

It has often been said that "behind every great man there's a woman". In most past societies this has been particularly true, since there was usually no way for a woman to express her own ambitions. She had to exercise her power and influence through a man. We do not normally think of someone as outstanding as Alexander the Great as being "ruled" by a woman, and in fact it wouldn't be true to say that he was. But he must certainly have been influenced by his home life while he was still a child, and probably the most dominant figure in that home was his mother Olympias.

"Home" life is perhaps a bit of a misnomer for the experiences of Alexander as a young boy. "Court" life would be closer to the truth. He did not live in a classic "nuclear" family, with mother, father, brothers and sisters. His father, Philip II, was king of Macedon, and married several wives over the course of his career. Of course people today may marry more than once, but the difference is that in today's society one usually ends a relationship with one spouse before going on to another. Philip saw no need to do so; he simply collected one wife after the other. Since he married most of them for political reasons, for instance to secure good relations with a neighboring kingdom, it would not have been diplomatic for him to have divorced one before marrying another. We know the names of seven wives of Philip II (he outmarried Henry VIII). Although some of them died young, the others would all have had to accept that their husband had several other wives. At least, that was the idea.

In fact, Alexander's mother Olympias never took very kindly to the fact that her husband saw no reason to "forsake all others". Olympias was wrapped up in Alexander, and demanded that he return her single-minded affection. Her love for her son was inseparable from her ambition for him, and her ambition for herself through him. This was the root of Olympias' resentment of Philip and her hatred of his other wives: if they had male children too, then Alexander might not be the one to succeed to the throne. All in all, it added up to an often uncomfortable home life for Alexander.

Olympias and Philip had only one other child together, Alexander's sister Cleopatra. Cleopatra also inherited the family ambition: when she grew up, she was married to her own uncle, the king of Epiros.

When her husband was away at war, and after he died, she ruled his kingdom in his place. We can imagine that Alexander and Cleopatra, who were only about a year apart in age and both very determined individuals, fought a lot with each other while they were growing up.

Cleopatra was Alexander's only full sibling, but he did have other brothers and sisters, the children of Philip's other wives. They probably all lived at court, but we must doubt whether they all lived together in a nice cozy little family! Still, Alexander certainly would have gotten to know his half-brothers and sisters, some of whom were just as ambitious as Alexander himself. For instance, he had a half-sister by the name of Kynanne who was probably born the year before him. Her mother was Audata, a high-born Illyrian whom Philip married in a successful effort to keep the fierce Illyrian tribes to the north in line. Kynanne inherited the wild characteristics of her people, and was trained by her mother in the arts of war. Alexander's half-brother Arrhidaios, on the other hand, never developed the proper warrior character the Macedonians prized. He was said to be feeble-minded, although he may not always have been that way. Arrhidaios was probably a couple of years older than Alexander (he was the son of Philip's Thessalian wife, Philinna), and Olympias may have seen him as a potential rival to her son. At any rate, rumours said that Olympias contrived something against Arrhidaios, perhaps a drug of some sort, which scrambled his wits and kept him from becoming a viable candidate for the throne as long as Alexander was there.

Part of Alexander's home life as a child probably revolved around watching his mother vent her anger not only on Philip's other wives and children, but on Philip himself. Philip had married Olympias in part for political reasons (she was a member of the royal family of Epiros, a kingdom bordering on Macedon). But it was also a love match. He met the young princess of Epiros when they were both attending an international religious festival, and fell passionately in love with her. As often happens, however, the passionate love between the two turned to equally passionate hate. And, as is also frequently the case, the battles between the two were generally fought over the children, specifically Alexander. As a young boy, Alexander loved his mother deeply, and was greatly influenced by her; he no doubt resented his father's treatment of her. But as he grew older, he began to be stifled by his mother's possessiveness, and he began also to respect Philip and his accomplishments. As a result, even though his feelings for Philip were probably never what they were for Olympias, Alexander did draw closer to his father. The inevitable result was a kind of tug-of-war over Alexander between his parents: Olympias trying to retain the hold she'd had over Alexander as an infant, Philip trying to remove him from his mother's influence and groom him for the kingship.

The tensions in the royal family of Macedon culminated in a family tragedy when Alexander was in his late teens. Philip was so into the habit of marrying whomever he liked that when he fell in love (at the age of 45) with Eurydike, a noble Macedonian girl younger than his own son, he went ahead and married her. As it was a family occasion, Alexander was invited to his father's wedding feast. He was therefore present to hear the deadly insult cast on him by Eurydike's kinsmen: her uncle, in the toast to the bride, offered up the hope that out of this new marriage "at last there will be a legitimate heir to the throne of Macedon". The implication of course was that Alexander himself was not legitimate, or at least not a proper Macedonian. Since it was a regular Macedonian-style party, with all the participants appropriately drunk, Alexander flung his drinking-cup at the bride's uncle. Naturally, Philip could not ignore this injury to his new in-law; he jumped off his couch, drew his sword and started across the room to teach his son a lesson. In the event, however, he tripped and fell sprawling across the floor. Alexander sneered at his father's drunken clumsiness, stormed out of the party, collected his mother, and took her off to her ancestral home of Epiros.

This incident marked Olympias' victory in the struggle between Alexander's parents for the affection of their son. Although, after an absence of a few months, Alexander and his father were formally reconciled, they never fully trusted one another again. Alexander was never as sure as he had been before of his father's favour and of Philip's intent to pass the throne on to him. Olympias also may have realized that, while she had won the battle, she might lose the war. She might have gained all of Alexander's love, but her ambition would be thwarted if, for example, Philip's new Macedonian bride should have a son who would grow up to challenge the claim of Olympias' son. So the tragedy which occurred within a few months of Alexander's return to Macedon was in a way convenient for both Alexander and Olympias: in midsummer 336 B.C. Philip II was stabbed to death by a member of his bodyguard. Alexander, now aged twenty, became king in his father's place.

Although it may be maligning Olympias to say that she had a hand in her husband's assassination, there were widespread rumours that she did play some role in it. Certainly she would not regret the death of a man she had grown to hate so much if it would help the son she loved so much. She was rumoured also to have murdered Philip's youthful bride Eurydike and her newborn child. Tender feelings were not always uppermost in royal families: in an extreme example of sibling rivalry, Alexander himself may have assassinated his younger half-brother Karanos and his cousin Amyntas, both of whom were potential rivals to his new power.

It was Olympias' fate to outlive her beloved son, who died in Babylon at the age of 32. But her ambition and devotion to his memory continued, as she fought to uphold the rights of his young son and her grandson, Alexander IV. She was getting on in years, however, and an old woman and a young boy were no match for the ruthless generals and nobles who struggled for power in the chaos after Alexander the Great's death. Olympias was executed in 316 B.C., just a few years before her grandson, the only child of Alexander the Great, was assassinated by the general Kassander. In the end, Olympias lost the family battle. She had fought to the death to establish her own son, and then her grandson, on the throne of Macedon; but her line, the line of Alexander the Great, was wiped out. It was a child of Philip II by yet another wife who carried on the dynasty. Kassander, the murderer of young Alexander IV, married Thessalonike, the daughter of Philip and Nikesipolis, in an attempt to legitimize his own claim to the throne. And it was her children who, however briefly, inherited the kingdom of Macedon.