

As Alexander says. The Alexander-dream motif in Plutarch's *Successors' Lives*

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Abstract. The importance of being related to Alexander was a key element after his death, and it was shown when he appeared to his Successors in dreams (the Alexander-dream motif). Plutarch inserts the Alexander-dream motif in his *Lives* three times (*Eum.* 6.5, *Pyrrh.* 11.2, *Demetr.* 29.1), all of them in a very similar context. Though the apparition of Alexander in dreams in the *Lives* could be considered as a Plutarchan invention (and it is in two of them), Plutarch means to employ it as a resource for his objective: to exemplify the character of the protagonist of the *Life*.

Keywords: Plutarch, Alexander the Great, dreams, Demetrius, Eumenes, Pyrrhus.

[es] Como Alejandro diga. El motivo del sueño de Alejandro en las *Vidas* de los Diádocos en Plutarco

Resumen. La importancia de estar relacionado con Alejandro fue una pieza fundamental después de su muerte, y se manifestó cuando se le presenta en sueños a sus sucesores (el motivo del 'sueño de Alejandro'). Plutarco introduce este motivo en sus *Vidas* en tres ocasiones (*Eum.* 6.5, *Pyrrh.* 11.2, *Demetr.* 29.1), todas ellas dentro de un contexto muy similar. Aunque la aparición de Alejandro en sueños en las *Vidas* podría considerarse como una invención plutarquea (y en dos sueños lo es), Plutarco busca usarlos como recurso para cumplir su objetivo: ejemplificar el carácter del protagonista de su *Vida*.

Palabras clave: Plutarco, Alejandro Magno, sueños, Demetrio, Eumenes, Pirro.

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1. Introduction

The fact that Alexander the Great is an important figure in History and in Literature is undeniable, and it is a topic that has made rivers of ink to flow since the very moment of his appearance. As well, his presence is usual in particular contexts such as the dreams, more especially in Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*. There is such considerable quantity of dreams in this Plutarchan biography whose main character is Alexander that the life of the Macedonian general could be probably the richest in dreams, not only do they be starred by himself (*Alex.* 24.4-8, 26.5, 50.6) but also by others (*Alex.* 2.3-5, 3.1, 18.6-7, 24.8). And even more, his ghost could be considered a character by himself, since his presence is abundant in Greek literature (if we compare to other ghosts) both in other Plutarchan lives (Demetrius, Eumenes and Pyrrhus) and in other authors like Curtius (10.6.15), Cassius Dio (80.18.1-3), Lucian (*Dialogues of the Dead* 12, 13, 25), Silius Italicus (*Punica* 13.763-75) and even in the *Life of Matrona of Perge* (25).

Further to these references, the origin of the presence of the conqueror in dreams (the Alexander-dream motif)² might be the quote by Diodorus Siculus (19.90.9-4)³, where the conqueror visits Seleucus in dreams to foretell him his future reign. The episode belongs to the Seleucid legend⁴ as an incomparable propaganda to him (Hadley 1974: 57), created *ex eventu* after Ipsus when Antigonos and Demetrius were defeated whereas the alliance of Lysimachus and Seleucus won.

In this episode, two interrelated motifs stand out: the apparition of a ghost and the message given by it. However, these two motives do not have any difference between the same motives that are found in similar scenes of Greek literature. Still, the importance resides in the identity of the ghost (Alexander the Great) and the historical context when the episode takes place (after his death, when his generals are trying to rule what his empire was while they are dividing it among them).

There is no doubt that both Diodorus and Plutarch use the motifs to associate their protagonists with Alexander. However, they disagree in the purpose: Diodorus wants to eulogise Seleucus not only in his current situation (the expedition to Babilon) but also in his future (the Seleucid dynasty)⁵, whereas Plutarch goes beyond the praise and is more interested in exposing a moral portrait of the Successors⁶. So, the article will analyse the elements contained on the dreams of Demetrius, Eumenes, and Pyrrhus to show how Plutarch draws upon them to define the moral portrait of these characters.

² Ogden (2017: 65, n. 179), for a discussion about the origin of the episode.

³ Maybe Diodorus Siculus, though he is the first author who writes about the dream, copy it from Hieronymus of Cardia, cf. Hadley (1969: 150); Ogden (2011: 99); Asirvatham (forthcoming). I truly appreciate that Sulochana Asirvatham sent me her chapter to consult it. For its part, the dream of Demetrius with Alexander, as well as Eumenes' one, does not appear in others authors, thus it can be said that it would be an invention of Plutarch, cf. Harris (2009: 41); Asirvatham (forthcoming).

⁴ For a list of the motifs or episodes of Seleucus' legend, cf. Ogden (2017).

⁵ Hadley (1974: 54); Erickson (2012: 112); Asirvatham (forthcoming).

⁶ It is not my intention to analyse the *imitatio Alexandris*, although its presence is evident, especially in the cases of Demetrius and Pyrrhus. For an explanation of it, cf. e.g. Asirvatham (forthcoming); Monaco (2017: 406-430), among others.

2. The apparition of the ghost of Alexander in dreams

2.1. Demetrius

In Demetrius' dream (*Demetr.* 29.1)⁷, which is previous to the battle of Ipsus, Alexander asks Demetrius what his watchword will be⁸. The answer of Demetrius, not 'Zeus and Alexander' but 'Zeus and Victory,' keeps away the Macedonian conqueror from the Poliorcetes to the rival camp. The question that arises here is why Demetrius does not use the name of Alexander in his watchword⁹.

The fact of avoiding the name of Alexander¹⁰ as watchword explains that the Poliorcetes could not appeal to any relationship with the Macedonian for not having been under his service. The only link he could adduce was through his father Antigonos, who was at the command of both Philip II and Alexander¹¹. But even Antigonos, as well as Demetrius, seems to give preference to their association with Philip, as it can be seen when they held the meeting of the Corinth League in 303-302 B.C. (25.5). Doing it, they seek to convert themselves into the heirs of Philip's politics and to be a conscious imitation of him (Billows 1997: 172)¹².

Related to this disdain to Alexander, and probably it could be the true reason for this disdain, Demetrius shows no interest in being associated with Alexander¹³, for he considers himself to be superior to the conqueror (οὐ παρὰ μικρὸν ἐνόμιζεν ἑαυτὸν εἶναι βελτίονα, 25.3), "in the elation of success and of the power which he enjoyed at that moment" (25.6). However, this disdain to Alexander seems to contradict the description of the Poliorcetes offered some chapters later, in which Demetrius is presented as an imitator of Alexander. Quite the opposite: Demetrius does not imitate or reflect the essence of the conqueror (the bravery) but the arrogance (ᾄγκον) and the ostentation (41.5).

Both the arrogance and the ostentation are the result, on the one hand, of the success, even the good luck, Demetrius is enjoying at that moment and, on the other hand, the consequence of the flattery with which the Athenians have corrupted his nature¹⁴, as they devised honours that favoured the change of Demetrius' behaviour. Nevertheless the recognition of him as king (18.1), an exclusive privilege of the Macedonian Royal family (10.3)¹⁵, doubtlessly triggered that his behaviour

⁷ From now on, if there are no other indications in this section, all the quotes are referred to *Life of Demetrius*.

⁸ It is not the first time that the theme of the watchword given for a battle appears in relation to Demetrius-Antigonos, as it can be read in Lucian, *cf.* Ogden (2017: 65).

⁹ Hadley (1974: 57) adduces that this was the *motto* in Seleucus' and Lysimachus' coinage.

¹⁰ The presence of Zeus can be explained as it was the ancestral god of the Macedonians and the kings, who considered themselves as descendants of him, *cf.* Ogden (2011: 11); Le Bohec (2002: 56-57).

¹¹ *Cf.* Billows (1997: 24-48); Anson (2014: 170); Champion (2014: 13).

¹² When Demetrius, during his second stay at Athens, did not attend to the justice requests of the people, Plutarch makes a correlation between Philip and Demetrius, whose result is negative for the latter, *cf.* Plut., *Demetr.* 42.7.

¹³ *Cf.* Champion (2014: 18); Stewart (1993: 278-279).

¹⁴ According to Plutarch, the first flatteries were the title of 'king' that both Antigonos and Demetrius rejected (10.3); the title of 'saviour gods' (10.4), the embroidery of their pictures in the sacred robe together with those of the other gods (10.4), the consecration and the building of an altar in the spot where Demetrius alighted from his chariot after freeing Athens (10.5) and the creation of new tribes (10.6). The rest of the honours are in chapters 11-13.

¹⁵ Billows (1997: 159) writes about the nature of the kingship assumed by Antigonos and Demetrius and affirms that their kingship was totally different from that of Philip and Alexander, as it was based not on a territory but on their personal deeds and abilities.

became insufferable and hateful (ἐπαχθῆ καὶ βαρὺν) (10.2) because his arrogance and self-importance (ὄγκον... καὶ βαρύτητα) were introduced into his daily life and his dealings with others¹⁶ (18.5). Plutarch exemplifies the Demetrian disposition to any kind of people, no matters they were kings or subjects. Hence Demetrius makes mockeries (χλευάζων)¹⁷ and laughs (γελῶν) at the other kings, as well as he forces the Athenians to initiate him into the Eleusinian mysteries, although it was not the proper date (26), and, later, he extorts 250 talents from them to be given to his mistress, Lamia. Plutarch records the humiliation of the Athenians not because of the extortion but because of the words that accompanied the petition (27.5).

Likewise, this change of behaviour does not only affect his rule but also his appearance, as “he began to wear a splendid robe, he dressed purple and toga”¹⁸. From now on, he wears a robe interwoven with gold and double *kausia* (καυσία) (καυσία) (καυσία) (καυσία) as a symbol of his royal status and as a way of his own exaltation¹⁹. Judith Mossman sums up superbly the effect or even the real reason for wearing this diadem (Mossman 2015: 154)²⁰:

Given that the practice of wearing a *kausia* with one royal diadem is associated with Alexander wearing two is indeed extraordinary. The intention was presumably to lay claim to both Greece and Asia: the effect is to outdo Alexander himself in splendour, which is presumptuous.

2.2. Eumenes

The second opportunity to read about Alexander’s ghost in a dream is in the *Life of Eumenes* and on two occasions. The first apparition is in a similar context as in Demetrius’ one, since it occurs before a battle, whereas the second apparition takes place previously to a meeting between commanders and soldiers. This second apparition is known as the “episode of Alexander’s tent”²¹.

The apparition of Alexander we will focus on happens the night before the battle between Eumenes and the alliance formed by Craterus and Neoptolemus in Cappadocia. In this dream, two Alexanders guided by Athena and Demeter, respectively, fight against each other. The Alexander winner is whom Demeter helped. Accordingly, Eumenes, considering the dream, uses ‘Demeter and Alexander’ as watchword, even more confidently when he is reported that the enemy’s watchword is ‘Athena and Alexander’ (*Eum.* 6.5-6)²².

For the first time in Literature it is found the presence of two Alexanders guiding both Macedonian sides (as a reflection of the civil war that was taking place) and,

¹⁶ Plutarch refers that Demetrius becomes intractable and rude with Macedonians in several ways (*Demetr.* 42.3-4).

¹⁷ According to Aristotle, mockery (χλευασία) is a kind of *hybris* (*Top.* 6.6, 144a5-8) while laugh (or the laughable, τὸ γελοῖον) ‘consists in some blunder or ugliness that does not cause pain or disaster’ (*Poet.* 1449a32-37).

¹⁸ Although the quote is taken from *Rom.* 26.1, it can be used to describe Demetrius.

¹⁹ Cf. Stewart (1993: 278-279); Asirvatham (forthcoming). Plutarch does not mention the bravery of Demetrius in battle in these moments as it does not fit in the portrait he is painting, cf. Bosworth (2002: 254-255).

²⁰ To see the relation between the *kausia* and Alexander, cf. Kingsley (1984: 67); Waterfield (2011: 189).

²¹ I will not study this dream as it has been analysed for many scholars, e.g. Bosworth (1992: 56-89); Meeus (2009: 244); Anson (2014: 95); Anson (2015: 165-168). The bibliography is even more extensive when scholars contrast the Eumenesian ‘Alexander tent’ episode in Plutarch with those in Diodorus and Curtius.

²² From now on, if there are no other indications in this section, all the quotes are referred to *Life of Eumenes*.

consequently, the name of Alexander in both watchwords: the army led by Eumenes and their ‘Demeter and Alexander’ against Craterus’ army and their ‘Athena and Alexander’. It would seem that the latter should be the winner because it has gathered together all the chances to win: Alexander himself and Athena, the guardian goddess of the expeditions of the conqueror²³. Nonetheless, it is the former who won, as Eumenes was committed himself with Alexander and was fighting for the very fertile land of Cappadocia, symbolised by Demeter.

According to the presence of Alexander in both watchwords and, therefore, the relationship with the two generals, the question about the function of Alexander’s presence arises. It is evident that, firstly, it is not to show the association between them and the generals, as this was excessively demonstrated²⁴, but to define the support of Alexander to who deserves it. Eumenes is worthy of it (Roisman 2012: 127), due to his loyalty to the kings and the regent as well as the criticisms and Neoptolemus’ conspiracies he had become the target (*Eum.* 1.2-3, 5.2).

Nevertheless, the presence of Alexander has a second function. With the insertion of the dream, Plutarch seems to explain that wars are won with strategies and not only with the fame of a name. And the use of strategies is precisely the quality par excellence of Eumenes’ character. From the beginning of the biography, the Chaeronean describes Eumenes as trickster (πανούργος, 2.5)²⁵ and this shrewdness is manifested in the decisions he made. Thus, on one occasion, to avoid the delay and the slowness of his troops during their escape after capturing the supply train of Antigonos, he secretly informed his enemy Menander, warning him about his vulnerable position. Later, he sent scouts to watch Menander, and they reported the change of Menander’s position. Eumenes pretended to be annoyed, but he got his objective: to withdraw his army (9.3-5). Another instance of his shrewdness is previously to the dream with Alexander. The Cardian had decided to conceal from his soldiers that the enemy was Craterus, as he knew about the power of Craterus’ name among them. So, he put about the story that they would fight against Neoptolemus, Pigres and a force of Cappadocian and Paphlagonian cavalry (6.4). Some time afterward, Eumenes does not hesitate to resort once more to the figure of Alexander as a strategy to solve the situation. Aware of the superstition of the Macedonians and in an emergency to assure his authority, he suggests that whenever the generals hold a meeting, they would meet in a tent in whose centre there is the throne of Alexander (13.1-4). Finally, the last stratagem of the Cardian takes place in Cappadocia: before an attack which pretended to be a surprise on the part of Antigonos, Eumenes lit a great number of fires on the mountains so they could be visible to Antigonos, who understood it was a stratagem of Eumenes (κατεστρατηγημένος ὑπὸ Εὐμένους, 15.7) when he discovered there was no fire anywhere.

Therefore, Plutarch inserts the dream about Alexander as one manifestation more of the Eumenean stratagems, highlighting that the means of the shrewdness is an essential part of the war, especially when your background is not Macedonian.

²³ Cf. Holt (2016: 19); Stewart (1993: 110, 141, 194, 239, 248, 260, 315, 320).

²⁴ To see the relation between Eumenes and him, cf. *Eum.* 1.2-3. As well, the relation between Alexander and Craterus is proven, cf. Heckel (2016: 122-152).

²⁵ Shipley (2000: 47) considers the image of Eumenes as trickster, a resourceful man, like the epic hero Odysseus. Plutarch seems to agree with this traditional image as he describes Eumenes with the same adjective as Sophocles does.

2.3. Pyrrhus

The last mention of the Alexander-dream motif is found in the *Life of Pyrrhus* 11.2. Again the common elements with the dreams above are present in this dream: the context previous to the dream, the motifs that define the dream (the apparition of Alexander and his prediction) and the name of Alexander.

Pyrrhus has occupied the field near Beroea, after calculating rightly that Demetrius would leave the southern area of Macedonia without protection, as he would rather fight against Lysimachus than go after him. The vision he has seems to confirm the good choice he made. In the dream, which precedes the conquest of Beroea, Alexander sends for Pyrrhus, who comes to the tent. Nonetheless, Alexander is lying ill on a couch although he promises his help to Pyrrhus, who asks him with incredulity how it could be possible considering his current condition. The answer of the Macedonian is plain but clarifying: With his name itself. After this answer, Alexander leaves the tent mounting a Nisaeian horse²⁶ (*Pyrrh* 11.1-5)²⁷.

The dream is inserted in what can be named as the Macedonian *logos* (6-12), it is, some chapters where the conquest and the loss of Macedonia by Pyrrhus is narrated. Among these chapters, the outstanding portrait of Pyrrhus, compared to Alexander, stands out. Prior to the dream, the Epirot has been resembled the Macedonian because of his ardour of the fight, and now, after the dream and the conquest, the comparison is amplified to other qualities like brilliance, invincibility, and mildness to opponents, that, although they are not unique of Alexander, “the combination of (them) creates a strikingly Alexander-like image” (Monaco 2017: 419).

Why is the dream underlined? What is the relation between the description of Pyrrhus, the dream and the use of Alexander’s name by Pyrrhus? Some answers are possible. Firstly, according to Goukowsky, the words said by Alexander, “With my name itself”, could be construed as his will, what implies that Pyrrhus is made Alexander’s heir (Schepens 2000: 430) because the state of prostration of the conqueror was his deathbed. The exit of the tent, as Plutarch writes, would be to lead Pyrrhus²⁸. This option matches up the portrait of Pyrrhus as his successor or almost perfect image of Alexander, but it does not explain the use of the name.

A second option, the most feasible taking into account the three dreams, is that the name of Alexander would be the watchword given to the army when some Macedonians deserted from the camp of Demetrius asked Pyrrhus for it (8.5). But, in the case of having been used the name as watchword, this occasion would be perfect. However, it does not seem to have happened (Monaco 2017: 417).

Finally, a third possibility is related to the power that the name of Alexander keeps at that moment among the Macedonian soldiers. In this case, “the name of Alexander” would be not understood literally but symbolically: his person and what

²⁶ According to Lévêque (1957: 154-155, n. 6), the author of this dream would be Proxenos whereas the dreams of Demetrius and Eumenes do not have a known author and so, they would be a Plutarchan invention. Garoufalas (1979: 282, n. 86) has the same opinion and adds the reference of Schubert, who thinks that “Plutarch borrowed the account of the dream from Duris, who took it from somewhere else, only adding the Nisaeian horse”. Garoufalas (1979: 47) also writes that the dream was “regarded by later historians as pure Pyrrhic invention for propaganda purposes”.

²⁷ From now on, if there are no other indications in this section, all the quotes are referred to *Life of Pyrrhus*.

²⁸ Maybe Goukowsky (1978: 117) go a step further and interpret that the exit would be an advice to the Macedonians to not oppose Pyrrhus, for it would be compared to an offense to their divine protector.

it denotes, so the Alexandrian qualities are equivalent to the name itself of Alexander (Monaco 2017: 416-422). Thus, it might be said that the name of Alexander would be used in the description of the Macedonian soldiers and the Beroean habitants made of Pyrrhus and his qualities. Only in this way, it seems to be possible to be fulfilled the prediction of Alexander in the dream.

But it is necessary to complete this use of the name (or qualities) of Alexander with that the Epirot himself utilises through his agents disguised as Macedonians (ἦσαν δὲ τινες οὗς αὐτὸς ὁ Πύρρος ἐγκαθίει προσποιουμένους εἶναι Μακεδόνας, 11.4) to spread his image among Demetrius' soldiers "as a man who possessed the common touch and was devoted to his soldiers". Cleverly Pyrrhus²⁹ appeals to his similarity to Alexander in a Macedonian context³⁰, which would manifest that the intrigue belongs to the conquest of kingdoms with merely the name of Alexander (Mossman 1992: 97).

Without a doubt, this means to the intrigue is not alien to Pyrrhus' greed when the time comes to conquer new places. He has already made use of it with Neoptolemus, whom he murdered during a banquet as an end of the plot concocted against him, allowing Pyrrhus for recovering the throne of Epirus. He also has utilised it with Alexander, Cassander's son, to whom he offered his help for ascending him the throne (6.4), which turns out the occupation of some Macedonian areas by Pyrrhus. As a result of it, Pyrrhus is acclaimed as king of Macedonia shortly after (11.6).

It is precisely in the Macedonian *logos* where Plutarch describes twice what the greed is, a characteristic and highlighted quality of Pyrrhus. In the first description, the Chaeronean emphasises the link between greed and intrigue through the relation of mistrust between two kings ("Greed... made the two men distrustful and suspicious neighbours", 7.3). This mistrust has been exemplified by the cases of Neoptolemus and Alexander and Plutarch insists that this distrust will be present during the relation between Pyrrhus and Demetrius. In the second definition, Plutarch points out the moral consequence of the greed, the thirst for expanding the own territory without being content with what one has (12.2-4), the moral characteristic per excellence of the Epirot, which since now on it will be a constant in his life:

He could not endure inaction, 'but heartsick he brooded waiting there, pining for the war-cry and the battle'... He could see enough the happiness he was leaving behind, but he could not give up his hopes for what he desires (13.1, 14.8)³¹.

3. Conclusions

Plutarch collects a variant of two well-known literary motifs –the apparition of a ghost in dreams and the oracle prophesied by him. The variant he collects from Diodorus Siculus has an important political meaning as far as the ghost manifested is the ghost of Alexander the Great and foretells the future of his Successors. In

²⁹ In *Demetr.* 44 Plutarch attributes the desertion of Demetrius to the dissatisfaction of the soldiers. Garoufalas (1979: 282, n. 87) considers both possibilities as complements, the propaganda of Pyrrhus and the dissatisfaction of Macedonians, for the fall of Demetrius.

³⁰ Schepens (2000: 430, n. 48) points out the convenient use of the ancestors by Pyrrhus depending on the area he is in that moment.

³¹ Translation by Ian Scott-Kilvert & Timothy E. Duff (2012).

Diodorus' text, Alexander speaks to Seleucus whereas in Plutarch's he speaks to Demetrius, Eumenes, and Pyrrhus. The apparition of Alexander in dreams shows the political use of these Successors when they appeal to the name of Alexander to legitimise their battles.

However, Plutarch is not interested in this political use of the dream but in the moral one to reinforce the character of his subjects. With the rejection to the help offered by Alexander, Demetrius showed his arrogance; in spite of being foretelling the victory by Alexander, Eumenes manipulated it to his purposes; with the acceptance of Alexander's help, Pyrrhus utilised it as a means of his greed.

Notwithstanding, Demetrius, Eumenes and Pyrrhus make the same mistake: they outlast the success or the failure that the name of Alexander leads to, and thus, they reveal who they were: they were not Alexander.

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