

ARISTOTLE AND THE MURDER OF ALEXANDER

Lyndon H. LaRouche Jr. recently revived the charge that Aristotle was the poisoner of Alexander the Great. He wrote:

The poisoning of Alexander by an alliance of Aristotle the poisoner with Macedonian generals formerly of Philip's faction aborted the city-building efforts of republicanism of Alexander, the Academy, and Amon.¹

The original charges stemmed from Olympias, the mother of Alexander. There was no great love lost between the mother who urged immoderate behavior on her son and Aristotle who preached, "Moderation in all things." In his "Life of Alexander" Plutarch mentions the rumors as coming from Antigonos to Hagnothemis but describes them as probably false.²

In the study of Aristotle's thought there has been no systematic effort to examine the allegations in relation to Aristotle's political philosophy. The action would have been especially relevant to such a later work as John of Salisbury's Policraticus which treats tyrannicide.

Of the sources only the Persian romance, the Iskandarnama, places Aristotle himself in the Near East at the time of the crime. It is worth noting that he is depicted as a magus who manipulates wax figures and mixes potions.³ Although we may safely discount Aristotle's actual presence, he still was not lacking in either motive or opportunity. Although the evidence is circumstantial, it might have sufficed to obtain a conviction with a "pleas of justification."⁴

Wallis Budge offers the Ethiopic account of Alexander's death from pseudo-

Callisthenes:

And it came to pass that when Alexander had sat down with them and they had made him drink with them one cup, Iollas gave him a certain bitter and poisonous drug to drink which they are wont to give those who sit long over their wine . . . And the poison spread through Alexander's bowels and he shrieked with pain in his belly and liver, and the men present knew what had been done to him.⁵

Iollas was the son of Antipater, Regent of Macedonia, and the cup-bearer of Alexander. The draught may have been merely a "chaser." Death may have been due to poison but have been accidental. Olympias, however, believed that Iollas was guilty and scattered his ashes.

The narrative continues:

And Iollas sent Lysimander to Macedonia to Antipater, his father, and he wrote a message in shorthand, saying, "Behold the deed is done."⁵

Certainly if such a message existed, it would have been highly incriminating. The Ethiopic account gives an outline of the death. The sudden symptoms are as much typical of poison as of malignant malaria, sometimes given as the cause of death.

In order to examine the merits of the case against Aristotle it is necessary to offer a number of propositions regarding opportunity and motive. The symptoms of death were not only consistent with poison, but Aristotle was familiar with poisons (obviously mere knowledge does not prove use). He was aware of Alexander's "health-faddism" and of prophecies that Alexander would be poisoned. The chance to administer the drug came in Cassander's mission. Cassander could have delivered the drug to his brother, Iollas. There were plots and conspiracies to murder Alexander. Both Aristotle and Antipater with whom he was closely associated had political and personal motives for killing Alexander. Olympias thought that they were implicated.

The first series of propositions deals with the method of death. That the symptoms were consistent with poison has been demonstrated. Aristotle's knowledge of poisons derived from his father's background as physician to the Macedonian

Court. Plutarch mentions the poison as being water from a cliff in Nonacris (corrosive sublimate?).⁶ Hellebore and arsenic are possibilities. Mithridates in fact was so fearful of poisoning plots that he built up a gradual immunity by increasing the doses, mithridatism. Rasputin did the same thing. Napoleon did not. Aconite was the most probable poison (leopard's bane, aconitum anthora, or wolf's bane, aconitum napellus). Somewhat curiously Diogenes Laertius, citing Eumelus, relates that Aristotle committed suicide by taking aconite.⁷ Aristotle mentions the drug in "On the Generation of Animals" as well as Celtic "arrow poison" in "On Marvellous Things Heard."⁸

Alexander was surrounded by a number of real and imagined conspiracies to poison him. The Iskandarnama even mentions an effort by the Emperor of China. Alexander Lyncestes, the son-in-law of Antipater, had attempted to kill Philip according to Quintus Curtius.⁹ At varying times there were attempts by Limmus, Philotes, the Pages and Hermolaus.¹⁰ In the last episode Alexander thought that Callisthenes, Alexander's nephew, was involved. Callisthenes had been sent to accompany the expedition to dispense ethical advice and collect botanical specimens. According to Hermippus, Aristotle had criticized his nephew's lack of common sense, but he could hardly have been pleased to have the remains returned to him.¹¹

In the matter of Callisthenes, Plutarch states that Alexander said:

. . . but the sophist I will punish, together with those who sent him to me and those who harbour in their cities men who conspire against my life; and in these words he directly reveals a hostility to Aristotle.¹²

Aristotle knew that Alexander was something of a "pill-popper." Alexander was fond both of medical theory and of prescribing to his friends. The case in point is that of Philip the Acarnanian, related by Plutarch. Although warned that Philip was trying to poison him, Alexander insisted on taking the medicine in order to prove his trust. The pills proved to be harmless.¹³ Alexander, of course, ignored the maxim, "Nothing in excess," when it suited him to do so.

The second group of propositions deal with the probable motives, personal and political. At the heart of the matter was the issue of tyranny. Both Aristotle and Antipater thought that Alexander was becoming a tyrant and indulging in Medizing, or imitating Persian customs, modernise, communizing. Alexander was rendering the Aristotelean polis an anachronism. He persistently ignored Aristotle's advice of "The Letter to Alexander" by refusing to govern the Greeks as an hegemon, or first among equals, and the Persians as a despotes, or despot.¹⁴

The insistence on being paid divine honors in the form of proskynesis, or genuflection, was opposed by Callisthenes, who left Alexander "poorer by a kiss," and laughed at by Cassander. Alexander was not amused. Proskynesis was typical of the airs that Alexander was putting on, which were bitterly resented by the Greeks although they may have aided his legitimacy among the conquered peoples. Callisthenes was also responsible for altering the greetings from the oracle of Amon from "son of Amon" to "son of Zeus." Aristotle may himself have given Alexander some of the notions of divinity. As Tarn comments: "(N)ot content with telling Alexander that he had no peer (Aristotle said) . . . that the supreme ruler when he came would be a god among men."¹⁵ There is an ambiguity here, however, since Aristotle disagreed with Plato on this point. Perhaps the advice was intended ironically as in Philo Judaeus' Legatio ad Gaium.

Relations at the Macedonian Court between Antipater and Olympias were clearly strained, giving occasion to Alexander's remark that "one tear of a mother effaced ten thousand letters."¹⁶ Alexander was unhappy with Antipater's handling of Spartan affairs. All in all, Antipater, backed by Aristotle, would have had every reason to fear Alexander's return to Macedonia and every evidence to feel that he was becoming a tyrant.

There were apparently several prophecies to the effect that Alexander was to die in Babylon. One of them occurs in the Old English version of the Thornton Manuscript in which the trees tell Alexander that his friends will poison him.¹⁷ Fulfilling a prophecy always appears more pious than committing murder, and, if the prophecies were not after the fact, could have given the conspirators the

idea. Apparently Aristotle is not suspect in this version since he is told as "oure dere Maister" to deliver some treasure to the Egyptian priests.¹⁸

Opportunity for poisoning was furnished by Cassander's arrival from Macedonia. Medius, who egged Alexander into the fatal drinking bout, was a friend of Iollas, Cassander's brother. As Arrian points out, the death was mysterious and unexpected. Arrian states that one author makes him attempt to validate his claim to divinity by disappearing into the Euphrates. He died at the age of 32 in 322 B. C. at the height of his career.

If indeed Aristotle was a conspirator, his philosophy shows little evidence for justifying tyrannicide. Book II of the Ethics maintains that homicide is bad per se. Book V of the Politics gives a formula for maintaining a stable tyranny. Like St. Thomas Aquinas, tyrannicide, if at all justified, must be in extremis. Certainly Aristotle would not have taken the act lightly. Aristotle, however, is also a pragmatist and to some degree an opportunist. One might compare him with his near contemporary Kautilya, whose Arthashastra maintains the need for a moral state with an amoral ruler and provides a formulary for poisons and potions. Much more than Plato, Aristotle would have been willing to compromise his moral standards and urge his followers to "do as I say and not as I do."

To recapitulate the evidence in the case: Aristotle was familiar with the use of poisons. He was familiar with Alexander's attitude toward medicines. The symptoms suggest poison as the cause of death. There were both personal and political motives in Aristotle and Antipater in disposing of Alexander before he returned to Macedonia. Proskynesis was unacceptable to the Greeks. Olympias thought that Alexander had been murdered and that Aristotle and Antipater were co-conspirators. Indeed there were several major conspiracies to kill Alexander. Opportunity arose in Cassander's mission and Iollas' role as cup-bearer. Aristotle's highly ethical philosophy was not an absolute bar to tyrannicide. Did the conspiracy against Alexander succeed as that against Hitler failed? Was there then a monumentally successful cover-up of the evidence? The verdict rendered is the Old Scots' "not proven," but the possibility is indeed an intriguing one for the student of politics.

Notes:

1. Lyndon H. LaRouche Jr., "The Principles of Statecraft for Defining a New 'North-South' Order (International Caucus of Labor Committees, 1981), 63.
2. Plutarch, Lives, Bernadotte Perrin, trans., "Alexander and Caesar," (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1919), 437.
3. Iskandarnama: "A Persian Medieval Alexander-Romance," Minoo S. Southgate, trans., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).
4. Kathleen Freeman, The Murder of Herodes (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963) 20.
5. E. A. Wallis Budge, ed., The Life and Exploits of Alexander the Great (London: C. J. Clay and Sons, 1896), 340-41.
6. Plutarch, 477
7. Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, R. D. Hicks, trans., (London: William Heinemann, 1925) 449-51; Cf. H. Bonitz, Index Aristotelicus (Graz: Akademische Druck, 1955) 26,238; Aristotle, "On Marvellous Things Heard" in Minor Works, W. S. Hett, trans. (London: William Heinemann, 1936) 273.
8. Ibid.
9. Quintus Curtius, History of Alexander, John C. Rolfe, ed. (London: William Heinemann, 1946) 119.
10. Ibid., 65; Plutarch, 365, 389.
11. Diogenes Laertius, 449; Plutarch, 381.
12. Plutarch, 385.
13. Plutarch, 277.
14. Aristotle, Constitution of Athens and Related Texts, Kurt von Fritz and Ernst Kapp, trans. (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1950) 217, citing also Wilamowitz, Aristoteles und Athen, Vol I., 338 and W. Jaeger, Aristoteles 23, 339.
15. W. W. Tarn, Alexander the Great (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956) 145.
16. Plutarch, 343.
17. The Prose Life of Alexander from the Thornton Ms, J. S. Westlake, ed. (London: Kegan Paul, 1913), 94-95.
18. Ibid.
19. Arrian, Anabasis of Alexander, E. I. Robson, trans., (London: William Heinemann, 1929), 295.