

Callisthenes on Olympias and Alexander's Divine Birth

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The proclamation of Alexander's divine sonship at Siwah is universally acknowledged to have been of great importance to the steps that led to his later demand for divine honours. But the issue of whether Alexander *already* held a belief that he was son of a god before he travelled to Siwah is an equally important research question. Already a number of scholars have argued that Alexander believed in his divine sonship before Egypt,¹ and I wish to strengthen that case in this paper by arguing that Arrian, *Anabasis* 4.10.2—a passage ascribing to Callisthenes a remark about Olympias' stories concerning Alexander's divine birth—has a greater claim to historicity than has hitherto been thought.

First, some prefatory remarks on the notion of divine sonship are pertinent. Alexander's assertion of divine sonship during his life did not make him a true god or fully divine in Greek thought or culture.² For the Greeks, a man fathered by a god with a human mother during his lifetime was rather like a demigod of Homeric myth, on a par with the heroes of the mythic times, such as Heracles, Perseus and the Dioscuri. Homer, above all, uses the word "hero" of his living warriors, a subset of whom were sons of one divine and one human parent.³ The child of such a union was not an Olympian god, with the attributes and supernatural powers of the cosmic deities. One must also distinguish between the hero conceived as (1) a living man who was the son of a god (the sense in which the word is used by Homer), and (2) the hero as a powerful spirit of a *dead* human being, who received

¹ E. Badian, "Alexander the Great Between Two Thrones and Heaven: Variations on an Old Theme," in A. M. Small (ed.), *Subject and Ruler: The Cult of the Ruling Power in Classical Antiquity* (Ann Arbor, 1996) 19; A. B. Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire: The Reign of Alexander the Great* (Cambridge, 1988) 282; E. M. Anson, "Alexander and Siwah," *AncW* 34.2 (2003) 122–3; M. Zahrnt, "Von Siwa bis Persepolis. Überlegungen zur Arbeitsweise des Kallisthenes," *AncSoc* 36 (2006) 155–6.

² J. Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford, 1980), 82–3; B. Currie, *Pindar and the Cult of Heroes* (Oxford, 2005) 41–6, 60. On the concept of the hero in Greek thought, see G. Ekroth, "Heroes and Hero-Cults," in D. Ogden (ed.), *A Companion to Greek Religion* (Oxford, 2007) 100–114; K. Buraselis and S. Aneziri, "Heroisierung – Apotheose. Die griechische und hellenistische Apotheose," in *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum* (vol. 2; Los Angeles, 2004) 125–86; H. van Wees, "From Kings to Demigods: Epic Heroes and Social Change c. 750–600 BC," in S. Deger-Jalkotzy and I. S. Lemos (eds.), *Ancient Greece: From the Mycenaean Palaces to the Age of Homer* (Edinburgh, 2006) 363–79. On the issue of Alexander's divinity, see A. B. Bosworth, "Alexander, Euripides and Dionysos: The Motivation for Apotheosis," in R. W. Wallace and E. M. Harris (eds.), *Transitions to Empire: Essays in Graeco-Roman History, 360–146 B.C. in Honor of E. Badian* (London, 1996) 140–66; E. A. Fredricksmeyer, "Alexander's Religion and Divinity," in J. Roisman (ed.), *Brill's Companion to Alexander the Great* (London and Boston, 2003) 253–78; B. Dreyer, "Heroes, Cults, and Divinity," in W. Heckel and L. A. Tritle (eds.), *Alexander the Great: A New History* (Malden MA and Chichester, 2009) 218–34; A. W. Collins, "The Divinity of Alexander in Egypt," in P. V. Wheatley and R. Hannah (eds.), *Alexander and His Successors: Essays From the Antipodes* (Claremont, CA., 2009) 179–206.

³ A. W. H. Adkins, "Greek Religion," in C. Jouco Bleeker and G. Widengren (eds.), *Historia Religionum I. Religions of the Past* (Leiden, 1969) 401.

offerings and cult. To say that Alexander thought of himself as a son of Zeus entails that he was viewed as something like a Homeric and Hesiodic hero during his life (Hom. *Il.* 1.3; Hes. *Op.* 157–168), but not a god per se or a powerful dead hero who received cult. The transition from living hero to god was a gift of the Olympians and not the normal fate of the Homeric heroes, and certainly not of men in the post-heroic world of the Greeks (Paus. 8.2.4–5). In attempting to explain the origin of Alexander's belief in a divine birth, we are not necessarily explaining his demand for divine honours or any belief in actual divinity, though they are related concepts.

From the early years of Alexander's reign he was eager to surpass the heroes, and the implication that he regarded himself as on a par with them is already evident in his motive for the journey to Siwah.⁴ Arrian reports that shortly before the expedition to the oracle, Alexander had expressed a desire to emulate Perseus and Heracles, because he, too, traced a part of his birth (τι ... γένεσθως) to Zeus Ammon.⁵ This report requires that *before* Siwah Alexander had some idea that his father was not human. Although royal ideology in Egypt from the New Kingdom era had asserted that Amun-Re was the physical father of the pharaoh, as in the divine conception stories of Hatshepsut, Amenophis III, Ramesses II and an unidentified pharaoh of the 21st or 22nd Dynasty,⁶ it is difficult to know whether

⁴ For the primary sources on Alexander's journey to Siwah, see Callisthenes, *FGrH* 124 F 14a = Strabo 17.1.43; F 36 = Plut. *Alex.* 27.4–11; Arr. *Anab.* 3.3–4; Curt 4.7.5–32; Diod. 17.49.2–51.4; Just. 11.11.2–12. See J. Seibert, *Alexander der Grosse* (Darmstadt, 1972) 116–125 for a summary of earlier modern scholarship. A selection of other important studies include E. Mederer, *Die Alexanderlegenden bei den ältesten Alexanderhistorikern* (Stuttgart, 1936) 37–68; F. Schachermeyr, *Alexander der Grosse: das Problem seiner Persönlichkeit und seines Wirkens* (Vienna, 1973) 242–56; P. A. Brunt, *Arrian. Anabasis of Alexander. Books I–IV* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976) 467–79; A. B. Bosworth, "Alexander and Ammon," in K. H. Kinzl (ed.), *Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean in Ancient History and Prehistory. Studies Presented to Fritz Schachermeyr on the Occasion of his 80th Birthday* (Berlin, 1977) 71–75; K. P. Kuhlmann, *Das Ammoneion: Archäologie, Geschichte und Kultpraxis des Orakels von Siwa* (Mainz am Rhein, 1988), 144–57; Anson, "Alexander and Siwah" (n. 1); Zahrnt, "Von Siwa bis Persepolis," (n. 1) 152–8.

⁵ *Anab.* 3.3.2. The word γένεσις must be understood as "birth" and not "descent" in this passage, and it appears to come from Arrian's main sources, Ptolemy or Aristobulus, or both. U. Wilcken, "Alexanders Zug in die Oase Siwa," *Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse* (1928) 588–90, argued that *Anab.* 3.3.2 was a contamination from the Vulgate, but there is no reason to think this. On these points, see Brunt, *Arrian. Anabasis of Alexander* (n. 4) 472, and A. B. Bosworth, *A Historical Commentary on Arrian's History of Alexander. Volume I. Commentary on Books I–III* (Oxford, 1980) 270–71. The extreme scepticism of K. Kraft, *Der "rationale" Alexander* (Kallmünz, 1971) 43–67, who denied that Alexander believed in the idea of divine sonship, was wholly unwarranted. For a critique of Kraft's thesis, see A. B. Bosworth, "Review of *Der 'rationale' Alexander* by K. Kraft," *JHS* 93 (1973) 256–8.

⁶ On the divine birth of the pharaoh, see H. Brunner, *Die Geburt des Gottkönigs. Studien zur Überlieferung eines altägyptischen Mythos* (2nd edn; Wiesbaden, 1986); M.-A. Bonhême and A. Forgeau, *Pharaon. Les secrets du pouvoir* (Paris, 1988) 80–5; D. P. Silverman, "The Nature of Egyptian Kingship," in D. O'Connor and D. P. Silverman (eds.), *Ancient Egyptian Kingship* (Leiden and New York, 1995) 71–72. Kuhlmann, *Das Ammoneion* (n. 4), 149–51, even argues that the divine birth motif was not understood in a literal sense: the "birth cycle" events, during which Amun-Re took the form of the pharaoh and visited the queen, were

this idea continued as part of royal propaganda in the late period. That Alexander learned that the pharaoh was thought to be the son of Amun-Re while in Egypt is often assumed, but it must be considered doubtful whether the Egyptian divine birth idea (if it was still current) was ever explained to him. Moreover, the traditions in Plutarch's life of Alexander (*Alex.* 2–3) strongly suggest that this idea was not derived from the local Egyptian belief in the pharaoh as son of Amun-Re,⁷ but should be traced back to the king's birth and his mother Olympias (*Alex.* 2.6–7; 3.2). Plutarch reproduces three stories:

(1) Olympias dreamed that a thunderbolt struck her womb before her wedding night (*Alex.* 2.3–4);

(2) Philip dreamed that he sealed up his wife's womb (*Alex.* 2.4–5); and

(3) Philip saw a serpent (δράκων) stretched out beside his wife as she slept, which he thought was a divine being (*Alex.* 2.5–7).⁸

The story of Philip's dream of the act of sealing up his wife's womb was derived from Ephorus of Cyme,⁹ and must be judged as either from Philip's own time or early in the reign of Alexander, although it may not necessarily have been an omen of Alexander's divine birth, but presupposed Philip as his father.¹⁰ The thunderbolt omen appears to presage Zeus as Alexander's father, but the origin and date of this omen remain unclear.¹¹

The third story of the serpent has been widely credited as an authentic tradition, or at least the core idea of the siring snake, especially as in its original form it might have

thought of as “an epiphany, an oracular dream or vision” of the god (“einer Epiphanie ... eines orakulären Traumgesichts” [Kuhlmann, *Das Ammoneion*, 150]. Thus the human king, the earthly pharaoh, was still understood to be the physical father of the queen's child.

⁷ Bosworth, “Alexander and Ammon” (n. 4) 71–5. See Collins, “The Divinity of Alexander” (n. 2) 179–206, for a discussion of Alexander's relationship to Egyptian traditions of royal divinity.

⁸ See also Just. 9.5.9; 11.11.2–5. On the omens of Alexander's birth, see now D. Ogden, *Alexander the Great: Myth, Genesis and Sexuality* (Exeter, 2011) 7–78.

⁹ Tertullian, *De Anima* 46 = FGrH 70 F 217.

¹⁰ See Ogden, *Alexander the Great* (n. 8) 8–12, who also raises the possibility that the lion-seal omen may have indicated the dual paternity of Alexander by both Philip and Zeus. A generally accepted inference is that Ephorus lived at least to see Alexander's destruction of Thebes in 335 BC (on the basis of Diod. 15.88.4), and Ephorus' death is dated c. 330 (G. L. Barber, *The Historian Ephorus* (2nd edn.; ed. M. C. J. Miller; Chicago, 1993) 12–13). In addition, Plutarch reports that Ephorus refused to join Alexander's expedition (apparently when asked by the king to do so). See Plut. *De Stoicorum repugnantiis* 1043d = Ephorus of Cyme, FGrH 70 T 6, and V. Parker, “Ephoros (Fragments 120–239) (70 F 120–239),” *Brill's New Jacoby*. I. Worthington (ed.). Brill Online, 2012 (commentary to BNJ 70 T 6).

¹¹ Ogden, *Alexander the Great* (n. 8) 12–14.

referred to Dionysus, not Zeus, and reflected the Bacchic religious devotion of Olympias.¹² Authors earlier than Plutarch knew versions of Alexander's snake sire story. In a hostile variant form, it may well have stood already in Pompeius Trogus (if Just. 11.11.2–5 accurately reflects Trogus' history).¹³ Ogden has suggested the possibility that the euhemerising version of the snake sire story in the Roman era author Ptolemy Chennos (whose dates are uncertain) derives from Ephorus' history.¹⁴ Whatever the merits of this, the report of Plutarch, citing Eratosthenes of Cyrene, refers explicitly to Olympias as the originator of the divine birth idea and may implicitly refer to the snake sire story:¹⁵

ἡ δ' Ὀλυμπιάς, ὥς Ἐρατοσθένης φησί, προπέμπουσα τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον ἐπὶ τὴν στρατείαν, καὶ φράσασα μόνῃ τὸ περὶ τὴν τέκνωσιν ἀπόρρητον, ἐκέλευεν ἄξια φρονεῖν τῆς γενέσεως ...

Olympias, as Eratosthenes says, when she sent Alexander forth on his expedition and told him alone the secret of his begetting, urged him to have thoughts worthy of his birth (Plut. *Alex.* 3.3–4 = Eratosthenes of Cyrene, *FGrH* 241 F 28).¹⁶

This is significant for it establishes that the tradition concerning Olympias must be traced back to at least the 3rd century BC, and to the Hellenistic scholar Eratosthenes of Cyrene, who expressed in his writings a deep skepticism about miracles and other divine happenings that supposedly occurred during Alexander's reign, by attributing them to the work of the king's flatterers.¹⁷ It is to be noted that the language of the passage parallels

¹² W. Vollgraff, "Le Péan Delphique à Dionysus," *BCH* 51 (1927) 427; J. R. Hamilton, *Plutarch, Alexander: A Commentary* (Oxford, 1969) 5; Fredricksmeier, "Alexander's Religion and Divinity" (n. 2) 272. Cf. Ogden, *Alexander the Great* (n. 8) 42–3.

¹³ Livy 26.19.7–8; Aulus Gellius 6.1.1. Ogden, *Alexander the Great* (n. 8) 14–19. Cicero (*Div.* 2.135) mentions Alexander's having a vision of the snake his mother used to carry (*draco is, quem mater Olympias alebat*), but does not explicitly connect the snake to Alexander's birth.

¹⁴ Ptolemy Chennos ap. Phot. *Bibl.* 148a. Ogden, *Alexander the Great* (n. 8) 19–20.

¹⁵ Ogden, *Alexander the Great* (n. 8) 20; R. Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend* (London, 2008) 7.

¹⁶ See F. Pownall, "Eratosthenes of Cyrene (241)," *Brill's New Jacoby*, ed. Ian Worthington. Brill Online, 2012 (commentary to *BNJ* 241 F 28); Ogden, *Alexander the Great* (n. 8) 20; A. B. Bosworth, *A Historical Commentary on Arrian's History of Alexander. Volume 2* (Oxford, 1995) 76. Both E. Schwarzenberg, "The Portraiture of Alexander," in E. Badian (ed.), *Alexandre le Grand: image et réalité* (Geneva, 1976) 238–9, n. 3, and P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (vol. 2; Oxford, 1972), 950–1, n. 25, doubt whether Eratosthenes himself actually believed the story he reported. On Eratosthenes' works, see K. Geus, *Eratosthenes von Kyrene. Studien zur hellenistischen Kultur- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte* (Munich, 2002).

¹⁷ See Strabo 15.1.7–8 and Arr. *Anab.* 5.3.1–4 for Eratosthenes' dismissal of reports of the Dionysian "possession" of Macedonians in Nysa (reported in various *legomena* authors), and his charges that other Macedonians had fabricated incidents relating to Dionysus in India, and the notion that they had discovered, in the territory of the Parapamisadae, the cave where Prometheus had supposedly been chained.

the supposed letter of Alexander to Olympias paraphrased by Plutarch, which some scholars think was authentic.¹⁸ But the authenticity of letters of Alexander is a vexing question,¹⁹ and there is legitimate doubt in this case.²⁰ It might be that the letter of Alexander was pseudonymous and based on some statement in one of the early Alexander historians, and the ultimate source of Eratosthenes must remain a mystery.

Our troublesome passage in Arrian's *Anabasis* throws light on the entire issue, and, if accepted as historical, leads to the conclusion that it was Olympias who was the ultimate source of the idea that Alexander's father was a divine being, possibly through the serpent story (even though various other omens and stories no doubt arose later about Alexander's birth, such as Justin 11.11.3–4). The crucial passage in question is *Anabasis* 4.10.2, where Arrian reports that Callisthenes said that Alexander's deeds depended on Callisthenes himself and his history (*Anab.* 4.10.2), but also the following:

καὶ οὖν καὶ τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν μετουσίαν Ἀλεξάνδρῳ οὐκ ἐξ ὧν Ὀλυμπίας ὑπὲρ τῆς γενέσεως αὐτοῦ ψεύδεται ἀνηρτῆσθαι, ἀλλὰ ἐξ ὧν ἂν αὐτὸς ὑπὲρ Ἀλεξάνδρου ξυγγράψας ἐξενέγκῃ ἐς ἀνθρώπους.

and also even that Alexander's participation in divinity did not depend upon those things that Olympias had pretended about his birth, but from those things Callisthenes wrote for Alexander and would publish to the world (Arr. *Anab.* 4.10.2).

According to Arrian, Callisthenes of Olynthus actually derided Olympias' story about Alexander's conception, at some time before his arrest in 327 BC.²¹

See also J. R. Hamilton, *Plutarch, Alexander: A Commentary* (Oxford, 1969) 7 and R. Lane Fox, *Alexander the Great* (London, 1973) 214–215.

¹⁸ Plut. *Alex.* 27.8–9: αὐτὸς δ' Ἀλέξανδρος ἐν ἐπιστολῇ πρὸς τὴν μητέρα φησὶ γεγονέναι τινὰς αὐτῷ μαντείας ἀπορρήτους, ἃς αὐτὸς ἐπανελθὼν φράσει πρὸς μόνην ἐκείνην. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (vol. 2; n. 16) 951, n. 25. Cf. Lane Fox, *Alexander the Great* (n. 17) 72.

¹⁹ J. Kaerst, "Der Briefwechsel Alexanders des Grossen," *Philologus* 51 (1892) 602–22; L. I. C. Pearson, "The Diary and the Letters of Alexander the Great," *Historia* 3 (1955) 443–50; Hamilton, *Plutarch, Alexander* (n. 17) lxx–lxxvi. On pseudonymous letters in antiquity, see P. A. Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions: The Letter in Greek Literature* (Cambridge, 2001); and J. A. Sint, *Pseudonymität im Altertum. Ihre Formen und ihre Gründe* (Innsbruck, 1960) 107–18.

²⁰ Kaerst, "Der Briefwechsel Alexanders" (n. 19) 612; Lane Fox, *Alexander the Great* (n. 17) 214; Brunt, *Arrian. Anabasis of Alexander* (n. 4) 472. Cf. P. Langer, "Alexander the Great at Siwah," *AncW* 4 (1981) 121–2.

²¹ Hamilton, *Plutarch, Alexander* (n. 17) 5. See also the discussion of this passage in A. Gitti, A. "Quando nacque in Alessandro Magno l'idea della filiazione divina," *Atti & Relazioni dell'Accad. Pugliese delle Scienze* 3–4 (1950–1951) 167–170. On Callisthenes, see W. Kroll, s.v. "Kallisthenes, 2." *RE* X.2 (1919) 1707–26; F. Jacoby, s.v. "Kallisthenes, 2," *RE* X.2 (1919) 1674–1707. H. Berve, *Das Alexanderreich auf Prosopographischer Grundlage* (vol. 2; Munich, 1926) 191–99 (no. 408); Jacoby, *FGrH* 124 TT 1–36; T. S. Brown, "Callisthenes and Alexander," *AJPh* 70 (1949): 225–48; D. Golan, "The Fate of a Court Historian, Callisthenes," *Athenaeum* 66 (1988) 99–120; A. B. Bosworth, "Aristotle and Callisthenes," *Historia* 19 (1970) 407–13; L. I.

The first issue that arises is one of historiography, and the source from which Arrian derived this statement. Arrian qualifies the first of his reports of Callisthenes' "unreasonable" remarks (*Anab.* 4.10.1) with the clause "if it has been recorded truthfully" (εἴπερ ἀληθῆς ξυγγέγραπται), although Arrian's qualification does not necessarily mean that he rejected the story as false. At *Anabasis* 4.9.9, Arrian signals by his use of the expression λόγος κατέχει that he has used sources other than Ptolemy and Aristobulus,²² and the accusative and infinitive construction that begins *Anabasis* 4.10.1 tends to confirm this deviation from his main sources. This suggests one of the following possibilities:

(1) a Vulgate source and not Ptolemy or Aristobulus, or

(2) a non-Vulgate source other than Ptolemy or Aristobulus (perhaps one of the other contemporary Alexander historians).

Although Arrian's source may well be a Vulgate author,²³ caution is in order: later at *Anab.* 4.12.3–4, when Arrian still discusses Callisthenes' opposition to Alexander, he reproduces a *logos* that comes directly or indirectly from Chares of Mytilene (*FGrH* 125 F 14; *Plut. Alex.* 54.5–6), and a most instructive point to remember is that even the sober historian Hieronymus of Cardia could count as one of *legomena* sources, according to Arrian's method (*Arr. Anab.* Preface 3).²⁴ The general point to be borne in mind is that not all of the *legomena* accounts in Arrian are from the Vulgate, and in his discussion of Callisthenes from *Anabasis* 4.9.7–12.5, Arrian is clearly not wholly reliant on Vulgate sources. Even if a Vulgate author is the source, this does not entail that the tradition is inaccurate, for, ever since Badian's rehabilitation of the Vulgate and rejection of the naïve

C. Pearson, *The Lost Histories of Alexander the Great* (Chico, CA., 1983 [1960]) 22–49; L. Prandi, *Callistene: uno storico tra Aristotele e i re macedoni* (Milan, 1985); A. Devine, "Alexander's Propaganda Machine: Callisthenes as the Ultimate Source for Arrian, *Anabasis* 1–3," in I. Worthington (ed.), *Ventures into Greek History* (Oxford, 1994) 89–102; A. B. Bosworth, "Plus ça change ... : Ancient Historians and their Sources," *ClAnt* 22.2 (2003) 167–97; W. Heckel, 2006. *Who's Who in the Age of Alexander the Great* (Malden, Mass. and Oxford, 2006) 76–7.

²² That is easily confirmed by Arrian's reference to Alexander's "orientalising" reforms, including his adoption of altered Persian dress and the changes in his attendance, details which stand in the Vulgate sources (*Diod.* 17.77.4–7; *Curt.* 6.6.1–8; *Just.* 12.3.8–11), and which no doubt stem from Cleitarchus.

²³ Gitti, "Quando nacque in Alessandro Magno" (n. 21) 167: "Arrian does not say which of the authors of the contemporary Vulgate he has drawn the report from, but most likely it was part of the original Vulgate" ("Arriano non dice da quale degli autori della corrente vulgata ha attinto la notizia, ma con grande probabilità essa faceva parte della vulgata originaria"). For general and critical analyses of Arrian's use of sources and the problem of the *legomena* authors and *logoi* that do not derive from Ptolemy or Aristobulus, see Bosworth, *A Historical Commentary on Arrian's History of Alexander. Volume 1* (n. 5) 16–34; P. A. Stadter, *Arrian of Nicomedia* (Chapel Hill, 1980) 74–6; and P. A. Brunt, *Arrian. Anabasis of Alexander. Books V–VII. Indica* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983) 550–4.

²⁴ J. Hornblower, *Hieronymus of Cardia* (Oxford, 1981) 86.

source method of W. W. Tarn, derivation from the Cleitarchan tradition cannot per se provide a reliable justification for dismissing a story in our sources.²⁵

Nevertheless, Arrian's report of Callisthenes' statement has been rejected by a number of modern scholars, with U. Wilcken,²⁶ F. Jacoby,²⁷ A. B. Bosworth²⁸ and E. Carney²⁹ questioning its historicity, although E. M. Anson and D. Ogden have recently raised the possibility of its authenticity.³⁰ My purpose here is to show that the reasons for rejecting it as unhistorical are not convincing, and that the remark was probably authentic.

Bosworth contends that "[it] is grossly implausible that the historical Callisthenes could have mentioned [sc. Olympias'] views on Alexander's birth; still less could he have branded them as lies."³¹ Citing Bosworth, E. Carney rejects the historicity of *Anabasis* 4.10.2, and adds that "one must doubt that ... [sc. Callisthenes] would have dared to put into writing the notion that Alexander approached divinity not because of his heroic acts but because of Callisthenes' recording of them,"³² even though Arrian's passage does not necessarily require written statements by Callisthenes at all. Curiously, Jacoby contended that Callisthenes' boastful statement of his purpose in writing the deeds of Alexander at *Anabasis* 4.10.1, at least in some less pointed form and not so hostile to the king, might have been drawn from the preface of his history.³³ But it is indeed highly improbable that Callisthenes could ever have written something so hostile about Alexander's mother in his

²⁵ E. Badian, "The Eunuch Bagoas: A Study in Method," *CQ* 8 (1958) 144–57.

²⁶ Wilcken, "Alexanders Zug in die Oase Siwa" (n. 5) 589: "the remark, whose authenticity Arrian himself doubts ..., is certainly not authentic" ("der Ausspruch, dessen Echtheit schon Arrian selbst anzweifelt ..., ist sicher nicht authentisch").

²⁷ Jacoby (commentary to *FGrH* 124 T 8): "The remark cannot be authentic. Callisthenes would hardly have mentioned Olympias at that time, rather Alexander himself" ("die Äusserung kann nicht wohl authentisch sein; K[allisthenes] hätte damals schwerlich Olympias, eher Alexander selbst genannt"). Jacoby of course assumed that the idea of Alexander's divine sonship only arose *after* Siwah and used this as his main reason for rejecting the historicity of *Anab.* 4.10.2: in his view, Callisthenes, in his remark, would have attacked Alexander or the flatterers who invented the story, not Olympias.

²⁸ Bosworth, *A Historical Commentary on Arrian's History of Alexander. Volume 2* (n. 16) 76.

²⁹ E. D. Carney, *Olympias: Mother of Alexander the Great* (New York and London, 2006) 102.

³⁰ Anson, "Alexander and Siwah" (n. 1) 123; Ogden, *Alexander the Great* (n. 8) 20. Prandi, *Callistene* (n. 21) 100, considered it plausible that this was an authentic comment of Callisthenes. See also Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (vol. 2; n. 16) 951, n. 25 and Lane Fox, *Alexander the Great* (n. 17) 214–15.

³¹ Bosworth, *A Historical Commentary on Arrian's History of Alexander. Volume 1* (n. 5) 76.

³² Carney, *Olympias: Mother of Alexander* (n. 29) 102 (citing Bosworth, *A Historical Commentary on Arrian's History of Alexander. Volume 1* (n. 5) 76) and Carney *Olympias: Mother of Alexander* (n. 29) 186, n. 142.

³³ Jacoby, "Kallisthenes, 2" (n. 21) 1691: "Für seine Auffassung ihres Wesens [sc. of his history of Alexander] kann man doch wohl seine Äusserung verwenden [οὐκ οὖν αὐτὸς ἀφ᾽ ἑαυτοῦ ἐξ Ἀλεξάνδρου δόξαν κτησόμενος, ἀλλὰ ἐκείνον εὐκλεᾶ ἐς ἀνθρώπους ποιήσων] ... Der Gedanke könnte – natürlich nicht in dieser gegen Alexander zugespitzten Form – sehr wohl aus dem Prooimion der Πράξεις stammen."

official writings, and we must assume that *Anabasis* 4.10.2, if true, was a *spoken* remark by Callisthenes, which overcomes these difficulties, as we will see below.³⁴

The next serious argument adduced to dismiss *Anabasis* 4.10.2 is that Olympias would hardly have left herself open to charges of adultery by expressing the story of sleeping with a god.³⁵ Yet this is not a very convincing objection, for, according to Plutarch, Eratosthenes of Cyrene's report was that Olympias had told Alexander *privately* and him alone of his divine birth, and *after* Philip's death before his expedition to Asia.³⁶ This was not some official or public announcement, and Olympias had nothing to fear from slanderers and her enemies once Philip was dead. If Olympias sincerely believed that her son's conception was miraculous, she surely would have wished to tell her son the truth.

In response to Bosworth's idea that Callisthenes could not have made such an impolitic remark, a number of points can be made. First, by 327 BC Callisthenes had become noted for his outspokenness, perceived arrogance, poor judgement and offences to the king,³⁷ even if the extent of his arrogant behavior may well have been exaggerated by polemic after he fell from favour. Callisthenes had died by crucifixion,³⁸ falsely accused of complicity in the Pages' conspiracy. The real cause of the cruel execution was Alexander's anger at his opposition to the recent attempt at *proskynesis*.³⁹ I would conclude that, far from being implausible, the remark quoted by Arrian was entirely *in character* for Callisthenes in the last years of his life.⁴⁰

An important point is that we do not know the context in which Callisthenes allegedly made his statement. In the absence of a proper context, it seems rash to reject the historicity of the remark merely because it was impolitic, and it may not have been a public remark at

³⁴ Ogden, *Alexander the Great* (n. 8) 20.

³⁵ Carney, *Olympias: Mother of Alexander* (n. 29) 103; E. D. Carney, "Alexander and his 'Terrible Mother'," in W. Heckel and L. A. Tritle (eds.), *Alexander the Great: A New History* (Malden MA and Chichester, 2009) 201.

³⁶ *FGrH* 241 F 28 = Plut. *Alex.* 3.3–4.

³⁷ Diog. Laert. 5.4–5; Plut. *Alex.* 52.7; 53; Curt. 6.1; 8.5.13. There is no doubt, however, that Callisthenes was able to maintain the support of Alexander throughout the earlier part of the reign: his alienation from the king came later. See Bosworth, *A Historical Commentary on Arrian's History of Alexander. Volume 1* (n. 5) 74.

³⁸ Ptolemy, *FGrH* 138 F 17 = Arr. *Anab.* 4.14.3.

³⁹ Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire* (n. 1) 118–119. See Arr. *Anab.* 4.14.1–2; Plut. *Alex.* 55.6; Curt. 8.6.24.

⁴⁰ Even Jacoby conceded that Arrian, *Anab.* 4.10.2, even if not authentic, was a plausible point of view that Callisthenes could have held: "seine Äusserung ... [sc. καὶ τοῦ θείου τὴν μετουσίαν Ἀλεξάνδρῳ οὐκ ἐξ ὧν Ὀλυμπιάς ὑπὲρ τῆς γενέσεως αὐτοῦ ψεύδεται ἀνηρτῆσθαι, ἀλλὰ ἐξ ὧν ἂν αὐτὸς ὑπὲρ Ἀλεξάνδρου ξυγγράμματος ἐξενέγκη ἐς ἀνθρώπους] gibt, auch wenn sie nicht authentisch ist, genau den Standpunkt, von dem K.[allisthenes] die Sache ansah und ansehen musste. Dass er mit Billigung Alexanders diese Gottessohnschaft verkündete ..., kann garnicht zweifelhaft sein" (Jacoby, "Kallisthenes, 2" [n. 21] 1702–1703).

all. Was it perhaps a remark said *in private*, either as a boast or even a humorous, flippant comment? Such a private statement could have been reported to the king later when Callisthenes fell from favour by those anxious to accuse him of treason and malice.⁴¹ Much the same misfortune appears to have happened to Philotas, according to Plutarch (*Alex.* 48.4–49.2).

H. Berve raised the possibility that these remarks of Callisthenes reported in *Anabasis* 4.10.1–2 were maliciously exaggerated and related to the words he spoke when he refused to drink Alexander's health in unmixed wine (Chares, *FGrH* 125 F 13 = *Ath.* 10.434d), or even selected from his speech criticizing the Macedonians that he gave for rhetorical display (Plut. *Alex.* 53.5).⁴²

Still another possibility is that the comment was made in the context of the strong opposition to Alexander during the *proskynesis* experiment. In the latter case, it was entirely in accordance with Callisthenes' clear views against the notion of divine honours for Alexander in his lifetime, and was made in the context of his objection to obeisance at court, perhaps in private conversation. Moreover, it was around 330 BC when Callisthenes had published his account of Alexander's trip to Siwah and—in the very writings that he boasted of in his derision of Olympias—had proclaimed the king's divine sonship to the world.⁴³ Both the nature of Callisthenes' alleged remark and its context appear plausible and connected to events at court. Furthermore, even if the remark was exaggerated or perhaps *falsely* attributed to Callisthenes around 327 by his enemies—and he appeared to have many (Plut. *Alex.* 53.1–2; 55.1–2)—then this would *still* suggest that the tradition about Olympias was contemporary at that date.

That the remark was offensive to Alexander there can be little doubt. As we have seen, Alexander already had some inkling that there was something supernatural about his birth before Siwah (*Anab.* 3.3.2), and the view that Olympias had a role in this has much in its favour. Rather than some invention of one of the Alexander historians, Callisthenes' derision of Olympias' stories about Alexander's birth was most probably historical. This would

⁴¹ See Golan, "The Fate of a Court Historian" (n. 21) 117–18; and Bosworth, "Plus ça change..." (n. 21) 190–91, which is a discussion of Arr. *Anab.* 4.10.2 in the context of a nineteenth century debate between Johann Gustav Droysen and Karl Wilhelm Krüger about Callisthenes. Krüger's suggestion (cited by Bosworth, "Plus ça change" (n. 21) 190 that Callisthenes made a remark that was later "distorted by court gossip into the form we find it in Arrian" is quite possible. There was no doubt a campaign of invective directed against Callisthenes when he fell from favour.

⁴² Berve, *Das Alexanderreich* (n. 21) (vol. 2) 196–7.

⁴³ Callisthenes, *FGrH* 124 F 14a (with Jacoby's commentary) = Strabo 17.1.43. On the question of how Callisthenes' history was published, see Pearson, *The Lost Histories of Alexander* (n. 21) 23. In Jacoby's view, the sections of Callisthenes' history dealing with Egypt were first published in Greece in the winter of 330/29 BC. See also P. Goukowsky, *Essai sur les origines du mythe d'Alexandre (336–270 av. J.-C.)*, I: *Les origines politiques* (Nancy, 1978) 24; and Golan, "The Fate of a Court Historian" (n. 21) 110.

strongly suggest that the tradition of Olympias' story was current by at least *c.* 327 BC during the king's own lifetime.⁴⁴

Lest we think that such an idea was unprecedented in Alexander's time, or even in the "historical," post-Heroic age in the thinking of the Greeks about their history,⁴⁵ Pythagoras was rumoured to have been fathered by Apollo (Iambl. *VP* 2.7–8), and Plato was considered by some as a son of Apollo as well (Diog. Laert. 3.1–2).⁴⁶

Plutarch's story of Alexander's snake sire (*Alex.* 2.5–7) considered as the original story that Olympias believed deserves further scrutiny. With respect to the manner of a god's manifestation as a snake, we have in the mundane world of ordinary Greek mortals a startling inscription from Epidaurus from the late 4th century BC:

Nicasibula of Messene for offspring slept in the Temple and saw a dream. It seemed to her that the god [sc. Asclepius] approached her with a snake which was creeping behind him; and with that snake she had intercourse. Within a year she had two sons.⁴⁷

While a healing miracle leading to natural human conception is most probably imagined here, the element of copulation with the snake that was a manifestation of Asclepius might leave some room for the idea that Asclepius was thought to have fathered her children.⁴⁸ But in any case we can see how the notion that a god in the form of a snake

⁴⁴ See also Gitti, "Quando nacque in Alessandro Magno" (n. 21) 174–7. Cf. Carney, *Olympias: Mother of Alexander* (n. 29) 102, who argues that Olympias was not the originator of the story.

⁴⁵ For the Greek and Roman notions of the *spatium mythicum* (the age of the gods and heroes) and the *spatium historicum* (which, in Herodotus 1.1–5, roughly begins around the time of the Mermnad dynasty in Lydia, and in Ephorus' universal history starts after the return of the Heraclidae), see W. von Leyden, "Spatium Historicum," *Durham University Journal* 11 (1949–1950): 89–104; G. Parmeggiani, "Mito e *spatium historicum* nelle Storie di Eforo di Cuma: (note a Eph. *FGrHist* 70 T 8)," *RSA* 29 (1999) 107–125; and K. Clarke, *Making Time for the Past: Local History and the Polis* (Oxford, 2008) 98–106. The Latin expression *spatium mythicum* is misleading, however, as the figures of the "mythical" age were considered to be as *real* as those from "historical" times, even if definite knowledge of them could not be attained.

⁴⁶ After Plato died in 348/7 BC, Speusippus of Athens, his successor in the Academy and nephew, wrote a work called the Πλάτωνος περίδειπνον, and here mentioned the rumour at Athens (Ἀθήνησιν ἦν λόγος) that Plato had been the son of Apollo by his mother Perictione (Diog. Laert. 3.1–2). H. Dörrie, *Der hellenistische Rahmen des kaiserzeitlichen Platonismus: Bausteine 36–72: Text, Übersetzung, Kommentar* (Stuttgart Bad-Cannstatt, 1990) 405–409, was sceptical about whether this story actually went back to Speusippus, but Dörrie's arguments are refuted in E. Theys's commentary to Speusippus of Athens, *FGrH* 1009, F 1a–1b in *FGrH* IVA (ed. G. Schepens, 1998), 223–30.

⁴⁷ *IG* IV² 1.122 42. The translation follows E. J. Edelstein and L. Edelstein, *Asclepius: A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* (New York, 1975 [1945]), 237, no. 423.42.

⁴⁸ I would not, however, press this point. On this inscription, see Ogden, *Alexander the Great* (n. 8) 44 and D. Ogden, "Alexander's Snake-Sire," in P. V. Wheatley and R. Hannah (eds.), *Alexander and His Successors: Essays From the Antipodes* (Claremont, Calif., 2009) 165–6.

copulating with Olympias in Plutarch has contemporary cultural precedents, and that this may well have been what Olympias herself believed.⁴⁹ Ogden has recently argued that the story of Alexander's conception from a divine being in the form of a snake "must have existed separately and in its own right before being merged with the tradition of Alexander's visit to Siwah,"⁵⁰ and that Ptolemy's snake guides (*FGrH* 138 F 8 = *Arr. Anab.* 3.3.5) primarily reflect the story of Alexander's "siring snake," and only secondarily Ammon's Egyptian iconography (in which Ammon was represented in ram-headed anthropomorphic form, and his main cult animals were the ram and goose in the late period).⁵¹

The identity of the divine being Olympias originally identified as the siring snake has been a long standing problem. W. Vollgraff postulated that Dionysus was the original god in the story, on the basis of Plutarch's story of the snake, and was followed in his view by Hamilton and Fredricksmeyer.⁵² The snake was associated with the ancient Dionysian rites that had been popular with Macedonian women (*Plut. Alex.* 2.5), and Olympias was an

⁴⁹ Hamilton, *Plutarch, Alexander* (n. 17) 5; E. Badian, "The Deification of Alexander the Great," in H. J. Dell (ed.), *Ancient Macedonian Studies in Honor of Charles F. Edson* (Thessaloniki, 1981) 44. Gitti, "Quando nacque in Alessandro Magno" (n. 21) 173–7, was an early advocate of the view that the role of Olympias was important in the origin of the divine birth story. See Gitti, "Quando nacque in Alessandro Magno" (n. 21) 174: "... in the period of the campaign of Alexander before the entry into Egypt the idea already spread amongst the masses and soldiers that the king was of divine origin. The germ of this idea already circulated almost certainly before Alexander ascended the throne. Philip at one point repudiated Olympias; the rumours were of adultery and that Alexander was not even the son of Philip. Then Alexander ascended the throne, and his achievements astonished the world; with his physique and superior intelligence there began the belief that he really was a divine being: he was fixated on the idea. Olympias, then, in good faith believed that she had been the lover of a god?" ("... nel periodo della campagna di Alessandro anteriore all'ingresso in Egitto correva già tra le masse e tra i soldati l'idea che il re fosse d'origine divina. I germi di quest'idea circolavano quasi certamente già prima che Alessandro salisse al trono. Filippo a un certo momento ripudia Olimpiade; corrono le voci che si tratti d'un adulterio e che Alessandro non sia addirittura il figlio di Filippo. Poi Alessandro sale al trono e i suoi successi sbalordiscono il mondo; la sua stessa prestantza fisica e la sua superiore intelligenza cominciano a farlo ritenere davvero un essere divino: egli stesso s'infatua a quest'idea. Olimpiade, poi, credette in buona fede di essere l'amante di un dio?").

⁵⁰ Ogden, *Alexander the Great* (n. 8) 28 and Ogden, "Alexander's Snake-Sire" (n. 48) 150.

⁵¹ Ogden, *Alexander the Great* (n. 8) 26 and Ogden, "Alexander's Snake-Sire" (n. 48) 146, n. 22 and 156–157.

⁵² Vollgraff, "Le Péan Delphique à Dionysus" (n. 12) 427. However, his argument was also based on a restoration and reading of lines 132–3 of Philodamus' *Delphic Paean to Dionysus* (for the text, see J. U. Powell, *Collectanea Alexandrina* (Oxford, 1925) 165–9: this was written c. 340 BC, but engraved in 329/8), which is now no longer accepted. See the generally accepted reading in L. Käppel, *Paian: Studien zur Geschichte einer Gattung* (Berlin, 1991) 378, ll. 132–3. Cf. Ogden, *Alexander the Great* (n. 8) 42–43 and Ogden, "Alexander's Snake-Sire" (n. 48) 162–4. See also Hamilton, *Plutarch, Alexander* (n. 17) 5; E. A. Fredricksmeyer, "The Origin of Alexander's Royal Insignia," *TAPhA* 127 (1997) 104 and Fredricksmeyer, "Alexander's Religion and Divinity" (n. 2) 272.

enthusiastic participant in these rituals, according to Plutarch.⁵³ Thus Dionysus is at least a plausible deity in the stories Olympias told to her son.

In the most comprehensive survey, Ogden has surveyed the possible deities that are candidates for the original “siring snake” of Alexander, including Dionysus, an anonymous *daimon*, Agathos Daimon, Asclepius, and forms of Zeus, and Ogden leans toward a non-Ammonian form of Zeus, such as Zeus Meilichios.⁵⁴ Although the case for Dionysus still seems plausible, if Alexander's belief in a divine birth was indeed derived from Olympias, this would provide yet further evidence for the view that the motive for Alexander's famous journey to Siwah was the king's desire to ascertain the truth once and for all about his birth, and the precise identity of the divine being who had supposedly fathered him.⁵⁵ If he did not already believe so, Alexander was led to the view that his father was Zeus before his visit to Siwah (Curt. 4.7.8),⁵⁶ and this is reflected in Arrian's statement (*Anab.* 3.3.2) that the king traced part of his birth to Ammon (τι ... γενέσεως), who was identified with Zeus by generations of Greeks.

Now Plutarch (*Alex.* 3.4) cites other sources who stated that Olympias repudiated the idea of Alexander's divine birth, and that she was reported to have said that Alexander never stopped slandering her to Hera.⁵⁷ This passage might be pressed into service to show that Olympias was not the source of Alexander's belief. But even E. Carney thinks that this story about Olympias was not authentic.⁵⁸ Plutarch does not name his sources, and

⁵³ Plut. *Alex.* 2.7–9; Duris of Samos *FGrH* 76 F 2 = Athen. 13.560f. Fredricksmeyer, “The Origin of Alexander's Royal Insignia” (n. 52) 103. Cf. Carney, *Olympias: Mother of Alexander* (n. 29) 96–102. For Olympias' ritual use of snakes, see C. Mortensen, *Olympias: Royal Wife and Mother at the Macedonian Court*, PhD dissert. (University of Queensland, Brisbane, 1997) 76–83 and Carney, *Olympias: Mother of Alexander* (n. 29) 93.

⁵⁴ Ogden, *Alexander the Great* (n. 8) 42–52, and Ogden, “Alexander's Snake-Sire” (n. 48) 162–178. See also S. R. Asirvatham, “Olympias' Snake and Callisthenes' Stand: Religion and Politics in Plutarch's Life of Alexander,” in S. R. Asirvatham, C. O. Pache and J. Watrous (eds.), *Between Magic and Religion: Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and Society* (Lanham, Md. and Oxford, 2001) 93–125. For the siring snake in later art, see D. J. A. Ross, “Olympias and the Serpent: The Interpretation of a Baalbek Mosaic and the Date of the Illustrated Pseudo-Callisthenes,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 26.1/2 (1963) 1–21.

⁵⁵ See also Fredricksmeyer, “Alexander's Religion and Divinity” (n. 2) 272.

⁵⁶ Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire* (n. 1) 270–1. For Zeus as Alexander's father, see G. Wirth, *Alexander der Grosse: in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1973) 120; Brunt, *Arrian. Anabasis of Alexander* (n. 4) 477; Goukowsky, *Essai sur les origines* (n. 43) 24; Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire* (n. 1) 282; Badian, “Alexander the Great Between Two Thrones” (n. 1) 19.

⁵⁷ Plut. *Alex.* 3.2: ἕτεροι δὲ φασιν αὐτὴν ἀφοσιῦσθαι καὶ λέγειν· “οὐ παύσεται με διαβάλλων Ἀλέξανδρος πρὸς τὴν Ἥραν;”.

⁵⁸ Carney, *Olympias: Mother of Alexander* (n. 29) 186, n. 141: “Entertaining though the remark is, it is unlikely to be true. Once Alexander had begun to assert that he was the son of a god, Olympias was hardly likely to contradict him.”

the context is not completely clear. At *Alex.* 3.1–2, it appears that Plutarch already has in mind the idea that Zeus Ammon was Alexander's father, and it is quite possible that all this story means, even if true, was that Olympias rejected the idea that *Zeus* was Alexander's father, and does not necessarily mean that she repudiated the idea of a divine birth per se, only the identity of the god in question (whom she may have regarded as Dionysus, a *daimon*, or Asclepius). But it is better to reject the authenticity of Olympias' complaints of slander. Suspicion is aroused by the letter allegedly sent by Olympias to Alexander cited by Aulus Gellius in the 2nd century AD (*NA* 13.4.1–2), taken from Marcus Varro's *Orestes* (or *On Madness*), where Olympias urges Alexander not to slander her before Juno.⁵⁹ This is most probably one of the many apocryphal letters written in the Hellenistic age or later, and it may well lie behind Plutarch's sources in *Alex.* 3.4. It would have no weight against contemporary evidence, *if* Callisthenes' remark was indeed authentic, as argued above. In Plutarch (*Alex.* 3.2) we may have later sources using pseudonymous letters, or perhaps hostile accounts written after Alexander's death, transforming his mother into a pious opponent of his fathering by Zeus, and deliberately downplaying the king's divine sonship.

By contrast, in other traditions, the story of the snake sire was presented as a deliberate invention of Olympias. The “Freiberg Macedonian dialogue” is preserved on two papyrus fragments, possibly dictations by ancient students, and written in different hands.⁶⁰ Although R. Reitzenstein thought that the dialogue was an early Hellenistic historical tragedy, it seems more likely, as Deubner argued, that it is in the style of Lucian, probably from the 2nd century AD, a dramatic composition, and influenced by Attic drama, especially Old Comedy.⁶¹ The character Antipater in the text makes the somewhat cryptic comment that “everyone must be terrified of the serpent and the invented things, by which she [sc. Olympias] reckoned the king [Alexander] amongst the gods.”⁶² Antipater also refers to Olympias as the mother of a god and having over-high thoughts from the myths of her own devising.⁶³ However, this late and clearly fictitious source has no independent value, although it was presumably a composition based on earlier historical traditions.

⁵⁹ Pearson, “The Diary and the Letters of Alexander the Great” (n. 19) 447.

⁶⁰ *FGrH* 153 F 7. See L. Deubner, “Zum Freiburger Makedonierdialog,” *Hermes* 56.3 (1921) 315 and L. Deubner, “Nachtrag zu S. 314ff,” *Hermes* 56 (1921) 445; Pearson, *The Lost Histories of Alexander* (n. 21) 259–60. For translation, see C. A. Robinson, *The History of Alexander the Great* (vol. 1; Providence, 1953) 271–73.

⁶¹ R. Reitzenstein, “Zu dem Freiburger Alexander-Papyrus,” *Nachrichten von der Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen* (1922) 189–96. Deubner, “Zum Freiburger Makedonierdialog,” (n. 60) 318–19.

⁶² *FGrH* 153 F 7 (col. III): δεῖ πάν[τας] πτοεῖσθαι (?) τῷ δράκοντι καὶ τοῖς ἐφευρημένοις, [οἷς] εἰς θεοὺς] ἐνέκρινε τὸν βασ[ι]λέα ...

⁶³ *FGrH* 153 F 7 (IV): ... [ἀ]λλ' ὁρῶ προσιοῦσαν τὴν θεομήτορα καὶ τοῖς [διασκ]ευῆς μύθοις μεγάλα φρονοῦσα.

In the account of Eratosthenes of Cyrene preserved in Plutarch (*Alex.* 3.3–4), Olympias communicated the idea of a divine birth to Alexander when he left Macedonia and to him alone, but some scholars have wondered whether it had already circulated privately as a rumour in the last years of Philip. It is perhaps in this light that one can see Demosthenes' gibe soon after Philip's death that Alexander was a mere Margites (Plut. *Dem.* 23.2)—that is, not only a foolish youth, but also a mock hero who was confused about how he had been born.⁶⁴ After Alexander's succession the divine birth story may have become more widely known. For instance, the oracles about Alexander's divine sonship that reached him in Memphis after Siwah, proclaimed by the Branchidae and Athenais of Erythrae, might have been inspired by rumours of his divine birth that circulated in the wake of Alexander's liberation of Asia Minor.⁶⁵ Those rumours, we may conclude, ultimately came from Olympias, the source of Alexander's belief that he was the son of a god. R. Lane Fox suggested that this story had been invented by Olympias after her estrangement from Philip,⁶⁶ but an alternative view I would propose is that it was a sincere personal belief on the part of Alexander's mother, not propaganda. The original identity of the divine being in her mind remains a subject for speculation, but the purpose of Alexander's journey to Siwah was, above all, to settle the matter and the identity of the god once and for all.

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⁶⁴ See also Aeschin. *In Ctes.* 160 and Marsyas of Pella, *FGrH* 135–136, F 3. Lane Fox, *Alexander the Great* (n. 17) 215; Ogden, *Alexander the Great* (n. 8) 12.

⁶⁵ Strabo 17.1.43. On the historicity of these oracles, see Brunt, *Arrian. Anabasis of Alexander* (n. 4) 469. See Gitti, "Quando nacque in Alessandro Magno" (n. 21) 173: "We conclude therefore that the oracles [sc. from the Branchidae and Erythrae] which related to the divine sonship of Ammon cannot be a *post eventum* invention and must be authentic, or rather were formulated before Alexander went to the oasis and independently of the declarations made by the Siwah oracle" ("Τραϊ μαντεῖα, quindi, quelli relativi alla filiazione da Ammone non possono essere un'invenzione post-eventum e devono pertanto essere autentici, vale a dire essere stati formulati prima che Alessandro si recasse all'oasi e indipendentemente dalle dichiarazioni di quest'oracolo"). This view is also taken by Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire* (n. 1) 282.

⁶⁶ Lane Fox, *Alexander the Great* (n. 17) 215.