Olympias: ‘The Macedonians will never let themselves be ruled by a woman’

It is clear that royal women in the kingdom of Macedon and its neighbours Epirus and Illyria played a more public role than the women of the world of the city-states to the South, especially in Athens. This can be seen most clearly in the period of Alexander the Great and the Successors. However, the roles played by such women were less active than those of their male relatives and women were more likely to play an active role when they lacked close male relatives who could act in their interests. We need to consider the nature of women’s roles in Macedon in order to understand the structures of power in the kingdom.

Sarah B. Pomeroy shows us that the Macedonians made the same gender distinctions as the Athenians and argues that Macedon, as a less urbanised society and one open to the influence of neighbouring societies where the sexes were not segregated, did allow a wider role to its women particularly in the period of great social change during the reign of Philip II. Furthermore, Macedonian women, like Spartan women, at least in Hellenistic times, appear to have owned and controlled their own wealth. The direct evidence for Macedonian women owning land comes from the time of the Successors and later, but it is likely that Macedonian women

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1 This is a version of a paper delivered at the thirtieth Congress of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association at the University of Auckland in February 1999. The comments of the anonymous referees have enabled me to make considerable improvements in the paper.

controlled their own wealth at earlier times. Macedonian queens played prominent roles, but this should be seen as a private function, within the royal household, rather than a public one.

I believe Pomeroy’s picture is sound in its general outlines, but needs to be modified in detail. Macedonian women played a less prominent role than their male kinsmen in public life, but they are found acting in the public sphere, outside the household, in ways that are not found for women in Athens. The most prominent roles are played by royal widows, who lacked a male relative with any strong interest in protecting their orphaned sons. A similar pattern is found in the neighbouring kingdoms of Epirus and Illyria, which Pomeroy sees as not being segregated by gender. There is a difference, in that a widowed queen in Macedon did not exercise power unless some male held independent authority alongside her. However the Macedonian widows seem to have been just as effective as the Illyrian and Epirote queens who apparently held unrestricted power as regents.

Alexander the Great’s mother Olympias is the best documented example of a Macedonian royal woman in the fourth century BC, and is thus the best example to start the analysis. However, the ancient sources present Olympias as an untypical case, someone who did not know that the Macedonians would not allow a woman to rule them.

Similar quotes occur to this effect in two different authors. Plutarch Alexander 68.4 tells us that when Alexander heard that his mother and sister had exchanged places, with Olympias going to Epirus and Cleopatra to Macedon, he remarked that his mother had made the better choice, since the Macedonians would never allow themselves to be ruled by a woman (Μακεδόνας γὰρ οίκ ἄν ὑπομέναι βασιλευομένους ὑπὸ γυναικός) Diodorus Siculus 19.11.9 tells us that when Olympias was overthrown, people remembered a similar remark made by the dying Antipater, which was later seen as having been prophetic: he observed that the Macedonians would not allow the kingdom to be controlled by a woman (μηδέποτε συγχωρήσαι γυναῖκι τῆς βασιλείας προστατήσαι) Olympias’ subsequent career and death were seen to have confirmed this remark.

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3 Pomeroy, Women (as in n.2), 14ff. The one example she quotes from before Alexander’s death is Olympias’ donation of a phiale to the statue of Hygeia.

4 Pomeroy, Women (as in n.2), 11.
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The historical traditions may seem to tell us that Olympias was exceptional for a Macedonian woman in her high public profile, and that she failed to realise that this was unacceptable to the Macedonians. However, our traditions on Macedon are recorded by writers from the city-state world, from Herodotus to Plutarch and Arrian. Even when they appear to rely on Macedonian male sources, they try to present Macedonian history as if its women adhered to the customs of their own society.\(^5\)

On many occasions Olympias played a visible role during the lives of her husband Philip and her son Alexander, but she rarely exercised control over events. Justin 8.6.4 says one reason for Philip’s action in replacing her uncle Arybas with her brother Alexander as king of Epirus was Olympias’ influence—alongside a more sordid one: Philip’s own affair with the young Alexander. But apart from her flight to her brother in 337 and her alleged responsibility for the assassination of Philip, there is no record of Olympias taking action herself; her role was public, but largely passive under Philip. In the reign of her husband, Olympias’ public role was principally to support her son’s hopes of becoming the next king.\(^7\)

Early in Alexander’s reign, she is said to have murdered Philip’s last wife Cleopatra and her infant child.\(^8\) Thereafter she reverted to a less active role. In his absence Alexander appointed Antipater as regent of Macedon (Arrian Anabasis 1.11.3; Diodorus Siculus 17.118.1). We find Olympias (along with her daughter Cleopatra) receiving booty from Gaza (Plutarch


\(^6\) Justin 19.7.6, Plutarch Alexander 10.5. Aristotle (Politics 1311b1) does not seem to know this story, parts of which are totally incredible: cf. J.H. Ellis, Philip II and Macedonian Imperialism (London, 1976), 225, N.G.L. Hammond, Philip of Macedon (Baltimore, 1994), 175.


\(^8\) Justin, 7.6.4, cf. Plutarch Alexander 10.6. N.G.L. Hammond, Alexander the Great: King, Commander and Statesman (London, 1981), 39, queries whether the responsibility was Olympias'.
Alexander 25); writing to Athens to forbid certain activities at Dodona, while also making dedications of her own at Athens, a bowl (phiale) to Hygeia (Hypereides Against Euxenippus 19-26); and possibly making a monetary dedication at Delphi (Syll. 3 252).9

These latter two cases show that a Macedonian woman had the right to alienate her own property, not only to be its owner at law. At Athens, Isaeus 10.10 tells us, an Athenian woman could not make a valid transaction for more than the value of a medimnus of barley, which meant that she could not dispose of the property which was legally hers unless she had the consent of her guardian.10 The position of Macedonian women here seems like that of the women of Sparta and Gortyn, who had actual control of the property which was legally theirs.11 Unfortunately, there is no evidence for any Macedonian woman alienating land before the time of the Successors, but it seems likely that they could have done so.

In her son’s reign, Olympias’ major role seems to have consisted in writing letters to Alexander, culminating in a major attack on Antipater.12 Alexander showed respect for his mother, and relied on her to watch his interests at home in Macedon. However, he was not willing, or perhaps unable, to transfer political power to her.13

After Alexander’s death Olympias remained outside the political arena for a time, even after the death of her enemy Antipater. On the advice of Eumenes of Cardia she rejected Polyperchon’s offer of the care (ἐπιμέλεια)

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9 The name is largely restored, but plausible: Ol[ympia]di.


12 Arrian Anabasis 6.12.5ff; Diodorus Siculus 17.118.1. For earlier letters denouncing Alexander the Lyncestian in 333 BC, Diodorus Siculus 17.32.1, and attacking Amyntas son of Andromenes in 331, Curtius 7.1.36ff.

13 G.H. Macurdy, Hellenistic Queens (Baltimore, 1932), 32; E.D. Carney, ‘Women and Basileia’ (as in n.5), 378.
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of her grandson Alexander and remained in Epirus (Diodorus Siculus 18.49.4). A year later, she decided to accept this offer and returned to Macedon. Although Polyperchon remained as regent, Olympias took over the leading role. She appointed Eumenes as royal general in Asia (Diodorus Siculus 18.62.2) and she wrote to Nikanor in Athens and demanded that he hand over the Piraeus (but he remained loyal to Cassander—18.65.1). Her appearance at the head of her army led to the desertion of the opposing troops, and she had Philip Arrhidaeus and his wife Eurydice killed. However, her persecution of Cassander’s family and allies (including digging up the bones of his dead brother Iollas) aroused opposition (Diodorus Siculus 19.11). After a bitter siege of Pydna, Cassander forced Olympias to surrender and had her executed after a trial in which she was not allowed to defend herself (Diodorus Siculus 19.49-50).

Olympias seems to have taken up the leading role in Macedonian life only reluctantly. While her husband and son were alive, she expected a position of honour, but largely left active public roles to her male relatives. Only when it was clear that her grandson had no other reliable protector, since other Macedonian noblemen were looking out for their own future power, did Olympias come forward and adopt a masculine role.

Olympias was by no means the only Macedonian royal woman to act this way. Philip’s mother Eurydice had called in the Athenian general Iphikrates to expel the pretender Pausanias (Aeschines 2 [Embassy].26). She is also said to have conspired with Ptolemy of Alorus, the regent for her second son Perdiccas, resulting in the deaths of her sons Alexander and Perdiccas (Justin 15.5.1: this story cannot be correct as it stands). While the adult men of the Macedonian royal house intrigued to acquire royal power for themselves, Eurydice’s actions probably helped her two younger sons, Perdiccas and Philip, to survive long enough to become adult kings themselves.


Plutarch *Moralia* 14 B-C records an dedication Eurydice made to the Muses to commemorate having learnt to write as an adult. This shows Eurydice appearing in public, outside the household, and suggests that she had control over her own money in order to pay for the inscription. This shows Macedonian queens in a public role before the social changes during the reign of her son Philip.

Similarly Polyaenus *Stratagems* 8.68 tells us that Philip’s daughter Kynane (or Kynna) led armies in person and trained her daughter Adea to do the same, killing a reigning Illyrian queen in battle by her own hand (no other source for Philip’s reign records such an Illyrian queen). In order to secure the marriage of her daughter Adea (later renamed Eurydice) to the new king Philip Arrhidaeus, she defeated Antipater’s troops at the Strymon, but was assassinated by Alketas, brother of the regent Perdiccas, while at the head of her troops at Sardis. We should consider the possibility that Polyaenus, or his sources, have embellished the story of Kynane in order to make her seem less like a proper Greek woman, but other evidence does show her as a very forceful woman: Arrian (*Successors* 22 [=FGH 156F9]) confirms Polyaenus on Kynane’s death at Sardis.

Polyaenus also tells us she refused to marry again after the death of her husband Amyntas son of Perdiccas. This would have produced a crisis if the husband to whom Alexander had promised her, King Langarus of the Agrianians, had not died before the wedding could take place (Arrian *Anabasis* 1.5.4). Since Alexander had had Kynane’s husband Perdiccas executed for treason shortly before this, it seems that Kynane was making a direct challenge to his authority. So it seems there was a kernel of truth in Polyaenus’ account of Kynane as a forceful woman, even if some of the details may be dubious.

Kynane’s daughter, Adea-Eurydice, was married to Philip III and played an active role in Macedonian affairs. At Triparadisus she organised mutinous troops to attack the regent Antipater (Arrian *Successors* 33 [=FGH 156F9]; cf. Diodorus Siculus 18.39.3-4). Being dissatisfied with his successor Polyperchon (who wanted an alliance with Olympias), she replaced him with his rival Cassander (Justin 15.5.3). She appeared at the

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head of an army for battle, and on its defection to Olympias, she escaped, but was captured and forced to commit suicide (Diodorus Siculus 19.11).

Philip's remaining child, his daughter Thessalonice, had had little influence for most of her life. Olympias had prevented her from marrying while she was alive, and she was then married by Cassander in order to assist his plans to make himself king of Macedon (Diodorus Siculus 19.52). After the deaths of Cassander and his eldest son Philip, Thessalonice was murdered by her second son Antipater on the grounds that she had showed undue favour to the youngest son Alexander. It seems that she had had sufficient influence to make Alexander joint king with his brother.

In the fourth century royal Macedonian women played active roles, especially when there was no adult male of the family to assist them, and where the interests of infant children or grandchildren, or in the case of Adea-Eurydice, her mentally incompetent husband, were at stake. When there was an adult, competent royal male (without conflicting dynastic interests) present, women did not need to play such an active role. Therefore it was not Olympias' personality which made her unusually active in Macedonian affairs after Alexander's death, but her lack of reliable male relatives.

While royal Macedonian women normally played a more active role as widows this does not mean that the Macedonians accepted such female activity as proper. All these active women encountered some hostile reactions. The two incompatible traditions about Philip's mother Eurydice indicate that she met with slander as a form of opposition, but that this opposition to her was not universal.

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17 Since the army deserted before fighting, there is no more reason to think Eurydice actually intended to fight than Olympias did. Diodorus' evidence does not justify the claim of E.D. Carney 'Foreign Influence' (as in n.7), 323, of three generations of warrior queens.


19 K. Mortensen, 'Eurydike: Demonic or Devoted Mother?' AHB 6 (1992), 156-171; cf. Macurdy, Hellenistic Queens (as in n.13), 20.
We have seen the hostile comments on Olympias, and she, like the other royal women of the Argead house in the period of the successors, Kynane, Adea-Eurydice and Thessalonice, met male opposition and eventually paid with her life for her intervention in the political sphere. In the case of Eurydice, the hostility of Olympias, defending the interests of a different male heir, rather than male disapproval, led to her defeat, but Antipater and probably Polyperchon had also opposed her bid for power.

There is one case of a non-royal Macedonian woman who is known to have played a political role. Antipater (who was no champion of women who were active in public life)\(^{20}\) described Phila, his daughter, as having the wisest head of anyone in Macedonia, and he consulted her on political matters even before her first marriage (Diodorus Siculus 19.59.5). Since Phila was first married in the reign of Philip,\(^{21}\) Antipater's remark must have been made well before she became queen as wife of Demetrius the Besieger.

We find her acting as ambassador for her husband Demetrius to her brother Cassander, to explain Demetrius' seizure of Cilicia from Cassander's brother Pleistarchus. She helped Demetrius' career in less active ways: the Macedonians were reconciled to him as king in part because his queen (and mother of his heir) was the daughter of the popular Antipater. Even in Athens (a city which did not admire Antipater or prominent women) we find Phila Aphrodite linked to the two Saviour Gods (Antigonus and Demetrius) in a fragment of the comic poet Alexis—presumably as a goddess. Phila was a propaganda asset to the Antigonids even at Athens (Plutarch Demetrius 32.4 and 37.4; Alexis ap. Athenaeus Deipnosophists 5.254A).\(^{22}\)

Phila was never without a male guardian, as she committed suicide by poison when Demetrius was expelled from Macedon (Plutarch Demetrius

\(^{20}\) Carney, 'Women and Basileia' (as in n.5), 378.

\(^{21}\) W.Hoffman, 'Phila (2)' RE 19 (1938), 2087.

\(^{22}\) See Pomeroy, Women in Hellenistic Egypt (as in n.2), 15 and n.53 on p.177, for other activities of Phila.
45). So, unlike Olympias, Phila was never in the position where she needed to make an active defense of her sons’ interests.

It is clear, then, that Macedonian women were more active in public life than Athenian women. They were not, however, normally as active as Macedonian men. Many of these women were not themselves of Macedonian origin, and they may have brought with them different attitudes toward a woman’s role. For example, Olympias came from Epirus—and Alexander’s remark could mean that a woman might rule there, but not in Macedon. Kynane’s mother was Illyrian and E.D. Carney sees an Illyrian tradition of warrior-queens being continued for three generations. Despite Polyaenus Stratagems 8.60, which says that Kynane taught her daughter to fight, there is no actual evidence that Eurydice did more than appear at the head of her troops, like her rival Olympias. Kynane’s actions in actually fighting have no parallel in the ancient evidence.

The evidence for the history of Illyria is poor. However we do know of one ruling queen of Illyria at a later date. In the First Illyrian War, Teuta, the widow of king Agron, is described both as guardian for her stepson Pinnes and as possessing the kingship (βασιλεία) herself. Teuta received ambassadors, ordered assassinations and sent out pirate ships and armies, but does not seem to have commanded in the field, leaving that to subordinate males.

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23 Carney, ‘Women and Basileia’ (as in n.5), 367-391.
24 Pomeroy, Women in Hellenistic Egypt (as in n.2), 6f: E.D. Carney, ‘Foreign Influence’ (as in n.7), 313-323.
25 Aelian VH 13.36 says Eurydice’s mother was Illyrian. This is presumably an error for ‘grandmother’.
26 Carney, ‘Foreign Influence’ (as in n.7), 323.
27 This story may be a later invention: E.S. Gruen, The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome (Berkeley, 1984), 361.
28 Polybius 2.4.7ff and 8.4ff; Appian Illyrica 7; Cassius Dio 11 fr.49; Zonaras 8.19.
Teuta is criticised in our sources for her light, unthinking, female mind, but this probably shows Greek and Roman prejudice, rather than Illyrian attitudes. After Teuta's death, Pinnes' mother Triteuta did not become ruler, but his guardian Demetrius of Pharos did increase his power by marrying her (Cassius Dio 11 fr.53). Presumably Triteuta, as a secondary queen, was not seen as a possible ruler.

Polybius' wording does suggest that royal women could possess royal power in Illyria, unlike Macedon, and the men under Teuta's rule, such as Demetrius of Pharos are her subordinates, not holders of independent power, like Antipater against Olympias. But there is no tradition of warrior-queens found outside the Polyaenus passage and the role may be an innovation by Kynane, which the Macedonians preferred to attribute to her barbarian origins.

The evidence for royal women's rights in Epirus is even poorer, but we do find at least one female regent in Epirus. In the late second century Pyrrhus' daughter Olympias II is attested as regent (and alleged wicked step-mother). Alexander's sister Cleopatra was probably regent during her husband Alexander the Molossian's campaigns in southern Italy. Lycurgus (Contra Leocratem 26) tells us of grain exported from Epirus under Cleopatra, and Aeschines 3.242 records her receiving an embassy of condolence from the Athenians when they heard of Alexander the Molossian's death. But we are not told what position she held at these times.

Our sources do not record any male Epirotes holding independent power alongside either Cleopatra or Olympias II, as they do for Olympias

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29 Zonaras 8.19, cf. Polybius 2.4.7; and 8.12; Cassius Dio 11 fr.49. Teuta, however, was following a coherent line of policy: F.W. Walbank, *A Historical Commentary on Polybius* I (Oxford, 1970), 156.

30 F.W. Walbank, ibid.

31 Carney, 'Foreign Influence' (as in n.7), 321.

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when she was guardian for her Macedonian grandson. However, in view of the limited evidence we cannot be certain that there were no such men, and N.G.L. Hammond concludes that Cleopatra’s position in Epirus was not regent, but prostates. The evidence does not allow decisive proof, but I think Cleopatra, like the later Olympias II, was probably regent in Epirus.

The evidence on Cleopatra’s role in Epirus does not distinguish her position from that of her mother in Macedon. Alexander sent booty from Gaza to both (Plutarch Alexander 25), and both are named as recipients of grain from Cyrene in the famine of the 320s (SEG IX.2 lines 6 and 10). The anecdote at Plutarch Alexander 68 treats their positions as being similar.

It is likely that the actual power exercised by Cleopatra as regent in Epirus and that exercised unofficially in Macedon by Olympias differed only in detail. N.G.L. Hammond, in fact, sees Olympias as holding an official position in Macedon during Alexander’s reign, the prostasia. If this is correct, Diodorus’ choice of words, in saying that the Macedonians would never let a woman be in charge of (προστατήσαι) Macedon (19.11.9) was unfortunate. Similarly the care (ἐπιμελεία) of her grandson offered to Olympias (19.49 and 57) might look like the name of a formally defined position, although it seems odd that Olympias should have been appointed to different positions on the two occasions. It is more likely that these words describe the informal power she held, but whatever the case, Olympias in Macedon was not able to hold the same legal power as regent as Antipater, and later Polyperchon, or her own daughter Cleopatra in Epirus. She was, however, able to exercise considerable influence, and she seems to have had comparable power to that exercised by Cleopatra.

33 Hammond, ‘Macedonian Offices’ (as in n.14), 157.
35 Hammond, History of Macedonia III (as in n.14), 130, sees this as a deliberate reference to the prostasia. Even so, Diodorus has not expressed himself clearly.
36 Hammond, ‘Macedonian Offices’ (as in n.14), 157 sees this as ‘management’ of the young king, and not a resumption of the prostasia.
Olympias’ position in Epirus after she had exchanged with Cleopatra is hard to determine. It has been suggested that she took over the regency for her grandson, Neoptolemus II. Cross’ argument that Neoptolemus II’s father cannot have been Alexander the Molossian because he is not described as King Alexander, is weak and has been generally ignored. However, even if we accept that he was king Alexander’s son, we have no evidence that he was the child of Cleopatra, or that he was king immediately after his father’s death.

Olympias’ support for Aeacides, son of her elder sister Troas and her uncle Arybas, can be more easily understood if she did not have a grandson in Epirus who was a rival. The next evidence for the ruler of Epirus after Alexander the Molossian’s death is Diodorus Siculus 18.11.1, which tells us that the party of ‘Aryptaeus’ was in power there in 322 BC. This suggests that Arybas had regained control by then. We do not know whether Olympias returned home to Epirus as regent for Neoptolemus or as a private person in 324, but the latter seems more likely.

While Epirus allowed a woman to have the title of regent, unlike Macedon, a forceful woman like Olympias aroused opposition there too. Hostility towards Olympias led the Epirotes to abandon her cause and dethrone her nephew Aeacides—disloyalty to the dynasty which had never happened before (Pausanias 1.11.4; Diodorus Siculus 19.36.4). Since Aeacides (and presumably his supporters) remained loyal to Olympias, it is clear that her leadership was also divisive in Epirus, arousing both support and opposition.

The same can be said of her leadership in Macedon. Even as her position in Pydna became hopeless, two of her supporters held on to key positions elsewhere in Macedon on her behalf: Aristonous at Amphipolis and Monimus at Pella. When she surrendered at Pydna, Monimus also

37 Macurdy, *Hellenistic Queens* (as in n.13), 35; Hammond, *Epirus* (as in n.32), 558.
38 Cross, *Epirus* (as in n.32), 108.
39 Plutarch *Pyrrhus* 1.5; Cross, *Epirus* (as in n.32), 37.
gave up, but Aristonous would only surrender on receipt of a written order from Olympias herself.

Cassander secured this and then had Aristonous murdered (Diodorus Siculus 19.50.3 - 51.1) Presumably he felt that Aristonous might seek to avenge the judicial murder of Olympias, or even claim that it violated the agreements on which he had handed over Amphipolis.

The powerful Macedonian royal women are clearly the forerunners of the powerful queens of the Ptolemies, and to a lesser extent, the Seleucids. However we do not find active queens in Antigonid Macedonia after the death of Phila. This is probably because there was only one occasion under that dynasty when there was an infant orphan heir to the throne requiring protection. When Demetrius II died, leaving his young son Philip as heir, his cousin Antigonus Doson was appointed as guardian and married Philip’s mother (later to become king himself and then leave the throne to Philip). Justin 28.3.10 says Antigonus himself arranged this, planning to become king, while Plutarch Aemilius 8.3 attributes the initiative to the leading Macedonians, who were afraid of anarchy. Our sources are too short too enable us to tell whether or not Philip’s mother, the Epirote princess Phthia, played an active role in the matter.

It is clear that Macedonian women had a greater role in public life than did astai in Athens, who could be seen so little in public that the lawcourts could face problems in deciding whether or not a woman had even existed. Macedonian women were active in the public sphere and, like Spartan women, had control over their own property.

However, their public role was normally less extensive than that open to a Macedonian man. When a Macedonian queen did not have a competent male relative to protect her interests and those of her children, she had no compunction about taking up a male role and acting to protect them. Such actions met with both approval and hostility, and the divisive effect of female activity meant that in the long run, her position was weak, though the first Eurydice did see her son Perdiccas grow up and take over the royal

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41 Lacey, Family (as in n.10), 168; for examples from opposite viewpoints cf. Isaeus 6 (Philoctemon) 64f and 8 (Ciron) 6-10.
power - protecting a somewhat older son, who could take over the royal power sooner, was probably less difficult.

Olympias was not exceptional in adopting a public role. Her mother-in-law Eurydice led the way, and two daughters and a granddaughter of Philip's, Kynane, Thessalonice and Adea-Eurydice, also played active roles in Macedonian affairs. We also find a commoner (later one of the new royalty), Phila the daughter of Antipater, active in public life. But she was never without a father or a husband and did not alienate Macedonian opinion.

Two of the kingdoms neighbouring Macedon, Epirus and Illyria, apparently gave greater legal rights to royal women than Macedon itself did. In Epirus a queen could be regent, without a man holding independent power alongside her, while in Illyria Teuta is described as having held the power of king. However, in neither state do we have evidence that warrior-queens led their own armies, as Kynane did. There were differences among the northern kingdoms in the positions allowed to women, which the surviving evidence does not allow us to determine fully. However all of them gave a greater public role to their womenfolk than did Athens and similar Greek cities. A queen, especially if she was a widow or guardian of the heir, could exercise far greater power than any Athenian aste could ever hold, but she was still not the equal of her male compatriots.

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