

## CHAPTER 24

“ ISOCRATES,  
DEMOSTHENES  
PLUTARCH, AND  
DIODORUS SICULUS

# “A PESTILENT MAN” PHILIP OF MACEDON

Beyond the borders of what many Greeks considered the “civilized” world in the fourth century BCE was the kingdom of Macedon (also called Macedonia), ruled by a strong man named Philip. One of Philip’s main goals was to conquer Athens and its allies, and he succeeded.

He was able to do this because things were falling apart in Greece. The Delian League (under Athens) had been destroyed after the Peloponnesian War. The Peloponnesian League (under Sparta) didn’t last much longer. So no unified force stood ready to combat Philip. In fact, some Greeks were so tired of the fighting among the various *poleis* that they thought it would be a good idea to have Greece unified, even if it was under a Macedonian. Philip looked like a good general who could beat the Persians in a fight if he had Greek armies under him. An elderly Athenian statesman named Isocrates who had lived through nearly a century of war wrote to him:

“ Isocrates, *To Philip*, 346 BCE

It is your responsibility to work for the good of the Greeks, to reign as king over the Macedonians, and to extend your power over as many as possible. For if you do these things, everyone will be grateful to you: the Greeks for your kind treatment of them; the



*Philip of Macedon had a strong personality and was a ferocious fighter, who lost an eye in a battle.*

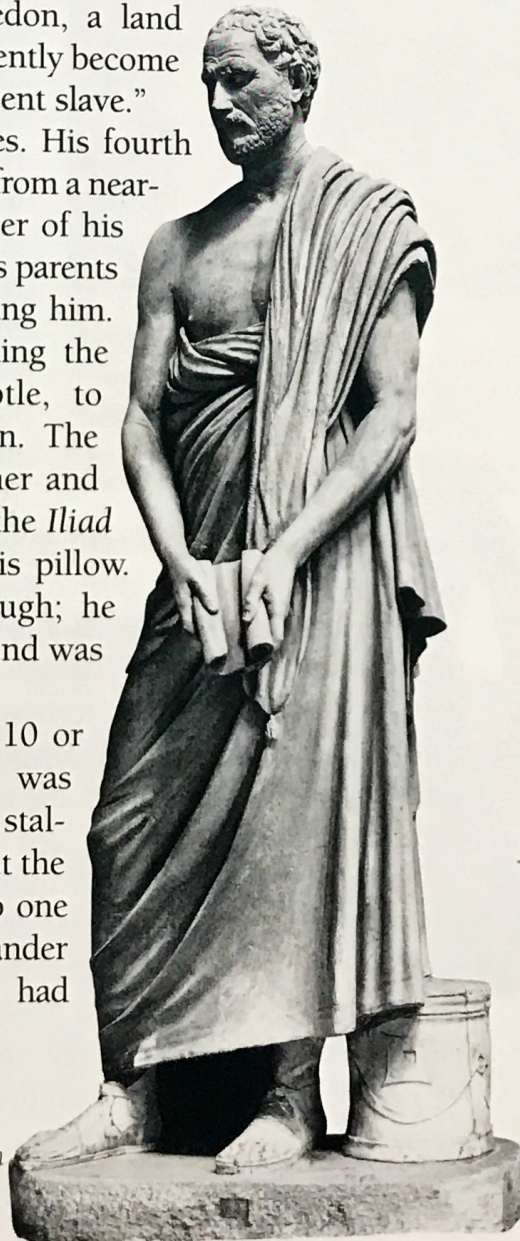
Macedonians if you reign over them like a king rather than a tyrant; and people everywhere if you free them from Persian despotism and bring them under the protection of Greece.

Not everyone supported Philip. One enemy was Greece's most esteemed orator, Demosthenes. In a speech he said about Philip that "not only is he no Greek, not only is he not even related to the Greeks, but he is not even a barbarian from a place that one could take seriously. He is a pestilent man of Macedon, a land from which it has only recently become possible to buy even a decent slave."

Philip had many wives. His fourth wife, Olympias, a princess from a nearby country, was the mother of his son Alexander. Alexander's parents spared no expense in raising him. They hired tutors, including the great philosopher Aristotle, to take care of his education. The boy grew up to love Homer and even slept with copies of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* under his pillow. He didn't just study, though; he also learned how to fight and was taught military strategy.

When Alexander was 10 or 12 years old, his father was thinking of buying a black stallion named **Bucephalus**. But the animal was so wild that no one could control him. Alexander asked if he could try. He had

66 Demosthenes, *Third Philippic*, 341 BCE



Demosthenes wears the traditional robes of an orator as he stands with his scroll in hand, ready to speak out against Philip.

{ *bous* + *kephalos* =  
"ox" + "head"  
Nobody knows why the horse had this odd name. Maybe his head was very large, or maybe he was as stubborn as an ox.



This 15th-century illustration shows Philip of Macedon marrying his cousin, the daughter of the king of a nearby country. When Philip's chariot won a race at the Olympics a year later, the queen's name, Myrtale, was changed to Olympias to celebrate the victory.

noticed that Bucephalus was afraid of his own shadow. So he whispered in the horse's ear to calm him and then took hold of his bridle and turned him around to face the sun so that the shadow was behind him where he couldn't see it. The boy then mounted the horse and rode him with no trouble.

The men were astonished, not only at Alexander's bravery, but at his intelligence. Philip said,

66 Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, about 100 CE

“Look for a kingdom worthier of you, son, for Macedon is not big enough.”

When Alexander was 16, his father left the country, putting his son in charge. Alexander didn't just keep things going until his father came home. When a Thracian tribe revolted, he attacked and conquered their city and set up some Macedonian colonies in their land. He named their main city Alexandropolis.

Philip's empire and his family started falling apart. First, some Greeks were afraid that the king was going to turn into a tyrant. Many men were so concerned that they abandoned Greece, sailing off to Persia to ally with that ancient enemy against this new threat. Some historians think that as many as 50,000 Greeks joined with the Persians.

And then for some reason, Philip became angry with Olympias. He accused her of adultery and declared that Alexander was not his son. He then married a Macedonian

princess. At their wedding feast, the bride's uncle toasted the newlyweds, saying that he hoped that they would soon have a baby who would one day be the next Macedonian ruler.

Alexander was no fool. He knew that the uncle was implying that he, being only half Macedonian and the son of a woman who was no longer married to Philip, was not a legitimate heir to the throne. Stung by the insult, he threw his wine into the wedding guest's face. Philip, who was drunk, staggered to his feet and came at Alexander with his sword drawn, but he slipped and fell. Alexander said, "Look, friends; this is the man who wants to cross into Asia, and he can't even cross the room."

Of course, Philip was furious. Olympias and Alexander left town in a hurry.

Philip and his new wife had first a daughter, and then a son. It seemed likely that the king would declare that this boy was his rightful heir, making Alexander into a nobody. Word reached the ambitious prince that he was probably going to wind up with nothing from his father, after expecting to inherit his throne.

Meanwhile, more Greeks were flocking to the Persian side. Philip was forced to attack Persia swiftly, before the enemy forces got too huge. He sent some generals and 10,000 soldiers to make the way ready for his larger army.

Before Philip left to join his troops, he celebrated the marriage of his daughter. The bride was also Olympias's daughter and Alexander's sister, so of course they had to be invited. The wedding was a great spectacle, according to the historian Diodorus Siculus, who said in his *Library of History*:

*Even at their first encounter, young Alexander knew how to control the wild stallion that he named Bucephalus. After the horse died in battle, Alexander reportedly wept during the burial.*



66 Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, first century BCE

In the procession Philip included statues of the twelve Olympian gods, crafted with the greatest skill and adorned with a dazzling display of wealth guaranteed to strike awe in the beholders. Along with these a thirteenth statue, suitable for a god, was conducted in the procession. This statue was of Philip himself, so that the Macedonian king showed himself enthroned among the Olympians. Every seat in the theater was full when Philip entered wearing a white cloak. He specifically gave orders for his bodyguard to follow him only at a distance so as to show publicly that he was protected by the good will of all the Greeks and had no need of an armed guard.

But all of a sudden one of the bodyguards darted forward and stabbed Philip between the ribs. He died instantly, and this, according to Diodorus Siculus,

was the end of Philip, who through his own efforts had become the greatest of all kings in Europe in his day, and because of the extent of his realm had established himself as the throned companion of the Olympian gods.

The killer fled, heading for the city gates where horses awaited him. He was pursued by friends of Alexander. But he tripped on a vine and Alexander's friends captured and killed him.

The assassin was identified as Pausanias, a former friend and now enemy of the king. But did he work alone?

What was waiting for Pausanias at the gate? Horses. Plural. Not *a horse*. So someone else had to be involved and Pausanias must have believed that his co-conspirator would flee with him.

Who was that co-conspirator? Perhaps it was Alexander. Perhaps it was Olympias, ambitious for her son to become king and angry at being divorced by Philip. Or it could have been another man wanting to become king. Any of them could have bribed or convinced Pausanias to commit the murder. The mystery has never been solved.

#### WHAT GOES AROUND, COMES AROUND

After Philip's assassination, Olympias had his young son killed. Then she had Philip's wife executed. In fact, she murdered so many people that eventually the relatives of her victims murdered her.