The Tomb of Alexander Discovered?

One of the great mysteries of antiquity, is the final resting place of that mighty royal warrior, Alexander the Great. His biographer, Arrian, fails to mention the funeral preparations, but Diodorus Siculus takes up the challenge in his *Library of History*. Diodorus mentions that Alexander's body was mummified in the Egyptian fashion (he had been, after all, the previous pharaoh of all Egypt) and placed in a solid gold anthropoid sarcophagus (similar to Pharaoh Tutankhamen's), which was then placed in another golden casket and overlaid with a purple robe. This assemblage was then placed upon a great bier or wagon, which had suspension to mitigate rough terrain, measuring eight by twelve cubits and covered with a roof of 'overlapping scales'. The project engineer for this great undertaking was called Arrhidaeus, and the result of his labours was said to have 'surpassed all others in cost, and was famed for the excellence of its workmanship'.

This immense and ornate carriage apparently took Arrhidaeus two years to construct but eventually it departed, drawn by 64 mules, and set off from Persia on the long journey to Alexander's final resting place. Such was the scale of the project, that the cortege had its own team of road-builders, to smooth the way. The final destination was said to be Egypt, and more specifically the Temple of Amun at Siwa, in the Western Desert. However, Ptolemy Soter, one of Alexander's generals who would eventually found the Greco-Egyptian line of Ptolemaic pharaohs of Egypt, marched his army as far as Syria to meet the cortege. Ptolemy proposed to entomb Alexander's sarcophagus in Alexandria, instead of Siwa. (But Pausanias says the final destination was Memphis).**1**

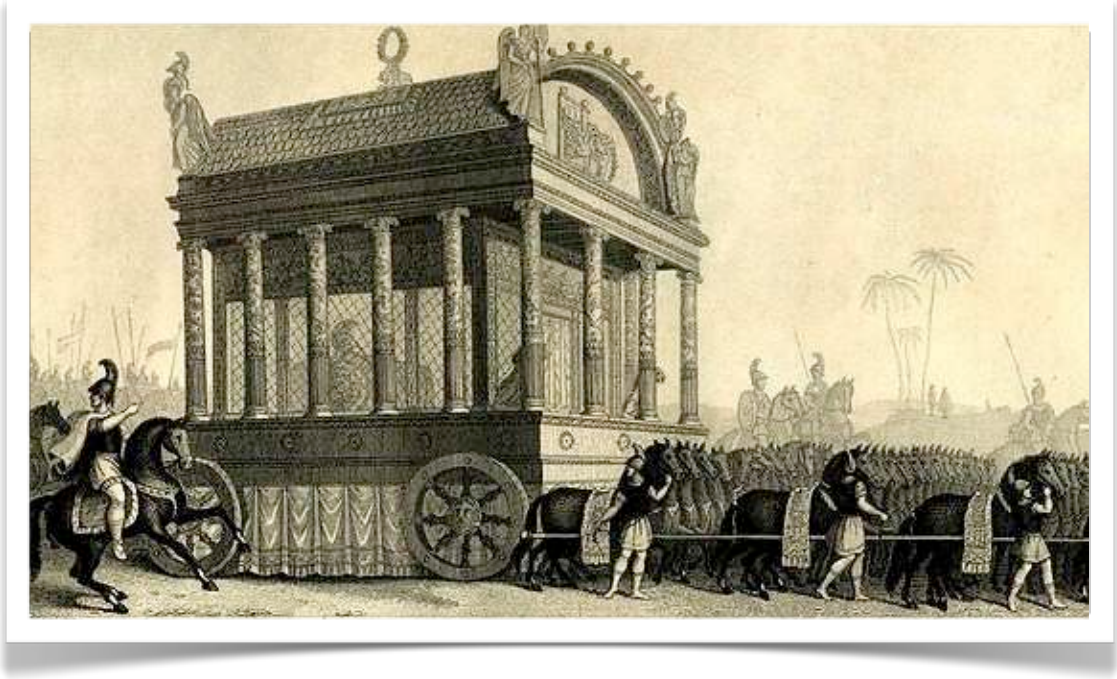


Fig 1. An artist's impression of the immense carriage that transported Alexanders sarcophagus back to Syria.

But is this really what happened all those years ago? It is claimed by others that Perdikkas, another of Alexander's generals, was actually escorting Alexander's cortege back to Aigai in Macedonia, the burial place of Alexander's ancestors. Perdikkas had been named as regent for Alexander IV, the infant son of Alexander the Great, and so it is often assumed, as Aelian writes, that Ptolemy Soter forcibly appropriated the sarcophagus of Alexander the Great from general Perdikkas and took it to Alexandria for personal propaganda purposes.**2** Interestingly, Aelian also adds that the sarcophagus of Alexander was separated from the great wagon and 'transported meanly'. Perdikkas recaptured the ornate wagon and thought he had regained the remains of Alexander, but they were still held by Ptolemy.

But would this strategy have suited Ptolemy's plans, to take over all of Egypt and much of Alexander's great empire? While denying the relics of Alexander to a rival claimant would be logical, surely the tomb of Alexander resting in Egypt would legitimise the claim to the throne of the infant Alexander IV, and not Ptolemy himself. Alexander IV was the legitimate heir to the Empire, and the only mitigating circumstance to deny his heritage was the fact that he was not pure Greek; being the son of Roxanne, Alexander's Persian (Bactrian) wife. So what would Ptolemy have really done with Alexander's sarcophagus, to maximise his claim to the throne of Egypt?

It is entirely possible that Ptolemy hid the sarcophagus in the Levant, Phoenicia, as a method of minimising the influence of the Alexandrian royal line. The many later reports to a tomb of Alexander in Alexandria may well be the result of a later tourist trade, similar to the one that flourished at the supposed site of Homeric Troy in northwestern Anatolia.

The problem here is that the tomb of Alexander the Great is completely missing from history. With the care and expense said to have been lavished upon it, Alexander's final resting place would no doubt have been very famous, and yet we have no idea where this fabulous tomb was. Even the classical historians are confused, and so the location of this magnificent mausoleum must have been lost to history in a very early era. So where did the ornate sarcophagus of Alexander finally rest?

What may have happened is that Ptolemy Soter did not want the fame of Alexander the Great to eclipse his own rule of Egypt. Thus the sarcophagus could not be allowed to enter Egypt proper. But neither could Ptolemy destroy the mortal remains of such a famous and god-like character, and so they would have to be lain is some relatively secret location, where the legend of Alexander could be safely put to bed. Ptolemy is said to have met the cortege and appropriated the sarcophagus in Syria, a region that includes all of the Levantine coast. Ptolemy may well have interred the remains of Alexander in the Levant, and if so then it is entirely possible that we still have the outer sarcophagus that held Alexander's golden coffin.

In 1887, Osman Hamdi Bey, the director of the Ottoman Imperial Museum in Istanbul, was alerted to a major find in Sidon, Lebanon. Two groups of underground chambers were unearthed and opened, containing a number of sarcophagi. One of these was a magnificent sarcophagus carved from Greek Pentelic marble, which is encompassed by some of the finest sculptures ever discovered from the classical Greek era. This is truly a mesmerising piece of workmanship.

Interestingly, although the sarcophagus has no inscriptions, and the contents have been looted in antiquity, the bold-relief marble friezes around the exterior do provide us with a great deal of information. The primary scene appears to be of Alexander the Great engaging the Persian king, Darius III, a scene that is thought to depict Darius fleeing the battle of Issus in 333 BC. Indeed, there are striking parallels between this sculpture and the mosaic discovered in the House of the Faun in Pompeii. The sarcophagus is therefore of the right era and context to be associated with Alexander; but this association also brings with it several problems, for

the descriptions of the sarcophagus in Diodorus' *Library of History* do not tally with this marble sarcophagus, and the location it was discovered in also seemed unlikely to many. Faced with these difficulties, the sarcophagus has been attributed to Abdalonymos, a Phoenician king of Sidon appointed by Alexander himself.



Fig 2. The 'Alexander' sarcophagus from Sidon. Note the 'roof with overlapping scales' on the lid of the sarcophagus. This magnificent artifact now lies in the Istanbul Archeological Museum. The figures on this sarcophagus are only 40 odd centimeters tall, and yet every facial and body feature can be discerned. It truly is a masterpiece of sculpture.

But this attribution is in itself is fraught with uncertainty, as 'King Abdalonymos' is depicted in these scenes in Persian dress, and appears to take the place of Darius III in the battle scene. Firstly, it is by no means certain that the Phoenicians used Persian dress in this era. And secondly, the central character on the 'war frieze' – who has to be King Abdalonymos for this to be his sarcophagus – appears to be in the process of being speared by Alexander. This would be an incongruous scene to place on one's own sarcophagus.

In addition, if one looks at contemporary Phoenician architecture and sculpture it usually mimics Egyptian, rather than Greek styles and culture, and it is more often than not of poor quality. But suddenly, in amongst all this mediocre Phoenician craftsmanship, there blossoms

the most spectacular and prestigious piece of Classical Greek sculpture ever discovered. As a Phoenician artifact, this sarcophagus is therefore highly anomalous, to say the least. The alternative suggestion – that this depiction is of Alexander the Great spearing King Darius III – makes a great deal more sense, and would allow a much closer association between this sarcophagus and Alexander himself. In which case, the hunting scenes depicting Darius (or Abdalonymos), on the reverse side of the sarcophagus, may simply be there to demonstrate that Darius was a worthy foe for Alexander to defeat. There would be no glory in defeating a bumbling coward, and so Darius is also depicted in a heroic hunting pose, as is Alexander.



Fig 3. Detail from the House of the Faun mosaic in Pompeii: the defeat of Darius III. Alexander is on the left of the scene. Apart from Darius being in a chariot here, as opposed to on horseback, the scene is remarkably similar to the 'Alexander Sarcophagus'.

So what of Diodorus' contradictory descriptions of the sarcophagus of Alexander, which claimed that it was made of gold? Actually, there no conflict here, for the majority of his description is of the bier or carriage that transported Alexander's sarcophagus to Syria, and not the sarcophagus itself. And it has already been explained that the (now empty) carriage was most probably captured by general Perdikkas.



Fig 4. Detail from the Alexander Sarcophagus: the defeat of Darius III. Alexander (complete with the lion's skin of Nema and ubiquitous ram's horns in his hair) rides the charging stallion, while Darius III's horse stumbles. Darius is depicted in Persian dress with traditional Eastern leggings, just as one might expect.

This leaves us with the gold anthropomorphic sarcophagus and its outer golden casket, a description that does not equate well with this marble sarcophagus. However, an inner golden sarcophagus would easily have fitted into this huge marble sarcophagus, and one resumes that the golden contents of the latter have been looted in antiquity, just as one might expect. As to the marble sarcophagus itself, how does this lithic masterpiece equate with its 'golden' description? Well, this magnificent white marble sarcophagus was originally painted in the brightest of colours, and no doubt much of this colouration was gold leaf, especially the overlapping roof-scales on the lid. In addition, the spears, bows and bridles for the horses were all fabricated in solid gold. In its original riot of colour and gold, this must have been one of the most spectacular funerary artifacts ever constructed.



Fig 5. An illustration of the many scenes on the 'Alexander Sarcophagus', demonstrating the many vivid colours that were originally used. In addition, all of the military and hunting hardware was originally fabricated in solid gold.

And why would Arrhidaeus, the master craftsman who fabricated Alexander's sarcophagus, have gone to the great bother of creating a wagon that incorporated a novel suspension system, if the caskets were just made of gold and gilded wood? Surely a suspension system would only be required for a delicate, brittle artifact, such as one made from marble.

Taking all of this evidence together, could this magnificent marble sarcophagus therefore be Alexander's 'golden' outer casket? A marble masterpiece that was covered in gold leaf? This is certainly a possibility, and it is a great shame that we have no inscriptions on this marble sarcophagus to either confirm or deny this suggestion. There may once have been an inscription, but unfortunately it was in solid gold, and was looted along with all the solid gold armour and weaponry that the marble sculptures once bore. If one looks along the upper rim of the lid, there is a line of vine leaves: the symbol of Dionysus. However, into each leaf, four holes have been driven, and it is lamely explained that these holes give 'naturalistic indentations' to the leaves. Well yes, in part, for the other sarcophagi in this cache do indeed have 'naturalistic indentations' on their vine leaves, but the holes on the Alexander Sarcophagus are completely different in form and nature, for they are small tubes. Yet the true purpose of neat, tubular holes in ancient stonework is well known - it was to receive the pins for holding metal artifacts or letters of the alphabet. In which case, the lid of this sarcophagus

may once have been ringed by an entire eulogy, wrought in solid in gold letters, detailing the name and the great deeds of the owner and occupant.

I have vainly sought to identify patterns in the arrangement of the pin-holes, to see if they match with certain Greek letters, but to no avail. However, it is my firm belief that the owner of this magnificent artifact was actually Alexander the Great himself. If so, then this is one of the most precious relics from antiquity to have survived into the modern era.

1. Diodorus Siculus Library of History 18:28.
2. Aelian, Various Histories 12:64.