It is said that fact is stranger than fiction. The case of the Macedonian king Ptolemy Keraunos (Πτολεμαῖος Κεραυνός) certainly confirms this.

Keraunos (Greek for Thunderbolt) was born the eldest son of Ptolemy I Soter, ruler of Egypt, and Eurydice, daughter of Antipater, the Macedonian regent. He first appears in history in 282 BC in connection with a plot by the Macedonian king Lysimachus to murder his son – Agathocles. The apparent reason for Lysimachus’ displeasure with his son was that Agathocles was having an affair with Lysimachus’ wife (his own mother), Arsinoe of Egypt, who also happened to be Ptolemy Keraunos’ sister. Actually, according to the ancient historians, Lysimachus was displeased with the situation, not because the boy was having sex with his mother, but because his wife and son were rumored to be plotting together against Lysimachus (Memnon 12:6). Incest among the Macedonian aristocracy was a common occurrence (see below), but political infidelity was not tolerated.

To solve this family problem the king decided to murder his son, who was duly given a dose of poison. Unfortunately for Lysimachus, Agathocles, apparently realizing his father’s intentions at the last moment, spat out the poison. Faced with this embarrassing situation, Lysimachus subsequently threw the boy into a dungeon and called on his brother-in-law, Ptolemy Keraunos, to finish the job. Happy to oblige, soon afterwards Keraunos visited his nephew in his cell and stabbed him to death. According to the ancient historian Memnon (Memnon: History of Heracleia 12’6, 8’ 4–6), it was for this deed that Ptolemy received the title Keraunos – The Thunderbolt.

However, according to other ancient historians (Justinus XXIV,3; Pausinius 1. 16:2. 10.19 7–12), Ptolemy received his ‘title’ for another murder soon afterwards. After Lysimachus’ defeat and death at the Battle of Corupedium in 281 BC, against Seleucus I Nicator, the Macedonian throne passed to Seleucus who now held the whole of Alexander’s conquests excepting Egypt, and moved to take possession of Macedonia and Thrace. On his journey home to Macedonia in
September 281 BC Seleucus was accompanied by Ptolemy Keraunos, who he, for some unexplained reason, had taken under his protection. However, as soon as they arrived in the Thracian Chersonese, Keraunos, in a magnificent example of opportunism, murdered the old general, jumped on his horse and rode to the city of Lysimachia, where he immediately crowned himself King of Macedonia (Pausinias 1.16.2).

Through treachery and murder Keraunos had made himself king of Macedonia. However, in order to secure his hold on the throne he now resorted to another strategy – incest. The main threat to Ptolemy’s hold on the Macedonian throne was presented by Lysimachus and Philip, the remaining sons of Keraunos’ sister Arsinoe (Keraunos had already murdered the eldest). In order to get at the children, over the next few months Keraunos wooed his sister with gifts and proclamations of undying love, until finally, convinced that her brother truly loved both her and her children, she consented to marry him.

The wedding was celebrated with great magnificence and general rejoicings. Ptolemy, before the assembled army, placed a diadem on his sister’s head, and saluted her with the title of Queen. Arsinoe invited Ptolemy to her city Cassandrea and her sons, Lysimachus who was sixteen years old, and Philip three years younger, went to meet their uncle/father with crowns on their heads. The events which followed were indeed a Greek tragedy:

‘Ptolemy, to conceal his treachery, caressing them with eagerness, and beyond the warmth of real affection, persisted for a long time in kissing them. But as soon as he arrived at the gate, he ordered the citadel to be seized, and the boys to be slain. They, fleeing to their mother, were slain upon her lap, as she was embracing them.

She several times offered herself to the assassins in the room of her children, and, embracing them, covered their bodies with her own, endeavouring to receive the wounds intended for them. At last, deprived even of the dead bodies of her sons, she was dragged out of the city, with her garments torn and her hair dishevelled, and with only two attendants went to live in exile in Samothracia; sorrowing the more, that she was not allowed to die with her children’.

(Just. 24.2’1–3’9; see also Memn. 8’7; Plut: Mor 112’A; Trog: Prol 24).

However, apparently Arsinoe’s grief did not last long. Shortly afterwards she returned to Egypt where she continued her intrigues and probably instigated the accusation and exile of her other brother, Ptolemy II’s, first wife (another Arsinoe – confusingly called Arsinoe I). Arsinoe II then married her brother Ptolemy II (Pausanias (I 7.1). As a result, both were given the epithet “Philadelphoi” (Greek: Φιλάδελφοι, “Sibling-loving”) (see also S.M. Burstein, “Arsinoe II Philadelphos: A Revisionist View”, in W.L. Adams and E.N. Borza (eds), Philip II, Alexander the Great and the Macedonian Heritage (Washington, 1982), 197–212). For all her worldly charms the
Ptolemy (s) sister/wife was subsequently deified and worshipped as a goddess after her death (see Ladynin I, Popova E. (2010) An Egyptian Pendant from the Settlement ‘Chayka’ (North-Western Crimea) and the Posthumous Divinization of Arsinoe II Philadelphos. In: Vestnik drevney istorii (Journal of Ancient History) 2 (273), 2010, p. 71–85 (in Russian).

In a short period of time a series of brutal murders had secured the Macedonian throne for Ptolemy Keraunos, who now proclaimed himself the successor to Alexander the Great. It appeared that Keraunos had played the game perfectly, and that the Gods had smiled on him. However, as the new Macedonian king was concentrating on his internal enemies he had apparently forgotten the bigger picture. In the summer of 280 BC, as ‘The Thunderbolt’ settled on his newly acquired throne, to the north the ravens were gathering...

‘But the crimes of Ptolemy were not unpunished; for soon after the immortal gods inflicted vengeance on him for so many perjuries, and such cruel murders’. (Justinus XXIV, 3)

The first warnings of the gathering storm arrived at the Macedonian court in the form of ambassadors from the Dardanii tribe who reported a massive Celtic army approaching from the north. To emphasize the gravity of the situation the Dardanians offered Ptolemy 20,000 warriors to help the Macedonians hold back the Celtic advance. However, Keraunos laughed at the ambassadors, boasting that as successors of Philip II and Alexander the Great, the Macedonians who ‘had been victorious throughout the world’ (Justinus XXIV, 4) required no help from ‘barbarians’. While arrogant, Ptolemy’s reply was not without a certain machiavellian logic. By refusing to come to the aid of the Dardanii, Keraunos hoped to ‘kill two birds with one stone’, presuming that the resulting battle between the Dardanii and the Celts would weaken both to such an extent that neither would subsequently present a threat to Macedonia.

However, if Ptolemy had paused to consider the statistics, he might have thought twice. The force of 20,000 offered by the Dardanii was in itself a large army by any standards, and the fact that they knew that this would not be enough to stop the Celtic advance without Macedonian help illustrates that the advancing Celtic army (Bolgios’ western army) massively outnumbered them. In any event Ptolemy had made the first of many fatal miscalculations. Wisely, the Dardanii did not try to stop the Celts. Instead they joined them, and as they advanced on Macedonia, the Celtic army was now reinforced by 10,000 Dardanians.
Again ambassadors arrived at Ptolemy’s court, this time from the Celtic leader, Bolgios. Apparently believing that they offered peace terms because they wished to avoid a fight, Ptolemy arrogantly informed the Celts that if they laid down their weapons and surrendered their leaders, he would spare their lives. We are informed that, ‘The deputies bringing back this answer, the Gauls laughed, and exclaimed throughout their camp, that “he would soon see whether they had offered peace from regard for themselves or for him.”’ (Justinus XXIV, 5).

**BOLGIOS**

The commander of the western Celtic army in Macedonia is referred to in classical sources as Bolgios and also as Belgio/Belgios – *Galli duce Belgio* (Just. xxiv, 5; cf. Pomp. Prol. xxiv – ‘Belgius leader of the Gauls’). The participation of Belgae tribes in the Celtic migration into the Balkans and Asia-Minor during this period is well recorded (see Mac Congail B. Belgae expansion into South Eastern Europe and Asia-Minor (4th – 3rd c. BC.) In: PRAE. In Honorem Henrieta Todorova. National Archaeological Institute With Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Sofia 2007. p. 295 – 302) and Bolgios/Belgios is, like that of Brennos, not a personal name, but in this case derived from an ethnonym – i.e. Belgius = leader of the Belgae (see also ‘Bastarnae’ and ‘Galatia’ articles).

The exact size of Bolgios’ western army is unknown, but a number of factors indicate that it was a formidable military force. One should bear in mind that this was only one of 3 Celtic armies operating in the Balkans during this period (4 if one includes the ‘Galatian’ force of Lutarius and Leonnorius) and, while exact statistics are not given for the western and eastern armies of Bolgios and Cerethrius, the size of the central Celtic force gives us an indication of the scale of these armies. The central Celtic army consisted of 150,000 infantry, on which all three main sources (Diodorus Siculus Fragm. XXII 9.1; Pausanias 10. 19.9 – 152, 000; Justin XXIV, 6) are agreed. The figure given for the Celtic cavalry varies between 10,000 (Dio. Sic. op. cit; Justin. op cit – 15,000) and 62,700 (Pausanias X 19.9). The remarkably high figure given by Pausianias is explained by the unique cavalry system used by the Celts – the *Trimarkisia system*. 
The Celtic Trimarkisia cavalry system was a system whereby each horseman was accompanied by two mounted servants who were themselves skilled riders. When the horseman was engaged in battle, the servants remained behind the ranks and if a horse fell, they would bring the warrior a fresh horse. If the rider himself were killed, the servant would mount the horse in his master's place, thus replenishing the Celtic ranks. Pausanias (X 19.10-11) also informs us that:

'I believe that the Gauls in adopting these methods copied the Persian regiment of the Ten Thousand, who were called the Immortals. There was, however, this difference. The Persians used to wait until the battle was over before replacing casualties, while the Gauls kept reinforcing the horsemen to their full number during the height of the action. This organization is called in their native speech trimarcisia, for I would have you know that marca is the Celtic name for a horse'.

As they advanced south the Celts were joined by large numbers of warriors from the Balkan tribes, particularly the Dardanii, the Thracian Denteletes and the Illyrian Autariatae tribe (on the participation of the Denteletes see Gerov 1961 - Проучвания върху западнотракийските земи през римско време. In ГСУ, ФЗФ, т. 54, 3, 1961). The Macedonian general, Kassandros, had settled 20,000 of the Autariatae in the Orbelos area (on the modern Greek/Bulgarian border) as military settlers in order to establish a buffer zone protecting Macedonia's northern border from Celtic expansion (Diodorus Siculus Bibliotheca historica XX. 19.1; see also 'Flight of the Ravens' article). However, as the Celts now advanced, instead of defending Macedonia's borders against the Celts, the Autariatae joined them. Interestingly, there is no record of any of the Balkan tribes supporting the Macedonians during this conflict, and it would appear that many of the Balkan peoples saw the arrival of the Celts as an opportunity to finally free themselves from centuries of Macedonian dominance.

THUNDERBOLTS AND ELEPHANTS

The inevitable battle between the Macedonians and Bolgios' Celts took place a few days after the 'negotiations' had broken down. The Macedonian army was the unchallenged military 'superpower' in the region during this period, and past Macedonian victories had instilled in the Hellenistic world in general, and Ptolemy Keraunos in particular, a belief in the invincibility of the
Macedonian military against the armies of ‘inferior’ cultures, which is clearly reflected in Ptolemy’s attitude to both the Dardanian and Celtic ambassadors.

The armies of the Diadochi period were equipped and fought mainly in the same style as Alexander’s, and the famous Macedonian phalanx was still the main component, much like in the earlier days. Its disadvantage was its lack of versatility, but as long as both armies were playing by the same rules this weakness in the Macedonian military tactics was not apparent. However, now faced with an army who did not play by the rules of Hellenistic warfare, the game was about to change...

The battle of Issos between Alexander the Great and Darius of Persia. Floor mosaic, Roman copy after a Hellenistic original by Philoxenos of Eretria. (Naples National Archaeological Museum)

What followed was, according to ancient authors, less a battle than a full-scale slaughter (Polyb. 9.35’4; Diod. Sic. 22.3’1–2; Memn. 8’8; Plut. Pyrrh. 22’2; Paus. 1.16’2; Just. 24. 3’10). Keraunos’ battle strategy was built around the use of battle elephants, apparently believing that these beasts would terrify the barbarians. In fact, it appears that the opposite was true. The Macedonian ranks quickly collapsed in the face of the Celtic onslaught, Ptolemy’s battle elephants rearing out of control and adding to the bloody chaos. During the ensuing events the Macedonian king fell
off the elephant he was riding, and was captured. His army fled in disarray and, turning their backs on the enemy, the Macedonians became easy prey for the advancing Celtic cavalry. The majority were slaughtered on the battlefield and those that surrendered were rounded up and ritually beheaded.

And ‘The Thunderbolt’ himself?

Ptolemy met his fate on a battlefield amid the bodies of his invincible Macedonian army, sacrificed to the God of Thunder, with his head impaled on a spear...

(on these events see also Polyb. 9.35’4; Diod. Sic. 22.3’1–2; Memn. 8’8; Plut. Pyrrh. 22’2; Paus. 1.16’2, 10.19’7–12; just. 24.3’10, 5. 5–11; Trog. Prol. 24; Euseb. Chron. 235 a–b, 237 a, 241 b, 243 a; Hieron. Chron. 1736).