




DOOMED
QUEENS

KRIS WALDHERR

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QUEENS

Kris Waldherr



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*For Theresa Park, a queen among women—
with affection and appreciation*



A Queen of the past is not an Ex-Queen.

~JOHN RUSKIN

Women have been called queens for a long time, but the kingdom given them isn't worth ruling.

~LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

INTRODUCTION

[The executioner] shall not have much trouble, for I have a little neck. I shall be known as *la reine sans tête*.

~ANNE BOLEYN



Welcome to your favorite dream—and worst nightmare. You are cosseted in silk, crowned with gold, and bowed to. Courtiers laugh at your jokes and compliment your beauty, even when you know you're having a bad hair day. All envy you, but things change. Just years later, even those who admired you steer clear of your path. Your influence is on the wane for any number of reasons. The fault could be yours—maybe you weren't as clever as you thought in the scheming department. Or it could be that others are scheming against you.

When the end finally comes, it arrives with the stroke of an ax at noon—a topsy-turvy Cinderella tale—or with a drumrolled march to the scaffold. The battlefield may provide you with a convenient grave. Or you might lose your crown as you labor to bring forth an heir to the kingdom. Biology becomes destiny. Best case scenario: You will survive a coup and be allowed to live out your days in awkward exile, where opportunistic stragglers will still suck up to your royal majesty, just in case.

No matter how your end finally arrives, one truth remains: Your fall from grace is not your fault, though your actions may encourage it. It is your fate. After all, you are a doomed queen—and, if one is to go by the lessons of history, the only good queen is a dead one.

For too many royal women throughout history, the scenario I've sketched here was their dark reality. The members of the doomed queens club—a club I suspect few would care to join—are legion, stretching from biblical times to the present day. Their names range from the infamous—Cleopatra, Anne Boleyn, Marie Antoinette—to those whose deaths are hidden within footnotes, such as Blanche of Bourbon and Thessalonike.

Within *Doomed Queens* I've presented fifty of these lives from around the globe and throughout the ages. While each queen's final destiny may differ, one fact remains consistent: Despite the perks of royalty, it's usually not good to be the queen.

What was it about being royal that made so many women so vulnerable to losing their lives for power? Let me count the ways—here is an admittedly abbreviated overview of the doomed queen:

BED, BIBLICAL TIMES, AND BEYOND: It has always been obvious that the female of the species holds the keys to the kingdom—the kingdom of life, that is. Without the fruit of the womb, humanity would crash and burn. Boo-hoo, what’s a power-loving man to do? To solve this problem, mating and relating is safely confined within the institution of matrimony and becomes sanctified with religious rites. The power of female fertility is harnessed, thus creating dynastic succession. Royal women who get uppity with the system get offed. Watch out, Olympias and Cleopatra!

YO, LET’S GET CIVILIZED: Power isn’t enough—there’s money, too. The Dark Ages roll in, disquieting queens everywhere. Men try their darnedest to hold on to property beyond the grave, despite that whole can’t-take-it-with-you dilemma. Salic law, which sprang from the Frankish empire, becomes institutionalized. An excerpt: *The whole inheritance of the land shall come to the male sex*. But if women can’t inherit property, can they inherit thrones? Over time, Salic law leads to lots of territorial fighting when a male heir isn’t available.

MARRIAGE MAKES THE WORLD GO ‘ROUND: No male heir? No problem! To avoid war, the powers that be send their daughters to sleep with their enemies and bear their children, keeping it all in the family. But are these queens royal consorts or royal hostages? The Austrian Hapsburg dynasty, whose rise to power peaks during the Renaissance, is especially adept at this clever little maneuver. Their family motto? “Leave others to make war, while you, lucky Austria, marry.” Like chess queens, women are moved about the game board but are sacrificed first to protect the king—especially if their wombs prove infertile or if they become too power hungry.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE: With the start of the Age of Enlightenment, blue bloods shake in their boots. Power has shifted to the people, as embodied by the press, who no longer respects the sanctity of royalty. *Vive la révolution*—or not, if your name happens to be Marie Antoinette. Later in history, the media can make or break a reign, as in the cases of Caroline of Brunswick, a nineteenth-century queen of England, and Diana Spencer, a twentieth-century queen of hearts.



OR
Why Ladies Only

The sad reality is that the threat level leaps from ecru to red when the head wearing the crown is missing a Y chromosome. Why are male rulers less doomed?

While kings were also vulnerable to political upheaval—just ask Louis XVI, Marie

Antoinette's headless husband—for the most part men pulled the strings at court. Therefore any woman blocking the way to power was a threat to be eliminated. Common ways to bump off an inconvenient consort included beheading, burning, drowning, poison, stabbing, strangling, starving, and forcing suicide.

The justifications for their deaths were usually based on underlying issues such as religious differences, infertility, or dynastic struggles. And when there wasn't an easy way to dump a queen, the men got creative. For example, in order to gain the right to slice off Anne Boleyn's comely head, Henry VIII accused her of treason with a side of adultery.

Women were also more vulnerable to the travails of the flesh. While they usually didn't go to war, potential royal brood mares were often sent on treacherous journeys to wed. After marriage, childbirth was a dangerous rite of passage many did not survive.

And now we have reached the twenty-first century. Are there still doomed queens among us? Certainly! Though we have moved on from the guillotine (which was last used by the French government in 1977), the doomed queen still lives and dies. These days, she might not be as easily recognizable as she once was. She may not have royal blood either. Tiaras are de rigueur for red carpets, but today's doomed queen is more likely to be attired in business best or haute couture. She could be part of a political dynasty, wield the wealth of a global corporation, or bear overwhelming celebrity.

Recognize her now? Just in case, here are two more examples ripped from news headlines. At the time of this writing, Benazir Bhutto, the first woman ruler of an Islamic nation, was assassinated after returning to Pakistan to reclaim the power she once wielded. Meanwhile, rumors fly that Pakistan's current president or his supporters could be responsible for her death. In the United States, former first lady Hillary Clinton has lost the democratic nomination for the presidency. Did first mate Bill muscle her into oblivion on the campaign trail? Whatever your opinion of Clinton or Bhutto, there's one point we can all agree on: Their femaleness was—and is—considered a liability in their quest for power.

Like it or not, it's still a man's world. As such, the doomed queen reflects our uneasiness with women of power, even in these advanced times. The not-so-subliminal message at hand is that women who strive upward do so at their own risk.

In closing, I leave you with a story that originated in Vienna, land of the marriage-happy Hapsburgs. In olden times, a masked ball was held to which all of society was invited. During the ball, a queen danced with a handsome gentleman, whose identity was concealed by a red mask. As the night wore on, she fell madly in love with him, not realizing that he was the executioner on a break—royal and death waltzing together in an intimate *danse macabre*. So it has been since the first crown was donned.

Before we commence our *danse macabre* through queenly history, here are a few notes to help you enjoy the ride.

The queens' stories are arranged chronologically according to date of demise or dethronement. When the exact year is uncertain, I've used the last date they were noted within history's annals. During my research, when confronted with contradictory information, I've striven to present the version which appeared most historically persuasive. However, when all things were equal, I allowed the scales to tip toward the more colorful version.

The art and graphics presented within *Doomed Queens* are adapted from numerous sources. The full-page portraits are my original drawings, some of which were inspired by famous paintings. Many of the other decorative elements were adapted from Victorian-era ornaments or portraits of historical personages.

While some of these doomed queens' lives are certainly tragic, others are so over the top that they invite disbelief or humor. Whether you find yourself laughing or crying, I hope you will consider these examples cautionary tales for modern women who yearn to avoid the sharp edge of the sword. Humorous aside, what's revealed here is serious stuff: the shadow side of feminine power in all its unsavory glory.

May you read and beware.

GRAPHICS KEY



assassinated or cause of death unknown



beheaded



burned to death



death by pacaptionzzi



deposed



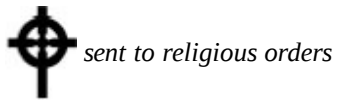
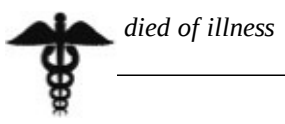
died in childbirth



divorced/annulled

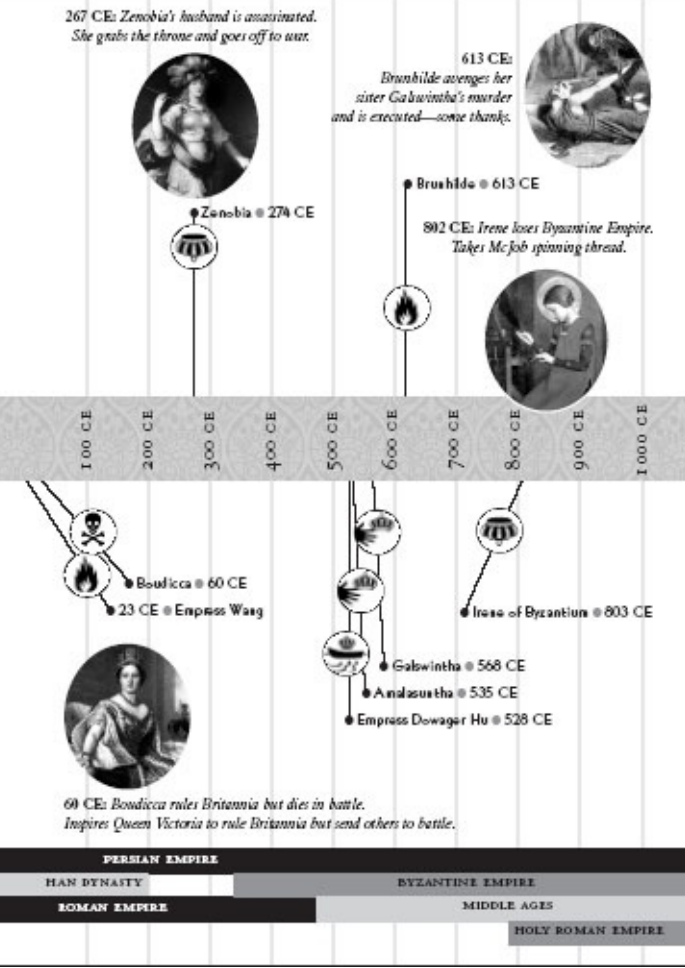
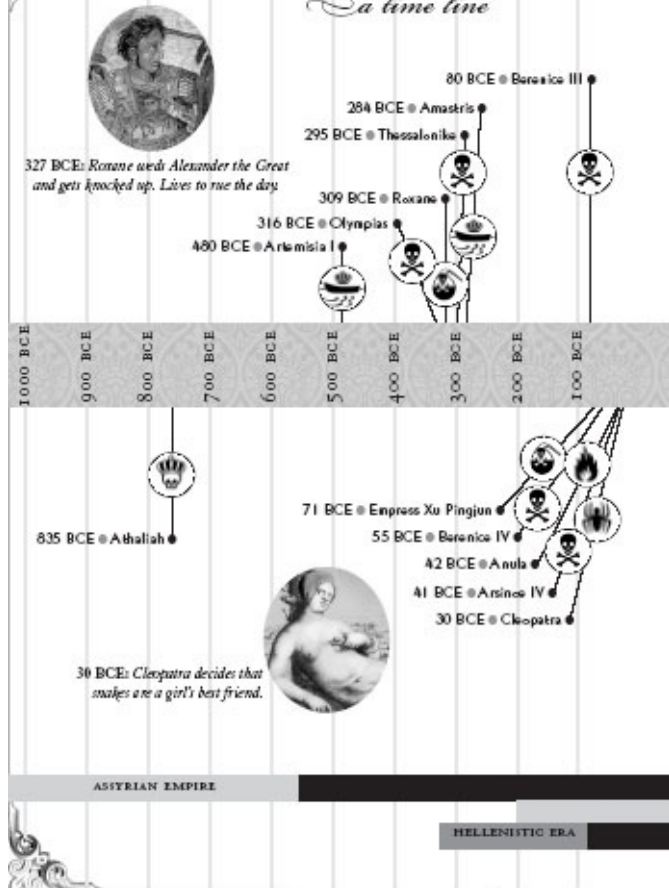


drowned



THE DOOMED QUEEN IN HISTORY

A time line



327 BCE: Rome sees Alexander the Great and gets knocked up. Lives to rue the day.



267 CE: Zenobia's husband is assassinated. She grabs the throne and goes off to war.



613 CE: Brunhilde avenges her sister Galwintha's murder and is executed—some thanks.



60 CE: Boudicca rules Britannia but dies in battle. Inspires Queen Victoria to rule Britannia but send others to battle.



802 CE: Irene loses Byzantine Empire. Takes Mc job spinning thread.





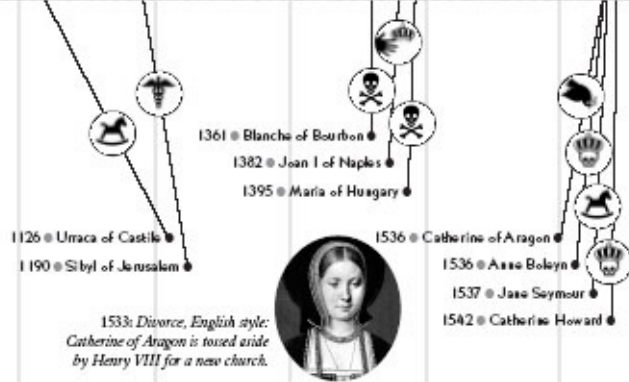
1095: Crusades begin with intent to popularize Christianity. Result is death and destruction. Queen Sibyl joins the fun; dies in an epidemic in 1190 while camping out with her two daughters.

- 1285 • Theodora of Trebizond
- 1248 • Oghul Ghaimish
- 1213 • Gertrude of Meran

1284: Theodora finds religion and saves butt.



1100 CE 1200 CE 1300 CE 1400 CE 1500 CE



1533: Divorce, English style: Catherine of Aragon is tossed aside by Henry VIII for a new church.



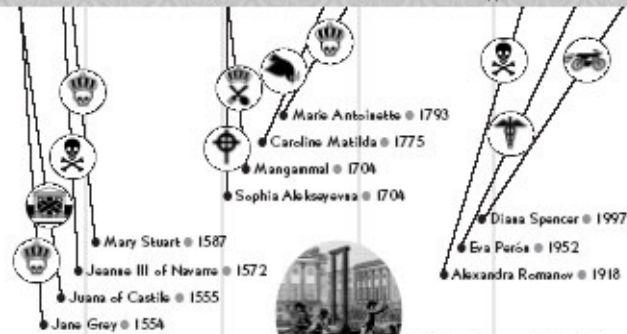
BYZANTINE EMPIRE
MIDDLE AGES
HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE
MONGOL EMPIRE
THE RENAISSANCE



1648: Symbol of undying love is built. Mumtaz Mahal is buried inside.

- Mumtaz Mahal • 1631
- Margarita Theresa of Spain • 1673
- Maria Luisa of Orleans • 1689
- Joséphine de Beauharnais • 1814
- Caroline of Brunswick • 1821
- Alute • 1875
- Elisabeth of Bavaria • 1898

1600 CE 1700 CE 1800 CE 1900 CE 2000 CE



1793: Say hello to my little friend—Madame la Guillotine comes to town.



BRITISH EMPIRE
INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION
ENLIGHTENMENT

CHAPTER ONE

Biblical Times and Beyond



OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES

Mine honor was not yielded, but conquered merely.

—Cleopatra, via William Shakespeare


It is in the ancient world that our survey of unfortunate queens begins. This era is anchored by two figures, Alexander the Great and Cleopatra. Though the two rulers shared little beyond a common ancestor and some serious ambition, both served to inspire the destruction of those close to them. Just call them the Typhoid Marys of blue bloods.

Alexander was a descendant of the powerful Argead dynasty that ruled the vast Macedonian empire in the fourth century BCE. He used his considerable military genius to expand his holdings to encompass just about all of the ancient world, spreading the best of Greek culture (better known as Hellenism) in the process. Alexander's premature demise in 323 BCE led to numerous power struggles and fatalities. His death also led to the founding of Egypt's Ptolemaic dynasty, from which Cleopatra sprang like Athena from Zeus's head.

The saga of Cleopatra and her kin is, in many ways, a tale of sibling rivalry gone wild. Cleopatra lived three centuries after Alexander and was the last pharaoh of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Though she

was a skilled ruler, she was no warrior like her ancestor—instead, she seduced influential men in fighting her battles for her. Her two regent sisters, Berenice and Arsinoe, also coveted the Egyptian throne but weren't as persuasive in the charm department. Nor did they have Cleo's cunning intelligence.

What exactly was it about Egypt that encouraged women rulers to set their caps so high? The historian Herodotus proposed that things were just different there: “The people, in most of the manners and customs, exactly reverse the common practice of mankind. For example women attend the markets and trade, while men sit at home at the loom.... Women urinate standing up, men sitting down....”

And how did these queens of biblical times end their reigns? Matricide occurred too often for comfort—offspring hungry for power did not allow sweet memories of the womb to discourage their desires. Also popular: poison, drowning, and state-sanctioned suicides. Fun times. 



Athaliah



835 BCE



Among royals of the biblical age, Queen Athaliah had quite the pedigree. She was the daughter of Israel's King Ahab and Queen Jezebel—yes, *that* Jezebel, the temptress immortalized in blues songs and an old Bette Davis movie. The Book of Kings claims that Athaliah's infamous mother met a nasty end at the hands of palace eunuchs. As for Athaliah, her life and death illustrate the adage of the apple not falling far from the tree.

Royal marriages in biblical times were no different from royal marriages later in history—dynastic aspirations have ever trumped personal inclination. Jezebel, a princess of Phoenicia, was pragmatically wed to King Ahab to ally their lands against enemies. Like mother, like daughter: When Athaliah came of age, her parents trundled the princess of Israel off to King Jehoram of Judah to say "I do." Ideally speaking, their union should have created one big happy conglomerate of Judah-Israel where everyone lived in harmony. But there was one problem: Athaliah followed her mother's worship of Baal, a Mesopotamian fertility god; Jehoram was a descendant of King David. Today, the differences would make prime ingredients for a screwball comedy where everyone learns religious tolerance and how to make a mean matzo ball. In ancient times, they usually spelled bloodshed.

When Athaliah married Jehoram, Jehoram agreed to take on Athaliah's religion. The new queen of Judah gave birth to a son named Ahaziah, who also followed his mother's lead in worship.

Though they all may have gotten along in private, in public Jehoram's rule was unstable—his subjects weren't too happy with the king's religion by marriage. Nor did they limit themselves to complaints. Jehoram was fatally shot with an arrow after defending his mother-in-law from accusations of witchcraft and fornication. Ahaziah succeeded his father as king but died a year later in battle.



A BRIEF DIGRESSION

Executions were performed during ancient times for a wide range of infractions beyond murder or treason. The Code of Hammurabi, the first set of written laws, which dates from 1760 BCE Mesopotamia, lists numerous death-worthy offenses, such as bearing false witness or hiding runaway slaves. Methods to dispatch the condemned to the next world included, in no particular order: starvation, hanging, poison, decapitation, strangulation, crucifixion, and stoning. Slaves were deemed unworthy of any official ceremony and simply beaten to death.

But what about royal women like Athaliah? The Bible states that "they slew Athaliah with the sword" one assumes this means a beheading rather than a picturesque fencing match. However, this fate was not shared by all condemned queens. Jezebel, Athaliah's mother, was killed by defenestration—a fancy way of saying she was shoved out a window. Her body was left where it landed and devoured by dogs.

Now it was Athaliah's chance to rule, for bad and worse. Grabbing the opportunity presented by her son's death, she immediately ordered the executions of all possible successors to the throne of Judah—in other words, every member of her family by marriage. However, Queen Athaliah wasn't as thorough in her machinations as she thought. Her sister-in-law Jehosheba escaped the communal bloodbath, taking the queen's baby grandson, Joash, with her. She hid him and his nurse in a bedroom on a simple but evidently effective plan.

While Athaliah ruled without impediment, Jehosheba secretly raised little Joash away from the queen's attention. Six years later in 835 BCE, Joash went public and was anointed king by the power that be.

Not surprisingly, Athaliah was furious at the royal coup. She tore at her clothes and screamed "Treason! Treason!" But the queen's accusations were no match against King Joash's army. They captured Athaliah and promptly executed her.



CAUTIONARY MORAL
*When completing a job,
don't overlook the small details.*

Artemisia I



480 BCE



Artemisia became the sole regent of Halicarnassus, a city on the coast of Caria (part of modern-day Turkey), after the death of her husband in the fifth century BCE. Her husband was evidently not as intriguing as she was—his name has been lost by time. However, their union did bring forth a son, Pisindelis, who joined Artemisia in battle as an adult.

As queen, Artemisia was denounced as a tyrant because she brown-nosed King Xerxes I of Persia despite the wishes of her people. In her defense, Halicarnassus was a client city of Persia, so it was good politics to keep the big kids on the block happy.

Toward that end, Artemisia promised aid when Xerxes went to war with Greece. She also advised the king: "Do not fight at sea, for the Greeks are infinitely superior to us in naval matters." He ignored her warning and lost the water-based Battle of Salamis in 480 BCE. Artemisia participated in the battle and commanded five large ships. But when the fight turned against her, the queen attacked and

sank an ally ship, thus convincing the Greeks she had defected to their side. After she escaped safety, the Greeks were peeved at her deception and offered ten thousand drachmas for her capture.

Was Artemisia a prudent warrior seeking to limit casualties on her side? Or was she a coward trying to save her derriere? It depends on how you look at it. One rumor claimed that the queen conveniently carried two different flags into battle; she raised the Persian flag on her ship while chasing Greeks but substituted the Greek flag when they sailed too close for comfort.

Yet the historian Herodotus thought highly of Artemisia. He wrote in his *Histories*: “I must speak of a certain leader named Artemisia, whose participation in the attack upon Greece, notwithstanding that she was a woman, moves my special wonder.... [Her] brave spirit and manly daring sent her forth into the war, when no need required her to adventure.” He concluded by praising the advice she offered Xerxes. Nor does Xerxes appear to have held a grudge against her. Or maybe he did not identify her as the naval force who sunk his battleship—after all, dead sailors can’t squeal. In any event, the king requested her counsel again. This time he listened and won victory.

Protected by Persia, Halicarnassus prospered under Artemisia’s rule. However, one story claims that Xerxes could not protect the queen from her emotions. Later in life, Artemisia fell hard for a boy named Dardanus. Alas, her affections were not reciprocated. After gouging out Dardanus’s eye while he slept, Artemisia ended her reign by jumping into the sea.



Drowning



Throughout the ages, drowning was more often deployed to torture witches than to rid a nation of an unloved monarch. However, as a suicide method, drowning wields a romantic spell, all the way from heartbroken Artemisia’s final plunge to Virginia Woolf’s stroll with rock-filled pockets into the River Ouse. This attraction can be partly traced to a belief that drowning was a painless way to die; once the struggle for life ceased, the victim was thought to exit the world surrounded by serene visions and heavenly choirs.

No doubt this belief has roots in physical reality: When a person drowns to death, her

brain becomes deprived of oxygen. And brains deprived of oxygen typically hallucinate, whether there's religion involved or not.



CAUTIONARY MORAL
*Don't let your heart
overrule your head.*



Olympias



316 BCE



Without Olympias, Alexander the Great could never have existed—and without Alexander, the civilizing force of Hellenism would not have flapped its great wings over Western culture. Olympias was queen to Philip II of Macedon; their only issue was a son who grew up to be known as Alexander the Great. For this, one must grant Olympias thanks. History would be far less interesting without him.

The birth of Alexander the Great was one of Olympias's few contributions to society. Beyond this, she was known for her affection for snakes and violence. The queen was never one to avoid dispatching a rival, real or imagined, to the great beyond. She approached murder with a ghoul-like creativity that appalled even her devoted son, who loved her beyond all others except for one other person—but that's Roxane's story, still to come.

When Olympias met Philip, Philip was yet another Greek warrior king accustomed to marrying his enemies' daughters to ensure peace; a joke from that time claimed that he took on a new wife after each battle campaign. Olympias was wife number four. On top of this, Philip also enjoyed the

company of men as more than friends.

After three docile war brides, Olympias was a walk on the wild side. An orphaned princess hailing from Epirus, Olympias's first loyalty was to the god Dionysus and his ecstatic mysteries, which involved dancing, snake handling, and much alcohol consumption. Plutarch writes that she "was wont in the dances proper to these ceremonies to have great tame serpents about her, which...made a spectacle which men could not look upon without terror." Amazingly enough, the Macedonian king fell in love with Olympias while participating in these rituals.

Their marriage was filled with portents from the start. The night before the wedding, Olympias dreamed that a thunderbolt fell upon her body and kindled a great fire that spread over the land before it was extinguished. Soon after, Philip dreamed that he sealed her genitals with a wax seal imprinted with a lion's image. A wise man assured the king that this vision meant that the queen was pregnant with a boy as courageous as a lion.



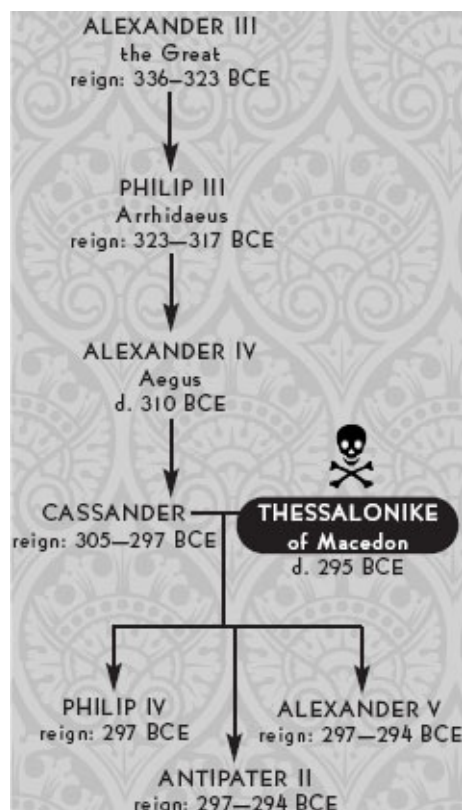
or

*When Empire Building
Is a Bad Thing*

Olympias was the daughter of Neoptolemus, the king of the Molossians; the Molossians were a tribe in Epirus, a region located in what is now northwest Greece. Though Philip had other wives, none could compare to—or survive after—Olympias.



Alexander did not name an heir to his empire. When asked on his deathbed, he cryptically replied, "To the strongest." Chaos ensued. Alexander's wife Roxane gave birth to a son after his death, whom she named after his father. In the meantime, the throne was kept warm for Alex Junior by Alex Senior's older half brother Philip, who was mentally impaired; many believed Olympias had poisoned him for fun and profit. The empire became mired in civil war, aided and abetted by Olympias's scheming.



After much strife, an eventual victor emerged in the form of Cassander, the son of Alexander's most trusted deputy Antipater. He married Alexander's half sister, Thessalonike, thus continuing Alexander's bloodline.

Divine omens or no, it was clear from the start that Alexander was meant for great things. To place him on the fast track for world domination, Olympias went far beyond what even the most devoted Texas cheerleader mom would consider. Philip grew uncomfortable with her zeal and cut off marital relations after he found her sleeping next to a serpent. He decided that the queen was either an enchantress or making whoopie with the god Zeus, who often took on animal forms to seduce mortal women.

In either case, Philip felt threatened. To protect himself, the king chose to dump Olympias as queen, disinherit Alexander, and take yet another wife, Cleopatra Eurydice, who was of pure Macedonia blood. The results were incendiary. Olympias insinuated that Alexander was indeed the son of Zeus and the divine superior of Philip. Soon Philip was stabbed to death by a jealous male lover. Not surprisingly, Olympias's fingerprints were all over the plot. One rumor claimed that she plied the murderer with words to inflame his anger. She even placed a gold crown upon the executed murderer's corpse—hardly the act of a mourning widow. To ensure Alexander's reign would be unimpeded, Olympias assassinated Cleopatra Eurydice and her two small children by Philip. In a scenario out of Grimm's fairy tale, the children were roasted to death, their mother forced to hang herself.

From here, there was no stopping Alexander—or Olympias. After he took off to conquer the world, she never saw him again. Nonetheless, she wrote him frequently. He bore her advice patiently, though he rarely took it. In turn she, too, did as she wished. When Antipater, his governor in Macedon, wrote Alexander to complain about Olympias's meddling, Alexander remarked, "Antipater does not realize that one tear of a mother erases ten thousand letters like this."

As predicted, Alexander was as brave as a lion—but even lions are vulnerable. After conquering much of the world, Alexander died in 323 BCE from a suspiciously sudden illness. He was only thirty-three.

Without Alexander's protection, Olympias knew her days were numbered. She returned to Epirus to plot her return to power but met her match in Antipater's son Cassander, who inherited Alexander's throne. He arranged for the queen's execution in 316 BCE. As a final insult, he denied her the rites of burial.



CAUTIONARY MORAL

Religion can take you only so far.

Roxane



309 BCE



One has to feel compassion for Roxane, queen to Alexander the Great. Though her beauty made her the toast of the ancient world, she simply couldn't compete with Alexander's number one love. Surprisingly, this all-encompassing passion wasn't his mother, Olympias (though the king certainly loved her best of all women). Nor was it world domination (though he slept with a copy of Homer's *Iliad* by his side). Nope, it was a man, Hephaestion. And when Hephaestion died, Roxane's life went to hell in a handbasket.

Hephaestion was Alexander's favorite childhood friend. When they came of age, evidence suggests that their friendship became a friendship with benefits. Olympias did everything she could to discourage their intense attachment. She even sent her son a famed courtesan, to ease him into heterosexuality. But Alexander refused to do the deed with her—the courtesan could not compare to his beloved Hephaestion.

Had Alexander not conquered Persia, Roxane would probably have been married off to some minor warlord, hopefully to live and die in peaceful obscurity. Instead, she became enmeshed in a dynastic struggle that brought the lives of herself and her son to premature ends.



Coin of the realm featuring the emperor himself.

Roxane was the daughter of Oxyartes, king of Bactria, a region in what is now Afghanistan. Her name translates as “Little Star,” presumably in reference to her luminous beauty. The royalty of Bactria used the fortress of Sogdian Rock as a refuge when threatened; Sogdian Rock was surrounded by a sheer cliff no one could surmount—until Alexander. In 327 BCE Alexander sent three hundred of his best climbers to scale the cliff in the middle of the night. Come morning, they greeted Oxyartes and company with pancakes and mimosas. The Bactrian king was so unnerved by Alexander's success

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