

11 June 323 BC

Alexander the Great dies after drinking binge

The mighty ruler's sudden demise sends his empire spiralling into decline

Alexander of Macedon, master of the world from the shores of the Adriatic to the mountains of Afghanistan, spent the early summer of 323 BC in Babylon. Only a year before, his troops had persuaded him to turn back from a planned invasion of India. But already he was planning new conquests, hoping to strike at the heart of Arabia. On top of that, the 32-year-old king was pressing forward with his plans to integrate Persians and Macedonians, even urging his officers to take Persian wives. And then, some time around the beginning of June, disaster struck.

Accounts of Alexander's death differ widely. The most popular, told by the historian Plutarch, holds that he was taken ill after a drinking session with his friend Medius of Larissa. In the next few days, Alexander developed a fever.



Mourners lament the death of Alexander the Great in this 14th-century copy of a fifth-century Armenian manuscript. Did he fall prey to typhoid, malaria or poison?

Although he managed to put in an appearance before his worried troops, his condition worsened until he could no longer speak. At last, some time in the night between 10 and 11 June, he died.

Since so many Macedonian rulers fell victim to assassination, speculation has long surrounded Alexander's death. Many historians have suggested that he may have been poisoned by rivals within the Macedonian elite or by officers outraged by his Persian affectations. The true explanation may be more prosaic. In

the festering heat of summer in Babylon, the hard-drinking Alexander may well have succumbed to typhoid or malaria.

His death had a shattering impact. Within weeks the Macedonian empire was already falling apart, as his officers began to carve out their own rival dominions. Even Alexander's sarcophagus, hijacked and taken to Alexandria, became a weapon in the civil war. "I foresee great contests," he is supposed to have said, "at my funeral games." He was right. **H**

COMMENT / Professor Edith Hall

"If Alexander hadn't died, medieval Europe might have looked more Greek"

“By dying so young, Alexander III of Macedon left his new vast empire unsecured. He never created the centralised administration and infrastructure desperately needed to unify peoples stretching from Egypt to India. A consolidated government might not have fragmented into the rival monarchies of the successors. Its cradle, Macedonia in northern Greece, might never have fallen to the Romans in 163 BC; it might even have expanded westwards into Italy. The geopolitical map of late antiquity and the Middle Ages may have looked more Greek.

Alexander's premature death left a question mark over his motives. Was he

a drunken megalomaniac, hooked on warfare, incapable of settling down to peaceful supervision of his domains? Or do his marriage to a Bactrian and admiration of Persia suggest he was a visionary planning a peaceful, multicultural world family?

We shall never know. By the end of the first century BC, the Greek philosopher Dio Chrysostom asked how the Macedonians had ever "vanquished the Greeks, crossed over into Asia and gained an empire reaching to the Indians". But now, comments Chrysostom, "if you should pass through Pella [Alexander's birthplace], you would see no sign of a city at all, apart

from the presence of a mass of shattered pottery on the site". The rise and fall of Alexander's empire had already entered the sphere of legend. ”



Edith Hall is professor of classics at King's College London. Her most recent book is *Introducing the Ancient Greeks* (Bodley Head, 2014). She is the recipient of the Erasmus Medal of the European Academy 2015