

Is the Mother of Alexander the Great in the Tomb at Amphipolis?

Part 5: The Family of the Occupant

By Andrew Chugg, 18th October 2014

Author of *The Quest for the Tomb of Alexander the Great* and several academic papers on Alexander's tomb (see <https://independent.academia.edu/AndrewChugg> and www.alexanderstomb.com)

I wrote my initial article on this question on the morning of 6th September, a day before the announcement of the discovery of the caryatids, and I wrote a second part on 20th September and a third part on 28th September dealing with the caryatids. The discovery of the mosaic announced on 12th October prompted fourth article on 13th October, in which I predicted that the part-excavated mosaic depicted the Abduction of Persephone with the god Hermes running ahead of the chariot and Hades (a.k.a. Pluto), god of the Underworld, driving the chariot. Therefore I forecasted that the figure of Persephone would be found in the unexcavated part on the right-hand side. I further suggested that "Persephone" would actually be a representation of the occupant of the tomb. On 16th October Persephone was duly revealed and that has required that I compose this fifth instalment, since the image of this goddess provides us with the strongest evidence yet on the identity of the occupant of this increasingly impressive mausoleum.

But in order to set the occupant's identification in context I first offer the following summary of the inferences I drew from the evidence available in my first three articles:

- 1) Sphinxes decorated the thrones found in the tombs of two mid to late 4th century BC queens of Macedon, one of whom was Alexander's grandmother Eurydice I
- 2) Greek mythology recognised Hera the wife of Zeus as the mistress of the sphinx: the 4th century BC Macedonian kings identified themselves with Zeus, so it would make sense for their principal queens to have identified themselves with Hera
- 3) The female sphinxes at Amphipolis have their closest parallel in a pair of female sphinxes found by Mariette at the Serapeum at Saqqara, which were dated to the reign of the first Ptolemy by Lauer & Picard, mainly on the basis of an associated inscription: the Serapeum at Saqqara is also a strong candidate for the site of the first tomb of Alexander the Great
- 4) There are strong parallels between the façades of the tombs of Philip II and Alexander IV at Aegae and the reconstructed façade of the lion monument that stood atop the mound at Amphipolis
- 5) The paving in the tomb at Amphipolis closely matches paving in the 4th century BC palace at Aegae
- 6) The 8-petal double rosettes in the Amphipolis tomb have an excellent match on the edge bands of the gold larnax of Philip II
- 7) The evidence therefore favours an important queen being entombed at Amphipolis: Olympias, Alexander's mother, and Roxane, Alexander's wife may both have died at Amphipolis and are the only prominent queens that accord with the archaeologists' firm dating of the Amphipolis tomb to the last quarter of the 4th century BC

- 8) On the assumption that the occupant of the Amphipolis tomb is Olympias, a straightforward explanation of the caryatids would be that they are Klodones, the priestesses of Dionysus with whom Plutarch, *Alexander 2* states that Olympias consorted: the baskets worn on their heads would be those in which Plutarch says the Klodones kept snakes.
- 9) Plutarch, *Alexander 2* tells the story of Philip having dreamt that he sealed Olympias's womb whilst she was pregnant with Alexander with the device of a lion. This provides an explanation for the tomb having been surmounted by a lion monument.

In pursuing the logic of the evidence provided by the mosaic, there is a strong presumption that the figure of Persephone could be a portrait of the deceased individual who is the occupant of the tomb. This is because a forced abduction into the Underworld is a metaphor for death. If there is a depiction of someone passing from life laid out across the path of a visitor on entering a tomb, it is hard not to form a conception that it represents the death of the tomb's occupant.

But there is a second reason to believe that Persephone should be a portrait of the deceased. The people who built a tomb of such phenomenal grandeur clearly intended to exalt its occupant in every possible way. Since the world was plunged into permanent winter when Persephone was abducted, to make her look like the deceased in the mosaic would have been a wonderful compliment. It was like saying that the world was again plunged into a kind of winter by the death of the occupant. It is hard to believe that the tomb-builders, who were probably the occupant's close relatives, would have missed such an opportunity, when they had gone to so much trouble and expense over the rest of the arrangements.

If Persephone is indeed a portrait of the deceased, then the occupant was a woman. In view of the exceptional size and magnificence of the structure, she should be a woman of exceptional status, almost certainly a queen. Everything I have seen tends to support the archaeologists' firm date range for this tomb within the last quarter of the 4th century BC. Consequently, the field of possible occupants narrows to just two particular queens: Olympias, the mother of Alexander, and Roxane, his wife, both of whom may have died at Amphipolis.

I have previously argued that the caryatids representing priestesses of Dionysus and the lion that stood atop the mound are more readily explicable, if Olympias is the occupant. But now the fully revealed mosaic (Figure 1) presents us with a significant new piece of evidence to decide between them. Specifically, the Persephone figure has reddish hair (Figure 2). It is certain that Alexander's wife, Roxane, was a native of northern Afghanistan. There are now, and I believe were then, very few redheads in that region. The reddish hair of the Persephone figure makes Roxane an unlikely occupant for this tomb (or at least an unlikely *principal* occupant.)

Conversely Olympias was a Molossian from Epirus, where redheads were reputedly common. Some websites actually declare that Olympias had red hair, as though it is an established fact (e.g. <http://www.ancient.eu/Olympias/>). However, I am not sure that we have any direct evidence from written sources or ancient images to confirm it.

Nevertheless, there is some slightly less direct evidence on the matter. Firstly, Olympias claimed direct descent from Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles. His nickname was Pyrrhus, which means flame-red in Greek. This nickname suggests the person had reddish-blond hair in rather the same way that the nickname “Ginger” usually means someone with auburn hair in English. This Pyrrhus was of course a semi-legendary figure, but in fact the grandson of Olympias’s sister and uncle was the historical King Pyrrhus of Epirus, after whom Pyrrhic victories are named.

There is also firmer evidence in that we do have some strong indications of Alexander’s hair colour, which might very well have echoed that of his mother. Two ancient sources provide direct evidence on Alexander’s hair colour as follows:

“They say that Alexander the son of Philip was naturally handsome: his hair was swept upwards and was golden-red in colour.” Aelian, *Varia Historia* 12.14

“Alexander had the body of a man but the hair of a lion.” Pseudo-Callisthenes 1.13.3

Even better, we have a near certain colour image of Alexander in the form of a mural found at Pompeii (Figure 3). The hair colour of this Alexander is an excellent match for the hair of the Persephone figure in the mosaic and these murals from Pompeii are usually copies of much earlier Greek paintings.

Finally there is a mosaic depicting a deer hunt found at Pella in Macedonia (Figure 4) in which some scholars (e.g. Paolo Moreno, “Apelles: The Alexander Mosaic”, pp. 102-104) have seen representations of Hephaestion and Alexander. This is because the double-headed axe is an attribute of the god Hephaistos, after whom Hephaestion was named, and also because the Alexander figure on the right has his hair swept up over his forehead in an *anastole*, which is a feature found in many of the most authentic surviving ancient portraits of Alexander.

Therefore we can conclude that the reddish hair colour of the Persephone in the newly discovered mosaic is highly consistent with Olympias’s probable hair colour and the ensemble of evidence now before us makes it reasonable to suspect that Persephone is represented as a portrait of Olympias.

The question next arises of whether the Hades (or Pluto in Latin) and Hermes figures in the Amphipolis mosaic also have human counterparts? Did its artist intend that there should be a kind of overall duality in its interpretation, such that each of the gods is actually a portrait of a dead member of the Macedonian royal family? This is inherently quite a likely possibility, because artworks seeming to possess a similar duality have been found in other Macedonian tombs of this era. In particular, there is a superb ivory carving from the Prince’s tomb (Tomb III) at Vergina (Figure 5), which has often been interpreted as representing Philip and Olympias as a god and goddess with Alexander serenading them on the pipes in the guise of the god Pan.

In this ivory it is immediately obvious that the bearded and wreathed man at its centre bears a striking resemblance to the bearded and wreathed Hades figure in the newly discovered mosaic. Hades also looks very similar to a range of other contemporaneous portraits of Philip II, Alexander’s father, and it was widely remarked prior to the unveiling of Persephone that he looked like a portrait of Philip

II. That he is crowned as a king could equally refer to a kingdom in the Underworld or in Macedon. Furthermore, Hades averts the right side of his face. This is significant, because Philip's right eye was disfigured by an arrow wound at the siege of Methone in 354BC, so the right side of his face could not be shown without spoiling the Hades-Philip duality. It is a magnificent irony to depict Philip as carrying Olympias into the Underworld, since Justin 9.7.1 repeats an old rumour that she had been involved in organising his assassination.

But it is the final figure's possible human identity, which is the most interesting point of all. The artist seems to have depicted Hermes (Figure 6) with particular care, vivacity and drama. Staring out at us, he almost steals the show! If he is to have a human counterpart he should be somebody close to Olympias who preceded her into the afterlife for he precedes her into the Underworld and nobody still living at the time the mosaic was crafted could sensibly be depicted entering the afterlife. Philip is depicted at about his age at death, which was forty-seven. He could not be shown any older, if he were to be recognisable. He died at about the autumnal equinox in 336BC, almost twenty years before the death of Olympias in the spring of 316BC. All the human portraits in the mosaic therefore need to be consistent with the year 336BC in order for them to work as a group portrait of members of the royal family, although there is some artistic leeway, since it is difficult to be precise about the ages of figures represented in mosaics. Olympias would have been in her mid-thirties in 336BC. Rendering her more youthful than her actual age at death could also be seen as a compliment to the deceased, so it was probably expected of the artist anyway.

Hermes appears as a young, clean-shaven man of about twenty and there is something curiously familiar about him to me. Indeed this riddle has a simple solution: the male member of the royal family who was twenty when Philip died and who pre-deceased Olympias was their only son, Alexander the Great. There seems to me also to be a family resemblance between the figures of Hermes and Persephone in the mosaic. It is not difficult to believe that they are mother and son. Although it may be unfamiliar to see Alexander depicted wearing a *petasos* hat, there is in fact a parallel instance in the Pella deer hunt mosaic (Figure 4), where just such a hat has flown up off Alexander's head, due to the impetus of his attack on the deer. A few other portraits of Alexander at this age survive, perhaps the most important being a head found on the Acropolis in Athens (Figure 7). It seems to me quite credible that the Amphipolis Hermes and this Acropolis Alexander depict one and the same individual.

This duality in the interpretation of the figures in the newly discovered mosaic is necessarily conjectural, but if it is obvious to me, it should have been obvious to anybody viewing this mosaic when it was first made. We may have a spectacular new portrait of Alexander as a young man - the way he was always remembered in Macedon, for he left his homeland at twenty-one, never to return. The whole composition is really quite moving when you know the tragic stories of the three enormously important individuals portrayed. And everybody who saw this when it was new would have known and understood everything that its subtle and masterful artist intended.

Finally it is opportune to note that an interview with Lena Mendoni, general secretary of the Greek Ministry of Culture, and Katerina Peristeri, head of the Amphipolis archaeological team was published by the Ministry on 16th October. They suggest that

the occupant is “extremely important” and they are connecting the finds with Orphic and Dionysiac cult activities. Furthermore, they state that this may in turn connect the occupant to the Royal Family of Macedon. They also remain firm on the dating of the tomb to the final quarter of the 4th century BC.

I would like to comment that there are not many extremely important members of the Macedonian royal family that were available to be buried at Amphipolis in that period. Alexander himself was entombed in Egypt beyond reasonable doubt. His father was the occupant of Tomb II at Aegae/Vergina, as has just been re-confirmed. It is about 90% certain that Tomb III at Aegae/Vergina contained the cremated remains of Alexander IV. Philip-Arrhidaeus, Adea-Eurydice and her mother Cynna are stated to have been interred at Aegae by Diodorus 19.52.5. Cleopatra, the daughter of Philip and Olympias, was murdered at Sardis in about 308BC and Cassander and Thessalonice died a little too late in 297BC and 296BC respectively. Among prominent members of the royal family that mainly leaves Olympias and Roxane. But among all the members of the royal family, the person most explicitly associated with Orphic and Dionysiac cults was undoubtedly Olympias, so it is appropriate in conclusion to cite Plutarch’s comments on Olympias’s participation in such activities:

“Moreover, a serpent was once seen lying stretched out by the side of Olympias as she slept, and we are told that this, more than anything else, dulled the ardour of Philip’s attentions to his wife, so that he no longer came often to sleep by her side, either because he feared that some spells and enchantments might be practised upon him by her, or because he shrank from her embraces in the conviction that she was the partner of a superior being. But concerning these matters there is another story to this effect: all the women of these parts were addicted to the Orphic rites and the orgies of Dionysus from very ancient times, being called Klodones and Mimallones, and imitated in many ways the practices of the Edonian women and the Thracian women about Mount Haemus, from whom, as it would seem, the word ‘threskeuein’ came to be applied to the celebration of extravagant and superstitious ceremonies. Now Olympias, who affected these divine possessions more zealously than other women, and carried out these divine inspirations in wilder fashion, used to provide the revelling companies with great tame serpents, which would often lift their heads from out the ivy and the sacred baskets, or coil themselves about the wands and garlands of the women, thus terrifying the men.” Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 2.4-6

Perhaps it is still premature formally to identify Olympias as the occupant of the Lion Tomb at Amphipolis, but it is very clear that the evidence continues to move forcefully and consistently in that direction.



Figure 1: The new mosaic depicting the Abduction of Persephone fully revealed



Figure 2: Hades abducts Persephone in his chariot: she flails her left arm in distress



Figure 3: Mural depicting a reddish blond Alexander from Pompeii

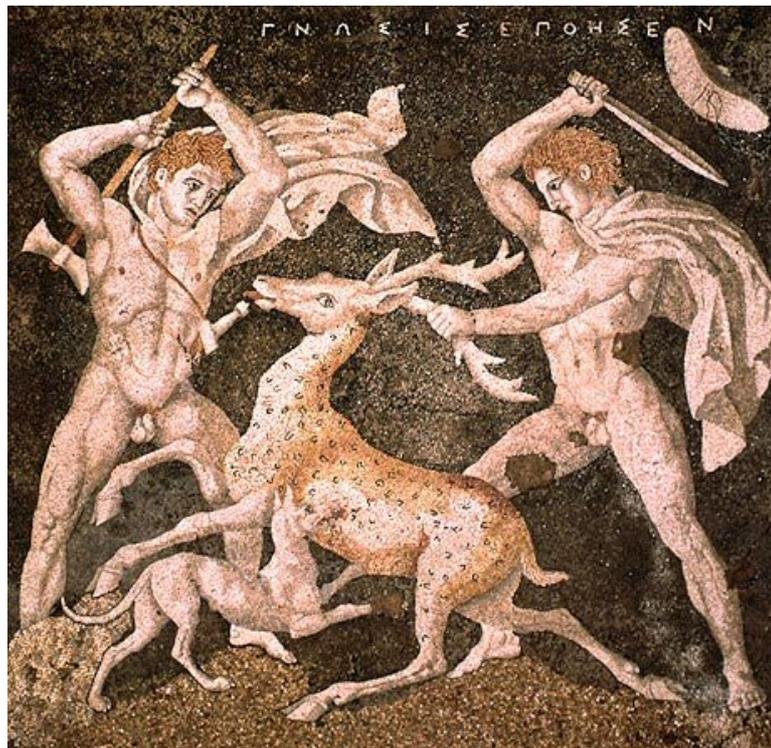


Figure 4: Deer hunt mosaic from Pella: a possible representation of Alexander and Hephaestion, the latter wielding a double-headed axe



Figure 5: Ivory from the Prince's tomb (Tomb III) at Vergina possibly representing Philip and Olympias as a god and goddess and Alexander as Pan.

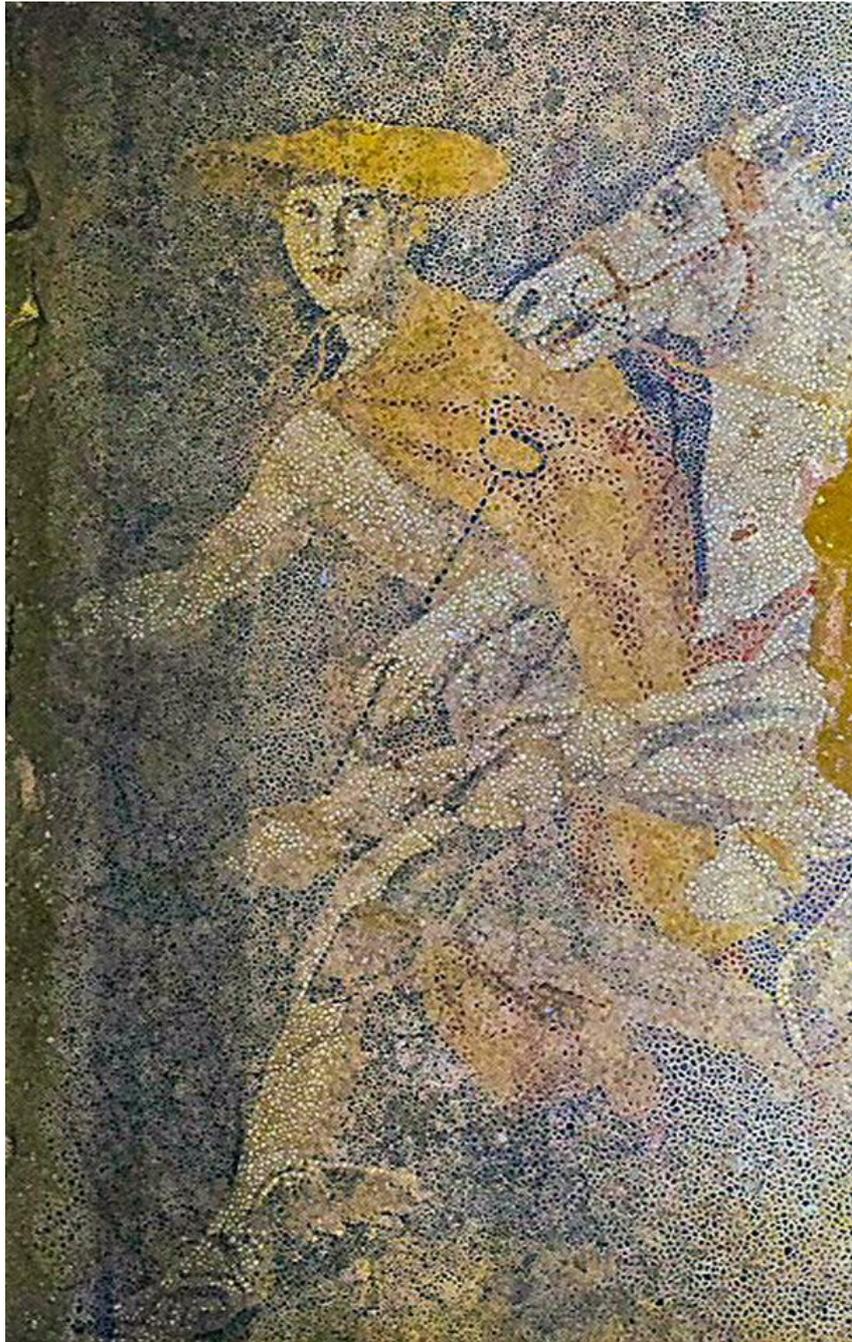


Figure 6: Hermes in the newly discovered mosaic: a portrait of Alexander the Great at twenty?

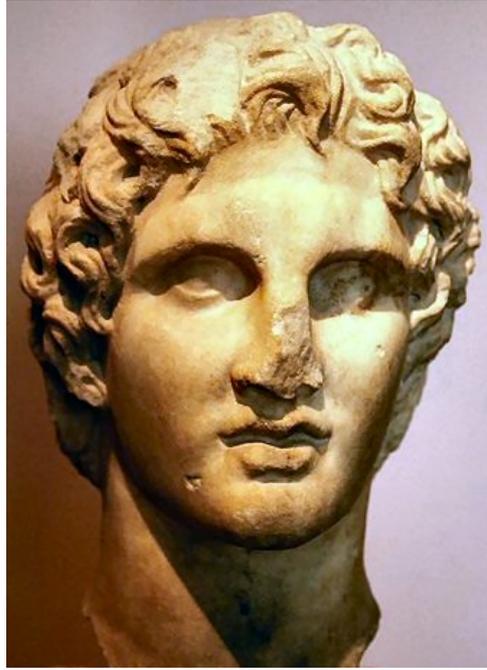


Figure 7: The youthful Alexander from the Athenian Acropolis