

## **How important was it for Alexander to be recognised as pharaoh and what did it involve?**

When Alexander the Great<sup>1</sup> invaded Egypt in 332BC he conquered the entire country in six months without fighting a single battle.<sup>2</sup> He defeated the Persians, an age-old enemy of the Egyptian state and became pharaoh, seemingly seamlessly. This conversion to Egyptian religion and pharaoh was a key part of his success in Egypt, and across the rest of his empire. The accession was multi-faceted and included trips to Memphis, Heliopolis and famously, the Zeus-Ammon oracle at Siwa. Alexander's visits to these sites, his adoption of Nectanebo II as father and use of the Egyptian hostility towards Persia, show at the least, a surface-deep understanding of Egyptian culture and tradition, as well as a knowledge of how to use this to gain a strong political stance in Egypt. He was also successful later in Persia and parts of Asia, which may not have been possible had it been for his triumph in and mind-set after leaving Egypt. Alexander's accession to the office of pharaoh was the first step in a mix of cultures, which eventually led to the thriving, cosmopolitan city of Alexandria in Hellenistic times.<sup>3</sup> He set the precedent for the Ptolemaic period, when Greek and Macedonian cultures were successfully merged with the native traditions apparent in Egypt.<sup>4</sup>

Egyptian kingship had been consistent over the thousands of years since the Predynastic period<sup>5</sup> and although aspects had changed including depictions, wealth and dependency on different parts of society, the basics were still the same.<sup>6</sup> However, belief in the sincerity of kingship was declining. The true religious belief no longer lay behind

---

<sup>1</sup> In this article, the terms "Alexander" or "Alexander the Great" will refer to Alexander III of Macedon, son of Philip II.

<sup>2</sup> Cassell, J.M. (1980) 90.

<sup>3</sup> Stanwick, P.E. (2002) 2; Baines, J.R. (1995) 3.

<sup>4</sup> Manning J.G. (2010) 78.

<sup>5</sup> Baines, J.R. (1995) 3.

<sup>6</sup> Kemp, B.J. (2006) 20; Baines, J.R. (1995).

pharaohs, and this was mostly due to their foreign nature.<sup>7</sup> This meant any foreign pharaoh had to try much harder to prove his legitimacy. Pharaohs also became much more reliant on institutions and individuals, such as temples and priests, due to their increased wealth and power, than they had been in the thousands of years prior. For the general population, the legitimate king was essential to the running of daily life; he was the only person<sup>8</sup> who could act as an intermediary to the gods,<sup>9</sup> who needed him for continued sustenance and ma'at on earth. In return, the gods confirmed him as the legitimate ruler<sup>10</sup> and provided a safe and stable Egypt. This symbiotic relationship was the basis for all life in the world. The king was a manifestation of all the gods on Earth,<sup>11</sup> while he ruled he was a semi-divine being carrying out their work.

In contrast, Macedonian kings were not divine and theoretically, did not have autocratic power. They had many advisors and often worked in a “semi-democratic” way, discussing issues before making decisions.<sup>12</sup> Civil war was common in Macedonia due to the instability after a king died; accession was not necessarily based on the individual who was “next in line” but who was politically the strongest candidate. Despite not being considered divine, mythology surrounding the fathers of kings was common,<sup>13</sup> although generally limited to being considered mythology. Very few kings strongly believed they had divine parentage,<sup>14</sup> although it seems that Alexander truly believed he was the son of Zeus-Ammon, even before his visit to the oracle.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Höbl, G. (2001) 77. Baines, J.R. (1995) 4; 42.

<sup>8</sup> Except for elected priests who could act on his behalf, who in realistic terms, undertook most of the pharaoh's religious activities.

<sup>9</sup> Höbl, G. (2001) 77.

<sup>10</sup> Baines, J.R. (1995) 4.

<sup>11</sup> Baines, J.R. (1995) 5.

<sup>12</sup> Chanitos, A. (2011) 185.

<sup>13</sup> Chanitos, A. (2011) 184.

<sup>14</sup> Cassell, J.M. (1980) 91.

<sup>15</sup> Chanitos, A. (2011) 185.

This visit to Siwa was one of the most famous aspects of the legitimisation of Alexander's rule, although for the majority of the Egyptian population, was not vital for him becoming accepted as pharaoh. Confirmation by an oracle was a tradition of New Kingdom<sup>16</sup> pharaohs but this practice had disappeared by the Late Period.<sup>17</sup> For the Egyptian people, the most important aspect of a pharaoh's work was the maintenance and sustenance of the gods, and in turn the continuation of ma'at.<sup>18</sup> The king needed to offer to the gods and take part in rituals.<sup>19</sup> On his arrival in Egypt, Alexander went to Memphis, where he was traditionally coronated and made offerings to gods including Ptah and the Apis bull, as pharaoh.<sup>20</sup> This confirmed him as pharaoh in the eyes of Egyptians, as he was filling roles only a pharaoh could do. The ideological factors are also interesting to note; Memphis was the city linked with the first unification of Egypt,<sup>21</sup> which would have echoed in Alexander's coronation. He would have played on the tradition hostility Egyptians felt towards Persians, and had himself depicted as re-unifier of the state after foreign invasion.<sup>22</sup> The gods he offers to also help to tie this into his legitimisation- both have strong links to Memphis.<sup>23</sup> Both are also considered some of the 'original' members of the Egyptian pantheon,<sup>24</sup> reinforcing the image of alexander as a native pharaoh. Additionally, Apis' links with the Late Period and Greek world<sup>25</sup> provide the perfect bridge between Alexander's ancestry and newly conquered land; a god which both his troops from home and the native population can relate to.<sup>26</sup> Alexander's

---

<sup>16</sup> Alexander's consultation of Zeus-Ammon at Siwa promoted a re-instigation of this tradition and a new trend of emulation of the New Kingdom (Höbl, G. (2001) 78.).

<sup>17</sup> Lorber, C.C. (2011) 295; 301.

<sup>18</sup> Baines, J.R. (1995) 10.

<sup>19</sup> Baines, J.R. (1995) 4.

<sup>20</sup> Lorber, C.C. (2011) 295; Fakhry, A. (1973) 85; Höbl G. (2001) 9; Cassell, J.M. (1980) 90.

<sup>21</sup> Höbl, G. (2001) 78.

<sup>22</sup> In literature and mythology, the expulsion of the Persians by Alexander the Great soon became equated with the unification and expulsion of the Hyksos in the New Kingdom (Höbl, G. (2001) 81.).

<sup>23</sup> Ptah is the patron god of the Memphite area (Wilkinson (2003) 123-4.) and Apis has been linked with both Ptah and Memphis from the earliest dynasties (Wilkinson (2003) 170.).

<sup>24</sup> Höbl, G. (2001) 78; Wilkinson, R.H. (2003)

<sup>25</sup> He becomes much more prominent during the twenty-second dynasty, when more detail about the sacred bulls is recorded.

<sup>26</sup> Wilkinson, R.H. (2003) 172.

links to the Late Period, Nectanebo II<sup>27</sup> particularly, were specifically important to his legitimisation and will be detailed later.

Art and architecture were also key aspects of Alexander's reign- he built extensively<sup>28</sup> and depicted himself across temples, specifically in Lower Egypt. Some of his many building projects include the restoration of the House of 1000 Years in the Amun temple at Luxor; a boat shrine in the Luxor temple; renovation of a sanctuary in the festival temple of Thutmose III at Karnak; the Isis temple in Alexandria; the temples to Amun-Re and Horus at the Bahariya Oasis.<sup>29</sup> Many of his projects were also continuations of the work started in the Thirtieth Dynasty, either from the reign of Nectanebo in a bid to prove legitimacy or those started by the Persians and finished by Alexander, to wipe them from history. Three of the afore mentioned projects are notable for other reasons. The first being the Isis temple in Alexandria, and the links she had with the Greek pantheon. This shows an understanding from Alexander, or at least his advisors of the assimilation of Hellenistic culture in Egypt and the requirement to encourage this for Egypt, and specifically Alexandria to be fully functional, as it was, in later years. Secondly, the House of 1000 Years at Luxor is important due to its function- it was dedicated to the royal ka<sup>30</sup> and therefore the ancestors of the king. Nectanebo II was often shown as Alexander's father, to depict a clean succession and by restoring the House of 1000 Years Alexander reminded everyone of his "native" lineage. Finally, in depictions at Thutmose III's sanctuary in Karnak, Alexander is depicted as a parallel to Thutmose, the 'great warrior pharaoh'. He was seen as a "new Thutmose"<sup>31</sup> in these images which leads us to assume equations were made between the empire Thutmose achieved in the Eighteenth Dynasty and the empire Egypt joined under Alexander.

---

<sup>27</sup> Höbl, G. (2001) 78; Manning (2010) 73.

<sup>28</sup> Although interestingly, there are no buildings or inscriptions belonging to Alexander at Siwa (Fakhry, A. (1974) 88.).

<sup>29</sup> Lorber, C.C. (2011) 295; Höbl, G. (2001) 85.

<sup>30</sup> Lorber, C.C. (2011) 295.

<sup>31</sup> Höbl, G. (2001) 85.

These depictions are commonplace in temples across Lower Egypt, especially at Luxor and Karnak- in Luxor alone he is shown as pharaoh over fifty times.<sup>32</sup> They also show him taking part in the Opet festival<sup>33</sup> although it is incredibly unlikely that he ever did, as well as offering to the gods and completing rituals. This is mostly propaganda; it is unlikely Alexander undertook even half of these activities in the six months he spent in Egypt and he died on campaign before he could return.<sup>34</sup> However, this did not affect the perception of Alexander as pharaoh, as Egyptian belief directed that anything recorded happened and would continue to happen in the future.<sup>35</sup> These depictions of Alexander undertaking rituals, participating in festivals and offering to the gods meant that in the Egyptians' eyes, he was doing this and would be for his entire time as pharaoh.

Among these depictions are often inscriptions, captioning the images with descriptions and titles of the pharaoh, including some traditional ones, such as sA ra, nTr Hor, "protector of Egypt" and other epithets legitimising his rule. "Protector of Egypt" is a key part of his Horus name,<sup>36</sup> which further reinforces the image he had depicted himself as the legitimate king, i.e. Horus on earth.<sup>37</sup> This echoes Nectanebo's five-fold titulary,<sup>38</sup> further reinforcing the idea of Alexander's native Egyptian lineage as well as drawing a parallel between the two's battles with the Persians.<sup>39</sup>

In terms of Alexander's lineage, he is considered to have three "fathers", Philip II, Zeus-Ammon and Nectanebo II.<sup>40</sup> Of course, Philip II was his true father and this is often important in his conquest of the empire and his ability to rule over the Macedonians to start

---

<sup>32</sup> Lorber, C.C. (2011), 295-6.

<sup>33</sup> Lorber, C.C. (2011) 296.

<sup>34</sup> Bosworth, A.B. (1988) 172.

<sup>35</sup> Robbins, G (1997) 19; Smith, W.S. (1958) 15.

<sup>36</sup> Höbl, G. (2001) 79.

<sup>37</sup> Lorber, C.C. (2011) 197.

<sup>38</sup> Höbl, G. (2001) 79.

<sup>39</sup> It is alluded to in the *Alexander Romance* that Nectanebo had failed against the Persians so that Alexander, his son could defeat them (Höbl, G. (2001) 78.).

<sup>40</sup> Chugg, A. (2002) 13; Höbl, G. (2001) 78; Manning (2010) 73.

with. Without Philip II's fatherhood and guidance, of course Alexander would never have been king nor would there have been the smooth transition experienced between Philip and Alexander's reigns, a fairly rare phenomenon in Macedonia.<sup>41</sup> During his time as pharaoh, Nectanebo was also shown as his father, to reinforce the image of a smooth transition between native pharaohs and wiping the hostile Persians from history. In addition, Olympias had suggested numerous times his divine father, Zeus,<sup>42</sup> had visited her in the guise of Philip II, linking Alexander by blood to Heracles and Perseus.<sup>43</sup>

This visit, as mentioned earlier, is one of the most famous aspects of the legitimisation of Alexander's reign, and has immortalised the name of Siwa in history records.<sup>44</sup> Alexander visited Siwa early in 331BC, a timing which has led many to question his motives.<sup>45</sup> When at Siwa, Alexander asked the oracle questions in relation to his lineage, future and the death of his father.<sup>46</sup> In response, the god confirmed Alexander as the son of Zeus-Ammon and the legitimate king of Egypt.<sup>47</sup> The response to questions surrounding his father's death have gone unknown but it is suspected that Alexander asked in an attempt to clear Olympias' name, and he planned to reveal the answers on his return to Macedonia.<sup>48</sup> This aspect of Alexander as pharaoh is particularly interesting, as he did not need divine legitimisation of this type to be accepted into Egyptian society.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, he did not need divine lineage to be considered a King in Greek or Macedonian terms, although divinity always surrounded

---

<sup>41</sup> Bosworth, A.B. (1988) 25-6.

<sup>42</sup> Chanitos, A. (2011) 184.

<sup>43</sup> Fredricksmeier, E.A. (1991) 200.

<sup>44</sup> Fakhry, A. (1973) 84.

<sup>45</sup> At this time, Persia was not defeated and many would assume Alexander's priorities would lie with mustering his troops and organising the next stage of his conquest (Fakhry, A. (1973) 86.). Explanations for this come from various ancient authors, including Callinthenes, who suggests Alexander wanted to equate himself with Heracles and Perseus, both of whom had consulted Zeus-Ammon (Fakhry, A. (1973) 87) and Arrianus, who suggests that simply Alexander was closer to Siwa after founding Alexandria (Cassell, J.M. (1980) 90; Fakhry, A. (1973) 84.), and took the chance to visit while he could (Fakhry, A. (1973) 87.).

<sup>46</sup> Höbl, G. (2001) 10; Fredricksmeier, E.A. (1991) 200.

<sup>47</sup> Höbl, G. (2001) 11.

<sup>48</sup> Alexander questioned the oracle in complete privacy in the sanctuary and it is pure speculation that he asked these questions (Fredricksmeier, E.A. (1991) 201.).

<sup>49</sup> Fredricksmeier, E.A. (1991) 199-200.

the fathers of Macedonian kings, it was never considered more than mythology and Alexander would have been almost unique in having a belief in his own divine nature,<sup>50</sup> leaving him open to criticism from his homeland.

However, the links Zeus-Ammon has across Alexander's empire at this stage are interesting. Zeus-Ammon formed the link between Egypt and Greece that Alexander needed- the god had undisputable force and power in both countries<sup>51</sup> and formed the best link to Macedonia within all of Egyptian mythology.<sup>52</sup> Legitimation by this god in particular formed the link and filled both religious features of Macedonian kingship in the form of a myth surrounding the king's father, and that of Egypt, by confirming legitimacy and divine lineage, in a more serious manner.<sup>53</sup>

It is also interesting to note how Alexander may have asked the oracle about his conquest, or the future of his ever-expanding empire, especially when we consider that he did not consult an oracle before leaving Macedonia.<sup>54</sup> However, it may be that Alexander adopted the answers the oracle at Gordium gave to Philip before his invasion.<sup>55</sup> Alexander's behaviour on campaign has raised comments over the importance placed on Zeus-Ammon- specifically sacrifices. Sacrifices during campaign are often described by Alexander's contemporaries but only as being 'customary'. There are a handful of sacrifices which seem to be of utmost importance which are specifically referred to; these sacrifices with the most detail and which seem to differ from the norm are always to Zeus or Zeus-Ammon, and seem to be on the instruction of the latter.<sup>56</sup> This was common practice in Greek warfare, but a new

---

<sup>50</sup> Cassell, J.M. (1980) 91; Fredrickmeyer, E.A. (1991) 199.

<sup>51</sup> Temples to Amun had sprung up all over Greece from around the fifth century BC (Fakhry, A. (1973) 85, 87; Höbl, G. (2001) 10.) and the aspect of myths surrounding lineage was an important feature in Macedonian kings.

<sup>52</sup> Lorber C.C. (2011) 295; Fakhry, A. (1973) 85; Höbl, G. (2001) 78.

<sup>53</sup> Höbl, G. (2001) 78.

<sup>54</sup> Fredrickmeyer, E.A. (1991) 202.

<sup>55</sup> Fredrickmeyer, E.A. (1991) 213.

<sup>56</sup> Fredrickmeyer, E.A. (1991) 208; Arrian 6.19.4; Plut. *Alexander* 34.1.

phenomenon for Egyptian gods to instruct specific sacrifices during campaigns. These aspects of the campaign certainly add weight to the arguments presented above, concerning the Egyptian nature of Alexander's campaign.<sup>57</sup> These sacrifices are a direct link to his kingship in Egypt and his status there as divine. Does this suggest that Alexander was on campaign in Persia on behalf of Zeus-Ammon and Egypt, opposed to Macedonia?<sup>58</sup>

These aspects combined in the early 330s to develop Alexander's pharaonic image across Egypt. The impact this had is not strictly measurable but we can see success later in Alexander's campaign, which although is not directly because of his time in Egypt, would have been much different without it. Before visiting Siwa, Alexander had an unprecedented belief in his own divinity, which was exaggerated during his time in Egypt through elevation to pharaoh and confirmation as the son of Zeus-Ammon. Alexander was almost immediately accepted into Egypt by the Egyptians- it would seem this long, drawn out legitimisation, specifically his trip to the oracle at Siwa was aimed at a different audience, either his contemporaries or the population back in Greece and Macedonia, where kings were not as easily accepted.

Alexander's status as divine also gave him new confidence and although the goal for him was to always conquer the entire world, it was during his time in Egypt, or shortly after, that he adopted the title "King of Asia".<sup>59</sup> Did his success in Egypt mean he could continue into the Near East? It is without doubt that Alexander was successful, within thirteen years he managed to disseminate the Greek language, culture and political structure from Anatolia, south to Egypt and from Syria into Central Asia, and although his empire did not survive intact, without its creation in the first place the Hellenistic Kingdoms which flourished from

---

<sup>57</sup> Fredricksmeyer, E.A. (1991) 212-3.

<sup>58</sup> Lorber C.C. (2011) 296.

<sup>59</sup> Cassell, J.M. (1980) 90; Keenan, J.G. (2004) 13.

it would never have developed over the next 300 years.<sup>60</sup> Alexander's kingship is also specifically important in Ptolemy I's succession, when he adopts many features used before him.<sup>61</sup> The six months Alexander and his troops spent in Egypt were valuable, not only for him to establish himself as pharaoh and divine (as the two were different, he was pharaoh and divine in Egypt, yet only divine in the Greek world), but also for the morale and health of his troops. When we look at the importance of Alexander being recognised pharaoh within Egypt, we see that it mattered a great deal to the Egyptian people, they had previously been treated badly by foreign rulers,<sup>62</sup> but it was also important on a much wider scale, for the Greek people of Alexander's homeland and his own understanding of the native traditions of a land and the important role they play in conquest.

Charlotte Morgan, 655298@swansea.ac.uk

Written for *Alexandria: Multicultural Metropolis of the Ancient World (CLE-334)*

## Bibliography

- Baines, J.R. (1995) "Kingship, definition of culture and legitimisation" in *Ancient Egyptian Kingship* O'Connor, D.B. and D.P. Silverman (eds.) Brill: Leiden 3-49.
- Bosworth, A.B. (1988) *Conquest and Empire: The Reign of Alexander the Great* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Cassell, J.M. (1980) *Sunrise of power, Ancient Egypt and Alexander and the World of Hellenism* Edgell Communications: London.

---

<sup>60</sup> Cassell, J.M. (1980) 91.

<sup>61</sup> Lorber, C.C. (2011) 293; Höbl, G. (2001) 81.

<sup>62</sup> Keenan, J.G. (2004) 12.

- Chanitos, A. (2011) "The Ithyphallic hymn for Demetrios Poliorketes and Hellenistic Religious Mentality" in *More than men, less than gods, studies on the royal cult and imperial worship, proceedings of the International Colloquium organised by the Belgian School at Athens* Issif, P.P., A.S. Chankowski and C.C. Lorber (eds.) Peeters: Paris 157-197.
- Chugg, A. (2002) "The Sarcophagus of Alexander the Great?" *Greece and Rome* 49, 1 (April).
- Fahkry, A. (1973) *Siwa Oasis* The American University in Cairo Press: Cairo.
- Fakhry, A. (1974) *The Oases of Egypt: volume II Bahriyah and Farafra Oases* The American University in Cairo Press: Cairo.
- Fredricksmeier, E.A. (1991) "Alexander, Zeus Ammon and the Conquest of Asia" *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 121 199-214.
- Höbl, G. (2001) *A history of the Ptolemaic Empire* Routledge: London.
- Keenan, J.G. (2004) "Before the Ptolemies" in *Egypt from Alexander to the Copts: An Archaeological and Historical Guide* Bagnall, R.S. and W.Rathbone (eds.) British Museum Press: London 11-13.
- Kemp, B.J. (2006) *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilisation* Routledge: London.
- Lorber, C.C. (2011) "Theos aigiochos: the aegis in Ptolemaic portraits of divine rulers" in *More than men, less than gods, studies on the royal cult and imperial worship, proceedings of the International Colloquium organised by the Belgian School at Athens* Issif, P.P., A.S. Chankowski and C.C. Lorber (eds.) Peeters: Paris 293-357.
- Manning, J.G. (2010) *The Last Pharaohs: Egypt under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC* Princeton University Press: Oxford.

Robbins, G. (1997) *The Art of Ancient Egypt* British Museum Press: London.

Smith, W.S. (1958) *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt* Penguin: London.

Stanwick, P.E. (2002) *Portraits of the Ptolemies: Greek kings as Egyptian pharaohs*  
University of Texas Press: Austin.

Wilkinson, R.H. (2003) *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* Thames and  
Hudson: London.