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LIFE AFTER DEATH: ALEXANDRIA AND THE BODY OF ALEXANDER

By ANDREW ERSKINE

The Tomb

After his victory at Actium in 31 BC Augustus pursued the defeated Antony and Cleopatra to Alexandria. Soon the master of the city, he was free to view the sights. One of the few places he is on record as having visited is the tomb of Alexander the Great, where the embalmed body of the famous Macedonian lay. There are two versions of this visit, one by the imperial biographer Suetonius, the other by the Greek senator and historian, Dio Cassius.

In Suetonius we read of a deeply respectful Augustus. Rome's future emperor reverently places a golden crown on the body laid out in front of him and then scatters flowers on it. When he is asked if he would also like to view the tombs of Ptolemies, he abruptly dismisses the suggestion, saying that 'he wanted to see a king, not some corpses'.¹ This forthright rejection of the Ptolemaic dynasty helps to promote the feeling that this is a meeting of equals; Alexander merits Augustus' attention but the Ptolemies do not.

Dio Cassius, on the other hand, tells a different story; the punchline is the same but the build-up portrays a clumsy and arrogant Augustus. Here there are no flowers, no golden crown, none of the symbols of veneration. Worse still, Augustus actually dares to touch the precious body, a careless gesture that was said to have broken off part of Alexander's nose. The subsequent snub to his Alexandrian hosts only serves to accentuate this image of an arrogant and insensitive man. Perhaps this version reflects Dio's Greek perspective, or perhaps this was the story told by the Alexandrians themselves.²

It is Alexander's body that is the subject of this paper, or, to be more accurate, Alexander's dead body. He had been the most powerful man in the world, the master of an empire that extended from Greece to

¹ Suet. *Aug.* 18, 'regem se uoluisse ait uidere, non mortuos'.

² Dio 51.16.5.

India; he was descended from the gods; some even viewed him as divine. In Alexander history and myth merged. This was a man who had not only received an embassy from the Amazons, that tribe of warrior women, he was even widely reported to have spent almost two weeks having sex with their queen.³ Dying in Babylon in 323 BC, he had been embalmed by Chaldaean and Egyptian specialists, and within a few years he had been transported to Alexandria, where for centuries he was to be the object of special reverence.

But what was the significance of the body? What meanings were attached to it? In what follows I consider how these changed both with time and perspective. This is evident even in the story of Augustus' visit. The Alexandrians imagine that if Augustus wants to see the dead Alexander he must also want to see the dead Ptolemies. In their minds the tomb of Alexander is closely associated with those of the Ptolemaic dynasty, an association that had been deliberately fostered by the Ptolemies themselves. For Augustus, however, there is no connection at all; his dismissive remark shows the huge gulf between his perspective and that of the Alexandrians.

First, however, it is necessary to consider the place that Augustus would have been visiting, the tomb itself. Where, for instance, would he have found the tomb of Alexander? Fortunately there survives an account written by someone who was living in Alexandria not long after Augustus' conquest of the territory. The geographer Strabo was a resident there in the 20s BC and gives a valuable description of contemporary Alexandria.⁴ He makes clear that the tomb was part of the royal palaces:

The city has extremely beautiful public precincts and also the royal palaces, which cover a fourth or even a third of the whole city. For just as each of the kings, from love of splendour, would add some ornament to the public monuments, so at his own expense he would provide himself with a residence in addition to the existing ones, so that now in the words of the poet 'there is building upon building'. . . . Also part of the royal palaces is the so-called Soma (Σώμα), which was an enclosure containing the tombs of the kings and that of Alexander. . . . Ptolemy [I Soter] carried off the body of Alexander and laid it to rest in Alexandria, where it still lies, but not in the same sarcophagus. The present one is made of glass,⁵ whereas Ptolemy placed it in one made of gold.⁶

³ Curt. 6.5.24–32; Diod. 17.77.1–3; Justin 12.3.5–7 (cf. 2.4.33, 42.3.7); Plut. *Alex.* 46 reports the story and lists sources but is sceptical, cf. also Arr. *Anab.* 7.13. Discussion and bibliography in E. Baynham, 'Alexander and the Amazons', *CQ* 51 (2001), 115–26.

⁴ Strabo 2.3.5; see also P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (Oxford, 1972), ii.12–13.

⁵ Or possibly 'alabaster', so Fraser (n. 4), i.15.

⁶ Strabo 17.1.8.

There are two points that should be noted about this passage of Strabo, at least for the present; first, that the tomb was within the royal grounds, secondly, that the burial place of the Ptolemaic dynasty was part of the same complex as Alexander's tomb. There was a clear message here: whether living or dead the Ptolemies were inseparable from Alexander.

It is often said that Alexander's embalmed body was on public display, that it was even something of a tourist attraction.⁷ This can be overstated; distinguished visitors, such as Augustus and before him Julius Caesar, were allowed to pay their respects, but this was no Lenin's Mausoleum. Suetonius' text suggests that, rather than the visitor going right into the tomb for the viewing, the body was brought out from some inner room (*cum prolatum e penetrali subiecisset oculis*). Perhaps, however, this was an exception, reflecting relative status of Alexander and Augustus.

Strabo's description of Alexandria is very important for historians but it must not be forgotten that this is Roman Alexandria he is describing. This is after the end of the Ptolemaic dynasty, after Cleopatra has jumped into her coffin to wait for the snake-bite to take effect.⁸ By this time Alexander himself had been lying in his own coffin for almost three hundred years, ever since Ptolemy Soter had brought him to Alexandria.

The city of this first Ptolemy would have been a very different place from the one that Strabo knew.⁹ Ptolemy, the founder of the dynasty, was still establishing his power, asserting himself both over Egypt and over his rivals. Alexandria was more likely to have resembled a gigantic building site than a prestigious capital city. This was still something of a pioneer society, more men than women, more soldiers than civilians. Even in the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, Theocritus can have a woman in one of his poems sum up the crowded Alexandrian streets as 'everywhere army-boots and men in military cloaks.'¹⁰

Alexander would have been given a magnificent tomb by Ptolemy I but it may not have been the same one that Augustus saw. Ptolemy IV Philopator is credited with having constructed a dynastic burial complex

⁷ Public display: A. Stewart, *Faces of Power: Alexander's Image and Hellenistic Politics* (Berkeley, 1993), 252; tourist attraction: P. Green, 'Alexander's Alexandria' in *Alexander and Alexandrianism: papers delivered at a symposium organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Malibu, Calif., 1996), 17 (cf. *Alexander to Actium* (London, 1990), 13), R. M. Errington, 'Alexander in the Hellenistic World' in E. Badian (ed.), *Alexandre le Grand: image et réalité*, Fondation Hardt Entretiens 22 (Geneva, 1976), 145, W. M. Ellis, *Ptolemy of Egypt* (London, 1994), 35.

⁸ Cleopatra's death: Dio 51.14.3.

⁹ On the problems of understanding the development of the city see Fraser (n. 4), i.36-7.

¹⁰ Theoc. 15.6.

which included the tomb of Alexander. It may only have been at this point, late in the third century BC, that the Ptolemies themselves were laid alongside Alexander. A fairly brief notice by the second century AD sophist Zenobius reports that Philopator, tormented by guilt over his mother's death, 'built in the middle of the city a *mnema*, which is now called the Sema (Σήμα), and there he interred all his ancestors together with his mother Berenice, and also Alexander the Macedonian'.¹¹ It would be wrong to assume that this must be a single building such as a mausoleum; the term, *mnema*, can be used both of a single monument and in a collective sense.¹² Strabo had described it as 'an enclosure (*peribolos*) containing the tombs of the kings and that of Alexander', so I prefer to use the looser expression, 'burial complex'.¹³ Zenobius' interest is in Berenice, not Alexander, so the fate of Alexander's original tomb is unclear. It is possible that he was rehoused but it is also possible that Philopator used the tomb as the basis for the whole dynastic complex.¹⁴

Zenobius writes that Philopator's new construction was called the Sema.¹⁵ This is a word which is used of tombs, graves, and burial mounds and, as the example of the *demosion sema* in Athens demonstrates, it can refer to collective burial sites as well as individual ones. It is found in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and has certain heroic connotations which carry through to the *demosion sema*, a burial site largely for Athenians killed in battle.¹⁶ This heroic quality may have made it an especially appropriate term for the tomb of Alexander.

Nonetheless, Sema is not the only name on record for this burial complex. The manuscripts of Strabo actually read 'Soma', not 'Sema', but scholars tend to feel that 'Sema' makes much better sense, so 'Soma' is usually emended to 'Sema' in the text of Strabo.¹⁷ 'Soma' means

¹¹ Zenob. 3.94 (*Paroem. Gr.* i, p. 81), quoted in Fraser (n. 4), ii.33 n. 80. Although at ii.36 Fraser rejects Zenobius' 'in the middle of the city (*ἐν μέσῃ τῇ πόλει*)' in favour of Strabo's palace grounds, elsewhere he assumes Zenobius is correct, i. 220, 225. But Zenobius should surely not be understood here to be even attempting to give any kind of location; to say that Philopator buried his mother right in the middle of the city only serves to emphasize the king's troubled state of mind.

¹² Fraser (n. 4), i.16, for instance, translates it as 'mausoleum', and Errington (n. 7), 144, writes of the 'creation of a single new building' and a 'new mausoleum'; on the meaning of *μνήμα*, see N. Loraux, *The Invention of Athens: the Funeral Oration in the Classical City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986; French edition 1981), 21 with n. 36 on pp. 350–1.

¹³ Strabo 17.1.8: *περίβολος ἦν, ἐν ᾧ αἱ τῶν βασιλέων ταφαὶ καὶ ἡ Ἀλεξάνδρου*.

¹⁴ Fraser (n. 4), i.16, however, suggests that the original tomb was abandoned.

¹⁵ Fraser (n. 4), ii.32–3, nicely summing up the issues, appears to leave the question open.

¹⁶ Liddell and Scott, s.v. *σήμα*; for *demosion sema* see Thuc. 2.34.5, Loraux (n. 12), 21, R. E. Wycherley, *The Stones of Athens* (Princeton, 1978), 257; Hom. *Il.* 2.814, 6.419, 7.86, 89, 21.322, 23.45, 255–7, *Od.* 1. 291, 2.222, 11.75.

¹⁷ See, for instance, the editions of C. Müller, A. Meineke, and the Loeb of H. L. Jones.

'body' and that is a strange name for what appears to have been a substantial dynastic burial complex. Yet, it is not only in Strabo that 'Soma' is to be found; the Greek version of the *Alexander Romance* reads: 'Ptolemy built a tomb for him in Alexandria which is called to this day the Soma of Alexander'; if this is a scribal error, it was an early and influential one because it also appeared in the text read by the *Romance's* fifth-century Armenian translator.¹⁸ The very strangeness of the name 'the Body' makes it more appealing and more plausible. The site acquires its name from the one thing it contains that is important, the body of Alexander the Great. When a tomb was originally built for Alexander under Ptolemy I, we can imagine Alexandrians referring to the location as 'the Body' or perhaps as 'the Body of Alexander' (e.g. 'we'll meet by the Body'). As the complex expanded, was re-built, and renovated, so the term stuck, until Strabo, maybe a little puzzled by the local terminology, refers to it as 'the place called the Body (*Soma*)'. The name *Soma* then would reflect the centrality of the dead Alexander in Alexandrian life: even his body had become a place-name.¹⁹

The Snatch

But what was Alexander's body doing in Alexandria in the first place? He had died in Babylon, well over a thousand kilometres from Alexandria. Here was a man who travelled more after his death than most Greeks did in their lifetime. This section looks at how the dead Alexander made his journey to Alexandria, then in the following section I turn to consider in more depth the various meanings attached to his body.

For this it is necessary to return to Babylon and the immediate aftermath of Alexander's death. Alexander died prematurely and unexpectedly in 323, still only 32 years old. He was the ruler and focal point of a vast empire. It is a sign of the confusion and uncertainty

¹⁸ Ps-Callisthenes, *Historia Alexandri Magni*, 34.6, where *Σώμα* is also emended to *Σῆμα* by its editor, W. Kroll; for the Armenian translation, A. M. Wolohojian, *The Romance of Alexander the Great by Pseudo-Callisthenes* (New York, 1969), 1–5 (on quality), section 284 for the 'Body of Alexander' reading. Fraser (n. 4), ii.32–3 sums up the issues involved in the *Σῆμα/Σώμα* debate.

¹⁹ Alexander's tomb has never been discovered, though many have sought it: Fraser (n. 4), i.16–17 with notes, A. Chugg, 'The Sarcophagus of Alexander the Great', *G&R* 49 (2002), 8–26. One of the more unusual attempts was led by Stephen A. Schwartz, whose *The Alexandria Project* (New York, 1983) documents the search for the tomb by his team of psychic archaeologists carried out in 1978–9.

that followed his death that it is impossible to put together a satisfactory account of what happened. What did he die of? Too much drinking, a touch of strychnine, or an attack of malaria – all have been canvassed. Did he die fairly quickly after knocking back twelve pints of undiluted wine? Or was death dragged out over a week or so?²⁰ Nor are the stories of what happened to his body afterwards any clearer.

Babylon had recently witnessed the grandiose funeral of Hephaestion, but it is striking that no attempt was made to organize a funeral for Alexander.²¹ If we are to believe Q. Curtius Rufus, Alexander lay neglected for some seven days while the leading men of the empire quarrelled. Only then did attention turn to the former ruler.²² Still there was no funeral. Instead the body was embalmed and work began on the construction of a hearse. It was to be another two years before the hearse was complete; this was clearly an empire in denial. There was no competent heir, only a choice between an unborn child and an idiot, and a funeral marks an end.²³

Rather than admit that the king was dead, the leading men, Alexander's generals, tried to carry on as before, administering the empire, allocating governorships, minting Alexander's coins, putting down the revolt in Greece.²⁴ No doubt they all had their eye on their place in the future, but whatever their personal career plans they affected support for the empire and what was left of the ruling family. All this time Alexander's now-embalmed body must have been lying in state somewhere in Babylon and the hearse was slowly being built.

That it took two years to build the hearse was not so much the fault of dilatory craftsmen as a consequence of its elaborate nature. Diodorus gives a detailed description of the vehicle, one which probably derives from the contemporary historian Hieronymus of Cardia. An onlooker would have been struck by the huge quantity of gold used in its construction. The hearse, which would have been accompanied by a

²⁰ A. B. Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire: the Reign of Alexander the Great* (Cambridge, 1988), 171–3, reviews the possibilities. For a quick death, Justin 12.13.7–10, Diod. 17.117; for a slower one, Plut. *Alex.* 75–7, Arr. 7.24–7.

²¹ Hephaestion: Arr. 7.14, Diod. 17.114–5, Justin 12.12.12, Plut. *Alex.* 72; at Curt. 10.6.7, 10.8.18, speakers do talk of the urgent need to perform appropriate rites over Alexander's body.

²² Curt. 10.10.9–12; Plut. *Alex.* 77.3 writes 'many days', while Aelian *V.H.* 12.64 gives thirty days.

²³ Embalming: Curt. 10.10.13; hearse: Diod. 18.26–8; on the succession problem, R. M. Errington, *A History of Macedonia* (Berkeley, 1990), 114–19.

²⁴ For the government of the empire in the early years, E. Will, *Histoire politique du monde hellénistique (323–30 av. J.-C.)*, vol. 1 (Nancy, 1979²), 19–43 (more briefly in *CAH*² 7.1: 23–39), R. M. Errington, 'From Babylon to Triparadeisos: 323–320 BC', *JHS* 90 (1970), 49–77.

substantial force of soldiers, sent out a message of wealth, divinity, and military might. The golden olive-wreath on the top was said to flash like lightning when caught by the sun. With its Ionic columns it resembled a temple on wheels, all adding to Alexander's divine status. The sides were decorated with paintings illustrating scenes of war and preparation for war; anyone who could get close enough would see panels depicting not only Alexander but also the officers, the soldiers, the elephants, the cavalry, and the navy. The completed funeral car was to be pulled by sixty-four mules, all of them decorated with gold and precious stones. When it did finally start moving, thousands of people along the route came out to admire it.²⁵

The intended destination of this hearse has been the subject of much discussion.²⁶ Contradictory sources are cut up and spliced together to produce a coherent picture; Alexander's last wishes are argued over; the aims of the successors scrutinized. Macedonian tradition, it is said, demanded burial at Aegae (Vergina) in Macedon;²⁷ this, however, conflicted with Alexander's desire to be buried at the Siwah oasis where on his visit to Egypt he had been declared the son of Zeus Ammon.²⁸ Nonetheless, both tradition and the desires of the dead are vulnerable to manipulation, so neither offer very satisfactory guidance as to where the hearse ought to have been going. If Alexander had collapsed and never regained consciousness, he would have found it difficult to express an opinion on the matter of his burial. If he spent a week or so dying, he may have dictated all sorts of plans. Or all sorts of plans could have been attributed to him. Alexander's intentions are, I think, beyond recovery.

The intentions of the living protagonists may also be elusive but at least we can observe their actions, or rather reports of their actions. Two men are especially relevant at this point. First there is Perdikkas, Alexander's leading officer, and the man now effectively in charge of the empire and importantly of Babylon. It is interesting to note that at this stage Babylon seems to be treated as the administrative centre of the empire. Yet, this appears to be largely because Alexander died there and

²⁵ Diod. 18.26–8, with the full discussion of Stewart (n. 7), 215–21.

²⁶ E. Badian, 'A King's Notebooks', *HSCP* 72 (1967), 185–9 with discussion of earlier scholarship, Errington (n. 7), 141–2, (n. 23), 120, P. Green, *Alexander to Actium* (London, 1990), 13–14, Stewart (n. 7), 221–3, R. Billows, *Antigonos the One-Eyed and the Creation of the Hellenistic State* (Berkeley, 1990) 60–1. Much of the evidence for Alexander's body and its removal to Egypt can be found conveniently collected in Stewart, 369–75.

²⁷ N. G. L. Hammond, *The Macedonian State: the Origins, Institutions, and History* (Oxford, 1989), 24, based on Justin 7.2.1–4; cf. Ellis (n. 7), 35; Paus. 1.6.3 says that Alexander was to be buried at Aegae.

²⁸ Curt. 10.5.4; cf. Diod. 18.3.4.

because his body was still there. Even after his death his empire revolved around him. If Perdikkas sought to keep the empire together, preferably with himself in charge, then my other protagonist displayed separatist tendencies from very early on. This was Ptolemy, son of Lagus, another of Alexander's officers, who shortly after Alexander's death was installed as governor of Egypt. The contradictory accounts of Alexander's posthumous travels reflect the different interests in the dispute.

Diodorus follows his detailed description of the funeral carriage with an uncomplicated, straightforward account of Alexander's transfer to Egypt:

After Arrhidaeus had spent almost two years on the preparation of the funeral carriage, he transported the body of the king from Babylon to Egypt. Ptolemy, out of respect for Alexander, went to Syria to meet it and, receiving the body, considered it worthy of the greatest care.²⁹

Everything here is done properly and runs smoothly but several sources suggest that all was not so amicable. In fact they suggest that Ptolemy kidnapped the body somehow, either intercepting the funeral cortege while it was on its way to Macedon, or persuading Arrhidaeus who was in charge of the body to bring it to Egypt, much to Perdikkas' horror. Perdikkas is said to have sent troops in pursuit. Given that a golden hearse cannot move too fast, even when pulled by sixty-four mules and with the best suspension the ancient world could provide, the army that Ptolemy sent to give a dignified military welcome to the body may have been there to defend his winnings. Whatever Alexander's intentions, Perdikkas certainly did not intend the body to make a trip to Egypt where it could promote the career of his rival. Shortly afterwards he launched a full-scale invasion of Egypt.³⁰

One of the more bizarre elaborations is to be found in Aelian, writing in the third century AD. It neatly combines the body-snatching with Ptolemy's invasion of Egypt:

Ptolemy put a stop to Perdikkas' attack. For he made a dummy of Alexander and fitted it out with royal clothes and an especially fine shroud. Then he laid it on one of the Persian carriages and constructed a magnificent bier on it with silver, gold, and ivory. Alexander's real body was sent ahead in a simple and ordinary manner, following secret and rarely-used tracks. Perdikkas, after he had seized the replica of the corpse with its specially-prepared carriage, came to a halt, thinking that he had gained possession of the prize. When he realized that he had been deceived, it was too late to resume the chase.³¹

²⁹ Diod. 18.28.2–3; cf. Curtius 10.10.20, *Heidelberg Epitome* (FGrH 155 F2).

³⁰ Arrian, *Ta meta Alexandron* (Roos), frag. 1.25 (FGrH 156 F9.25), frag. 24.1–8 (FGrH 156 F10.1), Strabo 17.1.8, Paus. 1.6.3, Aelian *V.H.* 12.64.

³¹ Aelian *V.H.* 12.64.

We should not believe this story; it is typical of the kind of story told of a loser. It is no surprise that shortly afterwards Perdiccas was assassinated by his own soldiers. Whatever Perdiccas' objectives, they are unlikely to be well represented in the historiographical tradition.

By whatever means, the embalmed corpse reached Egypt in safety. First, it seems to have resided at the old Egyptian capital of Memphis; then, when Ptolemy I moved his court to Alexandria, the body came too.³²

Changing Meanings

It is necessary now to consider the significance of the body. Why did Perdiccas and Ptolemy fight over it? What value did it have for them? What did it symbolize? The answer will be different for each.

Perdiccas was the man in charge of the empire, and Alexander's body was part of the heritage of the empire. His position as guardian of Alexander's legacy was symbolized by his role as effective regent for the two kings and by his power over the body. The association between himself and the body of Alexander would have been emphasized by the way he invested so much time, money, and reputation in the building of the hearse.³³ The loss of the body to Ptolemy was a blow to his prestige and a sign (or perhaps we should say another sign) of the fragmentation of the empire. When Perdiccas launches his invasion of Egypt, he brings with him the token monarchs. Once he has lost the body, these alone make him the focal point of the empire, legitimizing his position; he could not afford to lose them too. When Arrian describes this invasion, the identification between body and empire is clear. One of Perdiccas' primary reasons for the march against Egypt was, he says, 'to gain control of Alexander's body'. The word used here for 'gain control', *kratein*, is one we might more usually expect of the exercise of power.³⁴ It is interesting to note that after the assassination of Perdiccas there was pressure from the now leaderless army to make Ptolemy the regent for the two kings. Ptolemy refused, but there seems to be a perception here that body, regency, and empire all go together.³⁵ Ptolemy had the body so he should be offered the rest.

³² The sources are not fully in agreement but this seems the most likely scenario: Fraser (n. 4), i.15–16 with discussion and quotation of the sources, ii. 32. Paus. 1.7.1, however, says that Ptolemy II moved the body from Memphis to Alexandria.

³³ Stewart (n. 7), 223.

³⁴ Arrian, *Ta meta Alexandron* (Roos), frag. 24.1–8 (*FGrH* 156 F10.1).

³⁵ Diod. 18.36.6–7.

Ptolemy, however, wanted the body of Alexander for different reasons; there is no sign that he sought the whole empire. He saw early on that the future lay in separatism and he wanted to assert himself as the ruler of Egypt. By turning down the regency he had broken the connection between the body and the empire.³⁶ How he justified his body-snatching is unclear. Perhaps he argued that it was disinterested: that Alexander had wanted to be buried in Egypt and he was just carrying out the late king's wishes. But if Alexander had wanted to be buried at Siwah, he never got there; once Alexander was in Egypt, that could be quietly forgotten. Ptolemy had his own interests to look after and possession of the body served to legitimize his own rule in Egypt. But merely to say that it legitimated his rule does not really answer very much. Why should it? Who would have been impressed? Revealing here is a passage of Diodorus, describing the arrival of the body in Egypt:

Ptolemy decided for the present not to convey the body to Ammon [at Siwah], but to keep it in the city that had been founded by Alexander, which was, one might almost say, the most celebrated city in the world. There he built a precinct that was worthy of the glory of Alexander both in its size and in its construction. Laying him to rest and honouring him with heroic sacrifices and magnificent games, Ptolemy was rewarded richly, not only by men but also by the gods. For because of his good-heartedness and nobility men gathered in Alexandria from all sides and eagerly enrolled in his army, even though the royal forces were about to make war against Ptolemy. The dangers were obvious and great, but nevertheless they all willingly put Ptolemy's safety before their own.³⁷

What Ptolemy is doing here is attaching the reputation and charisma of Alexander to himself. Soldiers will gladly enrol in the army of one such as Ptolemy; they will come to Egypt to support the Ptolemaic regime. Many of these men would have served with Alexander, they would have marched all the way to the Indus and back; now they were at a loss without any clear leader to serve. It is soldiers like these who may have taken to referring to the burial place of Alexander as the Body, the Soma.³⁸ Ptolemy was not going to allow the link between himself and the king to be overlooked. He was the first of the successor rulers to place Alexander's portrait on a coin, probably about the same time as his

³⁶ Cf. Errington (n. 7), 142–3.

³⁷ Diod. 18.28.3–5.

³⁸ Cf. Curt. 10.7, where right after Alexander's death the emotions of the soldiers are focussed on his body; or Plut. *Eum.* 13, Diod. 18.60–1: Eumenes, who has no corpse to help him, tries to win over Alexander's veterans in his own army by holding council meetings in a royal tent dedicated to Alexander and containing an empty throne.

seizure of the body;³⁹ the troops who received these coins would not have missed the connection. For anyone who did miss it, there was always Ptolemy's account of Alexander's reign in which Ptolemy himself played an especially prominent part. When it was written is unknown, but the repeated denigration of his rival Perdikkas suggests that it was a product of his early years in Egypt, when Perdikkas' name still meant something. Although it would not have been read by the rank and file, it would have helped to shape the popular image of Ptolemy as a close associate of Alexander.⁴⁰

Ptolemy then is using Alexander, both as a physical presence and as a memory, in order to appear special in the eyes of others, primarily in the eyes of soldiers but also of his subjects. He is setting himself up as ruler in Egypt but he has several handicaps to face. First, he does not have the dynastic connections to claim to be king; it would not be until almost twenty years after the death of Alexander that any of the successors would make such a claim.⁴¹ Secondly he is, strictly speaking, only the governor. By his use of Alexander he raises his position above that of mere governor to something greater. It also gives a sense of continuity to an emigrant community without a past in this new land. Alexander's body provides a link with the old country, both in a physical and a more abstract sense.⁴²

But Alexander was not only an extraordinary king and general; towards the end of his life he was increasingly viewed as divine.⁴³ If we look at the stories surrounding the body, we can still see how these ideas have left their traces. Curtius reflects this when he describes the recently deceased Alexander; the body has been lying unattended in the savagely intense Mesopotamian heat:

I report what is handed down rather than what is believed: when finally his friends were free to care for the lifeless body, those who approached saw it spoiled by no decay, not

³⁹ O. Mørkholm, *Early Hellenistic Coinage from the accession of Alexander to the peace of Apamea (336–186BC)* (Cambridge, 1991), 27, 63–4; Stewart (n. 7), 231–3.

⁴⁰ R. M. Errington, 'Bias in Ptolemy's History', *CQ* 34 (1984), 373–85, made a strong case for Ptolemaic prejudice against Perdikkas and suggested an early date 'sometime after 320' (p. 241), a case vigorously questioned but not refuted by J. Roisman, 'Ptolemy and his rivals in his history of Alexander', *CQ* 34 (1984), 373–85. Nonetheless, any arguments about a history which is lost are bound to be inconclusive. Both, however, do agree that Ptolemy had a tendency to glorify Alexander.

⁴¹ At some point, though probably rather later, the story developed that Ptolemy Soter was the illegitimate son of Philip II: Curt. 9.8.22, Paus. 1.6.2, Errington (n. 7), 154–6.

⁴² Compare also the way in which Ptolemy's cultural policy brings continuity: A. Erskine, 'Culture and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt: the Library and Museum at Alexandria', *G&R* 42 (1995), 38–48.

⁴³ Bosworth (n. 20), 278–90.

even by the least discoloration. Nor had his face yet lost that vigour which is associated with the soul. Consequently the Egyptians and Chaldaeans who had been ordered to care for the body according to their custom at first did not dare to touch him, almost as if he were still breathing. Then, after they had prayed that it might be right and proper for mortals to handle a god, they treated the body. Afterwards the gold coffin was filled with perfumes, and the symbol of his rank was laid upon his head.⁴⁴

Here the divine Alexander is unaffected by the burning heat of Babylon, superhuman even in death. Then he travels to Egypt in a temple on wheels, signalling the message of his divinity to all he passed; the embalmed body inside becomes his own cult-statue. Diodorus in a passage quoted above describes the heroic sacrifices and magnificent games that accompanied the interment of Alexander in his tomb in Alexandria.⁴⁵ Whether it was hero cult or divine cult that Alexander received is not so important as the indisputable fact that he was no ordinary mortal. The remains of Alexander could thus become a kind of talisman for the regime, brought from afar to ensure its safety. In the same way the bones of famous heroes had been recovered by earlier Greek states. In the sixth century Sparta had retrieved the bones of Orestes from Tegea and it was to this that they owed their success in the Peloponnese; that at least is the story told by Herodotus. In the following century the Athenian Cimon had reclaimed the bones of Theseus from Scyros.⁴⁶ For the soldiers of the late third century Alexander's body must have been a potent talisman.⁴⁷

Before Ptolemy took control of Egypt, the country's administrative centre had traditionally been at Memphis, further up the Nile. The move to Alexandria was but another way of emphasizing the bond between Alexander and Ptolemy. This was the city founded by Alexander and named after him, and now thanks to the abilities of Ptolemy it contained his remains. As the founder of the city his burial within the city would have been appropriate. The worship of a founder as a hero and his burial within the city-walls had long been a common practice.⁴⁸ But more importantly he was not interred in some public place within the city but in the royal grounds. Alexander's position in Alexandria, thus, was a little ambiguous. As a founder he was within the city but his closest association was with the ruling family; I would imagine that even at an early stage this

⁴⁴ Curt. 10.10.9–13.

⁴⁵ Diod. 18.28.4.

⁴⁶ Orestes: Hdt. 1.67–8; Theseus: Plut. *Cim.* 8.5–7, *Thes.* 36.1–4, Paus. 1.17.2–6, 3.3.7, R. Parker, *Athenian Religion: a History* (Oxford, 1996), 168–70.

⁴⁷ For the talismanic qualities of Alexander's body, Aelian *V.H.* 12.64.

⁴⁸ I. Malkin, *Religion and Colonization in Ancient Greece* (Leiden, 1987), 189–203.

land was marked out as belonging to the Ptolemies and steadily filled in with buildings. This ambiguity is reflected in the cults of Alexander that developed in the city. Probably very early on there was a city-cult of Alexander as founder, a focus for the Alexandrian population, but that was overshadowed, at least in our sources, by a state cult of Alexander. This latter cult was established by Ptolemy I Soter and, as the Ptolemies themselves were gradually added, so it became a dynastic cult.⁴⁹

Ptolemy, advertizing himself as the guardian of Alexander's body, could share in Alexander's superhuman charisma. As Perdikkas was weakened by the loss of the body, so Ptolemy is energized by its acquisition.

In other successor kingdoms the importance of Alexander may have waned, but in Egypt he was a continuing presence, his memory kept alive by the eponymous city he had founded and by his tomb there. It is not known whether Ptolemy I was buried near Alexander, but Ptolemy II Philadelphus made sure that his father became a god. Going further still he set up a festival in honour of his father, the Ptolemaea.⁵⁰ Callixeinus of Rhodes in his now lost *About Alexandria* described a fabulous procession that took place as part of that festival, a celebration of Ptolemaic power, wealth, and their association with Alexander. The images of the Macedonian king play a prominent part in the whole procession which includes within itself a subsidiary procession of Alexander, led by four elephants drawing a chariot on which sat an image of Alexander in gold. The elephants would have recalled the portrait of Alexander on Ptolemaic coins, in which he wore an elephant scalp head-dress.⁵¹ This smaller procession may have had an earlier independent existence as part of the cult of Alexander established under Ptolemy I Soter; significantly, around 304 Soter began minting gold staters which depicted Alexander standing in a chariot drawn by four elephants. This may have been a representation of a contemporary procession.⁵²

⁴⁹ C. Habicht, *Gottmenschen und griechische Städte* (Munich, 1970²), 36 and Fraser (n. 4), i.212 with notes, collect the limited information on the founder cult, while Fraser, i.213–26 surveys the dynastic cult, on which more briefly see G. Hölbl, *A History of the Ptolemaic Empire* (London, 2001; German edition, 1994), 94–5.

⁵⁰ Fraser (n. 4), i.217–18.

⁵¹ Athen. 5.197c–203b excerpts Callixeinos, in turn reproduced and discussed by E. E. Rice, *The Grand Procession of Ptolemy Philadelphus* (Oxford, 1983); Stewart (n. 7), 252–60, considers the role of Alexander in the procession; for the procession of Alexander, Athen. 5.202a–f; for the coins, Mørkholm (n. 39), 63.

⁵² Mørkholm (n. 39), 65; the figure of Alexander is on the reverse with a portrait of Soter on the obverse. P. Goukowsky, *Essai sur les origines du mythe d'Alexandre (336–270 av. J.-C.)*, vol. 1: *Les origines politiques* (Nancy, 1978), 132, suggests the coins may show a contemporary statue group.

The poet Theocritus on the lookout for some way to praise the Ptolemaic rulers gives poetic and slightly comic expression to Ptolemaic ideology in his seventeenth *Idyll*. If Ptolemy's memoirs showed Ptolemy and Alexander together in life, then Theocritus shows them together in death. In a scene that recalls Homer's boisterous picture of the gods gathered round the table in the *Iliad*, Theocritus has Ptolemy, Alexander, and their common ancestor Heracles feasting together with the other gods.

Alexander was thus partner to the ruling dynasty. Ptolemy IV's reconstruction of the Soma as a dynastic burial complex for both Alexander and the Ptolemies emphasized this point – if, that is, burial alongside Alexander was not already a Ptolemaic practice. By this time, the late third century, the inhabitants of Alexandria would have viewed Alexander very differently from their counterparts a century before. No longer their king and general, their partner in so much fighting, he was now a figure of myth, the legendary patron of the ruling family, the founder and benefactor of their city. His presence permeated the city; he was not merely an embalmed body somewhere in the royal palace, statues of him were to be seen throughout the city.⁵³ The late Roman rhetorician Nicolaus of Myra gives a very vivid description of a lost equestrian statue of Alexander the founder which stood somewhere near the Alexandrian seafront:

Most famous founders of cities have received statues but Alexander's is special, for he founded a city such as no other man had done. Standing there, he shows that a renowned colonizer belongs in a renowned land. He built his city near the sea, which he himself stands near. And the form of the statue reveals his nature. First, he is carried riding high on a horse; not a horse that anyone could easily ride, but one suitable to the dangers he faced. And the animal's vehemence evokes the speed of his campaigns. Next, he has no helmet on his head. For he who intends to subdue and survey the whole earth has no need of helmets. Everything he has seized in his advance seems to lie in his eyes. . . . His hair, unconfined, streams in the wind and onward rush of the horse. Its locks appear like the rays of the sun. . . .⁵⁴

Alexander the founder thus was part of the visual make-up of the city, though it is unlikely that most Alexandrians walking past his statues would have gushed as Nicolaus does. There are other, further signs of Alexander's presence. He seems to have given his name not merely to the city itself but also to a part of the city. Achilles Tatius, the

⁵³ Stewart (n. 7), 252.

⁵⁴ Ps. Libanius, *Progymnasmata* 27 (Foerster's edition, vol. 8, pp. 533–55), translation (with minor changes) taken from Stewart (n. 7), 397–400; cf. also Goukowsky (n. 52), 213–14.

Alexandrian author of the second-century AD novel, *Clitophon and Leucippe*, has his hero walking into the city to ‘a place called after Alexander’. Perhaps the neighbourhood had taken its name from some celebrated statue located there.⁵⁵

Information about the later Hellenistic period is rather sketchy but it is clear that the tomb was maintained, hence Caesar’s visit there when he arrived in Egypt in pursuit of the by-now decapitated Pompey. In a brilliant scene from his epic of the civil wars the poet Lucan has Caesar striding through Alexandria, ignoring all the wonders that the city had to offer. Caesar had but one objective, to visit Alexander’s tomb – one demented megalomaniac visiting another. And for Lucan Alexander is a crazy, power-hungry psychopath.⁵⁶ Alexandrians, on the other hand, thought more highly of him and continued to identify the Macedonian king closely with their Ptolemaic rulers.

The Romans when they appear in Egypt as rulers redefine Alexander yet again. Alexandrians could carry on treating Alexander as their founder, but the link with the Ptolemies was broken. This finds manifestation in Augustus’ abrupt dismissal of the Ptolemaic tombs, but I suspect also that there was more to it than this. Strabo’s description of the burial complex incorporates an interesting shift in tense: ‘Also part of the royal palaces is the so-called Soma, which *was* an enclosure containing the tombs of the kings and that of Alexander.’ Why is there this change from present tense to past? Perhaps the Ptolemaic dead were evicted from the burial complex, rather like Stalin who found himself expelled from Lenin’s Mausoleum after a brief seven-year residency.⁵⁷ In this way the new Roman masters could symbolically assert their control over Egypt, effectively writing the Ptolemies out of history?

Alexander, however, could survive with proper respect. Where the Ptolemies were minor dynasts whose kingdom had been absorbed by Rome, Alexander was a mythological figure whose name resonated throughout the Mediterranean. For the emperors of Rome Alexander represented world-power and they in turn were his successors. As a result they would often directly identify themselves with him, acting in ways that highlighted their role as his heirs.⁵⁸ Augustus, for instance,

⁵⁵ Achilles Tat. 5.1.3: *εἰς τὸν ἐπώνυμον Ἀλεξάνδρου τόπον.*

⁵⁶ Lucan 10.14–52.

⁵⁷ D. Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy* (London, 1991), 576.

⁵⁸ Compare how in the Republic Romans would see themselves as heirs of Classical Greece: A. Erskine, ‘Greek Gifts and Roman Suspicion’, *Classics Ireland* 4 (1996), 33–45 (<http://www.ucd.ie/~classics/97/Erskine97.html>).

had not only visited the tomb but also used a seal with a portrait of Alexander.⁵⁹ Caligula, blending imitation of Xerxes with imitation of the great Macedonian, was said to have worn Alexander's breastplate when making his dramatic ride across the Bay of Baiae; it was even claimed that the breastplate had been taken from Alexander's tomb.⁶⁰ Nor did the influence of Alexander diminish. When Septimius Severus sought the imperial throne in the 190s, his rival claimant, C. Pescennius Niger, was hailed by his men as the new Alexander. Perhaps remembering past glories, the Alexandrians unwisely inscribed 'The city of the lord Niger' on the gates of their city. When Septimius arrived in Alexandria, he took steps to have the disruptive tomb sealed, but such a measure did not prevent the subsequent visit of his son and successor Caracalla.⁶¹ The Alexander-fixated Caracalla paid his respects early in the third century; clearly feeling that the tomb was a little chilly, he wrapped Alexander in his cloak before he left.⁶²

Eventually the memory of Alexander's tomb may have been restricted to Alexandria where it took its place among the city's legends. Even here its location may have been already forgotten by late antiquity, although stories continued to be told by local residents. As late as the 16th and 17th centuries visitors such as Leo Africanus and George Sandys were being shown a tomb said to be that of Alexander⁶³ or perhaps even in Alexandria its location was forgotten already in antiquity. Certainly in the wider world knowledge of it became hazy. Christian writers of the fourth and fifth centuries AD liked to point out smugly that no one knew where Alexander's tomb was. Theodoret included Alexander along with Xerxes, Darius, and Augustus as celebrated rulers whose last resting places were now unknown. And John Chrysostom, eager to prove that Christ was bigger than Alexander, pointed out that even the servants of Christ had fared better than Alexander. They had splendid tombs and the days of their death were commemorated throughout the world, but

⁵⁹ Visit: Suet. *Aug.* 18, Dio 51.16.5; seal: Pliny, *H.N.* 37.10, Suet. *Aug.* 50.

⁶⁰ Dio 59.17.3, Suet. *Calig.* 52; there is, however, no evidence that Caligula as an adult ever visited Egypt or the tomb. On Baiae see S. J. V. Malloch, 'Gaius' Bridge at Baiae and Alexander-imitatio', *CQ* 51 (2001), 206–17.

⁶¹ Niger as Alexander: Dio 75.6.2a; inscription: Malalas 12.21 (293); tomb: Dio 76.13.2; A. R. Birley, *Septimius Severus: the African Emperor* (London, 1988²), 135–7.

⁶² Fixation: Dio 78.7–8; visit: Herodian 4.8.9; regardless of his goodwill to Alexander, Caracalla treated the Alexandrians themselves very badly: Dio 78.22–3.

⁶³ Chugg (n. 19), 19–20.

Alexander was forgotten. Chrysostom could taunt his imaginary opponent thus: 'Where, tell me, is Alexander's tomb? Show it to me, and tell me the day on which he died.'⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Theod. *Graec. Affect. Cur.* 8.61, John Chrys. *26th Homily on II Corinthians* (PG 61, p. 581); these cannot, however, be used as evidence for either Alexandrian knowledge or the fate of the tomb. Building on the John Chrys. passage, both Fraser (n. 4), ii.34–5, and Green (n. 7), 18, do, nonetheless, suggest that the tomb was destroyed in the disturbances of AD 272, mentioned in Amm. Marc. 22.16.15.