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Introduction

The reader should be warned that my story (rather than “study”) is only very marginally devoted to the real Alexander, but is almost wholly concerned with stories told about him after his death, both about “historical” events and, especially, the fantasy that scholars and poets have woven around him from antiquity down to the present day, from ancient and mediaeval “Romances” to modern film. His name and career have been “used” by authors, historians, and artists, relentlessly. They take us over a very full range of European and eastern literature and art, from Scotland to China, as well as of geography, since the whole of the Old World was deemed to have been the setting for his adventures, especially Asia. In the latter case, what I write depends rather little on personal experience of the eastern areas described (certainly not the imaginary ones, as yet) although I have tourist-travelled Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, north India, Ceylon, and China. My principal written sources are those I have abbreviated, and the many cited in footnotes, and which I have found in the Sackler Library in Oxford or via Abebooks. I should note especially my debt to Richard Stoneman for his many books published on the Romance aspects of the subject over the last twenty-odd years and his comments on what I have written. George Huxley and Paul Cartledge also

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kindly read a late draft of my text and offered many useful corrections and additions, as have others, notably Olga Palagia. Claudia Wagner has been exceptionally helpful in the preparation of the text and references to academic sources. But the reader will also surely be aware of my plundering of the Internet, verified where I could. So I would not claim this as a work of original scholarship, except in its assembly, but I hope it will appeal to some scholars unfamiliar with this area, somewhat removed from real history yet reliant upon it as well as upon the imagination of numerous writers and artists, east and west. It also has, I believe, a certain entertainment value. It is the product of a desultory but fairly thorough skimming of many different sources, an activity that has given me much pleasure, which may be, I hope, in part shared by the reader, if for no other reason than that the possibilities of expanding it seem endless. The evidence and sources are confusing, like the stories themselves, and I cannot deny having added somewhat to the confusion. Nor would I claim for this any degree of “completeness.” I find new references daily, but there had to be an end.

Alexander the Great lived in the fourth century BC, a Macedonian, born in Macedonia, the country at the northeast of the Balkan peninsula, abutting onto the Black Sea, neighbour to Illyria, Thrace, and other immigrant states. The Macedonians were remotely related to the Greeks, who had made their way to the south of the peninsula much earlier, from the sixteenth century BC on, becoming our “Mycenaean” Greeks. The Macedonians too were “Indo-Europeans,” and spoke a language related to Greek (as well as to much else that hailed distantly from the “Indo-

European” east), if not always mutually intelligible in our period. They were a single nation with a royal family, unlike the Thracians’ petty kings, the Illyrians and other neighbours, and unlike the Greek-speaking tribes who had preceded them, by a considerable time, moving eventually to the south of the peninsula and beyond—south (Crete, Mycenaeans destroying the Minoan civilisation) and east (Anatolia and fighting Troy). By the fourth century BC the Macedonian kings had decorated palaces, built royal tombs, and were dependent on Greek arts and probably Greek artists, as was much of the eastern Mediterranean world by then. I suspect that they were temperamentally most like the Romans, also Indo-Europeans, who might have gone west into Italy at about the same time as the Macedonians entered the Balkans. Greece of our period was very different: dozens of independent cities—some democracies—of sorts, with an occasional local king or “tyrant” for each “city-state.” They never united until forced to by others and then selectively, and “Hellas” signified a common race and language, not a common government. In the Bronze Age, they had been ruled from a group of independent fortified Greek citadels (like Mycenae and Pylos), and in the “historic” period, any “empires” they formed (e.g., the “Athenian”) were short-lived, limited, and on home ground. On occasion, some (not all) could collaborate against a foreigner (Persians, Lydians), but they rated profit from foreign contacts more highly. They spent a lot of time fighting each other.

Alexander was no democrat. It was said that his father had enlisted the Greek philosopher Aristotle (also a northerner, born at Stagira) to educate his son, a fact not revealed to us until sources of the first century BC/AD, but generally

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accepted, although to some degree implausible except to those dedicated to Alexander's Greekness. But Aristotle had moved to Athens, and he had to be summoned back for the tutoring, and he never mentions his "pupil" in his plentiful extant works. He was said to have had to return south to found his School in the Lyceum in Athens in 355 BC. The philosopher plays a prominent part only in many of the less historical and fantasy stories of our man, even accompanying him to the east. By now it might seem almost sacrilege to doubt Aristotle's historical role, but. . . .

So I still call Alexander "Macedonian" not "Greek," for his upbringing, royal undemocratic background, and behaviour, whatever some of his genes may have been (some no doubt also shared with the Indo-European Romans). There is plenty of evidence for his attitude to Greeks, fighting some (destroying Thebes), despising others, even killing those who had been prisoners of the benign Persians and resettled by them in Persia after the Persian Wars. On his march east, he sent home the Greek contingent, employing only some mercenaries, and he married only easterners. He seems not to have spoken the Greek vernacular but, allegedly, could read Greek (Homer).

Alexander's reputation and adventures, real and imaginary, have caught the attention of the whole western world and even much of the east, down to the present day. My subject here is the mythical (and dead) Alexander and the way he has been treated by authors and artists since antiquity—not "real" history, therefore, but an attempt to share with the reader much that I and others have found interesting, amusing, and even instructive, about the legacy of the great man, about the image that he projected for posterity

and the way his story could be used for social, political, or artistic ends. In many respects, though, it tells as much or more about the attitudes and interests of those who have written about him or depicted him, and their often remarkable inventiveness and readiness to ignore the truth (inaccessible to most of them). We find that one imaginative story can generate many more. Also, since Alexander travelled far, he is the excuse for many a travelogue, real or imagined.

Alexander's successful conquest of the Persian Empire in the fourth century BC, reaching even beyond it to as far as India, was certainly the major military exploit of antiquity before the Romans created their empire, mainly over far less civilised lands and peoples; apart, that is, from the Greeks and the Carthaginians (ex-Phoenicians). His new, but short-lived, empire was not simply a replacement of the Persian but the start of an expansion of the Mediterranean world (then Greek, basically), and not simply a deliberate destruction of all that seemed Persian. This perhaps made him easier for many Persians to accept. But as an Alexander expert, Brian Bosworth, put it, "For large areas of Asia the advent of Alexander meant carnage and starvation and the effects were ultimately as devastating as that of the Spaniards in Mexico. The conquerors created a desert and called it empire" (Bosworth/Baynham, 49). But he also brought the benefits of a different civilisation to stand beside the Persian, and profoundly transformed the civilisations of Central Asia and India.

His skill as a military commander is indisputable. To a modern student of generalship, he was "Heroic," while Wellington was an "Anti-Hero," General Grant "Unheroic,"

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and Adolf Hitler “False Heroic.”¹ His quality as a man can raise some questions. His expedition was allegedly to wreak revenge on the Persians for their sack of Athens in the early fifth century BC, although the Persians had been defeated by Athens both before (at Marathon) and after (at Salamis and Eurymedon). Alexander himself, we have remarked, was not a Greek. In the years just before the start of his great expedition east, Philip, his father, and Alexander himself, had fought and defeated recalcitrant Greeks, who could never get their act together against any aggressor (not even the Persians initially), and were severely punished by the Macedonian kings for their independent ways and words (generally those of Athenian orator-politicians like Demosthenes). But they had prestige of a sort denied the Macedonians (briefly vassals of the Persians in 480), for their stand against Persia in the fifth century BC, for their heroic past (the Trojan War and Homer), and for their obvious (to many) intellectual skills. At any rate, the men of Macedon were empire-builders in a way the Greeks could never be. What Greeks sought was *Lebensraum* and riches, not power. The Persians were the most obvious quarry for the Macedonians.

Philip had intended to invade the east but was assassinated. His son followed his father’s ambition, but both had been busy defeating Greeks in these years. When Alexander marched east, there were a few Greeks in his army, mostly mercenaries from the mainland.² Others who went with him were soon sent home, and there were more Greeks in the Persian army, from their provinces (satrapies) in Asia

¹ John Keegan, *The Mask of Command* (London: Penguin, 1987).

² On Alexander’s army, see N. Sekunda, *The Army of Alexander the Great* (London: Osprey, 1984).

Minor (Anatolia) and mercenaries, than in Alexander's. We learn of his history from Greek writers, and often our sources were written long after the events. As Greeks, they betray a certain uneasiness about Alexander's attitude to their ancestors, torn between truth-telling and a proper regard for his achievements. There are of course modern problems too about "Greek" Macedonia between the states. A "spirits medium" (Stephen Hermann) has conjured up an Alexander who urges the modern citizens of Macedonia to accept reconciliation. The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia naturally has an interest in keeping Alexander away from too much idolatry as a "Greek." They may have a point historically, but erecting statues of Alexander and issuing stamps with his image will not go far enough to dispel the "Greekness," which Alexander himself fostered. In neighbouring Albania the early fifteenth-century hero George Castriotis took the name Scanderbeg (= Alexander), and there is a public equestrian statue of Alexander in Tirana, as also in Bulgaria, in Sofia. We shall meet more of Alexander in the Balkans.

There was something superhuman about the man, and soon after his death stories were circulating about his life and afterlife, which drew heavily upon existing legends of the mysterious east. Whether he was truly exceptional, physically or intellectually, is a matter for dispute. Some have thought him an epileptic (the "sacred disease"); others that he suffered from the lasting effects of concussion. He was certainly fond of the bottle. His image remained truly iconic to the present day—witness recent films, and there has long been a mystic quality about him—even association with Christ in that both died at the alleged mystic number

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of years—thirty-three. This book is devoted to a selection of the stories about Alexander that were invented and circulated after his death, and to the ways he has been treated by authors and artists ever since. As an introduction to them I quote from an early passage in one of the most readable scholarly accounts of Alexander’s life of recent years, by Robin Lane Fox:³

³ Lane Fox, *Alexander*, 26. I use this as a major source for the man since it is thorough, well based on both ancient sources and personal knowledge of the terrain involved, and it is engagingly written. His *Search* is more accessible for the general reader and very well illustrated. There are many books about Alexander. Early modern scholars tended to dwell on the aspects of empire-building, as befitted the age of modern empire-building, as Droysen and Grote (see *Memory*, ch. 7). There are very many modern works, tending to the repetitive but often with a message not unrelated to contemporary events, whether admitted or not. P. Cartledge’s *Alexander the Great: The Hunt for a New Past* (London: Pan, 2011) is reliable, succinct, and thoughtful. There are A. B. Bosworth’s excellent chapters in *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) and his other books. W. W. Tarn’s *Alexander the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948) is a useful and terse, somewhat idealising account of his life and influence. I. Worthington, *Alexander the Great, Man and God* (Harlow: Pearson Longman 2004) has a good chapter (14) about Alexander’s view of himself as a god. N.G.L. Hammond’s *The Genius of Alexander the Great* (London: Duckworth, 1997) is the fruit of years of study of the classical and Hellenistic Greek world. J. D. Grainger’s *Alexander the Great Failure* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007) is about his life, as are most of the essays in *Alexander the Great: A New History* (eds. W. Heckel, L. A. Tritle; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). An excellent brief study of all aspects of our subject is by the French scholar C. Mossé, *Alexander, Destiny and Myth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004). French scholars have been particularly busy with Alexander books in the last fifty years. The internet is a valuable resource: there is an “Alexander the Great Bibliography” site by Dr. Martin Cuypers; “Alexander the Great on the Web”; “Pothos.org”. For the Persian Empire, there is a useful account of sources in L. Llewellyn-Jones, *King and Court in Ancient Persia 559–331 BCE* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); A. Kuhrt and S. Sherwin-White, *Hellenism*

[Alexander's name] attracted the youthful Pompey, who aspired to it even in his dress; it was toyed with by the young Augustus, and it was used against the Emperor Trajan; among poets Petrarch attacked it, Shakespeare saw through it; Christians resented it, pagans maintained it, but to a Victorian bishop it seemed the most admirable name in the world. Grandeur could not resist it; Louis XIV, when young, danced as Alexander in a ballet; Michelangelo laid out the square on Rome's Capitol in the design of Alexander's shield; Napoleon kept Alexander's history as bedside reading, though it is only a legend that he dressed every morning before a painting of Alexander's grandest victory. In Egypt he was said to have visited the empty sarcophagus that had held Alexander's body and intended to take it to France.

Through the continual interest of the educated west in the Greek past, and through the appeal, mostly in oriental languages, of legendary Romances of Alexander's exploits, his fame reached from Iceland to China: the Well of Immortality, submarines, the Valley of Diamonds and invention of a flying machine are only a few of the fictitious adventures which became linked with

in the East (London: Duckworth, 1987). Most recently there are essays in *East and West in the World Empire of Alexander: Essays in Honour of Brian Bosworth* (eds. P. Wheatley and E. Baynham: Oxford University Press, 2015). He figures in my *Persia and the West* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000). In "Recent Travels in Alexanderland" *JHS* 134 (2014): 136–148, H. Bowden is fazed by the recent spate of Alexander publications, and see his *Alexander the Great: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2014). A Mythalexandre Project has been launched in France, available at <http://mythalexandre.meshs.fr>.

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his name. When the Three Kings of the Orient came to pay homage to Jesus, Melchior's gold, said Jewish legend, was in fact an offering from Alexander's treasure. Because of the spread of the *Romance of Alexander*, there are Afghan chieftains who still claim to be descended from his blood. Seventy years ago they would go to war with the red flag they believed to be his banner, while on stormy nights in the Aegean, the island fishermen of Lesbos will shout down the sea with their question, "Where is Alexander the Great," and on giving their calming answer, "Alexander the Great lives and is king," they rest assured that the waves will subside.

Most literature about Alexander is laudatory, even enthusiastic, without concealing his human weaknesses and errors. Some express a shade of skepticism about whether he deserves this "Greatness." Recently an attempt has been made to redress the balance a little in favour of the Persians, which seems fair since the Persian Empire was one to admire among all those of antiquity—an admiration shared by Greek writers before Alexander's day—Herodotus and Xenophon—whatever Greeks may have thought about the eventually abortive Persian invasion of their country in the early fifth century BC, and especially of their sacking of Athens. Thus Darius III, the Persian emperor for whom Alexander himself eventually found some sympathy—once he was deserted by his followers—rightly finds still a champion in a French scholar, Pierre Briant, a true expert in all matters concerning the Persian Empire.⁴

⁴ *Lettre ouverte à Alexandre le Grand* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2008) and *Darius in the Shadow of Alexander* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015);



FIGURE 1. P. Peyrolle, “The Last Supper of Alexander.” © Pierre Peyrolle.

Enthusiasm for the man seems to have re-emerged in the twentieth century, allegedly inspired by ancient practice, and promoted by King Paul I of the Greeks, in an “Order of Alexander the Great” to reward and promote progress in Arts and Sciences. Reputed recipients are given honorary titles and the French impressionist/surrealist artist Pierre Peyrolle (1945–) painted for it a splendid “Last Supper” of Alexander with some of his modern honoured guests (fig. 1). Evidence about the “Order” is obscure.

This book contains an account of several of these legends and attitudes to Alexander, from antiquity to the present

and a wider view of Alexander in *Alexandre des lumières* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012). *Alexander the Great: The Heroic Ideal*. New Horizons (London: Thames & Hudson, 1996).

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day. The choice is personal and not quite random, but there are some subjects and stories that appeal more to a classical scholar and his sense of humor (or history). The “Alexander Romance” is an especially important source, or rather sources since there were very many different versions which were created in the late classical and near eastern world, Coptic, Christian, and Islamic, with resonance from Scotland (the *Buik of Alexander*), to Ethiopia, to Malaya (as Iskander Zulkarnain) to China. There were also apocryphal collections of his letters—to his mother, Olympias, about Egyptian gods, and to Aristotle about India. He was to be the subject for songs, operas, plays, films, cartoons. But we start more seriously with his ancient biographers, mainly Greeks, who were not altogether impervious to the appeal of the many adventures imagined for the man by storytellers and writers, some invented even during Alexander’s life-time.⁵

⁵ F. Jacoby’s *Fragmente der griechischer Historiker* (now Brill: Leiden, 1923–) has a volume devoted to the Alexander historians.

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