

The Death of Alexander the Great, 323 BC

It was May of 323 BC and Alexander the Great was in Baghdad. The thirty-two-year-old King of Macedonia had spent the past thirteen years conquering much of the known world. In the process, he created an empire that reached from Macedonia through Greece and the Persian Empire to the fringes of India. He had plans to expand his holdings, but these dreams would never be realized.

Alexander's campaign of domination had started when he crossed the Hellespont to conquer the Persian Empire (see Alexander Defeats the Persians, 331 BC). Victorious after three major battles and the death of the Persian leader Darius III in 330 BC, Alexander continued his march eastward into the area to the west and north of India. He vanquished all who challenged his authority and would have extended his dominion into India and the lands beyond if his army had not balked, forcing him to abandon his plans to continue his march eastward.

Now that he had returned to Baghdad after years of military campaigning, Alexander took the opportunity to rest and to plan his next conquest. On May 29 he attended a dinner given by a close friend. Alexander joined in the heavy drinking during the day-long event. Complaining that he did not feel well, he went to bed. Alexander's health steadily deteriorated as fever wracked his body. Finally, too weak to leave his bed, the conqueror of the world died ten days after he was stricken.

The exact cause of Alexander's death is unknown. Historians have debated the issue for centuries, attributing it to poison, malaria, typhoid fever or other maladies. What is agreed upon is that the Macedonian king died in early June 323 BC while suffering a high fever that had lasted ten days. His empire was carved up by his generals and soon disintegrated.

"... he lay now in continual fever the whole night."

The following description of the death of Alexander was written by Arrian a Greek historian who wrote his account approximately 350 years after the event. Although not a contemporary of Alexander, Arrian based his account on the Royal Diaries – contemporaneous chronicles of Alexander's campaign. We join Arrian's account as Alexander begins to feel ill.

"A few days later he (Alexander) had performed the divine sacrifices (those prescribed for good fortune and others suggested by the priests) and was drinking far into the night with some friends. He is said to have distributed sacrificial victims and wine to the army by detachments and companies. Some state that he wanted to leave the drinking-party and go to bed, but then Medius met him, the most trusty of his Companions, and asked him to a party, for he promised that it would be a good one.

Day 1

The Royal Diaries tell us that he drank and caroused with Medius. Later he rose, had a bath and slept. He then returned to have dinner with Medius and again drank far into the night. Leaving the drinking, he bathed, after which he had a little to eat and went to sleep there. The fever was already on him.

Day 2

Each day he was carried on his couch to perform the customary sacrifices, and after their completion he lay down in the men's apartments until dusk. During this time he gave instructions to his officers about the coming expedition and sea-voyage, for the land forces to be ready to move on the fourth day, and for those sailing with him to be prepared to cast off a day later. He was carried thence on his couch to the river, where he boarded a boat and sailed across to the garden where he rested again after bathing.

Day 3

The next day, he again bathed and performed the prescribed sacrifices. He then entered his room, lay down and talked to Medius. After ordering the officers to meet him in the morning, he had a little food. Carried back to his room, he lay now in continual fever the whole night.

Day 4

In the morning he bathed and sacrificed. Nearchus and the other officers were instructed to get things ready for sailing two days later.

Day 5

The following day, he again bathed and sacrificed, and after performing them, he remained in constant fever. But in spite of that he summoned the officers and ordered them to have everything quite ready for the journey. After a bath in the evening, he was now very ill.

Day 6

The next day, he was carried to the house by the diving place, where he sacrificed, and in spite of being very poorly, summoned the senior officers to give them renewed instructions about the voyage.

Day 7

The next day he was carried with difficulty to perform the sacrifices, and continued to give orders just the same to his officers about the voyage.

Day 8

The next day, though very weak, he managed to sacrifice. He asked the generals to stay in the hall, with the brigadiers and colonels in front of the doors. Now extremely sick, he was carried back from the garden to the Royal Apartments. As the officers entered, he clearly recognized them, but he said not a word to them.

Days 9 and 10

He had a high fever that night; another day as well. all the next day and for another day as well.

This information comes from the Royal Diaries, where we also learn that the soldiers wanted to see him, some hoping to see him before he died and others because there was a rumor that he was already dead, and they guessed that his death was being kept back by his personal guard, or so I think.

Many pressed into the room in their grief and longing to see Alexander. They say that he remained speechless as the army filed past him. Yet he welcomed each one of them by a nod with his head or a movement of his eyes.

The Royal Diaries say that Peithon, Attalus, Demophon, Peucestas, Cleomenes, Menidas and Seleucus spent the night in the temple of Serapis and asked the god whether it would be better and more profitable for Alexander to be carried into the temple to pray the god for his recovery. A reply came from the god that he should not be brought into the temple, but that it would be better for him to remain where he was. The Companions brought this news, and, shortly after, Alexander died; for this was what was better. That is the end of the account given by Aristoboulos and Ptolemy."

References:

This account appears in: Workman, B.K., They Saw it Happen in Classical Times (1964); Lamb, Harold, Alexander of Macedon, the journey to world's end (1946); Worthington, Ian, Alexander the Great: man and God (2004).

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