

Alexander's Magnificent Seven

In an oft-cited passage of Arrian (*Anab.* 6.28.4) we have a list of seven Macedonians who, by the last year of Alexander's eastern campaign, held the prestigious honor of membership in an elite unit of Bodyguards or *somatophylakes*. The unit had existed since before Alexander's reign, and the number was fixed, evidently, for Arrian states that Alexander appointed an eighth – exceptional – honorary *somatophylax* for having helped save the king's life during the siege of a Mallian town near the Indus. The significance of the number seven, the history of the institution, and the criteria for appointment are nowhere recorded in the sources. That it was the most elite unit within the Macedonian court seems clear, but apart from biographical details about some individual members, whose high ranking military careers are well recorded – Perdikkas, Ptolemy, Lysimachus, Leonnatus and Hephaestion (Peithon is not mentioned until the Indian campaign, and Aristonus not until he appears in Arrian's list) – it has been difficult for historians to try to tease out its origin and purpose.

In scholarship the Seven have tended to be treated individually, with less attention being given to the unit as a whole. W. Heckel (1978), picking up from Berve, set out to identify the individuals who held the title *somatophylax* during Alexander's reign and the approximate dates of their appointments to the elite Seven. In a follow-up study (1986) he aimed to clarify the several units (2 in addition to the Seven) to which the Alexander historians variously applied the term *somatophylakes*, and to describe the *somatophylakia*, or what he called a political *cursus honorum*. Here (1986, 290) he argued that the importance of the unit of Seven began to decline late in Alexander's reign, evidenced by Hephaestion's vacated position not being filled. This is one point with which my paper begs to differ, as I argue that, apart from the regent at Pella,

Antipater, the Seven were *the* most important men in the entire empire at the time of Alexander's death in 323. When Heckel later published a more detailed biographical study of the individual Seven in *Marshals* (1992, 257-279), he elaborated on the Macedonian *cursus honorum* (revised 2016, 242-259) but did not elaborate the *purpose* of the Seven-man unit. Meantime N. Hammond (1991) had taken a quite different approach, disputing Berve's categories and seeking to identify the practical role of the various guards by examining key episodes in which they were significantly involved (murder of Cleitus in 328, assassination of Philip II in 336). His argument hinged on unconvincing source analysis, and he entirely ignored Heckel's earlier arguments. C. King (2017, 120-122) adopted both approaches, describing the various units responsible for protecting the king on and off the battlefield and using a third episode, the one involving Peucestas, to illuminate the practical role of the *somatophylakes* in a military context. E. Anson's (2013, 61-62) brief discussion suggests possible Achaemenid influence in the origin of the Seven. What remains is to explore further the social composition of the elite unit and the unit's role in legitimizing the power of the king.

The scene at Babylon immediately following Alexander's death is most illuminating. According to Curtius (10.6.1-7.15; cf. also Justin 13.2.4-3.1; Diodorus 18.2.1-2), Perdikkas and *the other Bodyguards* summoned Alexander's chief Companions and officers to the royal quarters to decide the critical question of how and by whom the army and empire were to be administered in the immediate circumstances. Curtius' list of speakers proposing various courses of action includes four of the Seven – or six at this date, since Hephaestion was dead and Peucestas reappointed to a satrapy – and a fragment of Arrian's *Successors* (1.2) lists the most eminent of Alexander's officers in Babylon when Alexander died: Perdikkas, Leonnatus, Ptolemy, then Lysimachus, Aristonus, Peithon, Seleucus and Eumenes, all commanders of

cavalry, and Meleager commander of infantry. The first six are the remaining Bodyguards in 323. Arrian's comment "all commanders of cavalry" is largely overlooked, but it may be a key to unlocking some of the unanswered questions about Alexander's Magnificent Seven, the political and social significance of the elite unit, and its role in legitimizing the power of the king.

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