

Essay One — Alexander
“The Ceremonial Burning of the Palace of Xerxes”

Russell J Lowke, October 16th, 2001.

A pivotal event depicted in Robert Rossen's 1955 film *Alexander the Great* is the sacking of the Persian capital Persepolis, and the subsequent pillaging and burning of the great palace of Xerxes. The palace was the center piece of the Persian kings, its spoils were enormous, and a massive fortune was yielded to the Greek invaders. Arrian in his *The Campaigns of Alexander* doesn't explicitly state how much was garnered, but the Penguin edition annotations speculate that according to Diodorus and Curtius, the sum came to 120,000 talents, while Plutarch and Strabo quote 40,000 talents.¹ This triumph confirmed Alexander's ascendancy, establishing him as both king of Greece and conqueror of Persia. The event foreshadowed his designs to also rule the whole of Asia; indeed, to rule the whole of the known world.

Unfortunately history is not clear on the exact circumstances around why the Palace of Xerxes was destroyed. It's quite possible that it was the result of an over zealous and possibly drunken Alexander, reveling in his conquest of the capital of Persia. We know after the burning, Alexander asserted it was done because he: "wished to punish the Persians for their invasion of Greece,"² referring to the massive invasion of Greece by Xerxes in 480 BC. Impetuous as his claim is, Alexander did conduct various acts focused specifically against Xerxes' reign, for instance, when marching into Babylon, he instructed the people to restore all the temples that had been destroyed by Xerxes, "in particular the temple of Bel, the god held by the Babylonians in the greatest awe."³

Diodorus, Plutarch, and Curtius all suggest that the burning of the palace was due to the goading of Thaïs, an Athenian and courtesan to General Ptolemy.⁴ She took advantage of a drunken feast to inspire Alexander to cast the fatal torch. This may well be correct; however, it might also be an attempt to transfer the blame to a woman and absolve Alexander. Rossen merges all these ideas for his film, showing Alexander's favored courtesan arguing "our soldiers have set fire to the city — look it's burning, as should this palace — a symbol to all that the holy war has ended, that the Persian empire is no more, that Alexander has revenged Greece." Alexander is then depicted favorably, retorting: "You think me too drunk not to know that you too only seek to betray me."

Many observers, including those contemporary to Alexander, have concluded that the

¹ Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, (London: Penguin, 1958) : 178.

² Arrian: 179.

³ Arrian: 173.

⁴ Arrian: (footnotes) 179.

sacking of the palace was a mistake. Arrian tells us that Parmenio (Alexander's second in command), strongly urged Alexander to spare the palace, chiefly because the palace "was now his own property."⁵ It is known that Alexander regretted burning the city. On his return to Persepolis Arrian observes that: "Alexander himself regretted it when he saw the palace for a second time." Arrian goes so far to interrupt his historical account to interject with his own opinion: "My own view is that this [palace burning] was bad policy; moreover it could hardly be considered as punishment for Persians long since dead and gone." There is claim that during the burning Alexander repented, and in vain ordered the fire extinguished. Rossen's film supports this, and has Alexander shouting "No, put them out! [the fires] It's my palace, mine! ...It must not be said of Alexander that wherever he passed only charred ruins remain his monument."

What is certain is the destruction of the palace of Xerxes, be it a mistake or not, was exploited a symbol that the Panhellenic war of revenge was complete. In particular, this boosted morale for dissident Greeks at home — even though Darius, the existing Persian king, was not yet dead. Alexander dismissed his Thessalian cavalry, and similarly returned his Greek allies to the Aegean; henceforth he marched after Darius waging a purely personal war.⁶ This climax is incorrectly represented in Rossen's film. Rossen merges the burning of Persepolis and the death of Darius to reinforce Alexander's sovereignty over both empires. The crowd shouts "the war is over. Darius is dead," and subsequently Alexander is rendered as a megalomaniac, making such claims as: "I am not Philip's son, I am the son of God, the world is my domain, and my mission is to rule it and rebuild it."

⁵ Arrian: 179.

⁶ Arrian: 180.

Bibliography

Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, (London: Penguin, 1958).

Robert Rossen, *Alexander the Great*, (Rossen Films: 1955).