***Olympias of Macedon: Woman, Queen and ἀρχή of a Multidimensional Exercise of Power in the Hellenistic World.***

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My paper today will focus on Olympias of Macedon: the mother of Alexander the Great and Philip II’s wife. Her figure has been associated with adjectives such as ‘manipulative’ or ‘scheming’, as well as with negative connotations attached to witchcraft. However, she established a model that would be repeated in the following decades by other royal women of the Hellenistic period. She was the beginning, or *ἀρχή*, of new dimensions of female power.

Before diving into her figure, I think it would be interesting to ponder the concepts of *power* and *leadership*. Both terms are often mentioned together and commonly connected by researchers in History to warfare or politics, the abstract expression of them receives less attention. They were not only a matter of performance in the battlefield nor of the control of resources after all, but an amalgam of different factors.

Let’s focus on power first. The attempts to define and study the nature of power have been directly linked to modern scholars who work in the field of international politics and diplomacy, business, psychology, and sociology, and to political analysts too. The main theories started in the 1950s, a bit late considering the omnipresent existence of the concept of power for hundreds of years. I am not intending to make of this paper a summary of different theories about the nature of power, but there are key concepts that do need to be explained. John French and Bertrand Raven (1959) established five main sources of power that have yet to be successfully challenged:

* **Reward Power** 🡪 it relies in the ability to reward (either with something tangible, such as money, or with something abstract, such as praise, responsibility or influence)
* **Coercive power** 🡪 it stems from the expectation that there will be a punishment or negative outcome for an individual if they do not conform to something.
* **Legitimate power** 🡪 it comes from internalised norms, values, or socially prescribed behaviour. In this way, a certain individual has a legitimate right to influence the behaviour of others, which must be in turn accepted. It relies on:
  + Cultural values.
  + Acceptance of social structures.
  + Designation by a legitimising agent (i.e., someone has been granted such power, with the correct procedure, by some agent that is deemed as legitimate by a group of individuals).
* **Referent power** 🡪 it resides on the identification with the person that is to exercise power, relying on a feeling of oneness or a desire for such an identity. In this way, the person with power is seen as attractive, although this can be applied to groups which would be attractive by giving a feeling of membership or a desire to join, as long as an individual follows the same system of beliefs, behaviour and perception of reality.
* **Expert power** 🡪 its strength dwells on the extent of the knowledge (or the perception of such) within a certain area.

French, J. R. P., Jr., & Raven, B. (1959).

*The bases of social power* in D. Cartwright (Ed.),

Studies in social power (pp. 150–167). University of Michigan.

I would like to drive your attention towards two other concepts: hard and soft power. Following the definition of Joseph Nye Jr.:

* Soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.
* Hard power is the ability to coerce. Nye studies it within international political analysis, but he links the hard power of a certain country to its military and economic might, whereas its soft power rises from its attractiveness (of its culture, political ideals, policies, etc.), which is enhanced if its actions are seen as legitimate.

Nye, J. S. Jr. (2006) *Soft Power and European-American Affairs*,

in L. Ilgen (ed.) Hard Power, Soft Power and the Future

of Transatlantic Relations (pp. 25 – 35). Ashgate: UK.

Furthermore, it is interesting that Nye himself had to assert that soft power was not weakness, but a different method for exercising power. Through the need of an expert such as Nye to insist on the fact that soft power does not equal weakness, we can see the bias of the negative pre-conceptions this notion still had even in 2000s, because hard power and shows of force and strength have been traditionally seen in a positive light as proof of manliness, strength, and successful leadership. However, soft power has been linked to non-male power dynamics due to its complexities and way of proceeding, which resulted in negative connotations (a scheming, plotting, treacherous and hidden way to proceed).

Finally, I want to address the concept of leadership. It engages with the different types of power that I have mentioned earlier to lead others, while relying on a combination of practical and abstract techniques and qualities. In this way, we can be more nuanced and adapt the previous framework to our historical analysis. I have created subcategories with key terms as well, as you can see on the screen:

* *Referent of the example*: the expression of “leading by example” summarises it all. It is to be a good example for a group of individuals by showing how things should be done.
* *Fear*: it relies in the capacity to punish either physically or through other methods an individual or group of individuals.
* *Tradition*: stems from an inherited authority, fame, or good reputation.
* *Religion*: it uses the shared religious beliefs of a group of individuals or population as a banner for someone’s authority.
* *Persuasion/influence*: the capacity to convince others to follow through one’s charisma or a possible benefit for doing so.
* *Education*: having what is considered a good education in the main fields of ‘expertise’ of the considered period.
* *Experience*: in the field where the claim for leadership is taking place.
* *Management*: connected to the previous category as well, is the capacity of someone to proof that they are good at managing a diverse range of resources.

These were often crucial for populations of Hellenic background when it came to choosing their leaders or the legitimisation of certain posts, even monarchies. The importance of acknowledging the abstract side of power and leadership dwells on the role of royal women, as their legitimacy and sway would normally fall into the abstract categories rather than on the practical ones.

Now, let’s begin our analysis of Olympias.

**Legitimate power**

The legitimate power of Olympias resided in her lineage, and it manifested two of the variables of leadership: *tradition* and *religion*. She was part of the Aecid dynasty, whose members claimed their ancestral link to Neoptolemus/Pyrrhus as a key feature of their legitimacy to rule and of their identity as Molossians. The use of a heroic foundation of a dynasty comes as no surprise, as we have many examples in antiquity, such as the Battiads in Cyrene (who claimed to descend from Battus) or the gens Iulia (connected to Aphrodite/Venus). Although there was already a tradition that associated Neoptolemus to Epirus, the fact that it was Neoptolemus was not trivial: he was the son of Achilles no less. Not only religion or a mythical past were used to enhance the Molossian royal dynasty and their claim for power, but also their connections to other states through the play *Andromache* by Euripides in the 420s BCE, where he states that Neoptolemus became king through the marriage of Andromache with Helenus, thus linking Athens’ interests at the time with the Molossian royal family while imprinting the connection between the royal house with Achilles in the collective mindset.

Olympias had her leadership supported by religion in this sense, through her ancestry. She herself insisted on it if we are to believe Theopompus (*FGrH* 115 F 355), by claiming that past: that she was the descendant of Achilles and Helenus. But she did not only connect herself to them, but the fact that the god Zeus Ammon appears mentioned in many ancient sources as Olympias’ lover and possible father of Alexander the Great is within the interest of this analysis, for at least during the life of Alexander the Great that tale was already being told, and more importantly, used. We cannot know how much of it came from Olympias, or what her reaction was when that rumour started to spread. Plutarch gives us two versions in the *Life of Alexander* 3.2: either she confirmed her affair with a god to her son before he leaves for his campaign, or she challenges Alexander’s claims. We do not know if Alexander believed in that story, but he certainly made sure to make visible his association with Heracles through his father, and Neoptolemus, Helenus and Zeus Ammon through Olympias, to enhance his right to rule and his “extraordinary” nature. In the eyes of the population, it was no wonder why he was a prodigy of politics and warfare if he had such a lineage.

Olympias had a secured association with different elements of Greek religion, which she used and kept even after the death of Alexander the Great, but another aspect of her legitimate power was her male relatives and ancestors, and their actions. A fragment from Diodorus Siculus summarises this perfectly:

*Such was the end of Olympias, who had attained to the highest dignity of the women of her day, having been daughter of Neoptolemus, king of the Epirotes, sister of the Alexander who made a campaign into Italy, and also wife of Philip, who was the mightiest of all who down to this time had ruled in Europe, and mother of Alexander, whose deeds were the greatest and most glorious.*

Ὀλυμπιὰς μὲν οὖν, μέγιστον τῶν καθ᾿ αὑτὴν ἐσχηκυῖα ἀξίωμα καὶ γεγενημένη θυγάτηρ μὲν Νεοπτολέμου τοῦ βασιλέως τῶν Ἠπειρωτῶν, ἀδελφὴ δὲ Ἀλεξάνδρου τοῦ στρατεύσαντος εἰς Ἰταλίαν, ἔτι δὲ γυνὴ μὲν Φιλίππου τοῦ πλεῖστον ἰσχύσαντος τῶν πρὸ αὐτοῦ κατὰ τὴν Εὐρώπην δυναστευσάντων, μήτηρ δὲ Ἀλεξάνδρου τοῦ πλεῖστα καὶ κάλλιστα κατεργασαμένου τοιαύτης καταστροφῆς ἔτυχε.

Diodorus Siculus 19.51.6 trans. Russel M. Geer

Before this, the legitimisation Olympias had was connected by the author to her male relatives in 19.11.2-3, when Diodorus states that one of the reasons why the soldiers of Eurydice switched sides to Olympias’ was that they “remembered Alexander’s favours and what he did for them”. The actions of her son benefitted her reputation and position. In fact, the connection to important men was in her benefit more than once: despite the rumours of Alexander not being Philip’s son, or the story about Zeus/Ammon, we do not find any sexual slander towards Olympias. She could be insulted, called a witch or manipulative, but that episode did not endure as a tool to use against her. Why? Because that would have meant that Alexander did not have a claim to the Macedonian throne and that despite being a good tactician and commander, he was a madman who claimed glorious ancestors and a semi-divine nature when he was not legitimate. Also, the discourse of the victor is the one that better stands the passage of time, and it was in the best interest of the Diadocoi to keep Alexander’s image, even if for an enemy such as Cassander it meant to attack Olympias’ reputation in another way.

**Reward Power**

Reward power is understandably connected to influence and persuasion, two abilities and capacities which I will develop further in another section. However, at the Macedonian court was an unspoken understanding: those considered allies and friends expected benefits, a special treatment that would reward them with wealth, power, influence, or anything that would position them at the front row. That seems to be the situation of the male lovers of the king, such as the case (possible case) of Philip and Alexander of Molossia, Olympias’ brother (Elizabeth Carney discussed the possibility of a romance between the two in 2006), who ended up as king. But more visible is the paradigm of Pausanias (Philip’s murderer) who would have felt aggravated and not satisfied with Philip’s behaviour as a new lover came into the picture.

This assumption regarding reward power can be seen in one of the famous letters between Olympias and Alexander, where, as related by Plutarch, she warned Alexander about his frugality with all the riches and wealth he distributed among his friends (Plutarch, *Alexander*, 39.5), creating many small kings and therefore becoming possible threats.

This statement is not futile: much can be achieved through the power of reward; it can also create alliances and promote stability. Such is the case of Polyperchon and Olympias, who became allies and fought against Cassander and Adea Eurydice after Alexander’s death. Polyperchon, after asking Olympias to come back to Macedonia, became the general of the military forces that supported Olympias (an important position that would reward such arrangement with Olympias). The event described by Diodorus in *Alexander*, 19.11.3 proves the reach and benefits of reward power, as the soldiers that fought for Eurydice sided with Olympias’ because they ‘remembered what Alexander did for them and his favours’. Even though it was not Olympias’ reward, she benefitted from that power. In the same way, Eumenes’ loyalty was acknowledged by Olympias when she asked him to help her to take care of Alexander’s heir and protect them (Plutarch, *Eumenes*, 13.1), an act that would provide him with a dignity and power that would reward and secure his support.

I just want to mention at this point that the benefactions that Olympias and her daughter Cleopatra made to different cities, although I will discuss them later within the section dedicated to influence, would fall within this category too. They were rewards that provided Olympias with power and sustained her positive imagine within different territories, and as long as the money, or grain, kept flowing, her power would therefore grow as well. Nevertheless, reward power is of no use on its own, as those that receive the rewards could start to consider that they are not receiving enough, or that someone else is given more and therefore they were given an unfair treatment.

**Coercive Power**

Jealousy, vengefulness, and ruthlessness are commonly mentioned in ancient sources as main features of Olympias’ character. Her agency (i.e., her capacity to act) increased prominently once Alexander succeeded to the Macedonian throne, which was translated into an increased safety as well. Furthermore, her honour or any attempt on her life would have entailed the dangerous reaction of Alexander, increasing Olympias’ coercive power accordingly, although as a subtle certainty that everyone would be aware of.

Besides this, Olympias herself took part (probably) in the purge Alexander the Great carried out in the first years of his reign. As expected from previous Macedonian experience, the period that followed his accession was all but calm. Olympias would have not hesitated to help her son in guaranteeing his throne after Philip’s murder: she is said to have ordered the murder of Philip’s late wife Cleopatra and their daughter Europa (or son, depending on the source), severing the threat they represented (Plutarch, *Alexander*, 10.4) with the likely awareness of Alexander. Whatever the circumstances were, and the plausible interest in showing a pattern in Olympias’ murderous intent, this is proof of the power she held and the threat she actively represented.

Olympias demonstrated her knowledge of how effective fear could be afterwards: Plutarch, *Alexander*, 77.1, mentions the purge Olympias carried out after Alexander’s death, which he believed to be to avenge the assassination of Alexander in Babylon. Diodorus goes one step further: besides her personal vendetta (a proper womanly behaviour as vengeful, jealous, and irrational being), Diodorus establishes the assassination of Adea Eurydice and Philip Arrhidaeus as the tipping point of her coercive power.

*She therefore sent to her a sword, a noose, and some hemlock, and ordered her to employ whichever of these she pleased as a means of death, neither displaying any respect whatever for the former dignity of the victim whom she was unlawfully treating, nor moved to pity for the fate that is common to all. Accordingly, when she herself met with a similar reversal, she experienced a death that was worthy of her cruelty*.

εἰσέπεμψεν οὖν αὐτῇ ξίφος καὶ βρόχον καὶ κώνειον καὶ συνέταξε τούτων ᾧ βούλοιτο καταχρήσασθαι πρὸς τὸν θάνατον, οὔτε τὸ προγεγενημένον ἀξίωμα τῆς παρανομουμένης ἐντραπεῖσα τὸ παράπαν οὔτε τῆς κοινῆς τύχης εἰς οἶκτον ἐλθοῦσα. τοιγαροῦν τῆς ὁμοίας μεταβολῆς τυχοῦσα τῆς ὠμότητος ἀξίαν ἔσχε τὴν τοῦ βίου καταστροφήν.

*But by glutting her rage with such atrocities, she soon caused many of the Macedonians* ***to hate her ruthlessness****; for all of them remembered the words of Antipater, who, as if uttering a prophecy on his death bed, advised them* ***never to permit a woman to hold first place in the kingdom****.*

ἐν τοιούτοις δὲ παρανομήμασι πληροῦσα τὸν ἑαυτῆς θυμὸν ταχὺ πολλοὺς τῶν Μακεδόνων ἐποίησε **μισῆσαι τὴν ὠμότητα**· πάντες γὰρ ἀνεμιμνήσκοντο τῶν Ἀντιπάτρου λόγων, ὃς καθάπερ χρησμῳδῶν ἐπὶ τῆς τελευτῆς **παρεκελεύσατο μηδέποτε συγχωρῆσαι γυναικὶ τῆς βασιλείας προστατῆσαι.**

Diod. Sic. 19.11.6-7; 9, trans. Russel M. Geer

She did not show the owed respect to a royal woman such as Adea Eurydice (as she did with Cleopatra - depending on sources), she treated her unlawfully and showed no pity (as a woman should have done). The extra-limitations of Olympias with her made the Macedonians hate her because she was ruthless. Here another nuance of gender stereotyping comes into the picture: leaving aside the moralising intent of the male authors that convey Olympias’ actions, we see how coercive power and fear are useful if and when the red line is not crossed. Too much fear, too much coercive power, and the balance could be lost.

**Referent Power**

I understand Olympias’ referent power as the expression of the attractiveness or feeling of oneness mentioned earlier. In this way, referent power also relies on the power of being a good example of valuable and good qualities or behaviours, as well as on the capacity to influence or persuade to convince someone of a similarity or closeness to the leader or powerful individual (and their interests and view of the world).

The mother-son bond Olympias displayed worked not only towards her protection as I have mentioned earlier, but also contributed to an idea of dynastic unity, in the same manner Philip did with the Philippeum at Olympia and the connection with his mother, Eurydice. This idea will be further developed later into an established behaviour in Hellenistic dynasties such as the Seleucids, as early as with Seleucus I, Antiochus I and Apama (topic developed by McAuley, 2022). However, that was a double-edged sword, as it has been used by ancient authors to assert that Olympias had too much influence with Alexander, although the image of Alexander as a respectful but still independent son, very masculine too, were still visible in Plutarch’s time.

Influence and persuasion were crucial for this kind of power as well. Olympias, and Cleopatra knew and interacted with elite men in Macedonia (Carney 2006: 31), but they also acted as benefactors, which enhanced their public image and role while providing them with supporters not only within Macedonia, but in other poleis or states too (e.g., Cyrene). Olympias knew how to pull the strings of both domestic and international affairs, being aware of important information that could benefit her by intelligence obtained with spies, which could be used for referent power through persuasion and influence, or for threatening, that is, coercive power. Furthermore, we can use the practical example of Eumenes and Olympias. The relationship between both after the death of Alexander the Great is described by Diodorus as *philia*, with such devotion on Eumenes’ side that Antigonus knew he could not fully trust him, as he would join Olympias if he had to choose.

(…) *but he had little faith in Eumenes’ promises because of the latter’s loyalty to Olympias and the kings;*

οὐ λίαν δ᾿ ἐπίστευεν αὐτοῦ ταῖς ἐπαγγελίαις διὰ τὴν πρὸς Ὀλυμπιάδα καὶ τοὺς βασιλεῖς φιλίαν·

Diod. Sic. 19.44.2, trans. Russel M. Geer

This is also said by Plutarch, in *Eumenes*, 12-13, where he mentions the intervention of Eumenes in Olympias’ favour: she is, in fact, in the first positions of the oath together with the kings. The use of the term *philia* is particularly interesting because that would be the oath sanctioned by the gods that was key to ancient diplomacy between poleis, taking Olympias to the front again in the kind of power she held as it mixed with the *euergetism* previously mentioned. Furthermore, the positive image Olympias had with the Athenians (as Diodorus in book 18.65.2 indicates) proved to be useful when she (and Antipater) asked the Athenians to turn Harpalus in, which falls into her public role, into the category of referent power and especially, with that of influence.

As the last example of the influence of Olympias, we must consider the common saying: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. The Macedonian court was a melting pot of alliances that were continually shifting, and everyone wanted to survive and to have power. It is possible, for instance, that Pausanias (Philip’s murderer) was a possible ally of Alexander and Olympias. Philip’s assassination definitely worked in their benefit, but Pausanias’ rape, ordered by Cleopatra and Attalus (Plutarch, *Alexander*, 10.4), shows those alliances at play: Cleopatra and Attalus would have been allied with the other lover of Philip. In the same vein, the wives of Philip likely established alliances between them depending on their interests at the time, and in general, Olympias managed to have significant supporters: Arybbas, Olympias’ bodyguard, seemed to be a member of the Aeacid family, Polyperchon (who, in fact, asked Olympias to come back to Macedonia after Alexander’s death and acted as her military head), Eumenes, and those who were cast out by Philip, such as Ptolemy. She was not alone at the court, and neither was she powerless after Alexander’s death: she knew how to persuade people to share her view and identify with her, and what she could offer them.

**Expert Power**

It might be complicated to try and compare this category of power to cases such as Olympias’. However, I would like to include some subcategories of leadership for this purpose: education, experience, and management. I will not spend much time regarding education, but that is a point I wanted to include here although with its nuances for royal women from the past. They might not have been doctors or astrophysicists, but they certainly underwent what was considered the necessary education for a royal woman who will have to carry certain duties within the quite extended and royal household. Not any woman could be a royal wife or the mother of the king, with all the duties and responsibilities, and it would probably be positive for them to know how to perform their royal duties well.

Moreover, having experience in the field of religion, such as leading rituals, was more than necessary. In fact, the distinction between the religious spheres of the *oikos* and the *state* within the Macedonian court were differentiated by a mere faint veil, and so Olympias as a royal woman had access to a role that combined the two, with the political benefits it entailed. In exhibiting her piety with offerings and patronage of a religious nature she also demonstrated her competence in managing money, as that sent by Alexander (Plutarch, *Alexander*, 25.4) from his successful campaign in Persia, which she spent on offerings at Athens and Delphi (which would also enhance her referent power where religion is concerned).

A good performance in such a task would enhance her *kleos* ‘reputation’, while it also benefitted Olympias from a political point of view, as her association with the cult of Dionysus would prove. The episode of the confrontation between Olympias and Adea Eurydice is once again suitable for our analysis: Olympias would have presented herself as a Bacchant, which, true or not, links her to the cult of the god. This episode adds to the image Plutarch gives of her role in Dionysiac and Orphic rites in Macedonia (Plutarch, *Alexander*, 2.5), which would enhance her expert power as a possible leader in such cults.

*All the women of these parts were addicted to the Orphic rites and the orgies of Dionysus from very ancient times (being called Klodones and Mimallones), and imitated in many ways the practices of the Edonian women and the Thracian women about Mount Haemus, from whom, as it would seem, the word “threskeuein” came to be applied to the celebration of extravagant and superstitious ceremonies. Now Olympias, who affected these divine possessions more zealously than other women, and carried out these divine inspirations in wilder fashion, used to provide the revelling companies with great tame serpents, which would often lift their heads from out the ivy and the mystic winnowing-baskets,or coil themselves about the wands and garlands of the women, thus terrifying the men.*

Plut*. Vit. Alex.* 2.5-6, trans. Bernadotte Perrin

However, I will not linger in her religious role as I am sure Borja Antela-Bernárdez will thoroughly discuss it.

**CONCLUSIONS**

In the end, Olympias’ power would not have been effective if the general population, including soldiers, courtiers, and the army, did not share certain values that allowed for these different types of power to exist. The population that is allowing someone to have power must believe the actions of the person in power are legitimate or follow the stipulated rules of what has allowed them to be in charge. Olympias’ agency relied on the fact that she had access to all the five categories of power mentioned in this paper to a greater or lesser extent, and she exercised that power through the different instruments of leadership.

Olympias established a new paradigm for royal women from the Hellenistic period. It is with her when we see a proper beginning, an ἀρχή, to a fully developed expression of the multi-dimensional nature of power in royal women, which in later periods kept balancing hard and soft power, consequently becoming a target and a threat.

I would like to make a final remark though, regarding the agency and visualisation of the power of royal women. As historians, it is tempting to look at the women that represent orthogonal power, as Sheila Ager mentioned in a previous session of this series, but we would be missing the point if we think that orthogonal behaviour is the one that proves the hold of power a royal female had. Even if Olympias acted on behalf of Alexander and with his approval, that does not equal lacking agency or power, neither the fact that soft power, persuasion, or other methods were used. There is no need for a sanctioned office, visible to us, to prove that these women existed or had power. Furthermore, in the absence of Alexander, and as Carney stated in 2006, she was seen as an able agent whose role was accepted, despite not being clear offices at the time (Carney 2006: 50).

Women were able to affect the outcome of the events of their times even if they did not visibly appear in opposition to a man or acting independently. We do not have to limit the relationship of power between men and women to a fight between them for authority, neither as a complete submission from the latter to the former nor as two different and independent spheres with no connection. Thinking of royal women as powerful because they appear as independent from their male relatives or rivals would be misleading, since the scarcity of sources can silence the agency and power of women that did not appear as challenging or self-regulating.

Contemplating how women fit into the different dimensions of power mentioned here could help us to shed light upon their reality. Moreover, it might make us consider that women who appear subjected to the kings and royal relatives’ will, with no real power or agency, had more sway than we had thought at first.