

The different versions of the life of Alexander

On his father's death.

There was a Macedonian Pausanias who came of a family from the district Orestis. He was a bodyguard of the king, but fell out with one of Philip's generals, Attalus. Philip took Attalus' side. Pausanias planned revenge. He left horses at the gates of the city and came to the entrance of the theatre carrying a dagger under his cloak. When Philip told his friends to go before him into the theatre, while the guards kept their distance, he saw that the king was left alone, rushed at him, pierced him through his ribs, and stretched him out dead; then ran for the gates and the horses which he had prepared for his flight. Having a good start, Pausanias would have got away had he not caught his boot in a vine and fallen. As he was scrambling to his feet, Philip's bodyguards came up with him and killed him with their javelins.

Such was the end of Philip, who had made himself the greatest of the kings in Europe in his time, and because of the extent of his kingdom had made himself a throned companion of the twelve gods.

From Diodorus Siculus' *The Library of History*

It is said that Philip died when Pythodemus was archon at Athens, and that his son Alexander, being then about twenty years of age, marched into Peloponnesus as soon as he had secured the regal power. There he assembled all the Greeks who were within the limits of Peloponnesus, and asked from them the supreme command of the expedition against the Persians, an office which they had already conferred upon Philip.

From Arrian's *Anabasis of Alexander*

What are the similarities and differences between these two accounts of the death of Philip II? Use some of these concepts to label the sources.

More detail	Less detail	Emotional	Unemotional
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Which author is more reliable?

Diodorus was writing about 50 BCE, nearly 300 years after Alexander was alive, while Arrian was writing about 100 CE, over 400 years after. They both based their writing on previous written stories.

Diodorus Siculus based his version on the writings of Cleitarchus, who got the stories from Alexander's soldiers. Arrian based his writings on those of Nearchus, Ptolemy and Aristobulus, who were both officials high up in Alexander's army and knew Alexander himself.

- Do you think the soldiers or the army officials who knew Alexander would tell the most reliable stories?
- Do you think it's best to use one previously written source or more than one to work out the correct story?

On Alexander untying the Gordian knot

Then he conquered the Phrygians, at whose chief city, Gordium, he saw the famous chariot fastened with cords made of the rind of the cornel-tree, which, by tradition, whoever should untie would be emperor of the world.

Most authors tell the story that Alexander was unable to untie the knot, the ends of which were secretly twisted round and folded up within it, so cut it with his sword. But Aristobulus tells us it was easy for him to undo it, by only pulling the pin out of the pole.

From Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*

While Darius was mustering his forces at the Euphrates, Alexander had conquered the greater part of the western and south-western coasts of Asia Minor. After settling the affairs of Lycia and Pamphylia, he took Celaenae in Phrygia and at Gordium loosed the fateful Gordian knot; he then marched to meet Darius.

From Quintus Curtius Rufus' *History of Alexander*.

What are the similarities and differences between these two accounts of Alexander cutting the Gordian knot? Use some of these concepts to label the sources.

More detail	Less detail	Gives two different versions	Gives one version
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Which author is most reliable?

Quintus Curtius Rufus was writing around 50 CE, while Plutarch was writing about 100 CE, both about 350 years after Alexander was alive. They both based their writing on previous written stories.

Quintus Curtius Rufus based his version on the writings of Cleitarchus, who got the stories from Alexander's soldiers. Plutarch based his writings on those of Ptolemy and Aristobulus, who were both officials high up in Alexander's army and knew Alexander himself.

- Do you think the soldiers or the army officials who knew Alexander would tell the most reliable stories?
- Do you think it's best to use one previously written source or more than one to work out the correct story?

Quintus Curtius Rufus tried to attack the Roman emperor Caligula by being very critical about how Alexander became a cruel ruler as he got older.

- Does that make his version of the life of Alexander more or less reliable?

On Alexander adopting Persian clothes and customs

From here he marched into Parthia, where, during a break from fighting, he first put on the barbaric outfit, either because he wanted to adapt himself to the local customs, believing that adopting local customs goes far towards bringing people together; or else this was an attempt to

introduce the obeisance [a very deep bow where the head touches the floor] among the Macedonians to get them to treat him as a god.

From Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*

Alexander deserves every honour. But there are honours for mortals and honours for gods... You greet men with a kiss, but since a god is placed higher up and it is not allowed to touch him, you greet a god with obeisance... Alexander himself would not tolerate just anyone laying claim to royal honours on the strength of a vote. The gods would be very displeased with men who use divine honours. Why, not even Heracles received divine honours from the Greeks in his lifetime, nor even after his death until the god Apollo at Delphi gave an oracle instructing Heracles to be honoured as a god.

From Arrian's *Anabasis of Alexander*

What are the similarities and differences between these two accounts of Alexander wanting to get his men to bow very low to him? Use some of these concepts to label the sources.

More detail	Less detail	Third person	First person	Emotional	Unemotional
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Which author is most reliable?

Both were writing around 100 CE, over 400 years since Alexander was alive but both used earlier writings, which are now lost, to write their books.

Plutarch said: *"It is not histories I am writing, but lives; and in the most glorious deeds there is not always an indication of virtue or vice, indeed a small thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of a character than battles where thousands die."*

Do you think Plutarch would always write events accurately?

Arrian said: *"It seems to me that Ptolemy and Aristobulus are the most trustworthy writers on Alexander's conquests, because the latter shared Alexander's campaigns, and the former -Ptolemy- in addition to this advantage, was himself a king, and it is more disgraceful for a king to tell lies than for anybody else."*

Do you agree that kings would never tell lies?

On the death of Alexander

It is said that when his soldiers passed by him he was unable to speak; yet he greeted each of them with his right hand, raising his head with difficulty and making a sign with his eyes. The Royal Diary also says that Peithon, Attalus, Demophon, and Peucestas, as well as Cleomenes, Menidas, and Seleucus, slept in the temple of Serapis, and asked the god whether it would be better and more desirable for Alexander to be carried into his temple, in order as a suppliant to be cured by him. A voice issued from the god saying that he was not to be carried into the temple, but that it would be better for him to remain where he was. This answer was reported by the Companions; and soon

after Alexander died, as if forsooth this were now the better thing. Neither Aristobulus nor Ptolemy has given an account differing much from the preceding. Some authors, however, have related that his Companions asked him to whom he left his kingdom; and that he replied: "To the best."

From Arrian's *Anabasis of Alexander*.

He was then called away by Medius, one of his friends. There he drank much unmixed wine in commemoration of the death of Heracles, and finally, filling a huge beaker, downed it at a gulp. Instantly he shrieked aloud as if smitten by a violent blow and was conducted by his friends, who led him by the hand back to his apartments. His chamberlains put him to bed and attended him closely, but the pain increased and the physicians were summoned. No one was able to do anything helpful and Alexander continued in great discomfort and acute suffering. When he, at length, despaired of life, he took off his ring and handed it to Perdikkas. His friends asked: "To whom do you leave the kingdom?" and he replied: "To the strongest." He added, and these were his last words, that all of his leading Friends would stage a vast contest in honour of his funeral. This was how he died after a reign of twelve years and seven months. He accomplished greater deeds than any, not only of the kings who had lived before him but also of those who were to come later down to our time.

From Diodorus Siculus' *The Library of History*

What are the similarities and differences between these two accounts of Alexander's death? Use some of these concepts to label the sources.

More detail	Less detail	Gives different versions	Gives one version	Emotional	Unemotional
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Do you think Alexander's soldiers or military generals would tell the most reliable stories?

Arrian said: *"It seems to me that Ptolemy and Aristobulus are the most trustworthy writers on Alexander's conquests, because the latter shared Alexander's campaigns, and the former -Ptolemy- in addition to this advantage, was himself a king, and it is more disgraceful for a king to tell lies than for anybody else."*

Do you agree that kings would never tell lies?