

Hephaestion's Death: A Moment of Grief for Alexander or a Catalyst for his Quest for Immortality?

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Hephaestion was the most loyal friend of Alexander the Great. He was the supporter of Alexander's policy and participated in building Alexander's image so by creating parallels with the Homeric figures. It already started at the beginning of the Macedonian expedition when they visited Achilles and Patroclus tombs. Mourning after Hephaestion death allowed Alexander expressed deep grief in a truly Homeric way. Mourning time was the last opportunity to refer to the created by them Homeric image of friendship. Alexander wished to be remembered by his contemporaries and subsequent generations just as his ancestors did. Therefore, sometimes undertook actions that were of an image-related nature. Extraordinary way of express feelings and lavish character of funeral ceremony, number of people involved the in preparations raise the question of Alexander's purposefulness. Important for this consideration is fact that commemorating Hephaestion also became an opportunity to aspire to divinity once again. The study aims are to analyze of actions taken by Alexander the Great after the death of his friend and consider how it influenced to Alexander's image.

Ancient authors describing the history of Alexander unanimously state that Hephaestion held a particularly important place in the life of the Macedonian¹. Even though the funeral ceremony and all related manifestations of preserving the memory of the deceased seem to confirm it the brief Justinus' report gives some doubts. Justinus put attention to the probably real reason of Alexander and Hephaestion friendship – Hephaestion's beauty and his submissiveness². The issue of Hephaestion is not often taken up by researchers and he played a great role in Alexander's environment³. This study will focus on analysing how the Hephaestion

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1. Arr. *Anab.* 7.16; Diod. 17.37; Plut. *Alex.* 39.

2. Iust. 12.12.

3. Usually Hephaestion is depicted in ancient sources beside Alexander. That is the reason why research on Hephaestion always includes the figure of Alexander. J. Reames, analyses the problem of the relationship between Alexander and Hephaestion in: *An atypical affair? Alexander the Great, Hephaestion Amyntoros and the nature of their relationship*, „Ancient History Bulletin” 1999, p. 81-96; S. Müller tries to reconstruct the image of Hephaestion independent of the figure of Alexander in: *In Abhängigkeit von Alexander? Hephaestion bei den Alexanderhistoriographen*, „Gymnasium” 118, 2011, p. 429-456; A. Collins refers to Alexander's politics and Hephaestion's role in it in: *Alexander and the Persian court chiliarchy*, „Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte” 61, 2012, p. 159-167; some researchers only partially refer to the figure of Hephaestion as a participant in significant events concerning Parmenio and

- as a counterpart to the Homeric Patroclus - was used to create the intended image of Alexander.

The descriptions of Alexander's mourning in ancient sources are presented differently. These differences have pivotal significance for the present consideration. Despite usually Alexander being depicted as truly devastated by the death of Hephaestion, questions arise about the intent behind his actions. Whether the spectacular and momentous nature of the actions taken meant to preserve the memory of Hephaestion, or did it serve to build Alexander's image?

Important from the perspective of the paper are features of discourse unique to each author, focusing on the descriptions that are significant according to the author. Diodorus' descriptions of mourning are laconic, but his account provides information on the political situation⁴. Plutarch and Arrian participate in the creation of Alexander's mourning along Homeric model⁵. Curtius focuses on information about Alexander's immediate circle and its contribution in the ceremony⁶.

The purpose of this paper is a consideration of selected exemplifications of Alexander's actions after the death of Hephaestion (324 BC) and attempt to reflect on the meaning of mourning. The favorable character of some literary sources causes that Alexander is portrayed as an imitator of Greek heroes⁷. In order to decode the true intentions of the actions taken, it will be necessary to refer some earlier events. Paying attention to these threads will allow us to better investigate the question of Hephaestion's influence on politics and, consequently, on Alexander's image. The attempt to introduce *proskynesis*, accentuates Alexander's aspirations to divinity and Hephaestion's participation is evidence of his commitment to Alexander's stated goals. Their frequent placement against the background of political and propaganda events raises the question of the nature of their relationship and, consequently, the nature of mourning.

The Death of Hephaestion

Ancient authors say that the mourning after Hephaestion's death was enormous and took many forms. Justinus presents critical attitude and assesses Alexander's behavior and considers it inadequate for a king⁸. According to Arrian, Alexander is one of the few characters about whom there is so much contradictory information. There have been also many false stories about how mourning was experienced.

Philotas E. Badain, *The death of Parmenio*, „Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association” 91, 1960, p. 324-338.

4. Diod. 17.110-116.

5. Plut. *Alex.* 72; Arr. *Anab.* 7.14.

6. Curt. 10.4.

7. Diod. 17.85; Arr. *Anab.* 4.30.

8. Iust. 12.12.

This was the result sympathy or hostility towards Hephaestion or Alexander⁹. In the introduction to *Anabasis*, Arrian explains that he provides information that, in his opinion, is more probable and deserves mention¹⁰ (this indicates the subjective nature of his work¹¹). Arrian mentions "preposterous things" attributed to Alexander, it is said that Alexander have ordered the crucifixion of the doctor attending to Hephaestion¹². Many things about Alexander was made up and hyperbolized this served to present Alexander in a positive or negative way, depending on the intention.

The mourning of Hephaestion's death extended to the Macedonians, the conquered population, he ordered mourning throughout the state. Alexander recommended a nearby cities to get involved in organizing the funeral¹³. All his orders were obeyed for fear of his wrath. Alexander devoted himself to mourning his friend and as a sign of mourning he cut his hair in imitation of Achilles¹⁴. According to Plutarch, he ordered the manes of horses and mules to be cut off, in the army he forbade music until a message came from the oracle of Ammon¹⁵. Alexander ordered to putting out the sacred fire was a sign of adopting Persian customs¹⁶. After receiving a message from the oracle of Ammon that Hephaestion could be worshipped as a hero¹⁷ Alexander was the first to make offerings to him¹⁸. This wholes process was driven by Alexander because the memory of Hephaestion was to extend even beyond the borders of the empire. The sending of the inquiry to Siwah is not accidental. It was a place particularly close to Alexander, since it was there that the god Ammon confirmed his divine origin¹⁹. Even though, according to A.B. Bosworth oracle at Siwah was as important as the Greek ones, during receiving embassies Alexander received the inhabitants of the city of Ammon and only later the Delphians²⁰. Additionally Alexander did not appoint a new commander of the cavalry troop that Hephaestion commanded and ordered it to be called as Hephaestion's chiliary, and forbade changing the military signs brought out by

9. Arr. *Anab.* 7.14.

10. Arrian's preface, [in:] *The anabasis of Alexander or the history of the wars and conquest of Alexander the Great. Literally translated, with a commentary, from the Greek of Arrian the Nicomedian*, by E.J. Chinnock, M.A., LL.B., London, Rector of Dumfries Academy, 1883, p. 7.

11. Arrian denies that Alexander could destroy the temple of Asclepius, believing that he offered a gift to Aesculapius Arr. *Anab.* 7.14.

12. According Arr. *Anab.* 7.14 Alexander hanged the physician, Plutarch says that Alexander crucified physician Plut. *Alex.* 72.

13. Diod. 17.114.

14. Arr. *Anab.* 7.14; II. 23.141.

15. Plut. *Alex.* 72; Arr. *Anab.* 7.14.

16. Diod. 17.114.

17. Arr. *Anab.* 7.14; Plut. *Alex.* 72; A.B. *Alexander and Ammon*, [in:] K.H. Kinzl, *Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean in ancient history and prehistory: Studies presented to Fritz Schachermeyr on the occasion of his 80. birthday*, Berlin- Boston, 1977, p. 55.

18. Diod. 17.115.

19. A.B. Bosworth, *Alexander and Ammon*, p. 56.

20. Diod. 17.113; A.B. Bosworth, *Alexander and Ammon*, p. 56.

Hephaestion²¹. In addition, Alexander held huge funeral games to which he invited three thousand athletes and artists. Alexander's primary goal was to honor the deceased Hephaestion, Alexander wanted to be remembered by his contemporaries and subsequent generations²². To gain Alexander's approval, companions tried to outdo each other with ideas to honor the memory of Hephaestion²³, who had previously not enjoyed the sympathy of his companions.

The symbolic moment that ended the mourning of a friend was the expedition to the warlike mountain tribe of Cossay²⁴. Persian kings paid them annually to be able to ensure their safety, since they could not defeat them - Alexander did it in forty days²⁵ during winter. Arrian once said that for Alexander there were no ventures he could not face²⁶ this event seems to confirm it. In view of this it can be claimed that the choice of time was deliberate, intended to emphasize the difficulty of the expedition and, consequently, Alexander's skills. The expedition against the Cossay did not bring Alexander any benefit except in terms of image.

After Hephaestion's death, Alexander entrusted his friend's body to Perdikkas and moved on against the Cossay²⁷. Diodorus draws attention on the sequence of events, Alexander devoted himself to his duties - he received the messengers among whom came the citizens of the cities who opposed the decree issued²⁸ and only proceeded to prepare for the funeral²⁹. Alexander wanted to organize a burial that surpassed in grandeur all those known so far³⁰. Ancient authors repeatedly note the costliness and artistic grandeur of the commemoration of Hephaestion³¹. According to P. Green, the costs associated with organizing the burial of Hephaestion were related to Alexander's aspirations, called *megalomaniac's dreams*³². Analyzing the earlier events, one draws the conclusion that Alexander's display of generosity³³ is a tool for image building which is confirmed by Diodorus' account.

21. A. Collins, *The office of chiliarch under Alexander and the successors*, „Phoenix” 55, 2001, p. 267.

22. Diod. 17.114; P. McKechnie, *Diodorus Siculus and Hephaestion's Pyre*, „The Classical Quarterly” 45, 1995, p. 418.

23. Curt. 10.4; Diod. 17. 115.

24. Arr. *Anab.* 7.15; W. Heckel, Tritle L.A., *Alexander the Great: a new history*, Hoboken - New Jersey 2009, p. 52; According to Curtius and Plutarch, the expedition against the Cossay was supposed to be only a break from mourning, not its end Curt.10.4 ; Plut. *Alex.* 72.

25. Curt. 10.4 ; Diodor says less than 40 days, Diod. 17.111.

26. Arr. *Anab.* 7.15.

27. Diod. 17.110-111.

28. I. Worthington, *Hyperides 5.32 and Alexander the Great's statue*, „Hermes” 129, 2001, p. 129.

29. Diod. 17.114.

30. Diod. 17.114.

31. Plut. *Alex.* 72.

32. P. Green, *Alexander of Macedon 356-323 B.C. A Historical biography*, foreword E.N. Borza, Berkley-Los Angeles-London 2013, p. 466.

33.6 Alexander paid off the debts of soldiers Diod. 17.109; generosity towards Taxiles Plut. *Alex.* 59.

Alexander envied Achilles, that through Homer the memory of Achilles' deeds survived³⁴. Alexander aware of the greatness of his exploits wanted precisely the same thing -to save memory of his deeds for posterity³⁵. When the attempt to introduce proskynesis failed

Alexander did not abandon his plans for divinity and the unexpected death of Hephaestion creates new opportunities. Hephaestion's death was the last chance to sustain the image of friendship modeled on Achilles and Patroclus created earlier. Alexander imitates Achilles in the way he experiences mourning for Hephaestion³⁶. Hephaestion's death played an important role in creating Alexander's image, just as Patroclus' death affected Achilles' image. The death of a close friend provided an opportunity to accentuate Alexander's qualities, distinguishing him from others, thus making this character unique.

During the attempt to introduce proskynesis Alexander was too proud and aware of his greatness this attitude did not work in his favor. This time the theme of divinity returns in a different atmosphere of sorrow and mourning and, moreover, the goal was noble- to honor the memory of a friend. For this purpose, Alexander was to forgive Kleomenes for his many offenses and abuses if he erected a haroon in Alexandria and on the island of Pharos. Kleomenes was also to name the tower standing there after Hephaestion and to put Hephaestion's name on every merchant's contract³⁷. After Alexander's death, a list of plans drawn up by him was read out where Alexander gave the order to build a tomb for Hephaestion³⁸. The ancient sources do not mention any other instance of covering such large funeral expenses³⁹. Although the sudden death of Nikanor, Parmenion's son grieved Alexander⁴⁰. Nevertheless, nothing compares to Hephaestion's funeral. Whether

34. Arr. *Anab.* 1.12.

35. Diod. 17.114.

36. H. Bowden, *Alexander as Achilles: Arrian's use of Homer from Troy to the Granikos*, [in:] T. Howe, F. Pownall, *Ancient Macedonians in Greek and Roman Sources: From History to Historiography*, 2018, p. 164.

37. Arr. *Anab.* 7.23; P. Briant, *Alexander the Great and his empire*, trans. A. Kuhrt, Princeton 2012, p. 136; P. Green, *Alexander of Macedon...*, p. 466.

38. Diod. 18.4; P. McKechnie, *Diodorus Siculus and Hephaestion's...*, p. 421.

39. Funeral ceremonies said a lot about the wealth of the deceased or his family. Costly funerals could be afforded by elite representatives. Some Hellenistic customs preserve the memory of the deceased spread in the ancient world. This is evidenced by the similarities in descriptions of burials in the Republic and the Roman Empire Plut. *Sull.* 38; G.S. Sumi, *Spectacles and Sulla's public image*, „*Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*“ 51, 2022, p. 420-421. Suet. *Aug.* 100; R.A. Cordingley, I.A. Richmond, *The mausoleum of Augustus*, „*Papers of the British School at Rome*“ 10, 1927, p. 23-24; Augustus's funeral rites referred to the culture of the East Tac. *Ann.* 16.6, J.C. Reeder, *Typology and ideology in the mausoleum of Augustus: tumulus and tholos*, „*Classical Antiquity*“ 11, 1992, p. 268-272; D. Favro, Ch. Johanson, *Death in motion: funeral processions in the Roman Forum*, „*Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*“ 69, 2010, p. 30.

40. Curt. 6.6.

political circumstances and political attitudes towards Alexander is a reflection of the way he handled the funeral issues?

The Issue of Athens in the Face of Hephaestions' Glorification

Athens' hostile attitude toward Macedonia was driven by anti-Macedonian circles as early as Philip's time. This was due to Philip's imperial policy. Despite this, Philip and later also Alexander dealt kindly with the Athenians⁴¹. However, the attitude towards Athens had its political justification⁴². Plutarch describing the visit to the oasis of Siwah and the theme of Alexander's divinity and then Plutarch quotes the contents of his letter addressed to the Athenians⁴³. There Alexander refers to Philip's "gave" of Samos to the Athenians adding that they will not get it again⁴⁴. Philip after his victory in 338 BC made an agreement with Athens⁴⁵. The "gift" was thus Philip's acquiescence rather than a literal gift of the island⁴⁶. The reference to Samos after the visit to Siwah is certainly not accidental. In this way, the author points to the connection between the Samos issue and his aspirations for divinity.

The pacification of Agis in 331 BC and the destruction of Thebes was a valuable message to the Greek cities. An even more important message was carried by the exile decree issued, which made clear to the Greeks the extent of Alexander's power⁴⁷. If J.P. Nudell's statement rightly is that the Samoans asked Alexander to help them as early as 334 BC this issue would be presumably a great prove of Alexander's far sighted policy. Alexander was aware that in the Greek world and peace in Greece depended to a large extent on Athens⁴⁸. Too early an attempt to interfere in Greek affairs, would have failed and Alexander did not want to create a conflict between him and Athens. His cautious policy worked⁴⁹. Athens did not join Agis' revolt⁵⁰.

41. W.S. Ferguson, *Hellenistic Athens: an historical essay*, London 1911, p. 7.

42. S. Perlman, *The coins of Philip II and Alexander the Great and their pan-hellenic propaganda*, „The Numismatic Chronicle and Journal of the Royal Numismatic Society” 5, 1965, p. 66.

43. Determining the date of the letter's creation is subject to discussion, compare N.G.L Hammond., *Alexander's letter concerning Samos in Plut. „Alex.”* 28.2, „Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte” 42, 1993, p. 381; J.R. Hamilton, *Alexander and his 'so-called' father*, „The Classical Quarterly” 3, 1953, p. 157.

44. Plut. *Alex.* 28; N.G.L Hammond., *Alexander's letter...*, p. 381.

45. Paus. 1.25.3; ; N.G.L Hammond., *Alexander's letter...*, p. 381.

46. Plut. *Alex.* 28; J.R. Hamilton, *Alexander and his...*, p. 153-154; N.G.L Hammond., *Alexander's letter...*, p. 381.

47. I. Worthington, *Alexander and Athens 324/323 bc: on the attitude to the Macedonina hegemony*, „Mediterranean Archaeology” 7, 1994, p. 46.

48. S. Perlman, *The coins of Philip II and Alexander...*, p. 66-67.

49. *Ibidem*, p. 66-67.

50. Diod. 17.62.

The issuance of the decree in 324 BC caused great discontent among the Greeks, who met with Nikanor to negotiate⁵¹. The question of whether the Athenians were preparing for war with Alexander is still unresolved. However, the attitudes of prominent Athenians including Demosthenes should be interpreted as a sign of determination to prevent war⁵². The decree of exile was directed mainly against Athens, and Athens did not want to measure itself against the might of Alexander⁵³. Earlier events in Greece had made Athens fearful of Macedonian power⁵⁴. The Athenians wanting to preserve Samos, which was important to them (about 12,000 Athenian citizens resided there⁵⁵) refused to support Harpalos⁵⁶ and brought Demosthenes to trial⁵⁷. These actions were intended to help Athens win the recognition of Alexander⁵⁸. Also, the reference in Athenaeus to Timagoras falling on his face before Alexander⁵⁹ indicates another attempt to gain Alexander's sympathy.

Alexander's image was built on competition. The characters around Alexander, both his companions (Parmenio, Eumenes) and enemies (Darius, Spitamenes) serve to emphasize his character traits and skills that make him superior to others. This is proven by numerous examples. In these considerations, the most important figure influencing the construction of Alexander's image is Hephaestion. Some researchers emphasize Hephaestion's lack of competence, they also claim that Hephaestion got promoted due to his friendship with Alexander⁶⁰. It is worth to notice that the relationship linking Alexander and Hephaestion is presented in a one-sided manner in the ancient sources. Which focus on Hephaestion's benefits, but even these are dependent from Alexander's generosity⁶¹. Despite Hephaestion's political roles still he is presented in the context of events building Alexander's image⁶². Hephaestion was meant to carrying out Alexander's plans. Alexander

51. J.R. Hamilton, *Alexander and his...*, p. 152.

52. O. Palagia, *Alexander the Great and the Athenians: deification and portraiture*, [in:] M. D'Agostini, E.M. Anson, F. Pownall, *Affective relations and personal bonds in Hellenistic Antiquity. Studies in honor of Elizabeth D. Carney*, 2021, p. 269; I. Worthington, *Alexander and Athens...*, p. 46.

53. I. Worthington, *Alexander and Athens...*, p. 51.

54. Ibidem, p. 50.

55. J.P. Nudell, *Accustomed to Obedience? Classical Ionia and the Aegean World, 480–294 BCE*, 2023, s. 156, K. Nawotka, Aleksander Wielki, p. 481-482; O. Palagia, *Alexander the Great and the Athenians...*, p. 269.

56. I. Worthington, *Alexander and Athens...*, p. 49; T. Howe, presents results of innovative research in: *Friendship is golden: Harpalus, Alexander and Athens*, [in:] *Affective relations and personal bonds in Hellenistic Antiquity. Studies in honor of Elizabeth D. Carney*, 2021, p. 208-209.

57. W.S. Ferguson, *Hellenistic Athens: an historical essay*, p. 13.

58. I. Worthington, *Alexander and Athens...*, p. 50.

59. Ath. 6.251b.

60. P. Cartledge, *Aleksander Wielki*, Warszawa 2005, p. 121; W. Heckel, *The conquest of Alexander the Great*, Cambridge 2008, p. 127-8.

61. Plut. Alex. 47.

62. S. Müller, *Hephaestion – a re-assessment of his career*, [in:] T. Howe, F. Pownall, *Ancient Macedonians in Greek and Roman sources. From history to historiography*, Swansea 2018, pp. 77.

imitated the Homeric ideals which were still attractive in the 4th century BC⁶³. Alexander's behavior many times referred to his Greek progenitors⁶⁴, whom he could imitate together with Hephaestion⁶⁵ and on this base he was building his image. Hephaestion, as an ally of Alexander's pro-Iran activities⁶⁶, participated in the attempt introduction of proskynesis which, although unsuccessful, equipped Alexander with some knowledge.

The concept of divinity is found in Curtius Rufus and concerns Olympias⁶⁷. The fact that Curtius is the only source containing such a reference raises the question of the veracity of this event⁶⁸. Despite this, it is valuable information in the context of the present discussion. Curtius emphasizes Alexander's beautiful attitude towards his mother, creating Alexander as an ideal son, cherishing family relations. Secondly, Alexander wanted to exalt his mother for image benefits. Being the son of a god and a mortal woman only gave Alexander semi-divine status. The establishment of the cult of Hephaestion, was linked to the establishment of the cult of Alexander⁶⁹. Yet there was a difference between the two. Hephaestion in ancient sources is called as an assistant deity of *πάρεδρος*⁷⁰. Alexander establishing the cult of Hephaestion and its spread rapidly and reached Greece⁷¹ (and lasted at least until 322 BC⁷²) make Alexander a superior deity. However the issue of Alexander's divinity is more complicated mainly because of diadochs' policy. Undoubtedly Alexander was building his image by imitating his mythical ancestors (Hephaestion was involved in it). The idea of a king became a role model for his successors, who alluded to Alexander in the struggle for power in order to lend prestige to their image. After Alexander's death diadochi participated in the creation of myths about Alexander because it was attractive to build their own image⁷³. This led to the development of an idealised model used by ancient authors to evaluate successive generations of kings. Because of this some researchers are skeptical toward

63. T. Howe, *The diadochi, invented tradition, and Alexander's expedition to Siwah*, [in:] V.A. Troncoso, E.M. Anson, *After Alexander. The time of the diadochi (323-281 bc)*, 2013, p. 61.

64. Ael. VH 7.8.

65. Arr. *Anab.* 1.12; Ael. VH 12.7.

66. M.J. Olbrycht, *Aleksander Wielki i świat irański*, Rzeszów 2004, p. 54.

67. Curt. 9.26; E. Carney, *Olympias: mother of Alexander the Great*, p. 130.

68. E. Carney, *Olympias: mother of Alexander the Great*, p. 101-102.

69. B. Dreyer, *Heroes, cults, and divinity*, [in:] W. Heckel, L.A. Tritle, *Alexander the Great. A new history*, p. 230-231.

70. Diod. 17.115.

71. P. Briant, *Alexander the Great and his empire*, p. 136; P. Treves, *Hyperides and the...*, p. 56.

72. O. Palagia, *Alexander the Great and the Athenians...*, p. 269.

73. T. Howe, *The diadochi, invented tradition, and Alexander's expedition to Siwah*, [in:] V.A. Troncoso, E.M. Anson, *After Alexander. The time of the diadochi (323-281 bc)*, 2013, p. 60.

Alexander's deification⁷⁴, while others reseraches claims that Alexander achieved his goal and was accepted as a god⁷⁵.

Conclusions

Exaltation is a characteristic model of the Homeric way of experiencing mourning. It is also understandable mechanism to the maintaining the image of Alexander as a better follower of Achilles. The mythologised image of friendship was the explanation of Alexander's actions. The expedition against the Cossay tribe made Alexander the conqueror of a previously impossible tribe to subdue. Despite the official purpose was to commissioning memorials to Hephaestion the truth is it meant to cultivate the memory of Alexander. All these events were significant from an image-building perspective. A series of these events helped to create the myth of Alexander being the model of a friend. Showing deep mourning by Alexander prevented opposition from companions and the passivity of those around him encouraged Alexander's proliferation of powers. Moreover the death of Hephaestion was an important justification for Alexander's extravagant plans. Political activities like decree of exile issued just before Hephaestion's death enabled Alexander to aspire to deity status again. The acceptance of Alexander as a god by the Athenians allowed the spread of the cult to other cities. This shows that Alexander used certain Homeric patterns to achieve his own assumptions.

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74. P. Siekierka, *Another note on deification of Alexander in Athens*, [in:] K. Nawotka, A. Wojciechowska, *Alexander the Great and the East. History, art, tradition*, Wiesbaden 2016, p. 270-271.

75. W.S. Ferguson, *Hellenistic Athens...*, p. 12

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