

THE RETURN OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT IN THE THIRD CENTURY A.D.: A QUESTION OF *DAIMONES* AND PHYSICAL IMMORTALITY

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Summary: Why was an unknown man insisting he was Alexander the Great received with distinct deference by Roman officials and Bacchic celebration by hundreds of attendants around A.D. 221? Examining Dio Cassius's presentation in light of contemporary beliefs, one finds that the enthusiastic reception most probably was due to the conviction that Alexander had actually returned physically immortal and deified, either resurrected or never having died at all. The respectful awe of the officials was also most likely caused by either this belief or by their holding that this was the dead and disembodied *hērōs* of the famed conqueror.

In A.D. 221 or right before, a man claiming to be Alexander the Great was received with deference and enthusiasm in three eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, more than half a millennium after the renowned conqueror originally lived. The contemporary Greco-Roman historian Dio Cassius is our only source on this event, but his succinct account is generally accepted as truthful and well-informed, as this traditionally renowned scholar born and raised in Bithynia was well connected in the area and writing about a contemporary event. And this is his report:

For briefly before this [an event in 221], a *daimōn* proclaiming to be Alexander of Macedon, and resembling him in all manners in looks and appearance, set out from around the Ister [Danube], after having appeared in some unknown manner, and travelled through Moesia and Thrace, together with four hundred men performing Bacchic rites, equipped with thyrsi and fawnskins and doing no harm. All those who were in Thrace at the time agreed that lodgings and all provisions for him were offered at public expense; and no one dared to

oppose him either by word or deed, neither magistrate, soldier, procurator, nor provincial governor, but he proceeded through daytime as in a procession, as far as Byzantium, as he had proclaimed. Then he went by ship and disembarked in the territory of Chalcedon [in Bithynia], and there, after performing certain sacred rites by night and burying a wooden horse, he vanished. This I was told while still in Asia (Trans. E. Cary, modified).¹

If one leaves out any supernatural explanation, this obviously involved an absolutely exceptional man, who after having gotten the idea to pose as the legendary conqueror, managed to gather an extensive following and considerable respect even among the upmost echelons of society. Beyond depicting his extraordinary ability to make the most profound impression on those he met,² and his appearance being similar to what his contemporaries held Alexander to look like, the sources do not give much in way of information about the man himself. However, as no one is recorded to have pointed out that this Pseudo-Alexander in reality was just so or so, he probably did not originate from the region through which he traversed.

The major question is, nevertheless, whom contemporaries thought this figure really was. Was he considered just a brazen impostor? Did others agree with Dio's assumption that this was a *daimōn*, who may or may not have been the fabulous conqueror and what did this really imply? Or did this pretender actually succeed in convincing people that he, indeed, was who he said he was, the real-life Alexander the Great, returned centuries after he had lived originally?

The status of Alexander after his death

The posthumous Alexander was in no way a peripheral figure in the Mediterranean world. In their extensive examinations of Alexandrian veneration, Boris Dreyer and Shane Wallace point to evidence of enduring cult

1 Cass. Dio 80.18.1-3.

2 Cf. Edmund Groag describing the man as “an ecstatic enthusiast,” who, “through his belief in himself, also carries the masses with him” (Groag 1909: 254).

in various places, like Arca Caesarea, Ephesus, and Thessaloniki.³ As Angela Kühnen argues, the momentous reception of the pretender may also, in itself, be considered “a clearer indication of the Alexander veneration of the time.”⁴ In Alexandria, Rhodes, and Ionian Teos, sacred games were celebrated in honour of Alexander.⁵ In what form the potentate was revered is rarely specified in the sources, but when games were performed in honour of various men, the men were generally venerated as *hērōes*, like Pelops at the Olympic games,⁶ Melicertes-Palaemon at the Isthmian games,⁷ and Opheltes-Archemorus at the Nemean games.⁸ As Diodorus of Sicily related how Ptolemy had the entombed Alexander in Alexandria honoured with sacrifices and magnificent games, he also specified that this was done in the way befitting *hērōes* (θυσίαις ἡρωικαῖς καὶ ἀγῶσι μεγαλοπρεπέσι τιμήσας).⁹

But Alexander was at times also honoured as a god, and not as a *hērōs*. In third century A.D. Erythrae, for example, there existed a “priest of Alexander the god” (ιερέα θεοῦ Ἀλεξάνδρου),¹⁰ while in Carian Bargylia a renovated statue central for the city’s third century A.D. cult simply bore the inscription “the god Alexander” (θεὸν Ἀλέξανδρον).¹¹ A third century A.D. dedication in Latin discovered in 1872 close to today’s deserted Macedonian village of Vlahčeni, might also present Alexander as a god. The inscription is addressed “to Jove and Juno and Dracco and Draccena and Alexander.”¹² As argued by Edmund Groag, Jean Gagé and Marjeta Šašel Kos, the epigraph may thus present Alexander as a god among

3 Dreyer 2009: 218-29; Wallace 2018: 183-87; Arcus Caesarea according to SHA *Alex. Sev.* 13.1; Ephesus according to SEG IV 521; Thessaloniki according to IG X 278.

4 Kühnen 2008: 40.

5 Alexandria according to Diod. Sic. 18.28.4; Rhodes according to IGR 4.1116; Teos according to Strabo 14.1.31.

6 Paus. 5.13.1-3.

7 Paus. 1.44.8, 2.1.3.

8 Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.6.4.

9 Diod. Sic. 18.28.4.

10 *Ierythrai* 64; cf. SIG III 1014.viii; my emphasis.

11 OGIS 3.

12 “IOVI ET IVNONI [E]T DRACCONI ET DRACCENAE ET ALEXANDRO EP[IT]YNCHANVS S(ERVVS) [R]VRI OCAVI C(LARISSIMI) V(IRI) POSV[IT].”

other gods, venerated along with Jupiter and Juno, and what were probably two regional serpent deities.¹³

According to Jaakkojuhani Peltonen, Greeks in the Roman Empire also tended to, more generally, portray “the Macedonian king as ‘our’ Alexander ... a Greek cultural hero” that gave them “something to identify with,”¹⁴ something that also could have contributed to the warm welcome the pretender received in his ancient Macedonian heartlands. But the exemplary status of Alexander was in no way limited to the east, as, for instance, pointed out by C.T. Mallan; he represented “a standard point of comparison” for any ambitious ruler in the Empire.¹⁵ It was at times a question of *imitatio Alexandri*. When Pompey celebrated his triumph for his victory over Mithridates of Pontus, a mighty ruler known for presenting himself in the image of Alexander, the Roman general himself chose to wear Alexander’s alleged mantel, which had been found among the possessions of the Pontic king.¹⁶ Dio Cassius also connected Alexander with a number of Roman potentates. Early in his career, Julius Caesar famously lamented his own shortcomings compared to that of Alexander, when encountering a statue of his role model in Cádiz.¹⁷ Octavian visited his tomb in Alexandria, emphasizing the alleged connection between himself and the formidable conqueror.¹⁸ After having crossed the Bay of Naples in a chariot, Caligula adorned himself with what he said was Alexander’s breastplate.¹⁹ Trajan claimed to have surpassed Alexander, after he had conquered the Parthian capital,²⁰ whereas Pescennius Niger was hailed by his men as the new Alexander, when initiating his unsuccessful claim to the imperial throne in 193.²¹

Caracalla was probably the emperor exhibiting the most intense enthusiasm about Alexander, imitating his idol in various ways, letting

13 Groag 1909: 253-55; Gagé 1975: 11-12; Kos 1991: 188-89.

14 Peltonen 2019: 57.

15 Mallan 2017: 137; cf. Carlsen 2016: 318-28; Wallace 2018: 171-72.

16 App. *Mithr.* 17.117.

17 Cass. Dio 37.52.2; cf. Suet. *Iul.* 7.1.

18 Cass. Dio 51.16.5; cf. Suet. *Aug.* 18.

19 Cass. Dio 59.17.3.

20 Cass. Dio 68.29.1.

21 Cass. Dio 75.6.2.

himself be depicted as him, and using weapons and cups held to be his.²² In 215, he, too, visited the mausoleum, offering the corpse of Alexander his purple cloak, as well as his belt, gemset rings, “and anything else of value on his person.”²³ He also created a military unit of 16,000 Macedonians, which he named “Alexander’s phalanx,” complete with arms and uniforms supposedly in style of that idealized period.²⁴ In a letter to the senate, Caracalla took his affinity with his magnificent idol to a new level, asserting that he was Alexander reincarnated. As he maintained, “Alexander had come to life again in the person of the Augustus, so that he might live on once more in him, having had such a short life before.”²⁵

Contemporary reactions

Examining the beliefs concerning the man asserting he was Alexander of Macedon, one finds that there does seem not to have been one single explanation as to what his appearance really meant to his contemporaries. Although Dio Cassius’s account is the only source preserved, he refers to various people holding divergent views on this dramatic incident.

First of all, there is Dio himself who has an opinion of his own. There are also the Bacchic entourage of several hundred men enthusiastically following the pretender; there are the “magistrate, soldier, procurator, and provincial governor” who did not “dare to oppose him,” and, finally, there are “all those” others “who were in Thrace at the time,” among whom the first or second-hand sources for Dio seem to be found.

One should also take into account how Dio connects the entire incident of Pseudo-Alexander with how emperor Elagabalus soon afterwards adopted his slightly younger cousin as his son and successor, while renaming him Alexander. According to Dio, the very reason why the emperor did this was “what happened in Moesia Superior” with the appearance of the Alexandrian pretender, along with an enigmatic prediction about how “some Alexander (τις Ἀλέξανδρος) should come from Emesa

22 Cass. Dio 78.7.1.

23 Hdn. 4.8.6-9.

24 Hdn. 4.8.7, 4.9.3; Cass. Dio 78.7.1-2

25 Cass. Dio 78.7.2.

[modern Homs in Syria] to succeed [Elagabalus].”²⁶ The main point here is, of course, how the emperor allegedly took Pseudo-Alexander’s spectacular appearance most seriously – even altering his policies in its wake. As Jesper Carlsen maintains, the reception of this impostor could have seemed so troubling to Elagabalus that he changed the name of his adopted son (conveniently from Arca Caesarea close to Emesa) to *Severus Alexander* in order to remove the possibility that he would be succeeded by any other Alexander, either someone claiming to be the original potentate returned like Pseudo-Alexander or, more simply, someone else by that illustrious name.²⁷ Although it is not possible to determine whether Elagabalus held that the pretender really was Alexander returned or some other supernatural figure, or whether his actions were based solely on the extraordinary reactions of others, the acts of the emperor testify to how momentous this entire incident was generally held to be. The extraordinary reception of the man claiming “to be Alexander of Macedon” was no trifling matter.

The nature of Dio’s *daimōn*

Describing the pretender as a “*daimōn*,” Dio himself holds that this was no ordinary man but a supernatural figure. Indeed, he connects the entire incident to “some divine arrangement (ἐκ θείας τινὸς παρασκευῆς).”²⁸ As such, he considered Pseudo-Alexander as something else entirely than the Nero pretender appearing about twelve years after the death of this emperor in A.D. 68. Whereas Dio simply dismissed this “Pseudo-Nero” as an Asiatic impostor “named Terentius Maximus,”²⁹ the Alexander pretender is depicted as an otherworldly *daimōn* inspiring awe. Here one should also note that there are no sources connecting anything miraculous with the claims of any of the three men who asserted

26 Cass. Dio 80.17.2.

27 Carlsen 2016: 330; cf. Shayegan 2004: 298.

28 Cass. Dio 80.17.3.

29 Cass. Dio 66.19.3.

they were Nero the first two decades after his demise. They all apparently based their claims on the rather mundane assumption that Nero had not been killed at all, but simply escaped.³⁰

When examining what Dio meant by Pseudo-Alexander being a “*daimōn*,” one should remember how complex this term really was. Originally, as in Homer, this was a synonym for an Olympian god, whereas Hesiod used *daimōn* for the classical hero or *hērōs*, the disembodied soul of certain mightier dead. As first found in Pindar in the mid fifth century B.C., there is also a belief in *daimones* watching over each mortal from birth, something that became particularly important in Platonic thinking and remained so even in imperial times, as seen with Plutarch.³¹ Another type of *daimones*, as presented in Plato’s *Symposium* by the priestess Diotima, are lesser divinities “halfway between gods and men,” whose main role is that of being “envoys and interpreters that ply between heaven and earth.”³² *Epinomis*, probably also by Plato, refers to “*daimones* and creatures of the air” being ranked immediately under the traditional gods and the heavenly bodies.³³ These *daimones* seem also closely related to the ones Apuleius referred to in the second century A.D., describing their bodies as “so loose-knit, lustrous, and fine-spun that all the rays of our gaze are let through by their loose texture.” Most strikingly, they are “not easily visible to anyone, unless they reveal their form at divine command.”³⁴

Fergus Millar argues that for Dio, *daimōn* seems like “the neutral term by which he designates any divine force or intervention.”³⁵ According to Dio a *daimōn* could certainly manifest itself in rather different ways, not

30 Tacitus *Hist.* 2.8, 1.2; Cass. Dio 66.19.3; Suet. *Ner.* 57. The Christian belief that Nero at the end of time would be resurrected from the dead mightier than ever, or return from some unknown place to where he had been miraculously translated, is only first documented in the beginning of the fourth century by Lactantius (*De mort. pers.* 2; cf. August. *De civ. D.* 20.19).

31 Pind. *Ol.* 13.105; Pl. *Ap.* 40a; *Phd.* 107d; *Resp.* 617d-e, 620 d-e; Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.2; Plut. *De gen.* 10; *Caes.* 69.2. Cf. Burkert 1985: 179-81, 321-22.

32 Pl. *Symp.* 202d-203a.

33 Pl. *Epin.* 984d-e.

34 Apul. *De deo Soc.* 11.

35 Millar 1964: 179.

least in dreams, as what they did to him on several occasions.³⁶ But although he seems to have understood his own life as directly affected by the kind of guardian *daimōn* who follows each and every one from birth, this does not appear to be how he understood the Alexander pretender either.

Turning to the *daimōn* as a lesser divinity placed somewhere halfway between gods and humans, one finds, however, that this is an understanding that apparently fits Dio's *daimōn* claiming to be Alexander the Great. The way he appeared mysteriously, and, in the end, simply vanished not only functions as proof of his profoundly different nature in Dio's account, but mirrors Apuleius's description of such *daimones* being able to appear and disappear at will.

An important clue to how Dio understood the *daimōn* claiming to be Alexander is found in the most direct parallel in his texts, namely his depiction of the *daimōn*, who miraculously appeared and disappeared in Italy in 217, or soon before. The rendition of this episode is as follows:

In Rome, moreover, a *daimōn* having the appearance of a man led a donkey up to the Capitol and afterwards to the palace, seeking its master, as he claimed, and saying that the emperor [Caracalla] was dead and Jupiter was ruling now. As he was arrested for this and sent by [the praefectus urbi Flavius] Maternianus to Antoninus [Caracalla], he said: "I will do as you bid, but I will not converse with this emperor, but with another." And when he reached Capua a little later, he vanished (Trans. E. Cary, modified).³⁷

Dio's depiction of this other *daimōn* appears as equally enigmatic as that of the Alexander pretender. Most importantly, one finds the same kind of unexplained first appearance and by how they both inexplicably disappeared in the end (ἀφανῆς ἐγένετο).

When comparing Dio's presentation of Pseudo-Alexander and the *daimōn* in Rome, it is, however, important to note that the quintessential indication of there being something supernatural about these two figures – that is the way they both inexplicably vanished in the end – is

36 See e.g. Cass. Dio 73.23.2-4, 79.10, 80.5.

37 Cass. Dio 79.7.4

something that could not have influenced how they were perceived when *initially* encountered. Prior to their miraculous disappearance, both of Dio's *daimones* looked and acted essentially like ordinary mortals, speaking and interacting with people along their way. None of the more extraordinary things they did, neither claiming to be Alexander the Great nor presenting some unsubstantiated assertion about the current emperor, classify as anything miraculous as such. Dio's unambiguous understanding of the two as *daimones* consequently appears not to be based on their initial appearance. He apparently accepts them as *daimones* in hindsight, in connection with how they both mysteriously vanished.

This must be taken into account also when examining how Pseudo-Alexander could have been understood by those who first encountered him and who received him in such a remarkable manner. Although both this episode and the one from Rome seem certainly less fantastic prior to their vanishing, there is still reason to consider their reception in the light of how one possibly could expect people who believed that supernatural figures could manifest themselves would react if they encountered one. But here there is also a distinctive difference between the two incidents.

Looking at the man in Rome, one finds that there is no indication that any of those who encountered him prior to his disappearance thought of him as anything but an annoying rabble-rouser, who had to be arrested and duly punished for his *lèse-majesté*. The cautious and deferent way with which the Roman officials met the Alexander pretender seems, however, more in agreement with how one should act when encountering a *daimōn*. On the other hand, anonymous *daimones* tended not to present themselves as such renown figures as Alexander of Macedon. As such, this is an unlikely explanation for what the officials thought the pretender to be. Looking at the parade of jubilant bacchants, one finds that this is not at all consistent with their believing this was a *daimōn*, as such explicitly divine rites were not performed in relation with such lesser superhuman beings.

A god manifested?

As the most traditional understanding of a *daimōn* was that of an Olympian god, it may be relevant to examine whether some could have perceived Pseudo-Alexander as one of these traditional deities having chosen to appear in the likeness of that most fabulous conqueror.

As witnessed already in Homer, gods could manifest themselves as ordinary humans, often duping people knowing the person they impersonated, like when Athena in the *Odyssey* took the shape of King Mentos of the Taphians³⁸ and the daughter of the Phaeacian sea captain Dymas,³⁹ when Apollo appeared as king Mentos of the Cicones in the *Iliad*,⁴⁰ or when Poseidon in the *Iliad* took the guise of the Aetolian warrior Thoas.⁴¹

These visitations of gods in human disguise were still considered to take place in historical times, though certainly not frequently. Demeter in the likeness of an ordinary woman killed king Pyrrhus of Epirus with a blow of a tile in 272 B.C.,⁴² whereas Luke-Acts depict the Lycaonians as convinced that Paul and Barnabas really were Zeus and Hermes visiting them.⁴³ Chariton of Aphrodisias does not seem to have raised many eyebrows either, when he in his first century A.D. novel *Callirhoe* presented the possible idea that a young girl had been a goddess all along appearing incognita, after she, too, had suddenly vanished mysteriously.⁴⁴

That both men behind the dramas in Thrace and Rome really were figures of flesh and bones is another thing that fitted with how the Greeks traditionally viewed their gods as creatures with an absolutely physical nature; physical immortality was, indeed, the very thing that made “the immortals (οἱ ἀθάνατοι),” differ from us “mortals (οἱ βροτοί).” That something was immortal meant originally that it was physically incorruptible (ἄφθιτος), a term repeatedly used to describe the nature of the gods as well as incorruptible objects, like items belonging to the gods

38 *Od.* 1.178-79.

39 *Od.* 6.20-23.

40 *Il.* 17.70-73.

41 *Il.* 13.215-18.

42 Paus. 1.13.8.

43 *Acts* 14.11-12.

44 Chariton *Call.* 3.3.

or made of gold.⁴⁵ Although the later and primarily philosophical understanding of the gods as more spiritual beings certainly had an effect, the basic notion of the physical nature of the gods remained. Christian apologists like Athenagoras could still in the second century A.D. complain about how the Greek “masses (οἱ πολλοί)” were not able to “distinguish between matter and God,” as they held the gods to be “of flesh (σαρκοειδής).”⁴⁶

The inexplicable disappearance of both the Alexander pretender and the Italian *daimōn*, as well as the way they appeared in some unknown manner, were typical of deities visiting the mortal realm. As both of them appeared for just a limited period of time, their bodies would not give away their corruptible nature by ageing, that most revealing aspect of human nature. How Pseudo-Alexander insisted that he was none of the great gods by claiming that he instead was so and so, in this case Alexander of Macedon, was also in accordance with how gods traditionally would act when appearing as mortals.

There is, however, an important factor that makes it mostly improbable that Pseudo-Alexander was considered a deity in disguise. When gods appeared as humans and not as *themselves*, they usually made a point of appearing incognito or with discretion, not making a spectacle. This was at times connected with the emphasis on showing kindness to strangers, as one simply could not be sure who was at one’s door. The prophesying but otherwise not very remarkable man in Rome could thus fit the picture, but that one of the gods should appear as the miraculously returned Alexander the Great along with such an ostentatious retinue was consequently particularly unlikely according to traditional beliefs. It is not probable that Dio either, considered his pretender *daimōn* as one of the major gods appearing in the form of Alexander, as this is nowhere indicated.

45 Rohde 1925: 74; Nilsson 1971: 623; Endsjø 2009: 38-45.

46 Athenagoras *Pro Christ.* 15; cf. Endsjø 2009: 42.

Alexander truly returned?

That Dio does not mention anyone protesting against the man “proclaiming to be the famous Alexander of Macedon” indicates to what degree the pretender’s assertion seems to have been accepted when he traversed Thrace and the neighbouring provinces. Any possible dissent appears to have drowned in the ecstatic enthusiasm and sombre respect shown him. As Dio himself points out, “no one *dared* to oppose him either by word or deed, neither magistrate, soldier, procurator, nor provincial governor.” How others “who were in Thrace at the time” apparently uncritically relayed these events to Dio indicates that they, too, were not overtly renouncing the pretender’s assertions.⁴⁷ One should also note that when Dio himself refers to this *daimōn* “proclaiming to be (εἶναι λέγων) Alexander of Macedon,”⁴⁸ he does not rule out that this *daimōn* truly was the ancient potentate in some way, although he apparently leaves open the possibility for this being some unknown *daimōn* only appearing in the likeness of Alexander.

The reception of the Alexander pretender stands in stark contrast to that of Dio’s prophesying *daimōn* in Rome, who apparently incited scant interest among the masses and who was quite simply arrested by the authorities. With regards to how the man in Rome was apprehended merely because of his unwanted divination about the emperor, it is, indeed, striking that the imperial authorities were not only lenient with but even welcoming the man falsely asserting to be the most powerful Hellenic ruler returned, thereby essentially challenging the very authority of the Roman emperor.

It is therefore ample reason to examine closer to what degree it could have been possible that some accepted that the remarkable pretender actually was Alexander the Great, once again returned.

But similar to how there is no simple explanation to what the Alexander pretender being considered a *daimōn* meant, there is no single answer either as to what it entailed that anyone was convinced that this really was that famed ruler of yore. There is a number of ways that people in

47 Cass. Dio 80.18.1, my emphasis.

48 Ibid., my emphasis.

antiquity thought it was possible for an individual to transcend his or her original mortality and subsequently return.

Alexander reincarnated?

Edmund Groag describes Pseudo-Alexander as “an ecstatic enthusiast considering himself to be the incarnation of an earlier, mythical personality.”⁴⁹ But if Pseudo-Alexander himself maintained that he was only a reincarnation or if he generally was held to be just that, Dio probably would have made that clear, as he did with Caracalla’s claim, instead of writing that this man was “proclaiming to *be* (εἶναι) the famous Alexander of Macedon.”⁵⁰

There is, indeed, nothing in Dio’s account indicating that Pseudo-Alexander was seen as Alexander reincarnated by anyone. If that had been the general understanding, he would probably not have been welcomed with such enthusiasm and utmost respect as he was. Although metempsychosis was held to be a principle of nature in certain more philosophical and eclectic circles, not least in Platonic and Pythagorean thinking, it was never a mainstream belief, as it ran so fundamentally against the traditional conviction that physical continuity was an absolute prerequisite for a complete individual survival. That one’s very identity was inseparable from the unity of one’s original body and soul remained, at this point, still the dominant notion.⁵¹ Reincarnated with a *new* body, without his original flesh and bones, Alexander would simply no longer be himself.

Although one cannot rule out that some more philosophically inclined people could have held the pretender to be the reincarnation of Alexander, the prevailing understanding of metempsychosis as something incompatible with individual survival makes any belief in this pretender being the reincarnated conqueror, all in all, inconsistent with the deference and excitement with which he was met. This also explains the

49 Groag 1909: 254; cf. Kos 1991: 189.

50 Cass. Dio 80.18, my emphasis.

51 Cf. Rohde 1925: 5, 9; Clarke 1999: 115, 157; Endsjø 2009: 1-2, 24-30.

general indifference Caracalla received when he himself proclaimed to be the reincarnation of Alexander.

A dead and disembodied *hērōs*?

If Pseudo-Alexander was seen as a disembodied *hērōs*, it would have been in accordance with his claim that he really was Alexander. Even though severed from their bodies, the dead souls of *hērōes* were still the same persons as when they were alive, and Alexander had already been venerated as a *hērōs* for centuries in various places in the Eastern Mediterranean. A heroic return of Alexander would not be in contradiction, either, with the fact that his dead body remained in the mausoleum in Alexandria,⁵² as a return as a *hērōs* would mean that it was only his soul that had manifested itself.

But forever disconnected from the remains of their physical bodies, being a *hērōs* did not equal that of attaining immortality, which according to traditional beliefs always required the continuous union of the soul with the physical body. *Hērōes* were the fortunate *dead* disembodied souls that were the subject of chthonic cult and at liberty, to a certain degree, to intervene into the realm of the living.

If Dio held that his *daimōn* really was who he said he was, or, at least, did not rule out the possibility that this was the case, this would also be in accordance with the traditional understanding of a disembodied *hērōs* – not least considering that *daimones* was one of the traditional terms used for such powerful dead souls. This is, moreover, in agreement with how most modern scholars maintain that Dio held Pseudo-Alexander to be a spiritual figure.⁵³

52 Whereas Septimius Severus had closed the tomb in 199, Caracalla apparently had it reopened when visiting it in 215. In 390 Libanius referred to the body still being on display in Alexandria. Cf. Cass. Dio 76.13.2; Hdn. 4.8.9; Lib. Or. 49.12.

53 Both Herbert B. Foster and Earnest Cary translated Dio's "*daimōn*" with "spirit" (Foster 1906: 100; Cary 1925: 473). Groag referred to Pseudo-Alexander as a "*Spuk*" in German, a "ghost" or "spectre," although simultaneously arguing that he may have been considered a deity (Groag 1909: 255, 253-55). More recently, M. Rahim Shayegan has translated Dio's *daimōn* with "soul" (Shayegan 2004: 298), Jesper Carlsen with "spirit"

The way Pseudo-Alexander just appeared and subsequently vanished was how such *hērōes*, *daimones*, *phasmata* or *eidōla* traditionally could manifest themselves for the living – although very rarely. In 490 B.C. many witnessed “a *phasma* of Theseus in arms” charging against the Persians at Marathon before he, too, vanished,⁵⁴ whereas the Messenians claimed that their seventh century B.C. leader Aristomenes was present as a *hērōs* at the battle of Leuctra in 371 B.C.⁵⁵ Later a whole number of *hērōes* appeared for a short time as *phasmata* in the battle against the Celts at Delphi in 279 B.C.⁵⁶

That Pseudo-Alexander in reality was no ethereal spirit but a man of flesh and bone does not rule out that even some of those who met him could still *believe* that he was an incorporeal *hērōs*. Traditionally these apparitions could appear just as tangible as the Alexander pretender. The *hērōs* Echetaeus, who also manifested himself at the battle of Marathon, slaughtered several Persians with a plough,⁵⁷ the unfortunate hunter Actaeon, who had been devoured by his own hounds, returned as an apparition (*eidōlon*) at some uncertain date only to ravage the lands of the Orchomenians;⁵⁸ the disembodied *daimōn* of one of Odysseus’s crewmen kept on killing young girls in Temesa in Magna Graecia, until he was waylaid and defeated by an Olympic pugilist in 472 B.C., after which he disappeared in the sea.⁵⁹ Polycritus, an originally well respected citizen of fourth century B.C. Aetolia, appeared as a disembodied *phasma* or *daimōn* soon after his death, only to tear his own new-born child limb from limb and devour it in front of a horrified assembly, before vanishing as into thin air.⁶⁰

(Carlsen 2016: 329), while C.T. Mallan called this figure the “phantasmagorical Alexander” (Mallan 2017: 143), and John Granger Cook “a spirit” and “a ghost” (Cook 2018: 253).

54 Plut. *Thes.* 35.5.

55 Paus. 4.32.4.

56 Paus. 10.23.2.

57 Paus. 1.32.5.

58 Paus. 9.38.5.

59 Paus. 6.6.10.

60 Phlegon *Mir.* 2.9-10.

The apprehensive but respectful manner, with which the Roman officials greeted this brazen impostor, seems consistent with how an incorporeal *hērōs* should be treated. As such it is probable that some of these officials, as well as some of those “who were in Thrace at the time” who reported this, may have held that this man apparently looking so much like the ancient conqueror could have been Alexander’s *hērōs*.

Turning to the enthusiastic followers who celebrated Pseudo-Alexander with Bacchic rites, one finds, however, that their reception is quite contrary to the possibility of their seeing him as a disembodied *hērōs*. If this had been the case, he would instead have been honoured with a more sombre and chthonic cult. This euphoric welcome was also incompatible with how the exceptional returned *hērōes* usually were treated with considerable caution, due to their ambiguous nature and how they often resorted to violence.

A returned Alexander of flesh and bones?

If people held that this remarkable pretender was Alexander the Great himself in flesh and bone, the most obvious challenge to this belief was that he at this point was so absolutely dead and had been so for more than half a millennium, with his corpse on display in a mausoleum in Alexandria.

If this was the *deceased* Alexander returned, he must consequently have been resurrected from the dead, as almost casually suggested by M. Rahim Shayegan in a claim he, alas, does not elaborate any further.⁶¹ But although always truly miraculous, being resurrected from the dead was not entirely impossible according to traditional Greek religion. Indeed, as I have previously tried to show systematically, this was one of the ways the gods made certain men and women physically immortal.⁶² According to Greek beliefs, there was a whole number of men and women whom the gods had resurrected to eternal life, like Asclepius,⁶³ Heracles’s mother

61 Shayegan 2004: 299.

62 Cf. Endsjø 2008: 423–24; 2009: 54–64.

63 Celsus according to Origen *C. Cels.* 3.22, 3.24; Justin *1 Apol.* 21.2; Theoph. *Ad. Autol.* 1.13.

Alcmene,⁶⁴ Achilles,⁶⁵ the Ethiopian king Memnon,⁶⁶ the infant Boeotian prince Melicertes,⁶⁷ at least one of the Dioscuri,⁶⁸ as well as the seventh century B.C. sage Aristeas of Proconnesus.⁶⁹

There is also another possible explanation about what beliefs lay behind the momentous reception of Pseudo-Alexander. Some could have held that Alexander had come back without ever having died at all. Although this meant that they ignored, were unaware of, or were not convinced by the historic accounts of Alexander's death and the existence of his body in the mausoleum in Alexandria, this is a possibility that also may be examined more closely.

That someone somehow could have escaped death entirely for centuries was not at all impossible according to traditional Greek beliefs, as I have also detailed more extensively before.⁷⁰ Indeed, the vast majority whom the gods offered eternal life were not resurrected but, instead, just never died. The number of people with whom this allegedly happened to is extensive, just to mention Dionysus,⁷¹ the quintessential superhero Heracles,⁷² queen Ino of Thebes,⁷³ princess Orithyia of Athens,⁷⁴ the

64 Plut. *Rom.* 28.6, cf. 28.7-8.

65 *Aethiopsis* according to Proclus *Chrest.* 4.2.198-200; Ibycus and Simonides according to the *Schol. Ap. Rhod.* 4.811-14; Pind. *Nem.* 4.49-50; *Ol.* 2.68-80; Eur. *Andr.* 1259-62; Eur. *IT* 435-38; *Ap. Rhod. Argon.* 4.811-14.

66 Pind. *Ol.* 2.79-80.

67 Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.4.3; Paus. 1.44.7.

68 *Cypria* according to Proclus *Chrest.* 4.1.106-9; Pind. *Nem.* 10.55-59, 75-90; *Pyth.* 11.61-64; Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.11.2.

69 Hdt. 4.14; Celsus according to Origen *C. Cels.* 3.27.

70 Cf. Endsjø 2008: 424-26; 2009: 82-89.

71 Plut. *Pel.* 16.5; Origen *C. Cels.* 3.22; Paus. 3.18.11.

72 Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.7.7; Callim. *Hymn Dian.* 159-61; Diod. *Sic.* 4.38.4-5; Eur. *Heracl.* 9-12, 871-72, 910-14; Isoc. *Or.* 5.32; Origen *C. Cels.* 3.22; Paus. 3.18.11; Plut. *Pel.* 16.5; Soph. *Phil.* 727-29; *Thrac.* 1255-78; Theoc. *Id.* 24.83-84; Theoph. *Ad. Autol.* 1.13.

73 Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.4.3; Paus. 1.44.7.

74 Hdt. 7.189; Paus. 1.19.5, 5.19.1.

handsome youths Ganymede,⁷⁵ Tithonus,⁷⁶ and Hylas,⁷⁷ king Amphiarus of Argos,⁷⁸ Helen of Troy,⁷⁹ Romulus, the first king of Rome,⁸⁰ and, according to the most ancient Greek sources, the entire generation of warriors who survived the wars of Thebes and Troy.⁸¹

As achieving physical immortality always equalled becoming divine, all of these men and women were turned into minor or, at times, greater gods, as they left humanity behind. As they were transformed into immortal deities, these figures no longer belonged in the human realm and were simultaneously translated to heaven or to lakes, the ocean, the underground, or some remote part of the earth. This was a belief that was still very much alive in the Roman Empire, as for example witnessed by the philosophically inclined Plutarch, who in the first century A.D. complained about “the masses (οἱ πολλοί)” continuing to hold that the gods could “send the *bodies* of good people with their souls to heaven.”⁸²

If the magnificent pretender was held to really be the deified and physically immortalized Alexander, it would also be in complete agreement with how he, in some places, already was venerated as a *god*, as in Erythrae, Bargylia, and perhaps even the province of Moesia Superior where Pseudo-Alexander first made his appearance. According to traditional beliefs, he must have been made physical immortal at some point if he were to be considered having become a true god.

75 *Il.* 20.232-35; *Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 5.202-6; [Lucian] *Charid.* 7; Pind. *Ol.* 1.43-45; Sophocles according to Ath. 3.602e.

76 *Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 5.218-38; Mimnermus *Fragment* 4. Sappho in a recently rediscovered poem first published by Michael Gronewald and Robert W. Daniel in *ZPE* 147 (2004) 1-8.

77 Theoc. *Id.* 13.43-73; Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 1.1224-39.

78 Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.6.8, Pind. *Nem.* 9.23-27, 10.8-9; Diod. Sic. 4.65.8-9; Eur. *Supp.* 500-1, 925-26; Paus. 1.34.2, 2.23.2; Philostr. *Imag.* 1.27.1; Xen. *Cyn.* 1.8.

79 Eur. *Hel.* 1666-69; Isoc. *Hel.* 61; [Lucian] *Charid.* 6; Paus. 3.19.13; Apollod. *Epit.* 6.29.

80 Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.56.2-3; Livy *Per.* 1.16.1-8; Plut. *Rom.* 27.5-28.8; Tert. *C. Marc.* 4.7.3; Tert. *Apol.* 21.23.

81 Hes. *Op.* 161-73, cf. *Od.* 4.561-65.

82 Plut. *Rom.* 27.8, 28.8, my emphasis.

These deified men and women, no longer at home in the mortal world, could never make more than limited returns to their original realm before they had to go back to where they now belonged.⁸³ The manner of Pseudo-Alexander's brief and momentous appearance was, as such, also reflecting this traditional pattern of return. That the pretender was held to have simply vanished in the end could easily be seen as the ultimate proof of his really being the mighty Macedonian ruler deified, as such an inexplicable disappearance was completely in agreement with how people who had been immortalized would leave after having briefly revisited the mortal realm. This was also the case when gods in general made their appearances.

Although there was no proof of anything supernatural prior to Pseudo-Alexander's inexplicable disappearance, there are, indeed, several factors in Dio's account that fit well with what would have been the case if he really was the physically immortal Alexander in accordance with traditional beliefs. First of all, how he appeared "in some unknown manner" meant that one could not rule out that he had just showed up miraculously, just the way he would have done if he now really had become divine. That the pretender was "resembling him [Alexander] in all manners in looks and appearance,"⁸⁴ as the almost thirty-three-year-old man he allegedly had been five centuries previously, was equally in agreement with his having become immortal, as this meant that he had received the agelessness intrinsic of divine nature. If this was Alexander immortalized, his looks really *should* be unaltered.

How Pseudo-Alexander was welcomed both by his most enthusiastic followers, who turned themselves into his personal Bacchic retinue and celebrated him with divine rites, and by the Roman officials, who were careful to show him no disrespect and to provide him with all his needs, was also in accordance with how a deified figure should be treated. This extraordinary reception was, moreover, something that could have convinced even more people that this actually was the famous conqueror returned immortalized. Such an understanding is thus also consistent

83 Cf. e.g. the return of Asclepius in Celsus according to Origen *C. Cels.* 3.24; of the Dioscuri in Eur. *Med.* 1642-79, and Paus. 4.16.9, 4.27.2-3, 3.16.2-3; of Aristeeas of Proconnesus according to Hdt. 4.15, and Celsus according to Origen *C. Cels.* 3.27.

84 Cass. Dio 80.18.1.

with how those others “who were in Thrace at the time” apparently were not refuting Pseudo-Alexander’s claims either.

Among those who were in the area at the time, may also have been a certain Epitynchanus who had procured the Vlahčeni inscription apparently presenting “Alexander” as a god. According to Edmund Groag and Marjeta Šašel Kos, Epitynchanus may have made this dedication in honour of Pseudo-Alexander,⁸⁵ something that may seem somewhat pointless if he did not accept that the pretender was who he said he was, the actually returned Alexander. How this “Alexander” is placed among other gods indicates that Epitynchanus understood him as a physically immortal god in accordance with traditional beliefs. Although one, of course, cannot be certain about the identification of this “Alexander” with the pretender, the inscription is a match in both space and time. The site of the dedication is south in what was Moesia Superior, the province where Pseudo-Alexander first appeared, whereas Epitynchanus was a contemporary of the pretender, as he presents himself as a slave or servant of the Roman senator Furius Octavianus, who served under Caracalla, Elagabalus, and Severus Alexander.⁸⁶

For anyone holding the pretender to be Alexander returned and deified, to receive him with Bacchic rites normally reserved for Dionysus was especially appropriate. The historical Alexander exhibited a particular affinity with this god, often seeing himself emulating the feats of the deity. If the famed conqueror himself had managed to become divine like what previously had happened to Dionysus, it could, thus, seem logical to honour him with the rites proper for his deified idol. The examples of Alexander’s devotion are many. He believed, for example, that he was following in the footsteps of Dionysus in his attempt to conquer India, celebrating the discovery of ivy in this far-away land as proof of how his divine idol previously had vanquished this realm.⁸⁷ When returning from his Indian campaign in 325 B.C., Alexander even had “his army wearing wreaths of ivy ... in imitation of Father Liber [Dionysus],” as reported by

85 Groag 1909: 253-55; Kos 1991: 188-89.

86 Groag 1909: 255.

87 Arr. *Anab.* 5.1.6-5.2.3; cf. Curt. 9.10.24.

Pliny.⁸⁸ Curtius notes that a bit later in the Persian province of Carmania, Alexander let his troops in a similar way “imitate” what he considered the original procession of a Dionysus, in a Bacchic revel that lasted seven days.⁸⁹ The close bond between Alexander and Dionysus was also recognized by Dio Cassius, as seen in his remark on Caracalla’s use of elephants in another attempt to emulate Alexander: “He might seem to be imitating Alexander, or rather, perhaps, Dionysus.”⁹⁰

The “certain sacred rites” (ἱερά τινα) – including the burial of a wooden horse – Pseudo-Alexander performed at night just before he disappeared⁹¹ could also have been seen as another indication of his divinity. This mirrored how both deified humans and other gods sometimes ended their temporary return to the mortal realm by initiating various rites. About 250 years after his resurrection and immortalization, Aristeeas of Proconnesus reappeared briefly to the Italic Metapontians, bidding them to set up an altar to Apollo and a statue of himself.⁹² In Euripides’ *Helen*, the deified Dioscuri intervened and told that due to the will of Zeus their sister Helen would also be made immortal and the object of libations and offering, just like themselves.⁹³ Euripides similarly made the once mortal Dionysus in *Bacchae* wanting to end his visit in Thebes by establish his mysteries there, as he had already done in numerous cities inhabited by both Greeks and barbarians.⁹⁴

A question of bodily continuity

The focus in traditional Greek religion was generally not on whether someone had been resurrected or not, but on the fact that these people were held to have achieved physical immortality, and how this always

88 Plin. *HN* 16.62; cf. the Bacchic celebrations of Alexander’s soldiers when discovering ivy in India according to Arr. *Anab.* 5.2.

89 Curt. 9.10.24-27; Kos 1991: 187.

90 Cass. Dio 78.7.4; cf. Carlsen 2016: 325.

91 Cass. Dio 80.18.3.

92 Hdt. 4.15.1.

93 Eur. *Hel.* 1666-69.

94 Eur. *Bacch.* 13-22.

involved absolute bodily continuity. But here, of course, lay the big challenge in regard to a returned Alexander of flesh and blood, regardless of whether he was held to have been resurrected or not having died at all.

The general acceptance of Alexander's death and the very presence of his dead body in Alexandria ran, of course, against any belief that this legendary figure never had died. That he should have been resurrected at some point before his appearance in the eastern provinces was, similarly, hard to reconcile with the widely accepted fate of his corpse. Whereas Asclepius, Achilles, Aristeas, and the other men and women generally considered to have been raised from the dead to physical immortality were all resurrected just briefly after their death, the presence of his body in Alexandria meant that Alexander would have been resurrected centuries after his demise. This makes the idea of a resurrected Alexander most problematic in light of the traditional notion that individual identity always comprised of both soul and the original body.

Once the body was destroyed, for example by decay, fire, or consumption, physical resurrection was consequently no longer possible.⁹⁵ Although the gods could heal certain wounds or reassemble a body that had been neatly cut up, they were not able to recreate flesh or bones that had been annihilated. These essential limits of divine powers were most obviously exhibited in the fate of ancient Pelops who had to be resurrected with a prosthesis of ivory, after Demeter had devoured his shoulder when he was dead and dismembered.⁹⁶ It is apparently the same logic behind how some Greeks denied the future resurrection of the dead at the end of time, while simultaneously accepting the resurrection of Jesus, as witnessed for example in First Corinthians and in Acts' depiction of Paul at Areopagus. Whereas the general resurrection involved countless people whose bodies had been annihilated, Jesus had been raised before his body in any way had deteriorated, although he forever had to keep his stigmata.⁹⁷

95 Cf. Endsjø 2009: 153-55.

96 *Schol. to Lycophron Alex.* 152; *Pind. Ol.* 1.52; cf. Endsjø 2009: 154-55.

97 1 Cor. 15.12. In Acts 17.31-32 Paul was met with interest from his Athenian audience when talking about Jesus' resurrection "from the dead (ἐκ νεκρῶν)" but was ridiculed as he referred to the general resurrection "of the dead (νεκρῶν)" (my emphasis). Cf. Endsjø 2008: 431-34; 2009: 147-52.

Although Alexander's body was yet not gone in the early third century A.D., the corpse still remaining in the famous mausoleum in Alexandria was not at all unchanged. The corpse had, as Curtius relates, been embalmed by Egyptians and Chaldeans "according to their customs,"⁹⁸ something that most probably meant that it had been eviscerated and had had its brain removed, as this was the usual practice in Egyptian mummification. How Octavian, as related by Dio Cassius, later on caused "a piece of the nose" to be broken off when visiting the mausoleum,⁹⁹ did not just further exacerbate the state of the body but demonstrated how brittle the corpse had become after centuries on display.

That anyone should be able to be resurrected with one's brains and entrails gone ran against the most basic traditional Greek understanding of physical continuity necessary for any proper further existence. The missing nose tip and the absolute frangibility of Alexander's physical state did not help in any way either. If resurrected at this point, this meant that one was dealing with a miserable reanimated and partly noseless corpse without brains and other internal organs, and which easily fell apart – in no way a figure that possibly could have received such enthusiasm and respect as in the account of Dio Cassius.

Convolutéd narratives

The more generally accepted facts about the fate of Alexander after his death do not, however, stand all by themselves. There are also intricate accounts of Alexander's dead body that could have made people uncertain whether the eviscerated body in the mausoleum in Alexandria really was him. Peculiar stories tell of the body being abducted or swapped. Strabo and Pausanias, for instance, related how Ptolemy kidnapped the body.¹⁰⁰ Around the same time as Pseudo-Alexander made his appearance, Aelian told of how Ptolemy, right after Alexander's death, secured

98 Curt. 10.10.9-13.

99 Cass. Dio 51.16.5.

100 Strabo 17.1.8; Paus. 1.6.3; cf. Erskine 2002. See also Curt. 10.10.20, where Ptolemy more simply "transported the king's body to Memphis, and from there a few years

the body by secretly conveying it in the most pedestrian manner, while leaving behind a magnificent bier of silver, gold and ivory with a dummy of the king to fool his rival Perdiccas.¹⁰¹

Another way Alexander's body appeared not so straightforward is seen in how it allegedly was impervious to corruption the first days after his death in Babylon. Quintus Curtius Rufus maintained that after seven days in the "burning heat" of Mesopotamia, the body was "not spoiled by any decay, not even by the least discoloration. Nor had his face yet lost that vigour which is associated with the soul."¹⁰² Plutarch maintained essentially the same thing, noting that the body "remained pure and not decomposed" for "many days ... although it lay uncared for in hot and stifling places."¹⁰³ The apparently miraculous state of Alexander's corpse was also stressed by how the morticians, according to Curtius, "at first did not dare to touch him" until "after they had prayed that it might be right and proper for mortals to handle a god."¹⁰⁴ Although this involved non-Hellenic caretakers, the presentation reflects the classical Greek notion that incorruptibility was the very sign of a divine body, although, here, first witnessed when Alexander was dead. If the corpse had remained in this way completely unaltered, Alexander could still have been resurrected according to the logic of traditional Greek beliefs, even centuries after his death.

A few decades before Pseudo-Alexander made his appearance, the Greek historian Arrian conveyed a particular narrative that indicates that even Alexander's death was not always considered entirely unambiguous. According to this, the mortally ill Alexander wanted to stage his own disappearance by throwing himself into the waters of the Euphrates, in order to have people believe "he had gone away," obviously with both body and soul, "to join the gods." His plans were, however, impeded by his wife Roxana, after which he gave himself up to lamentations over

later to Alexandria," and Diod. Sic. 18.26.3, where Ptolemy just "went to Syria" where he received the body.

101 Ael. *VH* 12.64.

102 Curt. 10.10.12.

103 Plut. *Alex.* 77.3.

104 Curt. 10.10.13.

his lost chance to be considered to have achieved immortality.¹⁰⁵ This incident was also retold in Pseudo-Callisthenes's *Alexander Romance*, probably in the third century A.D. Here the debilitated Alexander had "started to crawl on all four towards the river" when stopped by his wife, after which he chastised her for "taking away my glory."¹⁰⁶

The way Alexander allegedly planned to vanish without a trace, in order to make people believe that he had been taken with body and soul to the realm of the immortals, perfectly mirrored the traditional belief about various men and women being turned into gods both in mythical and historical times. In this narrative, Alexander played directly into the ancient conviction that when someone had mysteriously disappeared, this was by itself an indication that he or she had been swept away by the gods and made physically immortal,¹⁰⁷ as seen, for example, with Hercules,¹⁰⁸ Oedipus,¹⁰⁹ princess Orithyia,¹¹⁰ Romulus,¹¹¹ the Olympic boxer Cleomedes who vanished from a closed chest in 484 B.C.,¹¹² Apollonius of Tyana who disappeared from within a temple around A.D. 100,¹¹³ and, perhaps, also with Antinous, Hadrian's handsome lover, who became the subject of extensive cult after he drowned in the waters of the Nile in A.D. 130 and possibly was never found again.¹¹⁴

Although both Arrian and Pseudo-Callisthenes relate how Alexander did not succeed in his desire to disappear in the Euphrates, it is not inconceivable that this story could have contributed to some actually believing that such a greatly lauded figure really had vanished and become physically immortal. Popular beliefs do not automatically follow historical facts.

105 Arr. *Anab.* 7.27.

106 [Callisthenes] *Alexander Romance* 3.32.

107 Cf. Edwards 1985: 223; Endsjø 2008: 425-27; 2009: 91-99.

108 Diod. Sic. 4.38.4-5.

109 Soph. *OC* 1656-64.

110 Paus. 1.19.5.

111 Plut. *Rom.* 27.5, 28.8; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.56.2-3; Tert. *Apol.* 21.23.

112 Plut. *Rom.* 28.4-5, cf. 27.8, 28.8; Paus. 6.9.7-8; Celsus according to Origen *C. Cels.* 3.33.

113 Philostr. *VA* 8.30-31.

114 Origen *C. Cels.* 3.36, 5.62, 8.9; Celsus according to Origen *C. Cels.* 3.36. Cf. Rohde 1925: 78, 538; Endsjø 2009: 96, 102.

A pattern of contradictions

How there seems to have been disagreement on whether Alexander was to be honoured as a god or as a *hērōs*, with what that entailed of his having been made physically immortal or just having survived as a disembodied soul, was not unique.¹¹⁵ The accounts of even some of the most well-known men and women generally held to have been deified were not at all unequivocal. While Heracles was usually seen as a god due to his body having disappeared without a trace,¹¹⁶ there were those, like the Peloponnesian Sicyonians, who instead venerated him as a disembodied *hērōs*.¹¹⁷ According to the *Odyssey*, Heracles's shadow (*eidōlon*) is, even more confusingly, found in Hades, while he *himself* "is feasting forever with the immortal gods."¹¹⁸ In the second century A.D., Celsus felt the need to insist that the resurrected Asclepius, when seen by people who entreated him for healing, was not an "apparition (*phasma*)" or, in other words, a *hērōs*, but Asclepius "himself," consequently deified and physically immortalized.¹¹⁹

Other times the very basis of the immortalization narrative was challenged. Whereas most sources hold that Achilles after his death was translated to some place at the end of the earth by his divine mother, Thetis, and there resurrected to eternal life,¹²⁰ the ever-influential Homer squarely placed him as a miserable dead soul in Hades.¹²¹ Various authorities disagree on whether Iphigenia was sacrificed by her father or made physically immortal as she was swept away the very moment she was about to be killed.¹²² The account of Romulus having become a god after disappearing in a horrible storm was circulated along with reports

115 Cass. Dio 56.34.2, 67.2.6, 69.2.5, 79.9.

116 Soph. *Phil.* 727-29; Eur. *Heracl.* 12, 9-10, 871-72, 910-11; Diod. Sic. 4.38.4-5; Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.7.7; Origen *C. Cels.* 3.22.

117 Paus. 2.10.1.

118 *Od.* 11.601-2, my emphasis.

119 Celsus according to Origen *C. Cels.* 3.24.

120 See supra note 65.

121 *Od.* 11.488-91; cf. Edwards 1985: 221.

122 Iphigenia was sacrificed according to Aesch. *Ag.* 1523-29, 1555-59, Soph. *El.* 530-51, and Eur. *El.* 1020-26, whereas she was turned into a goddess according to Hesiod in Paus. 1.43.1, *Cypria* in Proclus *Chrest.* 4.1.141-43 and Eur. *IA* 1608, 1622.

of how he had been murdered, cut up limb for limb, and his body parts secreted away by the most noble citizens.¹²³ Claims that Jesus's body had actually been stolen by his disciples similarly, of course, never stopped the immense success of the accounts of how he had been resurrected to physical immortality.¹²⁴ Moreover, although the empty tomb in Mark was in line with traditional Greek beliefs around vanished people who had been deified, and Luke, as well as most later authorities, insisted that the resurrected Jesus was of "flesh and bones,"¹²⁵ Paul in his epistles seems to have understood the nature of the immortalized Jesus more akin to that of a classical *hērōs*, as he repeatedly insisted that flesh was generally not included in the resurrection of the dead.¹²⁶

None of these more contradictory aspects kept many in the ancient world from believing that these originally mortal men and women all had become physically immortal. This variety of claims was, indeed, not exceptional but typical of how traditions connected to various central figures and events frequently varied according to different literary sources and local cults. It is generally often difficult to establish absolute truths within traditional Greek beliefs. As pointedly made clear by Paul Veyne, the Greek worldview meant that people were often at liberty to draw their own conclusions as the sources so often did not align the most basic facts.¹²⁷

It is difficult not to recognize the parallels between the conflicting accounts pertaining to Alexander and to some of these other figures who were commonly held to have achieved physical immortality. As was the case with so many other deified mortals, all the most plausible explanations about Alexander's fate could be seen as countered by odd stories making everything seem opaquer. Most importantly, the already existing cult of Alexander as someone who had been turned into a god could simply make anything pointing to this not really being possible seem irrelevant.

123 Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.56.2-3; Livy *Per.* 1.16.1-8; Plut. *Rom.* 27.3-28.3; Dio Cassius in John of Antioch fr. 11 Mariev.

124 Cf. e.g. Matthew 28.13-15; Justin *D. Tryph.* 68.

125 *Mark* 16.5-8; *Luke* 24.39; cf. Endsjø 2009: 160-83.

126 Cf. e.g. *1 Cor.* 1.29, 15.50; *Col.* 2.11.

127 Veyne 1988: 8.

This is the background against which one must have in mind when re-examining Dio Cassius's description of the third century A.D. people, who reacted with such reverence and enthusiasm upon coming face to face with this charismatic character. If one tries to see it from the point of view of those who actually were there, one is suddenly encountered by this dazzling figure who proclaimed that he was Alexander of Macedon, once again returned, a man who already was recognized as a god in various cults. Hundreds upon hundreds of ecstatic followers donned their Bacchic attire and simply followed him. All dignitaries treated both him and his retinue with the upmost respect. No one dared to contradict that this really was the mighty Alexander, and he truly looked the part. Apparently, nobody argued that a physically immortal Alexander was less likely than a deified Asclepius, Heracles, Romulus, or some of those other figures, whose tales of immortalization were also countered by conflicting reports. Who, then, were there to point out that the apparent return of this deified conqueror was not actually possible according to what most authorities would tell about his fate?

The most probable conviction

Many of the soldiers, magistrates, procurators and other officials who received the Alexandrian pretender with such utmost respect, could very well have suspected or have been convinced that this was the disembodied *hērōs* of that celebrated potentate, in accordance with what Dio Cassius may have considered a possibility. Some of the others "who were in Thrace at the time" may also have held this to be the case. The momentous returns of such mighty dead souls, although always miraculous, were believed to have taken place at least since the end of Archaic times, and Alexander fit the picture perfectly, having already been venerated as a *hērōs* for centuries. But Alexander returned as a dead and chthonic *hērōs* was, however, not at all compatible with how Pseudo-Alexander was welcomed with exaltation and divine rites by his impromptu Bacchic retinue of four hundred men.

In this way, one finds that the only explanation that fits with how Pseudo-Alexander was received not only with respect, but *also* with enthusiasm and divine rites, is that those who encountered him either accepted the pretender's own claim, or were so much in doubt that they would not deny the possibility that he really *was* that legendary conqueror, once again returned in flesh and bones. Such a conviction was in accordance with the most ancient and enduring beliefs. As far back as it is possible to go in Greek history, the gods had chosen to deify certain men and women by making them physically immortal, either through resurrection or through altering their mortal nature before they died.

Everything about the pretender was in agreement with these traditional beliefs: he was already honoured as a god in certain places; his brief return mirrored how other deified men and women at times came back to the realm of mortals; how he "appeared in some unknown manner" was just the way divine figures generally manifested themselves most abruptly; both the reserved and the jubilant reception were appropriate if he had truly been deified; how he resembled Alexander "in all manners in looks and appearance" was as it should be, if he had truly become ageless and immortal; his clearly physical body reflected how the bodies of the gods traditionally consisted of flesh and bones; and the mysterious rites he performed in the end were in the manner of the way deified mortals and other gods at times introduced new cults upon their returns.

Although records of his death centuries before and the presence of his poorly preserved body in Alexandria ran counter to how immortality required absolute physical continuity, there were also the parallel stories indicating other possibilities – similar to how opposing narratives were often connected to various other individuals held to have been become physically immortal.

How he simply vanished in the end – in complete agreement with how the appearance of any immortal figure should end – could as such have seemed like the ultimate proof for those who believed that this really was the original Alexander the Great who had come back, deified and physically immortal.

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