

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

## **Part 6: The Mutilation of the Sculpture**

By Andrew Chugg, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2014

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I wrote my initial article on this question on the morning of 6<sup>th</sup> September, a day before the announcement of the discovery of the caryatids, and I wrote a second part on 20<sup>th</sup> September and a third part on 28<sup>th</sup> September dealing with the caryatids. The discovery of the mosaic announced on 12<sup>th</sup> October prompted fourth article on 13<sup>th</sup> 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. In a fifth article on 18<sup>th</sup> October I suggested that Persephone should be a portrait of the occupant of the tomb and therefore the occupant should be a woman. Of the two queens that are candidates, Olympias is far more likely to have had red hair. I also showed that the Hades figure could be a portrait of Philip II and the Hermes figure a portrait of Alexander the Great at his age when his father died. Now there is new evidence from the discovery of large fragments of the tomb doors and the head of the right-hand sphinx from the entrance, announced on 21<sup>st</sup> October.

But in order to set the occupant's identification in context, here is a summary of the inferences I drew from the evidence available in my first five articles:

- 1) Sphinxes decorated the thrones found in the tombs of two mid to late 4<sup>th</sup> 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 4<sup>th</sup> 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 4<sup>th</sup> 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 4<sup>th</sup> 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.
- 10) The mosaic from the floor of the second chamber depicts the Abduction of Persephone by Hades, led by Hermes. However, it is reasonable to suspect that Persephone is a portrait of the occupant, in which case she is a Queen. The reddish hair colour fits Olympias much better than Roxane. The Hades figure would work as a portrait of Philip II and Hermes may be a portrait of Alexander aged twenty, because he could not be depicted any older in the company of his father.

On 21<sup>st</sup> October 2014 the Greek Ministry of Culture issued a press release announcing the discovery of the missing head of the eastern sphinx that sits on the right-hand side of the lintel above the entrance to the tomb. The sphinx's head has a terrible beauty, considering that she was a mythological creature that tore her victims to pieces (Figure 1). The rarity of such original 4th century BC sculptures of this superb quality needs to be emphasised: nearly every example we are used to seeing of a similar nature is a Roman copy. Some are even whispering the name of Alexander's court sculptor, Lysippos.

However, this new discovery also provides important new information on the way that the Amphipolis Lion Tomb may fit in with other royal Macedonian tombs in the period immediately after Alexander's death. In particular, the pair of Amphipolis sphinxes can now be recognised to have the same hairstyle as the pair of generally very similar Greek sphinxes found in 1850-1851 at the Serapeum at Saqqara in Egypt (Figure 2). I wrote in 2012 that the Serapeum sphinxes were probably part of the decoration of the first tomb of Alexander the Great. The close similarity with the sphinxes at a tomb that may belong to Alexander's mother enhances the evidence that the Serapeum was indeed the site of Alexander's first tomb in Egypt, before his remains were moved to Alexandria in about 280BC. It improves the chances that the Serapeum sphinxes were indeed a part of its sculptural decoration. The speculation would be that it also indicates some tangible link between the two tombs. Did somebody view the sphinxes at Olympias's tomb shortly after 316BC and decide that similar sphinxes would serve as a suitable decoration for the tomb of her son at the Serapeum? Or might it even be possible that Olympias herself commissioned sculptures of a pair of sphinxes to guard her son's tomb at the Serapeum on her behalf soon after it was set up in 321BC?

One problem with the new head is currently obsessing the "Twittersphere". Naturally enough, photoshop reconstructions of the new head restored to its body have quickly been produced (Figure 3). It is immediately obvious that there is potential difficulty in fitting the head into the available space beneath the arch. This has led to wild speculation that the arch was not built when the sphinx's head was knocked off and that somebody subsequently built the arch to house already decapitated sphinxes. As

we shall see that is very unlikely, not least because the rest of the evidence is starting to suggest that the tomb was sealed up at the same time as the sphinxes were beheaded. However, there is a more credible answer to the conundrum. Two thousand three hundred years have passed since the sphinxes' heads were in place. Arches are not immune to some degree of movement on such timescales, especially when they have been subjected to known stresses. In this case the arch has long supported a huge overburden of soil and has been subjected to at least one historical earthquake. There are indeed signs of subsidence in the form of large cracks and slight misalignments of some blocks. The mason puts the same taper onto all the blocks in an arch of this form, which leads inexorably to a precisely semicircular form. However, the arch above the sphinxes is around 10% flatter than a true semicircle: its vertical radius is about 10% shorter than its horizontal radius (Figure 4). This is probably attributable to subsidence and/or earthquakes. So we can reasonably conclude that there was plenty of room for the heads and wings of the sphinxes when it was originally built.

Another important implication about the history of the Amphipolis tomb can be derived from the newly released photos. Both the sphinx's head and the tomb door fragments appear to have been found completely embedded in the sand and soil used to fill the tomb. For example one large door fragment is shown supported by a block of the sandy soil (Figure 5). It is hard for this to have happened unless the doors were smashed actually in the course of the process of filling the tomb with earth and sand.

The doors can now be confirmed to have originally looked exactly like the doors found in other high status Macedonian tombs of the period (4<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC), such as the pair from the tomb found by Heuzey in the royal cemetery at Aegae/Virgina (Figure 6). The massive construction and the thickness of the marble of these doors means that it is very unlikely that they could have been so thoroughly smashed other than through determined attack by people deliberately wrecking or mutilating the tomb.

It is also unambiguously clear that the sphinxes were deliberately mutilated. Although it is just possible that the heads and wings could have been dislodged by some natural accident, both breasts on both sphinxes have been very precisely hacked off. That must have been deliberate. Although it is less clear at the moment that fragments of the statues were found suspended in the fill, it is very likely that they were smashed on the same occasion as the doors.

Assuming that the various fragments were suspended in the fill, as is strongly implied by the latest photos, then in all probability the person who sealed up the tomb was the same person who had the statues decorating the tomb mutilated. Furthermore, the sealing and the mutilations must have happened at the same time. This is quite strange. Why would a tomb raider spend a lot of time and money diligently sealing up the tomb during the raid? Really, only some very important individual, most probably the ruler of Macedon, would conceivably have wished to seal the tomb so carefully. But why would the ruler of Macedon have so disliked this tomb as to risk the censure of the Macedonians by mutilating its decorations and fittings? What happened to this tomb virtually requires that a ruler of Macedon detested the occupant of the tomb and also had reason to wish to prevent anybody gaining access to the remains within it. That is a very specific set of circumstances. The most intriguing question is therefore how such circumstances could have transpired?

A terrible answer immediately presents itself from the pages of history, which further enhances the likelihood that this is the tomb of Alexander's mother. On the assumption that it is Olympias's tomb, a combined wrecking and sealing could have been perpetrated by Cassander after he had foully murdered Alexander IV and Roxane in 310BC.

Cassander had in effect arranged the murder of Olympias in 316BC. He nevertheless allowed her grandson, Alexander IV, to live along with his mother Roxane. He set them up in the citadel of Amphipolis seemingly in the custody of his henchmen, but not actually imprisoned. If the tomb belongs to Olympias, we should infer that Roxane and the retinue of Alexander IV organised the construction of the tomb at Amphipolis. Cassander seems to have sought reconciliation with the royal family by marrying Alexander's half sister, Thessalonike, in 315BC, so it is likely that he permitted the construction of Olympias's tomb as part of the same policy. However, in 311BC a conference of the generals who were running the empire concluded that Alexander IV should assume control when he came of age. Childhood seems to have been deemed to end at 14 in ancient Macedon, which meant 309BC in Alexander IV's case. Cassander presumably concluded that he had not been forgiven for the murder of Olympias and that he therefore needed to eliminate Alexander IV and his mother.

Up until his murder, Alexander IV might have become the ruling king, so Cassander needed to allow the tomb project to go forward, even though he must have resented the honouring of his erstwhile enemy with such a magnificent monument. But with Alexander IV dead, the tomb had no further political value to Cassander, but instead threatened to become a focus for opposition to his rule. He would both have wished to destroy it and to prevent Olympias's supporters getting access to what had become a shrine for her remains.

This fit with the history is an extra boost to the candidacy of Olympias as the occupant, because I believe it will be difficult to find other historical circumstances to explain the concurrent mutilation and sealing of the Amphipolis tomb. This reasoning would also suggest that we should still expect to find Olympias's remains inside the tomb, for it would have been pointless to seal it up if there was nothing of value inside. It is even possible that Roxane's remains were also incorporated in its deep interior, which was soon to become highly inaccessible. Although they may be a testament to one of history's most awful stories of foul treachery and child murder, the door fragments are simultaneously a beacon of hope for yet more tremendous discoveries ahead.



Figure 1. The head of the right-hand sphinx over the entrance as discovered inside the tomb

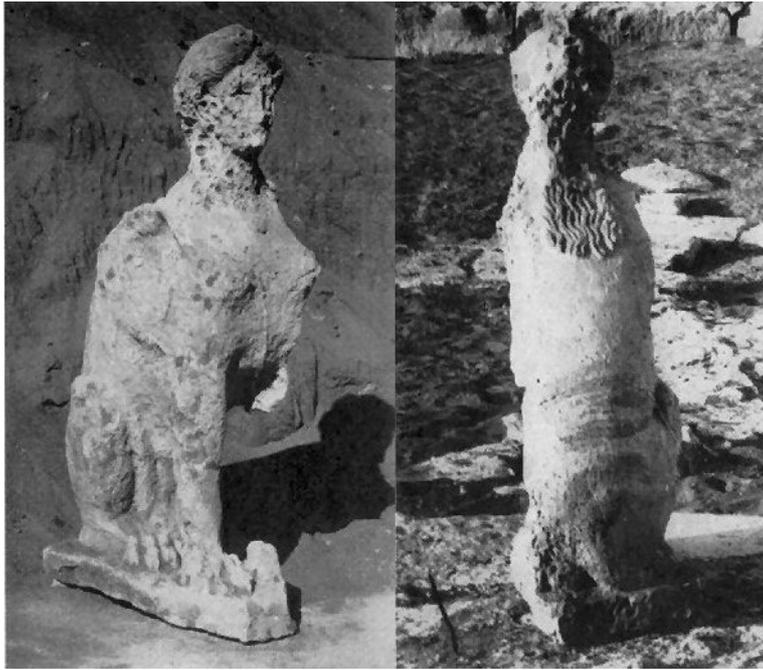


Figure 2. One of a pair of Greek sphinxes found at the Serapeum temple near Memphis which may once have guarded the first tomb of Alexander the Great

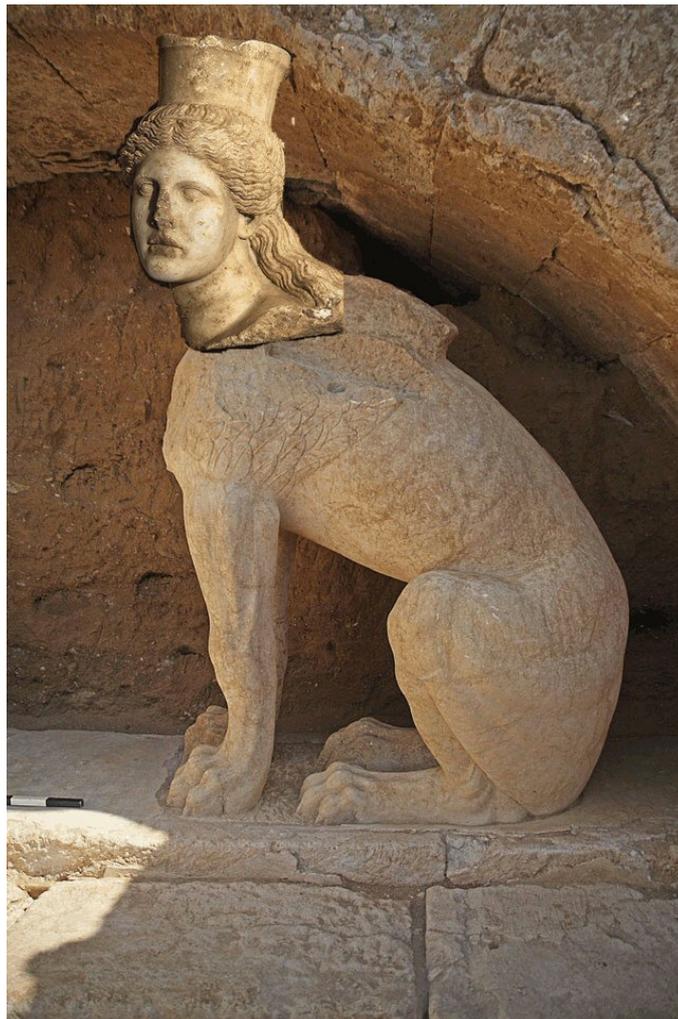


Figure 3. Fitting the sphinx's head



Figure 4. The departure of the arch above the sphinxes from a true semicircle.



Figure 5. Tomb door fragment from the Amphipolis tomb supported by a pile of the sandy earth that was used to fill the tomb.



Figure 6. Tomb doors from the high status tomb excavated by Heuzey in the royal cemetery at Aegae/Vergina