Greek not Achaemenid, modeled on that of Zeus, therefore not a royal but a divine throne.

Whereas the Great King of Persia sat on his throne surrounded by standing courtiers, Alexander introduced couches for his Companions. Ehippus records how Alexander sat on a gold and ivory throne in the gardens of Babylon, with his Companions sitting on couches with silver feet²³. Alexander's throne was sacrosanct, as shown by the episode of a condemned criminal who seized his royal garments and diadem, sat on the throne, and was consequently put to death²⁴.

As Fredricksmeier has aptly remarked, there is no evidence that Alexander's use of the royal throne in Persia and Babylon entailed ritual enthronement according to Achaemenid customs²⁵; he seems rather to have invested it with his own personal charisma. That Alexander's throne eventually came to symbolize his power as well as his invisible presence is shown by the potency of his empty throne after his death²⁶.

¹⁵ MANDROCLES dedicated a painting of this episode in the Heraion of Samos: Hdt. 4.88 and 7.44.

¹⁶ Hdt. 7.212 and 8.90.

¹⁷ Plut. *Them.* 16.

¹⁸ Olympia Museum Λ 45. GABELMANN 1984, 80-82, pl. 10; MORENO 1995, 92-93, no. 4.12.1.

¹⁹ Naples, Museo Nazionale 3253/819471. BOARDMAN 2001, 122, fig. 159.

²⁰ Diod. 17.66.3; Curt. 5.2.13 and 7.11; Plut. *Mor.* 329d. Plutarch (*Alex*. 37.7) places the incident in Persepolis.

²¹ Plin. *NH* 35.92; Plut. *Mor.* 335a. PALAGIA 2015, 2-3.

²² STIRPE 2006, 171-173, no. 24; PALAGIA 2015, 2-3, fig. 1.

²³ Ehippus *ap.* Athen. 12.537d. See also Arr. *An.* 7.24.1-3.

²⁴ Diod. 17.116.2-4; Arr. *An.* 7.24.1-3; Plut. *Alex.* 73.7-9 – 74.1. This incident, which took place in Babylon in 323, is often explained as part of the Oriental "substitute king" ritual which aimed to avert evil from the king's person though ABRAMENKO (2000) interpreted it as a plot against Alexander. LANE FOX (2016) argues against the ritual of the substitute king and considers it a random episode.

²⁵ FREDRICKSMEYER 2000, 160.

²⁶ See SCHÄFER 2002, 33-37; PASPALAS 2005, 87-88.

Curtius (10.6.4-9 and 15) records how a day after Alexander passed away in Babylon, Perdikkas called a marshals' assembly before the conqueror's empty throne in order to discuss the succession. Perdikkas placed on the throne Alexander's diadem, royal garments and weapons, along with the signet ring that the king had given him on his deathbed, and invited the assembly to reach a settlement about the fate of Alexander's empire. When Alexander's half-brother Arrhidaeus was chosen as his successor assuming his father's name Philip, he is said to have been placed on Alexander's throne²⁷. It is likely that the royal throne as symbol of kingship eventually made it to Macedonia with Philip III Arrhidaeus. Plutarch (*Phoc.*33.8) describes how Arrhidaeus met two rival embassies of the Athenians at Pharygae in Phocis in 318 sitting under a golden canopy and flanked by his Friends²⁸. Considering that the golden canopy belonged to the paraphernalia of the Great King's throne, this sounds like an imitation of the audience ritual adopted by Alexander in Persia.

The ploy of the empty throne as a token of the king's invisible presence was used in 318/17 by Eumenes, during his campaign against Antigonos the One-eyed in Cilicia and later in Susiana²⁹. His aim was to solidify the loyalty of the Silver-Shields, veterans of Alexander's army, and other elements of the Macedonian military to his person, in light of the fact that he was not a Macedonian. After the royal treasury was brought in from Susa, he announced to the army that Alexander appeared to him in a dream sitting on his throne and giving orders to his commanders. Eumenes had a golden throne from the treasury set up under a tent, placed on it the royal diadem, scepter and armour, added a fire altar and an incense burner in front and had the commanders sacrifice to the throne daily before they assembled to receive their orders, which were issued in Alexander's name. It has been suggested that this ritual was aimed at the Persian elements in the army on account of the employment of the fire altar³⁰, but Diodorus (18.61.3) explicitly says that Eumenes' goal was to placate the Silver-Shields.

We now come to a question that has remained unanswered in the archaeology of Macedonia for some years. In light of what we have discussed so far, what are we to make of the three marble thrones found in Macedonian tombs at the old Macedonian capital of Vergina–Aegae (Figs. 2-4)? No evidence of gold and ivory thrones like those used by Alexander in Babylon, for example³¹, has come to light in Macedonia so far. We have a painted example of such a throne in a wall-painting of the mid-first century B.C. from Boscoreale, presumably copying a Macedonian prototype³². The naked man sitting on the throne is generally interpreted as a king, either a historical king of Macedon or King Minos, judge of the Underworld³³.

Macedonian tombs usually housed couches made of various materials, e.g., stone or gold and ivory, that served as depositories of the mortal remains of their owners³⁴. These couches often supported vessels or caskets containing cremations. The beautifully decorated pair of marble couches of Potidaea (Cassandra) is a fine

²⁷ Plut. *Mor.* 337d. PASPALAS 2005, 88.

²⁸ This incident is extensively discussed by PASPALAS 2005.

²⁹ Polyae. 4.8.2; Diod. 18.61.1; 19.15.3-4; Plut. *Eum.* 13.5-8; Nep. *Eum.* 7.2-3. SCHÄFER 2002, 21-37; Anson 2004, 150-152.

³⁰ SCHÄFER 2002, 26-32.

³¹ See n. 23 above.

³² New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1903 (03.14.6). ANDERSON 1987/88, fig. 35; PALAGIA 2014, 217-219, fig. 4 (with earlier references).

³³ See PALAGIA 2014, 218-219.

³⁴ SISMANIDES 1997; ANDRIANOU 2009, 39-50.

funerary example from the time of Cassander³⁵. It is remarkable that despite the wide geographical distribution of Macedonian tombs, only a handful of tombs at Vergina contained marble thrones. Even though elements of Persian-type furniture have been found in Macedonia,³⁶ the thrones of Vergina are of purely Greek form. Vergina-Aegae served as the burial ground of the Argead dynasty of Philip and Alexander³⁷. Of the other kings of Macedonia, Demetrios Poliorketes was buried in Demetrias³⁸ and Lysimachos in or near Lysimacheia³⁹, both cities having been founded by the respective rulers. We do not know whether the other dynasties had designated burial grounds.

Two out of the three tombs with thrones at Vergina are situated very close to the royal palace. All three were found plundered and only one was fully published. The so-called Tomb of Rhomaios, named after the archaeologist who excavated it in 1938, had against the back wall of the main chamber a painted marble throne (Fig. 2) about 2 m high on the right and a stone bench on the left⁴⁰. The bench probably served as a base for a wooden or gold and ivory couch⁴¹. Both pieces of furniture, throne and couch, can be understood to have supported vessels or caskets with cremated remains. The throne rests on a pedestal and is accompanied by a footstool. The back of the throne is divided into nine rectangular panels which were decorated with painted stars. The design is obviously imitating a wooden prototype. The armrests are in the form of sphinxes. The right side of the throne preserves a painted scene of two griffins devouring a stag. This tomb is generally dated to the first half of the third century.

A similar throne came to light in the so-called Bella Tomb II at some distance from the palace (Fig. 3)⁴². The back of the throne is painted on the wall of the tomb and the footstool carries the impression of two feet. This tomb housed a single cremation burial contained in a limestone casket that was probably originally placed on the throne. Judging from the wall-painting on the façade showing the coronation of a warrior by a female personification, the owner must have been male. This tomb is also dated to the first half of the third century. It was excavated by Manolis Andronikos in 1981 but never fully published.

The so-called Tomb of Eurydice, partly excavated by Andronikos in 1987⁴³ and never properly published, has not been fully uncovered to this day. It was found at a distance of 4 m. from the Tomb of Rhomaios in close proximity to the palace. It is a Macedonian tomb encased in an outer shell of ashlar blocks giving the impression of a cist tomb from the outside, to discourage robbers⁴⁴. This in itself is an extreme measure and may indicate troubled times.

³⁵ Thessaloniki Museum. SISMANIDES 1997, 30-78, pls. 1-29.

³⁶ PASPALAS 2000. On the typology and material (wood, gold, silver and bronze) of Achaemenid thrones, see KYRIELEIS 1969, 36-41.

³⁷ Philip III Arrhidaeus was buried at Aegae (Diod. 19.52.5; Athen. 4.155a). Alexander the Great's body was originally going to be conveyed to Aegae for burial (Paus. 1.6.3). It is assumed that Philip II was buried at Aegae because he was assassinated there (Diod. 16.92-94) but no ancient source explicitly names the location of his burial. Cf. HATZOPOULOS 2018.

³⁸ Plut. *Demetr.* 53.3.

³⁹ App. *Syr.* 64; Paus. 1.10.4.

⁴⁰ ANDRIANOU 2009, 30, no. 11; MANGOLDT 2012, 270-273, pls. 107 and 108, 1-2; KOTTARIDI 2013, fig. on p. 338.

⁴¹ KOTTARIDI 2013, fig. on p. 339.

⁴² ANDRONICOS 1984, 35-37, fig. 15; ANDRIANOU 2009, 30, no. 10; MANGOLDT 2012, 288-289, pl. 112,4; KOTTARIDI 2013, fig. on p. 353.

⁴³ ANDRONICOS 1987; GINOUVÈS 1994, 154-161; KOTTARIDI 2007, 38-44; MANGOLDT 2012, 291-294, pl. 112, 5-6; FAKLARIS forthcoming.

⁴⁴ See MANGOLDT 2012, pl. 112, 5.

An iron helmet, probably part of the grave goods, and two skeletons attributed to tomb robbers were found in the ante-chamber. The main chamber housed a painted and gilded marble throne with a footstool, carrying a panel painting of Hades and Persephone on its back (Fig. 4),⁴⁵ a marble casket containing a cremation burial and the remnants of a gold and ivory couch suggesting a second burial.⁴⁶ The remains of the cremation are said to belong to a woman but no forensic study has ever been published. The back wall of the main chamber is decorated with engaged Ionic columns and a false marble door and windows giving the impression of a façade. The elaborate decoration of the marble throne imitates gold and ivory prototypes. A purple canopy may have stood over it⁴⁷.

The date of this tomb and its attribution to Eurydice, Philip II's mother, are controversial⁴⁸. The sherds of three Panathenaic amphorae of the Athenian archon Lykiskos dating from 344/3 were recovered from the pyre above the tomb, while an Attic red-figure lekythos by the Eleusis Painter dating from about 330 came to light inside the tomb⁴⁹. The date of the tomb, however, cannot depend on imported Attic pottery, and specifically not on Panathenaic amphorae that tended to be kept as heirlooms for generations. A case in point is the House of Mosaics at Eretria where Panathenaics of the 360s were on display in the peristyle for about a hundred years until the destruction of the house around 270⁵⁰. In any case, the date of the so-called Eurydice Tomb must remain open until further evidence comes to light.

The attribution of the tomb to Eurydice, whose date of death is unknown⁵¹, was based mainly on the assumption that thrones belonged to female burials⁵². This was in turn based on two backless marble thrones bearing female names in the Macedonian Tomb of the Erotes at Eretria which dates from the second century B.C.⁵³. This tomb also housed two marble couches bearing male names and a marble chest inscribed with a woman's name. Quite apart from the fact that the Tomb of Eretria is not in Macedonia and is moreover rather late, its so-called thrones can be more properly described as luxury stools since they have neither backs nor armrests.

It is therefore safer to assume that the funerary thrones of Vergina belonged to men following the evidence we have discussed concerning the Bella Tomb and the so-called Eurydice Tomb. Considering the significance of the throne in Macedonia and its association with royal authority from Alexander the Great onwards, one may well ask if the three tombs with thrones at Vergina are royal⁵⁴. The question was raised by Paspalas and Huguenot, who reached opposing conclusion⁵⁵. Paspalas' premise that thrones could also be used by non-royals is based on Arrian's (*Anab.* 7.4.7) description of the mass marriage at Susa arranged by Alexander for himself and his Companions in 324, in the course of which the brides and bridegrooms sat on thrones; but Arrian explicitly says that the nuptials followed the Persian custom. Huguenot, on the other hand, suggested that thrones denote royalty but was at pains to explain the thrones in

⁴⁵ ANDRIANOU 2009, 30, no. 9; KOTTARIDI 2007, 38-44; 2013, fig. on p. 140.

⁴⁶ Gold and ivory couch: KOTTARIDI 2007, 39.

⁴⁷ On the canopy, see GUIMIER – SORBETS 2001, 218.

⁴⁸ PALAGIA (2002b) advocates a date after Alexander's conquest of the East.

⁴⁹ For illustrations of this pottery, see KOTTARIDI 2011, figs. 83 and 168.

⁵⁰ BENTZ 2001.

⁵¹ In a speech given before Philip II in 346, Aeschines (2.26-29) spoke about her as if she were dead, so we assume she had died before then. See CARNEY 2000, 44-45.

⁵² Cf. SISMANIDES 1997, 198-199.

⁵³ HUGUENOT 2008, 115-119, 121, pls. 6, 3; 7; 8; 12-15; 25,1.

⁵⁴ We have no evidence anywhere in Greece or Macedonia of funerary use of priests' thrones.

⁵⁵ PASPALAS 2008, 88; HUGUENOT 2008, 115-119.

the Tomb of the Erotes at Eretria. As we have seen above, however, the Eretria “thrones” are more likely stools.

If the marble thrones of Vergina are evidence of royal burials, we have no shortage of Macedonian kings who died in the first quarter of the third century though of course we do not know where they were buried. The civil war between the younger sons of Cassander in 294 and the Gaulish invasion of 279 proved fatal for a number of Macedonian kings. Cassander and his sons, Philip IV, Antipater II and Alexander V, as well as Ptolemy Ceraunus, all died between 297 and 279⁵⁶. Meleager and Antipater Etesias were proclaimed kings and deposed in quick succession in 279 but may have eventually received a royal burial⁵⁷. But all this is speculation. We must await further evidence to fully explain the presence of thrones in Macedonian tombs.

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⁵⁶ Cassander and Philip IV both died in 297: HAMMOND – WALBANK 1988, 208, 210. Antipater II died in 294: Hammond and Walbank 1988, 218. Alexander V died in 294: HAMMOND – WALBANK 1988, 215-217. Ptolemy Ceraunus died in 279: HAMMOND – WALBANK 1988, 252-253.

⁵⁷ HAMMOND – WALBANK 1988, 253-254.

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CAPTIONS



Fig. 1: Marble throne in the temple of Apollo Zoster, Vouliagmeni (Photo: Hans R. Goette).



Fig. 2: Marble throne in the Tomb of Rhomaios, Vergina (Photo from KOTTARIDI 2013, 338).



Fig. 3: Marble throne in Bella Tomb II, Vergina (Photo from KOTTARIDI 2013, 353).



Fig. 4: Marble throne in the so-called Tomb of Eurydice, Vergina.
(Photo from GINOUVÈS 1994, fig. 137).