Women played a prominent role in the political struggles of Alexander’s reign despite the fact that few of them were physically present at his itinerant court for extensive periods. The most influential of these women, his mother Olympias and his full sister Cleopatra, never saw Alexander again after his departure for Asia. Because of the general nature of Macedonian monarchy as well as circumstances peculiar to the period of Alexander, a few women managed to act independently of the king and a larger number became pawns in the intrigues of others. In Macedonia, kingship belonged to the Argead clan. Women who belonged to the clan, whether by blood or by marriage, were therefore inextricably linked to the central political institution of Macedonia. Before the fourth century, royal Macedonian women had ordinarily functioned as little more than dynastic tokens. Changes in the nature of monarchy initiated by Philip II and expanded by Alexander increased the distinction between the royal dynasty and the rest of Macedonian society and thus elevated royal women along with royal men. The scarcity of male Argeads during Alexander’s reign and his prolonged absence from the Macedonian homeland further inflated the role of royal women.

The best way to understand the role of women at the court of Alexander is to begin by considering the role of women in Macedonian monarchy before his reign. With that background, we can then turn to an examination of the careers of those women related to him by blood (Olympias, Cleopatra, and his two half-sisters), by marriage or sexual relationship (Roxane, Stateira, Parysatis, Barsine), or by the establishment of pseudo mother-son relationships with the king. Once we have gained some familiarity with the lives and actions of these individuals during Alexander’s reign, we can determine to what degree the role of women at Alexander’s court was a consequence of the king’s policy and to what degree a consequence of the actions of individual women.
Until the time of Alexander’s grandfather, Amyntas III, we hear of royal women in Macedonia only as the brides in marriage alliances. It is likely that Macedonian kings had long practiced polygamy, but there is no certain evidence until the reign of Philip II. Alexander’s grandmother, Eurydice, is the first royal woman known to have played a role in the public and political life of Macedonia. Literary evidence paints a contradictory picture of her as either or both a scheming adulteress willing to take the life of son or husband or as a loyal mother desperately trying to secure the succession of her sons to the throne (the latter is the more likely picture). Recently discovered inscriptions indicate that Eurydice dedicated a temple in the agora (marketplace) at Vergina, the site now generally recognized as Aegae, the ancient capital of Macedonia.

Whereas Eurydice’s public career was to some degree the consequence of chance circumstance, her son Philip II made royal women prominent as a matter of policy, although their prominence largely consisted of playing traditional roles on a grand scale. Philip was polygamous to an unprecedented degree: he married seven women, primarily for political reasons (Athen. 13.557 b–e). Polygamy was alien to the classical Greek world to the south and Philip’s court became notorious there both because of the role Greeks believed women played in court intrigue (Plut. Alex. 9.3–5) and because of the role sexual relationships between adult males in court life (Athen. 6.260 f). Philip’s assassination was directly linked to the tensions created at court by his sexual relationships with men (Diod. 16.93.3–94.1; Just. 9.6.4–7.14). Indirectly, the conflicting aspirations of two of his wives (Olympias and another Cleopatra, ward of Attalus) and their families for the succession of their sons (living and hoped-for) may also have been a factor in the murder of Philip. There can be no doubt that the conflict between the factions of Olympias and Cleopatra led to serious trouble in the last two years of Philip’s reign: after a public insult inflicted by Cleopatra’s guardian Attalus, Alexander and his mother Olympias chose to go leave Macedonia. A public reconciliation between Alexander and Philip (and possibly between Philip and Olympias) was affected shortly before Philip’s

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3 See Carney Women and Monarchy 2000: 40–46, 242–43, for references and the possibility that Eurydice’s tomb has been found at Vergina.