

moved north, bypassing Babylon and camping at Opis by the banks of the river Tigris. Here Alexander faced down the last challenge to his authority and became the undisputed master of the ancient world.

Alexander's brief life was filled with warfare, intrigue, treachery, cover-ups and murder, sex scandals, and unimaginable wealth. It was enlivened by the ideas of destiny and death, unimpeachable valor, glory, entombment, and everlasting fame. No man before him, and probably few after, had ever seen so many different ways to die—and to live on in the imaginations and memories of the living.

Alexander carried the ashes of dead Athenian warriors after Chae-rona and then observed traditional funeral rites for his father at Aegae. Within months he was paying his respects at the tombs of Achilles and Patroclus at Troy, and gazing on the splendor of the mausoleum at Halicarnassus. He stood in wonder before the pyramids of Egypt and was impressed by the embalmer's uncanny art of mummification. He wept over the maimed and dying after the slaughters at Issus, Gaugamela, and the Hydaspes river.

He knew of the great burial mounds (kurgans) of the horse-riding Scythians on Asia's steppes and watched amazed as Calanus had himself immolated. He observed the elaborate Persian funerary rites, sanctioned by the prophet Zoroaster in honor of the great creator Ahura Mazda. And he refurbished Cyrus's desecrated tomb at Pasargadae.

The prospect of dying haunted Alexander throughout his life. He watched his father die and his mother place a golden crown on the head of the assassin's corpse. What strange and complex ideas swirled through Alexander's mind at such sights, and do they explain his own mercurial character, at once gifted and cruel?

Paradoxically, Alexander achieved immortality when he died. But fate, not Alexander, was the master of his undying fame, the guardian and architect of his gilded memory. It chased him across Asia to the furthest edge of the world, and almost caught him in the desert wastes of Gedrosia. Now it waited at Opis.

DEATH AND DYING IN BABYLON

AT OPIS IN BABYLONIA, IN THE SUMMER OF 324, Alexander vanquished the last earthly challenge to his authority and seized absolute power. Alexander announced to an army assembly that he was sending ten thousand veterans home to Macedonia under Craterus's command and replacing them with Persians trained and armed in the Macedonian fashion. In response, the soldiers insulted the Persians and ridiculed Alexander. If he held the Persians in such high regard, they shouted, then they could all be dismissed, and he could conquer the world with his father, alluding sarcastically to Alexander's claim that Zeus Ammon was his father. Alexander in turn accused them of ingratitude, haranguing them on how they owed everything to him:

I have sword-cuts from close fight; arrows have pierced me, missiles from catapults bruised my flesh . . . for your glory and your gain. Over every land and sea, across river, mountain and plain I led you to the world's end, a victorious army. . . . Out of my sight!¹

For several days Alexander talked to high-ranking Persians and refused to see Macedonians. Finally the opposition collapsed. The Macedonians swore undying loyalty and wept in gratitude when Alexander forgave them and sealed the reconciliation with a kiss of royal favor for each man. As the last soldier stepped forward, the prospect of a full-scale mutiny disappeared.

Sending away Craterus was an astute move, though the Roman historian Arrian tells us in *The Campaigns of Alexander* that all sides had tears in their eyes. It removed a thorn from Hephaestion's side and an ultra-traditionalist from Alexander's inner circle. Unlike Craterus, the three other marshals—Perdiccas, Ptolemy, and Seleucus—were more accepting of Alexander's Persian dress and courtly affectations. Also, they acknowledged Hephaestion's special place in Alexander's affections. At ease with himself and his men, Alexander was soon on the move. Opis disappeared in the haze of dust kicked up by the departing army.

With Hephaestion at his side, Alexander led long columns of armored men away from the stifling heat of the Mesopotamian plain and up into the cool valleys of the Zagros mountains. They were heading northeast for Ecbatana (modern Hamadan), the ancient capital of Media, where the Persian kings had built a royal palace as a summer retreat.

There was no rush, and for once no enemy to confront. The king's court and the rank and file slipped into a relaxed regime, enjoying frequent stops en route as they ascended to a more temperate climate. By night, Alexander's courtiers showered him with their customary adulation and praise at wine-drenched parties.

As the ruler of an imperial superpower, he was heavily occupied with matters of state. But he still made time for the business of pleasure. He sent a long list of demands to Atropates, his satrap (provincial governor) in Media, ordering him to prepare a lavish celebration for the army's arrival at Ecbatana.

With Craterus gone, Hephaestion could focus his petty spitefulness on Eumenes, Alexander's Greek-born secretary. For example, Eumenes's lieutenants once requisitioned a billet for him and were preparing it when Hephaestion's men arrived and ejected them, installing a flute player instead. When Eumenes complained to Alexander, the king rebuked Hephaestion. But later he changed his mind and reprimanded Eumenes. For Alexander, the dilemma of Hephaestion's imperious behavior remained unresolved.

Alexander's route meandered among the foothills of the Zagros, turning the march into a grand sightseeing tour. At one point, he detoured the whole army to encamp below a towering cliff at Behistun on the route that later became the Silk Road to Samarkand. Here, in 521, Darius the

Great had carved a huge image of himself and victory inscription five hundred feet up on a sheer cliff face. Unreadable from the ground, the stony text extolled Darius's virtues for the eyes of the Persian gods in a way that probably appealed to Alexander: "According to righteousness have I walked; neither the weak nor the strong have I wronged."²

The army heaved into life and Alexander marched up and over the valley's rim and out onto the rolling grasslands of the Nisaeen fields. Here the Persian kings once pastured 150,000 of their finest thoroughbreds, though Alexander found only 50,000 remaining after the depredations of the local horse-thieving Cossaeans. Alexander and his men lingered in the lush surroundings for a month before departing on the final leg of the journey to Ecbatana.

Autumn chilled the air as Alexander led the army onto a wide plain fed by icy waters flowing from snow-capped Mount Alvand. Ecbatana was built on rising ground and ringed by imposing walls and turrets, with the citadel and its glittering palace rising above. Darius had spared no expense in building his summer retreat. Cedar and cypress-wood columns were sheathed in gold, and the roof was plated with silver interspersed with turquoise tiles and sparkling jewels.³ Ecbatana symbolized the empire's wealth and radiated the sacred glow of the Persian god Ahura Mazda—the Lord of Light.

To honor Dionysus, Alexander sponsored games, gymnastics, theater, and sacrifices by day, and banquets and drinking parties by night. Alexander paid for three thousand Greek performers—the artists of Dionysus—to journey overland from Greece and entertain them. In return for his largesse, Alexander received an endless flow of praise, gifts, and golden crowns in honor of his conquests. His companions and satraps were joined at court by ambassadors and envoys from across the Mediterranean world.

They dined in Ecbatana's silvered palace, where the air was thick with the aromatic fumes of smouldering myrrh. Alexander's grand entrances played to his heroic ancestry and his identification with the gods. He would arrive draped in purple and wearing the horns of Ammon, or sporting winged sandals and a broad hat to impersonate Hermes, the messenger of the gods, or sometimes carrying a lion skin and wielding an oversize club as Heracles. The atmosphere was a heady mix

of opulence, excess, and exotic fancy dress, resting on the brute power of Macedonian arms.

Imported Greek wine was mixed with pure mountain water and poured into waiting cups. Reclining on couches in Greek fashion, Alexander, Hephaestion, Perdikkas, Ptolemy, and Seleucus toasted each other as the richest and most powerful men in the history of the world. They had plundered Asia, seizing tens of thousands of talents (hundreds of millions of dollars) from the Persian treasuries at Babylon, Susa, Persepolis, and Pasargadae. They sequestered vast amounts of gold, silver, and gems, and controlled the trade in spices, dyes, incense, and hardwoods. Astonishing wealth poured into the treasury daily, swelling imperial revenues almost beyond measure. At Ecbatana, a fraction of this wealth was spent on an extraordinary victory party.

Alexander was at the zenith of his power as lord of Asia. He now enjoyed great fame as an invincible conqueror, excelling even his heroic ancestors, Achilles, Heracles, and Dionysus. And by his side was Hephaestion, his lover since boyhood and sole keeper of his most intimate affections. Within days, however, Alexander's world began falling apart around him.

Dignitaries, commanders, and foot soldiers alike settled into a life of luxury at Alexander's expense. The athletic games, theatrical performances, and heavy drinking began in earnest. At one of these parties Hephaestion fell ill, possibly with typhus or malaria, or perhaps something more sinister. He languished for a week, tended by his physician Glaucias, and then seemed to improve. On the eighth day, Alexander was attending an athletic display by Greek youths when he was summoned with news that Hephaestion's condition had suddenly worsened.

Hephaestion had already died by the time Alexander pushed his way through the crowds to the palace. The news of his death spread through the city and into the encampment beyond. Hephaestion Amyntoros, the second most powerful man in the empire, had fulfilled the final act of the *Iliad's* tragic hero. Hephaestion had become Patroclus in death as in life, and had left his lover to grieve in spectacular Homeric fashion.

Rumors that Hephaestion had been poisoned were rife in the following days and weeks. But any assassin would have required nerves of steel and questionable motivation. Killing Hephaestion while leaving Alexander

alive would be a suicidal act. Our sources are silent, and only the unfortunate physician was ever punished. Glaucias was executed by crucifixion, probably for incompetence rather than suspicion of murder.

Descending into a welter of grief and mourning, Alexander refused food and drink for days. According to Arrian, Alexander "flung himself on the body of his friend and lay there nearly all day long in tears, and refused to be parted from him until he was dragged away by force by his Companions."⁴ He had the manes and tails of army horses docked and he cut his own hair, just as Homer said Achilles had done at the death of his beloved Patroclus.⁵ By this act, Alexander repeated the heroic identification between himself and Hephaestion that he had displayed at Troy ten years before.

Alexander dispatched envoys to distant Siwa in Egypt to persuade the priests of Ammon to grant Hephaestion rites of worship as a god. In Persia, Alexander demanded that the sacred flames of Ahura Mazda be extinguished, leaving the god's fire temples in darkness. However, for the Persians, such an act was reserved for kings.⁶ Since Hephaestion was not a monarch or even a royal, the Persian magi interpreted this action as an evil omen foretelling Alexander's own death.

A mood of dark depression settled over Ecbatana. There was no possibility in Alexander's mind of burying or cremating Hephaestion in the city of his death. Lashing out in fury, Alexander destroyed the local temple to Asclepius, the Greek patron deity of physicians. Today, all that remains to commemorate the tragedy is the so-called Lion of Hamadan, a typically Greek lion sculpture—the traditional form of funerary monument—that Alexander erected on the place of his bereavement.

Alexander also broke the rules of Macedonian tradition by ordering that Hephaestion's body be embalmed. In this he unwittingly set a precedent for his own mummification, which made his corpse a monument and a legend as enduring as the universal fame he achieved in life.

Embalming was unheard of among Macedonians. Their traditional burial rites were either interment of the whole body or ritual cremation, with the ashes stored in a casket beneath a burial mound, or tumulus. For Alexander, it was essential to preserve the body until it could be given a proper funeral in Babylon. Alternatively, Alexander may have intended to display Hephaestion's lifelike remains in a grand mausoleum.

Or did he perhaps envision being laid to rest beside his alter ego in the same way Achilles and Patroclus were buried at Troy?

Several months later, the army somberly assembled outside the city walls to watch Hephaestion's cortege file out through Ecbatana's gates. It was said that Alexander himself drove the chariot carrying his companion's body for a short distance.⁷ Perdikkas, who was hastily appointed grand vizier to replace Hephaestion, was charged with conveying the body to Babylon.

As the winter of 324 approached, according to Plutarch, the king attempted to "lighten his sorrow" by launching a brief, bloody raid on the Cossaeans—mountain tribesmen who made a living from brigandage. Notably they had rustled 100,000 of the royal Persian horses grazing in the Nisaeon fields. Alexander hunted them down mercilessly, slaughtering the entire male population, it was said, as a bloody offering to the spirit of Hephaestion.⁸

In early spring 323 Alexander finished with the Cossaeans and led the army back down to the Mesopotamian plains. Approaching Babylon from the east, he was met by a deputation of Babylonian priests who delivered a stark warning: death awaited the king if he entered the city.⁹ The prediction, they said, was based on astrological calculations of the heavenly bodies.

When Alexander first entered Babylon after defeating Darius at Gaugamela in 331, he found the great ziggurat—the temple of Babylon's patron god Marduk that towered above the city—neglected. Ever respectful to the gods (Greek and Barbarian alike), Alexander had ordered its restoration. Likely the priests had siphoned off temple revenues and now feared being found out. Alexander ignored the warning, perhaps in order to conduct Hephaestion's funeral.

No expense was spared for Hephaestion's funeral rites. Money, craftsmen, labor, and tribute were directed to Babylon from across the empire for what was probably the most expensive funeral in history. It has been estimated that an astonishing ten or twelve thousand talents—perhaps twenty-five tons of gold—were spent on the proceedings.

Private donations came from Alexander as well as the marshals, the Persian aristocracy, and foreign diplomats and envoys who wished to curry favor with the king. Diodorus records that the marshals and close com-

panions commissioned chryselephantine (gold and silver) likenesses of the dead hero used to decorate a funeral couch or perhaps just as offerings.

To build Hephaestion's tomb, Alexander sought out an architect whose name is variously given as Stasikrates, Deinocrates, or Cheirokeles.¹⁰ Stasikrates had rebuilt the temple of Artemis at Ephesus and would become the main architect of Alexandria in Egypt. Sometime before 331, he had suggested an astonishing project to Alexander. As Mount Athos in Macedonia had the general appearance of a human body, he said, it could be carved and worked into a vast statue of the king. This truly Olympian Alexander would have his feet in the Aegean and his head in the clouds; his left hand would hold a city of ten thousand, and from his right would pour a river from a huge bowl as a libation into the sea.¹¹

Alexander famously declined the offer: "Let Athos stay as it is . . . the Caucasus shall show my imprint, as will the Himalayas . . . and the Caspian Sea."¹² Alexander also recalled how the Persian king Xerxes had cut a canal for his ships through the Athos peninsula during his invasion of Greece in 480 B.C.E. Since then the name "Athos" had become a byword for hubris.¹³ Nonetheless, Stasikrates's project would have been an unprecedented memorial. Clearly his bravado appealed to Alexander as he contemplated Hephaestion's funeral. Unfortunately it seems the architect was unavailable.

We do not know who eventually designed Hephaestion's huge funeral pyre, but descriptions of it suggest influence by Marduk's ziggurat or more likely the mausoleum of Halicarnassus. It was built of wood on foundations of baked tiles, and it stood some 230 feet high in seven stories. Each level was decorated with a distinctive theme and style. The fascias were molded of unbaked clay and probably gilded.¹⁴ Alexander demolished a section of Babylon's city wall to make room for the pyre and obtain tiles needed to build the support platform. The pyre was hollow inside to facilitate burning and built entirely of highly combustible palm trunks.

Since this was probably the most expensive funeral in history, it merits Diodorus's full account:

Upon the foundation course were golden prows of quinqueremes [warships with five levels of oarsmen] in close order, two hundred and forty

in all. Upon the cat heads each carried two kneeling archers four cubits in height, and armed male figures of five cubits high, while the intervening spaces were occupied by red banners fashioned out of felt. Above these, on the second level, stood torches fifteen cubits high with golden wreaths about their handles. At their flaming ends perched eagles with outspread wings . . . while about their bases were serpents looking up at the eagles. On the third level were carved a multitude of wild animals being pursued by hunters. The fourth level carried a centaurmarchy [battle between Greeks and centaurs] rendered in gold, while the fifth showed lions and bulls alternating, also in gold. The next higher level was covered with Macedonian and Persian arms. . . . On top of all stood Sirens, hollowed out and able to conceal within them persons who sang a lament in mourning for the dead.¹⁵

Hephaestion's pyre was as much an overblown victory monument as it was a commemoration of Alexander's dead companion. Even in his grief, Alexander could not resist making a self-serving political statement in a dazzling hybrid of Macedonian and Persian features. There were symbolic weapons, archers, battleships, and lion hunts (representing the idea of Alexander as the victorious hunter of Persian civilization). The battleships likely referred to the fleet of ships Alexander commissioned to conquer Arabia.¹⁶

The eagle was the symbolic animal of Zeus, and Alexander's coins depict it being grasped by the god. The snake serves the same function for Ammon, and Ptolemy later used it as an emblem of Alexander's cult in Alexandria. The struggle between Greeks and centaurs, steeped in ancient myth, had been used as an allegory of the war between Greece and Persia ever since Xerxes's invasion of 480 B.C.E. The lions and bulls, emblems of the Babylonian deities Ishtar and Adad respectively, were the protectors of both body and pyre.¹⁷ At the top of the pyre, Alexander and his men dedicated their arms, a symbol of mourning as well as militarism. As a final gesture, they threw gold and ivory figurines onto the pyre.

During excavations in Babylon in 1904, archaeologists digging just inside the ancient city walls uncovered a large mud-brick platform still standing to a height of twenty-four feet after two thousand years. The

scorch marks told of a fierce conflagration, as did the preserved impressions of burned palm tree trunks.¹⁸

Although the base of the pyre survived, there is no trace of the tomb, and ancient sources are silent on the matter. Diodorus's description is graphic and detailed but does not mention the funeral or the impressive mausoleum Alexander intended for Hephaestion. Only Arrian mentions the funeral games, briefly: "The festival was far more splendid than ever before both in the number of competitors and in the money spent upon it. In all 3,000 men competed in the various events."¹⁹ An event costing ten thousand talents merits only three lines by a single author.

As for the funeral itself, we are left to imagine the scene, piecing together evidence from other descriptions. After sunset on the appointed day, the pyre was set ablaze, possibly by Alexander himself. Perfume, incense, and the aroma of roasting meat sacrifices mingled and wafted through the wide avenues and along the narrow streets and alleys of Babylon. The night air crackled and sparked with the burning palm trunks as well as laments, prayers, and the sound of horns blowing. Alexander's war elephants trumpeted their deep resonating battle cries, and the massed ranks of Macedonian soldiers clattered their shields and shouted to the gods. Alexander, the companions, army commanders, and ambassadors had a ringside view as the pyre exploded in flames and the costly edifice collapsed in on itself and crashed to the ground.

As memorable as this scene would have been, it is nowhere mentioned. Not a single word survives on the funeral of Alexander's lover and closest friend. Hephaestion's most telling obituary is the silence that surrounds it.

Different theories have sought to explain the silence. Some believe the elaborate pyre was the tomb, and that Hephaestion was buried and not cremated. The burned brick platform seems to argue otherwise, as does the fact that a templelike pyre of flammable materials could be built in months or even weeks, whereas a stone tomb would have taken far longer. Diodorus's description is surely an account of the completed pyre, but did it cost ten thousand talents to build? Or did this fantastic amount include the tomb Alexander envisaged? Alexander's last plans—although abandoned by his marshals and the army after his death as too

expensive and ambitious—include the construction of Hephaestion's tomb, so we must assume it was never built.

Macedonian royal tradition decreed cremation but did not mandate it, and full-body burial or inhumation was practiced as well. What the difference meant at the time is unknown. If we believe Diodorus that the Babylonian structure was a funeral pyre, then we can compare it to others uncovered by archaeologists in Macedonia and Cyprus.

Looming above the lush green pastures of the Gardens of Midas in western Macedonia, Tomb II at Vergina is the most famous example. Above the tomb were found burned remains of animal bones, arms, armor, and ivory figurines presumed to be decorations from a funeral couch.²⁰ At Salamis in Cyprus a similar example was found—a thirty-three-foot-high tumulus yielding the fire-damaged relics of arms, armor, golden wreaths, and human statues covered by a stone pyramid.²¹

The Salamis pyre was a memorial and probably a tomb, and likely Alexander intended to convert Hephaestion's elaborate pyre into an equally grand mausoleum built on the same spot.²² Hephaestion's pyre, in other words, was a tinderbox replica of what would later be built in stone.²³

Alexander's expensive plans for Hephaestion's tomb were abandoned when Alexander himself died. And so history's most expensive funeral proved as ephemeral as the poorest—no tomb was built and Hephaestion's body was never mentioned again. Remains would be placed in a ceramic funerary urn or a golden box known as a larnax, normally reserved for royalty. Both the historical and the archaeological record are silent on the fate of these remains. The man Alexander loved above all others disappeared from history amid the thick black smoke of his funeral pyre.

The embers of Hephaestion's pyre were hardly cold when Alexander turned to the only work he knew—military conquest. The ambition that had driven him since childhood overshadowed this grievous personal loss. His immediate concern was to finish converting Babylon into a port for launching a thousand warships against Arabia.

In late May 323, Alexander's envoy to Siwa returned. The oracle of Ammon had pronounced that Hephaestion could be accorded the

status and rites of a hero but not worshiped as a god.²⁴ Alexander jubilantly ordered the establishment of a hero cult in Pella, Hephaestion's hometown, and another in Athens. Alexander sent an official letter ordering his Egyptian satrap Cleomenes to build two hero shrines in Alexandria and ensure that every business contract was sanctified by invoking Hephaestion's name. At Babylon, Hephaestion's cult engaged in sacrifices to the gods and nightly drinking parties. Alexander was in good spirits; the army was massed and ready, and Hephaestion's name had been immortalized.

Nearchus, Alexander's Cretan-born admiral, would spearhead the seaborne invasion of Arabia. Alexander threw a lavish banquet in his honor one evening in early June. Later that night, Alexander and his closest companions were invited to a second party by another friend, Medius of Larissa. Not surprisingly, this proved to be a monumental binge-drinking affair.²⁵ The drunken session ended with grand toasts, and Alexander is said to have drained a twelve-pint flagon of undiluted wine. Diodorus, our earliest source, describes what happened next.

Instantly he shrieked aloud as if smitten by a violent blow and was conducted by his Friends who led him by the hand back to his apartments. His chamberlains put him to bed and attended him closely, but the pain increased and the physicians were summoned. No one was able to do anything helpful and Alexander continued in great discomfort and acute suffering. When he, at length, despaired of life, he took off his ring and handed it to Perdiccas. His Friends asked: "To whom do you leave the kingdom?" and he replied: "To the strongest."²⁶

This dramatic version of events supports the accusation of poisoning. More sober accounts are given by Arrian and by Plutarch in his *Life of Alexander*. Both writers apparently drew on the so-called Royal Diary or *Ephemerides*—a day-by-day account of Alexander's affairs written probably by his secretary, Eumenes.

According to this common source, Alexander developed a fever at Medius's party. After resting for a day in his quarters in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar, he resumed planning the coming invasion. Another meal and drinking session with Medius followed. Six days later, his condition

had become critical and he was confined to bed, guarded by his senior companions. Two days later, his soldiers forced their way into his room fearing he was dead. Arrian records the moment: "Lying speechless as the men filed by, he yet struggled to raise his head, and in his eyes there was a look of recognition for each individual as he passed."²⁷ Shortly after the final soldier had left, the king lost consciousness.

Alexander died in Babylon on June 10, 323 B.C.E., age thirty-two. Two traditions arose: his death was natural and his death was suspicious. Only Roman descriptions of Alexander's death have survived, and the earliest was written three hundred years after the event. Not one of these sources is free of contamination: retrospective propaganda, self-serving lies, half-truths, and fantastical legend grew by accretion during the three centuries between Alexander's death and Diodorus's first account. Unless Alexander's body is found, the truth of his untimely death will never be known. What is certain is that at the moment of death, Alexander was reborn as a universal myth of how humans can stretch the boundaries of the possible.

Conspiracy theories flourished at the time and have been joined in recent years by an equal number of scientific explanations. Alexander may have been poisoned or he may have died of natural causes, his death hastened by overindulgence, the cumulative effects of battle wounds, the loss of Hephaestion, and possibly some unknown disease.

Alexander's mother, Olympias, believed her son was poisoned, and at the first opportunity she desecrated the tomb of Iolaus, accusing him of murder.²⁸ Iolaus was Antipater's son, and Alexander's cupbearer and so a natural suspect. What kind of poison might Iolaus have administered? Arsenic was widely known, and its symptoms of abdominal pain, shock, and hypertension fitted Alexander's decline. Strychnine was also known among Aristotle's followers. But these are both quick-acting poisons, however, and Alexander lingered for ten days. White hellebore (*Ventrum album*)—a well-known purgative—is also a possibility.²⁹ It weakens the heart, brings on fever and stomach pains, and ends in death. A teaspoonful disguised in strong wine would suffice.

But what assassin or group of assassins would want Alexander to die slowly and possibly take revenge on those he suspected of poisoning him? For the next two years Alexander's body lay in state in Babylon.

Read one way, this inertia suggests political and administrative gridlock: strategic indecision and an empire in denial. If Alexander had been the victim of conspiracy, a plan surely would have been enacted.

This lack of direction can also be argued to suggest that the conspirators took their time to let things cool down and kept a collective grip on the empire while they divided it among themselves. In this view, it might not be surprising that it took two years for the marshals to reach a workable deal.

Poison remains a possibility, and it is a suspicious coincidence that Hephaestion died under similar circumstances only months before. But Alexander's symptoms are only vaguely described and the timing remains a problem. And besides, there are other possible explanations.

Malaria also explains some of Alexander's symptoms, such as fever, weakness, and delirium. As many ancient and modern authors have pointed out, Alexander had spent weeks sailing down the Euphrates, exploring the marshes at its mouth in order to improve drainage and canal irrigation, and could easily have been infected. If malaria was the culprit, this was an ironic and unlucky death, as the disease was endemic in Macedonia at that time (and remained so until the twentieth century), where Alexander spent the first twenty years of his life without contracting it.

Typhoid is another suspect, causing fever, stomach pain, peritonitis, and delirium, with severe cases being fatal within two weeks. If Hephaestion died of a fever in Ecbatana, then Alexander could have contracted it from him.³⁰ One of typhoid's more striking symptoms is creeping paralysis. Victims bear the impression of death for days before it actually occurs. This might explain why Alexander's companions and embalmers, visiting the body six days later, saw that "no decay had set into it and that there was not even the slightest discoloration. The vital look that comes from the breath of life had not yet vanished from his face," according to Curtius's account.³¹

Alexander may have died of West Nile fever, a viral encephalitis that can be transmitted by mosquitoes, with birds serving as ideal hosts and often exhibiting strange behavior as a result.³² Plutarch describes an incident in which ravens attacked each other and fell dead at the king's feet near the gates of Babylon.³³ Observing bird behavior was a divinatory art at the time; the unusual behavior constituted a serious omen.

In the final analysis, we are left with a royal corpse. What should we do with it? The consequences of the marshals' decision—or indecision—laid out a course we are still following two thousand years later.

A corpse has to be attended to. Yet even in this, Alexander was different. He lay unattended for six days before the marshals and the embalmers examined him again, only to find no signs of decay. In the ovenlike heat of high summer this was an unnerving discovery and clearly unsettled the embalmers, as Curtius recalled. So it was that, after being instructed to see to the body in their traditional fashion, the Egyptians and Chaldeans did not dare touch him at first since he seemed to be alive. Then, praying that it be lawful in the eyes of god and man for humans to touch a god, they cleaned out the body.³⁴

Cleaning out the body is a euphemism for a gory procedure.³⁵ The embalmers were justifiably nervous, as Greeks and Macedonians did not mummify their dead, and so were ignorant of the bloody procedure.³⁶ They began eviscerating the cadaver, uneasy perhaps that their actions could easily offend the Macedonians and lead to their own execution for desecrating Alexander's body.

Why Alexander was embalmed remains a mystery, though he himself set the precedent with Hephaestion at Ecbatana the previous autumn. But Alexander, unlike Hephaestion, was a king, and mummifying his corpse broke with royal Macedonian tradition in spectacular fashion. Faced with silence in the ancient sources, we must assume that after days of wrangling, the marshals collectively sanctioned it. In keeping with his view of himself as divine and as king of Asia as well as Macedonia, Alexander was now being preserved for all time and all peoples, though this may not have been what the marshals intended.

It seems likely, following the example of Hephaestion, that Alexander's body was embalmed to preserve it for later cremation or burial in its final resting place. Perdicas, Ptolemy, and Seleucus probably did not intend Alexander to be mummified for eternity.

Alexander's embalmed body was lifted into a golden coffin lined with scented herbs. Perdicas, according to one account, placed Alexander's body in the casket, covered it with a robe and purple cloak, and tied the royal diadem across his forehead. The body was anointed with perfumes

mixed with honey, and the sarcophagus was draped with a purple cover.³⁷ On hearing of Alexander's death, the Athenian orator Demades is said to have exclaimed, "Alexander dead? Impossible; the whole earth would stink of his corpse."³⁸ Demades's clever quip was well wide of the mark.

Death reunited Alexander with Hephaestion, and perhaps not just in the afterlife. It is not impossible, though no ancient writer mentions it, that Hephaestion's remains, probably a casket of ashes, were temporarily laid to rest somewhere near Alexander's coffin in a final and brief act of respect by the marshals. After a lifetime together, Alexander and Hephaestion went their separate ways in death—one to obscurity and the other to everlasting fame. Had Alexander lived, Hephaestion would have shared his universal renown. But when Alexander died, he consigned his lover to the darkness: his death unexplained, his tomb un-built, his remains forgotten, and his name hardly spoken again.

The marshals likely intended to cremate, not preserve, Alexander's remains. If so, events soon outran the plan. As days turned into months, the lifelike Alexander lay encased in gold, ruling their thoughts and fueling their growing personal ambitions. When they did not immediately dispose of Alexander's body, Perdicas, Ptolemy, and Seleucus became its prisoners. The gilded corpse took on a life of its own and became a weapon in the deadly game of legitimacy and succession that pitted the successors against one another. Mummified, the king faced an extraordinary future.