



HERACLES TO ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Treasures from the Royal Capital of Macedon,
a Hellenic Kingdom in the Age of Democracy

A collaboration between

the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

and the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Tourism,
17th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities

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HERACLES TO ALEXANDER THE GREAT:
Treasures from the Royal Capital of Macedon,
A Hellenic Kingdom in the Age of Democracy

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attached to the linen cuirass of King Philip II
Back cover illustration: A celestial or solar symbol
became the emblem of Macedonian royal power
Frontispiece: Back of the marble throne and eternal
seat of the Queen Mother Eurydice

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3 Royalty and Democracy: the case of Macedonia

Miltiades B. Hatzopoulos

The Athenians, like the Arcadians, were no more autochthonous than other Greek peoples, but, unlike the Thessalians or the Boeotians, who settled in their respective territories during the last centuries of the second millennium, they did not maintain any recollection of their Middle Bronze Age (2000–1600 BC) migration to their historical habitat. The Macedonians knew they were relative latecomers and their legends (or mythological tradition) situated their occupation of the Central Macedonian Plain seven generations before the time of Herodotus, roughly in the first decades of the seventh century BC.¹

In fact, the Greek presence in what we today call Macedonia was significantly older and the Argead Macedonians, originally transhumant pastoralists, speakers of a north-western Greek dialect, who originated from the Pindus mountain chain and founded the Macedonian kingdom in Lower Macedonia (having conquered a Brygian town named Edessa, making it their capital, Aegae), were only the latest Greek-speaking group to appear in the region. Recent archaeological discoveries show that even in the Late Bronze Age (1600–1200 BC) the Mycenaean world extended well north of Mount Olympus and the Kambounian mountains, comprising at least the southern part of Macedonia. Abundant Mycenaean pottery, both imported and locally produced, weapons, pins, brooches and syllabic script have been discovered in tombs at Orestis, Elimeia and Pieria. Elements of the Achaean dialect of this early Greek-speaking stratum emerge in later inscriptions from these areas, while an early Greek presence of a different origin is also traceable on the shores of the Thermaic Gulf and in the Chalkidic peninsula, which were eventually incorporated into the Macedonian kingdom. Recent excavations have brought to light there Late Mycenaean period settlements of Ionian Greeks hailing from Euboea, whom Herodotus would later call the *Chalkidikon genos*.

These newcomers from the Pindus mountain chain merged with earlier Greek speakers, founding several principalities in the Macedonian uplands. Thucydides (2.99.2) mentions the kingdoms of the Lynkestai and the Elimiotai ‘and other peoples of the highlands’, who were subject to the kings of Lower Macedonia, but had their own kings. Among the omitted names of peoples



Fig. 32 Goats near Aegae in a snowy landscape

who might have figured are the Orestai, the Tymphaioi and Paravaioi, and perhaps the Derriopes. We know that the Lynkestian kings claimed descent from the Bacchiads of Corinth and the Orestai from Orestes himself, but neither could compete with the kings of the Argead Macedonians, who called themselves Temenids and claimed lineage to Heracles as the great-great-grandfather of Perdiccas, the founder of their kingdom. It is perhaps thanks to this association that they were recognised as the suzerains of the lesser Macedonian princedoms.

The ancient literary sources on Macedonian institutions are far from straightforward, often expressing the personal prejudices of their authors. It is unclear if Macedonia was a unitary state of the *ethnos* ('people') or a federation of *poleis* (city-states). Pseudo-Skylax, a geographer writing in the mid-fourth century BC, uses the term *ethnos* to qualify the Macedonians, but at the same time lists a series of Macedonian *poleis*, thus employing a term which elsewhere in his work designates the other form of independent states known in Greece. The Macedonian form of government is also contentious: was it an absolute monarchy or a democratic kingship? The second-century BC historian Polybius denounces the inexperience of Macedonians in democratic government, but elsewhere draws attention to the 'egalitarian' relationship between the king and ordinary Macedonians, who are never described as subjects, but as citizens. The ignorance, prejudice and sometimes even hostility to which statements in the ancient authors bear witness have left the field free for subjective modern constructions, some of which show admiration and others denunciation of ancient Macedonian institutions, for reasons that have to be sought in the personality of the individual writers. In contrast, increasing evidence provided by the archaeological, epigraphic and numismatic record in recent years allows us to form a less subjective opinion.

Macedonia was – and still is – to the Greeks of the south an exotic country. The traveller who penetrates the Valley of Tempe to enter Pieria discovers a land that in scale, if not nature, is completely different. He is greeted by the permanent snows of Mount Olympus, the highest mountain in Greece (2,917m). Straight roads, bordered by tall poplars, lead him across vast grass-lands, watered by perennial rivers, whose banks are grazed not only by goats and sheep (fig. 32), but also cows and buffalo. Except for a strip along the coast, he will not see any olive trees. As he ascends to the high plateaux, he encounters forests of oak, beech and even birch. Although the lion and the wild ox, once the favourite trophies of royal hunts, no longer inhabit the hills, the deer, the lynx, the wolf and the bear still resist the attacks of hunters. Over the vast stretches of lakes Prespa and Vegorritis fly swans, storks and pelicans, while in their depth swarm freshwater fish.²

Macedonia, along with Thessaly and Epirus, belongs unquestionably to a distinctive unit, legitimately called 'northern Greece', but one that should not obliterate another division between western and eastern (or Aegean) Greece cutting down the peninsula along the Pindus range from as far north as the lake district to as far south as the Gulf of Corinth. Lower Macedonia shares with Thessaly the vast plains and wide temperature variations. On the other hand, they both contrast with the strongly folded limestone mountain ranges of Epirus, between which the valleys are tightly squeezed. The Upper Macedonian districts of Orestis and Tymphaia also form transitional areas between Epirus on the one hand and Lower Macedonia and Thessaly on the other. In this respect Macedonia, with its two constituent parts, occupies an intermediate position between Thessaly and Epirus, reflected in its dialect, economic and social life, and political institutions. Macedonia, with an important pastoral economy in the uplands and extensive farming in the plains, falls between the Epirote and the Thessalian model. Unlike the latter, it provides little evidence for the existence of a servile population. Significantly, there is no trace either of aristocrats of baronial status comparable to the Thessalian model, or serfs bound to the land. Large domains did exist, especially in the conquered territories outside Macedonia proper, seemingly lent or leased to members of the owner's family, or tenants, rather than being directly exploited with the help of servile or helot manpower. The hearth, applicable to their ancestor's transhumant past, retains the name *pyrokausis* ('camp fire'), generally comprising a couple with their unmarried children, possibly some poor relatives and servants. Slavery was of the Homeric rather than of the chattel type. Manumitted slaves remained with the family of their previous owners, or were given assistance towards acquiring their own establishment. Another vestige of transhumant pastoralism was that women, who had to fend for themselves during the menfolk's prolonged absences, had acquired the possibility to engage in legal transactions without the presence of a *kyrios* (the male guardian); if widowed, women could also act as heads of family and guardians of their underage children, and within the royal family as regents.

Geographic conditions and economic activities largely determined the extent and pattern of settlement. The uplands of Upper Macedonia, like those of Epirus and most of western Greece, were until the fourth century essentially faithful to the *kome*, the open, unfortified village. In contrast, the plains of Lower Macedonia, like those of Thessaly, experienced urban life from the end of the sixth century at the latest.

This disparity is also reflected in the economic, social and political conditions. Transhumant pastoralism, common for centuries for both the Argead Macedonians and their cousins of the Upper Macedonian princedoms, is incompatible with the autarky and self-centredness of the Greek *polis*. Even until a few decades ago, herdsmen, before moving great distances from plain to mountain in the spring and upon their return in autumn, held gatherings and celebrated festivals, thus maintaining a sense of community. These gatherings gradually created common religious centres, such as Dion in Macedonia, which evolved around the cult of Zeus Olympios. Regular assemblies, called *apellai* were held on these occasions, which among other things designated the *basileus*, the part hereditary and part elective Head of State. This sense of community was enhanced by the part real and part constructed memory of the common origin of the group, the *ethnos*, which after the collapse of the Mycenaean world had conquered and appropriated the land.

Although the Macedonian kingdom appears from its inception as the state of an *ethnos*, of a people – albeit centred around a *polis*, or capital, Aegae – its expansion led to the inclusion of other communities that, from the end of the sixth century at the latest, are qualified in the extant literary sources by the term *polis*. This development of sedentary life and the rise of urban centres soon became the focal point for economic, social and political activities in the kingdom of Lower Macedonia, altering the traditional relations between local institutions and those of the whole *ethnos*. The cities acquired proper institutions, in particular a board of executive magistrates called *tagoi* (ordainers) and councils composed of elders named *peliganes* (grey-haired, *i.e.* elders), providing a layer of local administration between the gatherings of the popular assemblies.

By the final years of the fifth century there are clear signs of conflict between the king and the cities of Lower Macedonia. Some cities detached themselves from the kingdom, either joining as autonomous units other political formations such as the Athenian Confederation, or in an attempt to achieve independent status. The movement was to intensify during the first half of the fourth century under the impulse of the Chalkidian League, nearly leading to the disintegration of the common institutions of the Macedonian ethnic state.

For this period, the sources provide sparse information about political life in the cities and only glimpses of the central authorities at work. The main-spring of power seems to be the king, but he was nevertheless obliged to govern according to the ancestral custom, the *nomos* of the Macedonians. These restrictions regulated his relations with the *ethnos*, and above all the other members of the dynasty and with his Companions (*hetairoi*) – those few dozen



Fig. 33 The hieratic diadem of King Philip II (Cat. no. 87)

who formed his entourage, without whose support he would have been unable to rule effectively. The common people made only rare appearances as a last resort, punishing a king's failures by dismissing him. The predominant role of the king derived from his position as political, military and religious leader of the Argead Macedonians, but also his capacities as suzerain of the kings of Upper Macedonia and master of the conquered cities and territories not yet colonised by the Macedonians and integrated into Macedonia proper, the revenues of which accrued to the royal chest (fig. 33).

As Aristotle observed, 'royalties are preserved by bringing them into a more moderate form; for the fewer powers the kings have, the longer time the office in its entirety must last, for they themselves become less despotic and more equal to their subjects in temper, and their subjects envy them less' (Aristotle, *Politics* 5.1313a). We know from epigraphic evidence that in the late fifth century the Molossian king Tharypas, anticipating Aristotle's advice, introduced reforms creating a contractual kingship based on the mutual observance of the traditional *nomos*. His Macedonian contemporary Archelaos (413–399 BC) was also a reformer king, with his efforts cut short by his assassination in 399 BC. The ancient authors insist on his building activities and military reforms. However, Archelaos was also known to have reorganised the Olympic festival at Dion in honour of Zeus Olympios and the Muses. Given that this was a festival later attested as one of the two occasions of the biannual meeting of the Macedonian assembly and delegates of the cities, it is not impossible that this reorganisation had an institutional significance. From the early decades of the fourth century, Macedonians begin to be identified by a city ethnic, implying reorganisation into local political units.

The great instability punctuated by the civil wars and foreign invasions following Archelaos' assassination left the task of radically transforming Macedonia to another reformer king, Philip II (360–336 BC). The presence in the Old Kingdom of cities such as Pydna and Pella, each jealous of its autonomy and ready to rebel and secede, along with the annexation of formerly independent city-states in the New Territories east of the River Axios, such as Amphipolis and Apollonia, necessitated a reorganisation of the Macedonian state on the basis of the *polis*. The autonomy of the existing cities was formally recognised. In the indigenous hinterland of the New Territories, new cities were founded by Macedonian colonists or created by the federation of villages based around a market town called *metropolis*. In Upper Macedonia the former semi-independent *ethne* of the Elimiotai, the Orestai, the Lynkestai and the Tymphaioi-Paravaioi, were granted *polis* status. Thus in Macedonia proper, each local political unit had its own citizenship (*politeia*), legislation (*nomoi*), and governing body (*ekklesia*, *boule*, *archontes*) headed by an *epistates* and an eponymous magistrate, the priest of Asclepius. Philip, who was elected as hereditary Head of State of Thessaly, recognised the advantages of its regional organisation into four districts governed by an equal number of tetrarchs. He introduced it in Macedonia, creating four districts, each with its local capital (Amphipolis, Thessalonice, Pella, Heraclea?), where assemblies could be held and taxes collected. This reform combined the advantages of decentralisation in a country that Philip's conquests had more than trebled (Map 2), with a better control of the autonomous cities through the *stratego*i who were probably appointed to head each district.

The king was surrounded by a *synedrion* (council) of Companions, friends and army generals, which took political decisions with him. The most important questions were formally submitted for approval by the Assembly of the Macedonian citizen-soldiers, which was able to pass judgement on capital offences and acclaim the new king. Thus by the end of the third quarter of the fourth century BC, besides the Head of State and the Common Assembly, the two traditional organs of the Macedonian ethnic state, there existed scores of autonomous communities who sent their delegates to the festivals, coinciding with the meetings of the Common Assembly, but without being organically integrated into them. This new order lasted until the Roman conquest of Macedonia in 168 BC.

The Macedonian 'constitution' as it evolved under the reign of Philip II, shared a number of features with the 'constitutions' of pre-republican Thessaly and Epirus, which set the three northern ethnic states apart from their cognates in the south, such as the Achaean and the Aetolian federations. The salient feature was the paramount position of a Head of State – not with an annual mandate but life tenure – theoretically elective, but in practice hereditary. In internal affairs the local communities were usually left to their own devices, once the Common Assembly had appointed or – more usually acclaimed – the Head of State. This implied conferral on him of the traditional prerogatives to mobilise and command the army and freely dispose of the 'federal' revenues,



Fig. 34 Gold discs found in the tomb of a member of the royal family of the Temenids (Cat. no. 60)

so that he was in effect able to pursue the foreign policy of his choice. The control of war and diplomacy (through the declaration of war and the ratification of treaties), usually listed among the traditional rights of the Common Assembly, inevitably became illusory. Once the army was mobilised under the orders of a prestigious commander-in-chief, the actual decision on the declaration of war was bound by mere formality, with no assembly likely to challenge an advantageous treaty contracted by a victorious chief. In case of failure, of course, the Head of State could always be deposed, as happened several times, but this action was an extreme means of popular control. A Macedonian king would appear to an Athenian politician not only as a supreme commander in war, master of all sacrifices, and judge in law-suits (at an appellate court), according to the classical definition of heroic kingship by Aristotle (Aristotle, *Politics* 3.1285b), but also as 'sole master of his own policy, open or secret, at once general, absolute ruler and treasurer' (Demosthenes, *First Olynthiac* 1.4-5 on Philip II) (fig. 34).

Another shared feature of the three northern monarchical *ethne*, in contradistinction to the southern republican ones, was the absence of a *synedrion*, a standing organ of representative government reflecting the relative importance of the constituent local communities and enabling them to make their voice heard. The only *synedrion* in Macedonia under the Argead and the Antigonid kings is not a proper organ of the *ethnos*, but a consultative body composed of the king's companions or friends – a court nobility recruited among city elites. Such interpenetration of the political personnel at the central and the

local level made up for the absence of genuine representative *synedria*. It is also true that delegates from the local communities might join this Privy Council on certain occasions, but even this did not make them equivalent to the genuine *synedria* with the proportional representation of the southern republican *ethne*. It is only after the abolition of kingship by the Romans that Macedonia acquired such a deliberative body.

In the absence of a genuine *synedrion* integrating local political units into central government, what were the relations between central and local governments in Macedonia under the kings? The evidence that enables us to view such relationships in action consists of the letters (*epistolai*) and ordinances (*diagrammata*) emanating from the Head of State, the real holder of central authority. Some twenty-eight letters and eight *diagrammata* from the central Macedonian authorities offer us a varied and instructive picture of the relations between central and local authorities. There was a clear distinction between a reserved domain (army and court) where central authorities possessed a discretionary power to legislate, and other government matters in which the royal will could manifest itself only if mediated through local authority. In military affairs the king as commander-in-chief had a direct relationship with the Macedonians under his command, who were paid and often equipped by him. Thus army regulations were decided, probably in Council (*synedrion*), but by the king's sole authority, acquiring force of law largely without any intervention from local authorities. Therefore there was no mention of an addressee and the order for publication was included in a clause of the text of the *diagramma* itself.

The king could also request from the local authorities the publication of all sorts of information or rulings made by him, either in the form of letters or of ordinances. The latter were transmitted by a covering letter to the competent authorities of the local communities, who, according to the scope and content of the documents, took the appropriate steps for publication.

Letters from the central authorities, accompanying extracts of ordinances, might name a single person, the *epistates*, or the city authorities as their addressee. The occasional use of the second person plural leaves little doubt that even in the former case the chief magistrate figures in his representative capacity and the whole community is the real addressee. The explicit mention of the city authorities in royal letters is usually an indication that the request of the central authorities could not be satisfied by a simple executive decision by the chief magistrate, but required legislative action by all the deliberative organs (magistrates, Council, Assembly) of the community.

On the other hand, as we learn by over 25 civic legislative documents discovered to date, local legislation and decisions on local matters (laws concerning education or taxation, decrees honouring citizens and foreigners) lay entirely within the competence of the local authorities. Even if we suspect that they were prompted by royal initiative, these local authorities could even take decisions that theoretically had a bearing on foreign policy, such as the granting of citizenship, proxeny and decisions relating to security in time of war or peace.

This unstable equilibrium between the Head of State, the *ethnos* and the local political units it comprised, in order to last, it required all the stature the heroic dynasties could provide and exceptionally capable personalities such as the Temenids (and later the Antigonids). The unfailing loyalty of the Macedonians to their institutions highlights that it would have continued had it not been brutally destroyed by the Romans in 168/167 B.C. The reforms of Philip V and Perseus during the first third of the second century which granted more autonomy to districts and local political units exemplified by the replacement of the single *epistates* by boards of two politarchs and the end of the royal monopoly of minting, signified the creation of a political system more integrated and respectful of the composite nature of the state. The Macedonian kingdom in its final phase, could indeed claim its place among the autonomous peoples and the democratic cities of Greece.