

ARCHELAUS AND THE THRONE

Abstract

The philosopher Plato claims that the Macedonian king Archelaus was the illegitimate son of Perdiccas II and a slave, and that he allegedly killed all the legitimate heirs to the throne and used force to seize the royal power in Macedonia. Though this story was well known in ancient times, modern scholars dispute it, either fully or partially; nevertheless, all attempts to prove that it is unfounded are based on assumptions and a conjecture of circumstantial arguments. The reanalysis of our sources, as well as a comparison with suitable examples concerning the succession of royal power in Macedon point out that succession issues in Aegae were not, however, completely clear-cut; that the silence of Thucydides concerning the transfer of power, until he had introduced Archelaus as king, though not decisive, may nevertheless be indicative; that the position of Archelaus in terms of succession was complicated, regardless of whether he was a legitimate son; and finally, that, if nothing else, the story of Plato deserves much greater scrutiny and should by no means be disregarded due to academic inertia, as is usually the case.

Keywords: ARCHELAUS, ALCETAS, PLATO, SUCCESSION, MACEDONIA, THRONE

1. Plato tells us that Archelaus – an illegitimate son of Perdiccas II and a slave of Alcetas, Perdiccas’ brother – killed all the legitimate heirs to the throne and used force to seize the royal power in Macedonia. His alleged victims were Alcetas, Alcetas’ son Alexander, supposedly a peer of Archelaus, as well as an unnamed seven-year old son of Perdiccas II:

[...] ᾧ γε προσῆκε μὲν τῆς ἀρχῆς οὐδὲν ἦν νῦν ἔχει, ὄντι ἐκ γυναικὸς ἢ ἦν δούλη Ἀλκέτου τοῦ Περδίκκου ἀδελφοῦ, καὶ κατὰ μὲν τὸ δίκαιον δούλος ἦν Ἀλκέτου, καὶ εἰ ἐβούλετο τὰ δίκαια ποιεῖν, ἐδούλευεν ἂν Ἀλκότη [..] ὅς γε πρῶτον μὲν τοῦτον αὐτὸν τὸν δεσπότην καὶ θεῖον μεταπεμψάμενος ὡς ἀποδώσων τὴν ἀρχὴν ἦν Περδίκκας αὐτὸν ἀφείλετο, ξενίσας καὶ καταμεθύσας αὐτὸν τε καὶ τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ Ἀλέξανδρον, ἀνεψιὸν αὐτοῦ, σχεδὸν ἡλικιώτην, ἐμβαλὼν εἰς ἄμαξαν, νύκτωρ ἐξαγαγὼν ἀπέσφαξέν τε καὶ ἠφάνισεν ἀμφοτέρους. καὶ ταῦτα ἀδικήσας ἔλαθεν ἑαυτὸν ἀθλιώτατος γενόμενος καὶ οὐ μετεμέλησεν αὐτῷ, ἀλλ’ ὀλίγον ὕστερον τὸν ἀδελφόν, τὸν γνήσιον

τοῦ Περδικίου υἱόν, παῖδα ὡς ἐπτέτη, οὗ ἡ ἀρχὴ ἐγένετο κατὰ τὸ δίκαιον, οὐκ ἐβουλήθη εὐδαίμων γενέσθαι δικάως ἐκθρέψας καὶ ἀποδοῦς τὴν ἀρχὴν ἐκείνῳ, ἀλλ' εἰς φρέαρ ἐμβάλων καὶ ἀποπνίξας πρὸς τὴν μητέρα αὐτοῦ Κλεοπάτραν χῆνα ἔφη διώκοντα ἐμπεσεῖν καὶ ἀποθανεῖν.¹

2. The story according to which Archelaus killed his uncle, cousin, and younger half-brother in order to become king was well-known in ancient times, but it is disputed by modern scholars – some of them disputing it partially, others completely.² In any case, all attempts to prove that the story is unfounded are based on assumptions and a conjecture of circumstantial arguments; especially in recent times, there are neither new arguments nor new suggestions as to the reconstruction of events; rather, previous scholarship is either automatically cited, or the question is simply not mentioned. Though admittedly it is difficult to argue against impressions and hunches – concerning a question that many feel has been resolved – I am of the opinion that it deserves to be looked at once again.

3. One of the rare documents that provides us with a closer look at the characters in this drama is the well-known inscription IG I³, 89, whose conclusion reads:

(12) ...ες Μακεδ[όνο]ν Περδικίικας [Ἀλεχσάνδρο], Ἀλκέτες Ἀλεχσάνδρο, Ἀρχέλαος Π[ερδικί]κο (23) | (6) Μενέλαος Ἀλεχσά[ν-δρο], Ἀγέλαος Ἀ[λκέτο], ...]υρος Ἀλκέτο, Βυργίνος Κράστονο[ς] (29) | (6)]ο, Ἀγερρος Φιλίππ[ο], Εὐρύλοχος Βο[(6), Ἀλέ]χσανδρος Πανταπόνο, Νεοπτόλε[μος, (28)], *etc.*

Scholars mainly agree that the inscription concludes with signatories from the Macedonian party, listed either according to the then - hierarchy within the framework of the kingdom, or in accordance with the line of succession.³ Ἀλκέτες Ἀλεχσάνδρο, the brother of Perdikkas II, is listed immediately after Perdikkas, and before Archelaus. There is no rational and appropriate answer as to why Archelaus – if he were to succeed to the throne – is mentioned third, and not second. It is certain that his age is not the reason for this; the accurate dating of this inscription has been subject of much debate,⁴ yet regardless of which of the dates put forward we accept, Archelaus is, in any case, of

¹ Plat. *Gorg.* 471 a-c.

² Geyer (1930), 86; Hammond & Griffith (1979), 133-137; Borza (1990), 161; King (2018), 50-51. Borza (1990, 162, n. 3.) conveys Green's opinion, who accurately notes that the bloodshed in the house of the Argeadae is not something inconceivable, and that Plato provides a rather detailed account only 30 or so years after the events, which may indicate that he had first-hand information.

³ V., *e.g.*, Hatzopoulos (1986), 280; Borza (1990), 161; Anson (2009), 278; Psoma (2013), 75.

⁴ Concerning the dating, *v. imprimis* Mattingly (1968): 472-475; Meiggs (1972): 428-430; Hammond & Griffith (1979), 134-135; Borza (1990), among many others.

age.⁵ The order of names indicates that next in line in terms of hierarchy, as well as authority – and in all probability, next in the line of succession – was Alcetas, the brother of Perdiccas II.⁶

4. Contrary to this, Borza claims that Alcetas cannot be the next in the line of succession to the throne, or that things are, at least, dubious. He supports this claim with another well-known episode from the events that occurred at Potidaea, in which Thucydides notes that Perdiccas did not make Alcetas regent, but rather the once-mentioned and otherwise unknown Iolaus: ἀπέστη γὰρ εὐθὺς πάλιν τῶν Ἀθηναίων, says Thucydides, καὶ ξυνεμάχει τοῖς Ποτειδεάταις, Ἰόλαον ἀνθ' αὐτοῦ καταστήσας ἄρχοντα.⁷ This piece of information deserves more attention than modern-day scholars have afforded it, not least because there would be no logic for Perdiccas to appoint a regent in Aegae so that he can go and fight at Potidaea. Potidaea, less than 100 miles away, is located near Anthemus, which was allegedly under Macedonian influence as early as the times of Amyntas I,⁸ standing much closer than, for example, Ennea hodoi, which Alexander I reached without the help of any stand-ins half a century earlier. Gomme sees nothing peculiar in this episode and pays it no special attention, apart from stating the obvious – that Iolaus is not further identified, just like Pausanias in 61.4.⁹ Yet, the phrase Ἰόλαον ἀνθ' αὐτοῦ καταστήσας ἄρχοντα may refer to something completely different. In his comments, Hornblower accepts an unobtrusively laid out solution from Jowett's translation – "having appointed Iolaus to take his place with the expedition" – which would mean that the whole sentence refers to the command of the troops at Potidaea, and that Iolaus has, in fact, been sent to Potidaea as a

⁵ Errington (1990), 25, mentions that he was about 45 years old. *Contra* Hatzopoulos (1986), 285, who claims that Archelaus was not second in the inscription because he was too young, and provides "the 430s" as a *terminus ante quem* for his year of birth, which, undoubtedly, is too late. Hatzopoulos' hypothesis is allegedly founded on Hammond's calculations, but the quoted *locus* (1979, 104 sqq.) contains complex and somewhat unclear calculations concerning the reign of Alexander I, not Perdiccas or Archelaus.

⁶ *Contra* Errington (1990), 25, who claims that "[...] that Archelaos had already been designated for succession by about 440, the time of the alliance between Macedonia and Athens, can be deduced from the protocol order of the listed names" – but without noting any arguments supporting his claim. Generally speaking, all these hypotheses are not founded on any specific source. A prime example of this is Hammond's claim (1979, 115) that "it seems very likely that an agreement which gave Perdiccas the throne while it guaranteed Alcetas unsurpassed honour had been worked out long before", for which he offers no argument, except his own personal belief.

⁷ Thuc. 1.62.

⁸ Hdt. 5.94, "Ἰππία δὲ ἐνθεῦτεν ἀπελαυνομένῳ ἐδίδου μὲν Ἀμύντης ὁ Μακεδόνων βασιλεὺς Ἀνθεμοῦντα, ἐδίδουσαν δὲ Θεσσαλοὶ Ἰωλκόν"; nevertheless, cf. Gomme (1971), 216 on Strepsa and Anthemus. For a detailed account of this episode, and Anthemus in general, v. I. K. Xydopoulos (2012). "Anthemus and Hippias: The Policy of Amyntas I." *Illinois Classical Studies* 37, 21-37.

⁹ Gomme (1971), 219.

general.¹⁰ Then, what follows in the next paragraph becomes perfectly clear: [...] τὴν παρὰ Περδίκκου διακοσίαν ἵππων ἐν Ὀλύνθῳ μένειν, namely, 200 Macedonian cavalrymen who had been *sent by Perdiccas* (παρὰ Περδίκκου), and not *lead by Perdiccas*. Finally, regardless of the fact that IG I³, 89 is partially preserved, had Iolaus carried any weight *in Aegae*, his name would undoubtedly have appeared at the very top of the list of signatories – yet it does not.¹¹

5. If this is true, the story of the alleged regency of Iolaus in Aegae needs to be dropped. This changes things considerably because it destroys the main argument that, regardless of the order in which the names appear in the inscription, Alcetas was not second in line to the throne. The other arguments that Borza puts forward are mainly circumstantial. He says that *if we take Alcetas out of the equation*, the position of Archelaus as successor is not in question for the reason that Archelaus is mentioned after his father and his uncle, but before everyone else; however, as we have seen, there is no good reason to take Alcetas out of the equation. The same applies for the last argument – that Perdiccas was probably free to suggest a successor on the basis of his perceived abilities, as allegedly Philip II did later.¹² But, this, as Borza also admits to, is founded on *Archelaus' later achievements*; it is a personal impression, an *a posteriori* conjecture that is impossible – and probably unwise – to argue against. Let it be also mentioned that even according to the traditional interpretation of the Iolaus episode, Archelaus was still not appointed regent in Aegae, in stark contrast to the roles that were consequently given to Alexander, Demetrius II, or Perseus; Archelaus was obviously not even assigned a nominal command at Potidaea, although a corresponding responsibility was later given to Demetrius II, as well as to Perseus in the Second Macedonian War.¹³ If Archelaus was not too young for these roles, then the only possible explanation was that he really did not have the right to any of these, including that of succeeding to the throne; in that case, the whole story concerning the killings becomes all the more probable.¹⁴

¹⁰ Hornblower (1991), 105.

¹¹ Greenwalt (1985), 53.

¹² Similarly Errington (1990), 25: “Even if he was the son of a slave, as is *maliciously asserted* in Plato’s *Gorgias*, he was recognized for more than twenty years before his accession as the chosen successor of his father Perdikkas” – once again, not supported in any source.

¹³ It may be disputed that the examples of Alexander and Demetrius are not wholly appropriate for this discussion, as in their case the situation was more serious, the king was either not in Macedonia, or actively waging war (Philip II was in Thrace, and Antigonus in Greece), while the territory that was to be covered was relatively larger. However, if Perdiccas wished to stress the position of Archelaus in the political hierarchy, he could have undoubtedly assigned him nominal leadership, as was given to the 13-year-old Perseus, the real commander being Athenagoras; *v.* Liv. 31.28.5; 33.3.

¹⁴ An interesting point of view is held by Errington, who claims (as we noted earlier) that there is no doubt that Archelaus was a legitimate heir, as well as that the story about the murder is not impossible – not because the throne was in question, but rather

Borza concludes that the question of Archelaus' right to the Macedonian throne depends on how we interpret the role of primogeniture in the process of succession in Macedonia.¹⁵ If we agree that the rule of primogeniture was not absolute,¹⁶ then it is entirely possible that a legitimate heir to Perdiccas II was his brother Alcetas.

6. It is difficult to answer the question in this manner, since no source deals in greater detail about how power was passed down among the Argeadae before Philip II. Yet, this problem touches on other unresolved issues: first, if there were any differences in terms of rules of succession concerning children from a first/legitimate wife and a second/illegitimate wife, as well as what the role of porphyrogenesis was in Aegae. If Archelaus was the oldest son of Perdiccas, why would he decide to kill his younger brother in a dynastic struggle, and why would Plato, 30 years later, be inclined to believe that Archelaus' seven-year-old half-brother was the legitimate successor?

The question is rather extensive and, unfortunately, touches on several other unclear episodes in Macedonian history.¹⁷ Not much later, Amyntas III will end up with at least seven children from two wives (Alexander II, Perdiccas III, Philip II and Eurynoe from Eurydice, and Archelaus, Arrhidaeus and Menelaus from Gygaea) – and yet, though both wives were legitimate, for reasons unknown, only the children he had with Eurydice were in the line of succession.¹⁸

because “ [...] Perdikkas had had great difficulties with his brothers, particularly Philippos, and Archelaos may well have drawn the consequential, if brutal, lesson from a past that he had shared, deciding, as did Alexander the Great three generations later, that the stability of his regime demanded the sacrifice of possible contenders within the family, so that as king of the Argeadai he would have a monopoly of influence on the barons of the country”. Thucydides gives more than enough attention to the events in Macedonia, but makes no mention of the transfer of power as well as the act of succession; it is enticing to contemplate whether this was to improve the reputation of Archelaus due to the political ties with the Athenian democrats, and whether we can, in that case, differentiate two different traditions, one historiographical, which defends Archelaus' reputation, and another rhetorical/philosophical, which attacks it.

¹⁵ *Contra* King (2018), 51, who reminds that, in Plato at least, the problem cannot be tied to primogeniture, but rather to the origin and status of Archelaus' mother.

¹⁶ *cf.* Borza (1990), 177, 179, who accepts Carney's conclusions, himself talking about “an insecure system of primogeniture, a kingship based on personal (as opposed to institutional) power” – which, in itself, makes the analysis of the order of the names in IG I³, 89 practically redundant.

¹⁷ *Cf.* Greenwalt's analysis (1985), 99–105.

¹⁸ Unlike the pretender Argaeus, Philip II's half-brothers do not appear to make such a claim, which means that the line of succession to the throne was completely closed off to them. At first glance, this is contrary to what we come across in Justin (8.3.10-11): *Post haec Olynthios adgreditur; receperant enim per misericordiam post caedem unius duos fratres eius, quos Philippus ex noverca genitos veluti participes regni interficere gestiebat. Ob hanc igitur causam urbem antiquam et nobilem excindit et fratres olim destinato supplicio tradit prae-*

We can speculate far and wide as to the reasons for this. The father/ king had, undoubtedly, the last word when it came to determining the status of his sons, but the origin of the mother, as well as the importance of the marital union also played a role. Here things became more complex. It is probable that Gygaea was indeed Amyntas' first wife, whom he had married before 400 BC, at least eight years before Eurydice;¹⁹ Gygaea was in all probability a relative of his and a member of the Argeadae, which is attested by her name, as well as the names of her three sons.²⁰ In accordance with the importance and status of the mother, one would say that they should not have been passed over in the line of succession – which is precisely what happened. The Macedonian system of succession may have been patrilineal, but, as Greenwalt accurately notes, in a state with a rudimentary and fluid political structure, the king had to also constantly bear in mind the interests of the local ruling houses from Macedonia and the region and, accordingly, forge dynastic unions. Such a union was the marriage to Eurydice, forged for political reasons, perhaps in connection with the Illyrian withdrawal from Macedonia and the relations with the local ruling houses of Upper Macedonia.²¹ In this situation, neither the order of the union, nor its status were of any importance, but rather the political and diplomatic weight of the marital connection; that is what closed the road to succession to Gygaea's sons.²²

7. Let us return to our problem. If this is true, and if in the line of succession differences were made between the wives according to when the union was forged, the origin and the previous status of the wife, as well as the political weight the marriage held – then there was reason for Archelaus to feel insecure. He did not have to be an illegitimate son at all – the fact that he is present

daque ingenti pariter et parricidii voto fruitur. Greenwalt (1985) believes that the brothers did indeed raise a rebellion, yet he speculates that it was done as a final act, because their right to the throne was of secondary importance due to the lower status of their mother in comparison with Eurydice. There is no need to specifically point out that Justin's account is also rather problematic. Not only does he ascribe to Philip that he commenced battle and destroyed Olynthus *ob hanc igitur causam*, which is out of the question, but the whole account is rather reminiscent to Theopompus and his notorious hostility toward Philip; cf. G. S. Shrimpton, *Theopompus the historian*, London, 1991, Ch.5. An excellent parallel to this is Jordanes' account of the capture of Odessus, which reflects Theopompus in a very similar vein; v. Пановски, С., Стојанов, Д., „Кога митот и историјата се среќаваат: *Getica* 10.65-66“, *Гласник на ИНИ* 60.1 (2016), 47-70.

¹⁹ Geyer (1930), 127; this is accepted by Ellis as well (1973), 351.

²⁰ Beloch (1904) 2, 66.

²¹ V. Ellis (1969), 1 *sqq.*; Bosworth (1971), 100 *sqq.*; Ellis (1973), 351, no.11.

²² In the end, regardless of the opinions we put forward, we should always bear in mind Anson's sensible words of caution (2009, 278): "The difficulty in interpreting Justin's reference is that Justin and too many modern commentators assume that Macedon had a formal succession and regency process. [...] Disputed successions were common with multiple candidates often claiming a royal title through a show of force and foreign intervention."

in IG I³, 89 is clear enough proof that he was indeed legitimate; it was enough for his mother's marriage to be less important than that of her rival.²³

All of this takes us back to the conclusion which was "quite unfashionable" in the 1980s, when Greenwalt wrote, and is probably even more unfashionable today. In brief, (a) if we were to remove the "regency" of Iolaus, the list of signatories in the IG I³, 89 indicates that succession issues in Aegae were not quite clear; (b) Thucydides' silence concerning the transfer of power, until Archelaus was introduced as king, though not decisive, may, nevertheless, be indicative; (c) Archelaus' position in terms of succession was problematic, regardless of whether he was a legitimate son; and (d) that, if nothing else, Plato's story deserves much greater scrutiny and should by no means be disregarded due to academic inertia, as is usually the case.

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²³ Another unknown in the question of the succession to the Macedonian throne was whether the principle of porphyrogenesis was followed: this practice was not strongly evidenced on the Balkan Peninsula, but Greenwalt (1985), nevertheless, believes that it is possible, while Hatzopoulos (1986, 280) holds the view that the order of successors was determined by the order of birth after the father had succeeded to the throne. According to Errington, in 413 BC Archelaus was about 45 years old; this means that he would have been born about 458 BC – before Perdiccas became king, and, so, if the principle of porphyrogenesis was followed, Archelaus once again had no claim to the throne. In any case, the nature of the sources is such that only the reigns of Perdiccas II and Amyntas III provide enough facts; the other examples of the early history of the Argeadae are rather weakly evidenced so as to be able to function as any kind of a basis for a well-argued hypothesis. From the sources we have at our disposal, it is hard to determine the order of the kings' children, let alone their years of birth; *v.* Greenwalt (1989), 21.

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