

Analyzing Sources on Alexander the Great

Alexander the Great is a very popular historical figure, yet there is very little reliable source material that historians can use on Alexander. Some historians have written based on legends, thus creating new views about Alexander that may not be accurate. Included are four authors' "histories" of Alexander the Great.

Read through the following excerpts from various authors and determine whether these historians have done a "good job" in depicting Alexander. Use your knowledge of history to guide you through analyzing the following documents. Complete the chart that follows the readings to help you come to a conclusion.

Plutarch

Historian, Ancient Greece

Excerpt from writings, A.D. 90, Translated by John Dryden

... For when any of his friends were sick, he would often prescribe them their course of diet, and medicines proper to their disease... He was naturally a great lover of all kinds of learning and reading;

... While Philip [Alexander's father] went on his expedition against the Byzantines, he left Alexander, then sixteen years old, [in charge] in Macedonia, ... not to sit idle, [he] reduced the rebellious ..., drove out the barbarous inhabitants, and plant[ed] a colony of several nations ..., [He] called the place after his own name, Alexandropolis.

... When he came to Thebes, ... the city ... was sacked and razed. Alexander's hope being that so severe an example might terrify the rest of Greece into obedience, ... thirty thousand, were publicly sold for slaves; and it is computed that upwards of six thousand were put to the sword. Alexander, by founding more than seventy cities among the barbarian tribes, ... suppressed their savage and uncivilized customs ... Those whom Alexander conquered were more fortunate than those who escaped ... [He desired to give] all the races in the world ... one rule and one form of government, making all mankind a single people.

... And that the Grecians might participate in the honor of his victory he sent a portion of the spoils home to them particularly to the Athenians ... , and [with] all the rest he ordered this [message] to be sent: "Alexander the son of Philip, and the Grecians, ... won these from the barbarians who inhabit Asia. All the plate and purple garments, and other things of the same kind that he took from the Persians, except a very small quantity, which he reserved for himself, he sent as a present to his mother.

... For when his affairs called upon him, he would not be detained, ... either by wine, or sleep, spectacles, or any other diversion whatsoever...

... and Alexander, who was now proclaimed King of Asia, returned ... and rewarded his friends and followers with great sums of money, and places, and governments of provinces. Eager to gain honor with the Grecians, he wrote to them that he would have all [cruel governments] abolished, that they might live free according to their own laws... He sent also part of the spoils into Italy, ... to honor the zeal and courage of their citizen[s].

... Meantime, on the smallest occasions that called for a show of kindness to his friends, there was every indication on his part of tenderness and respect.

Diodorus

Greek historian, 1st century BCE

Excerpts from his writings "World History," Translated by M.M. Austen

The Destruction of Persepolis

As for Persepolis, the capital of the Persian kingdom, Alexander described it to the Macedonians as their worst enemy among the cities of Asia, and he gave it over to the soldiers to plunder, with the exception of the royal palace.

It was the wealthiest city under the sun and the private houses had been filled for a long time with riches of every kind. The Macedonians rushed into it, killing all the men and plundering the houses, which were numerous and full of furniture and precious objects of every kind. Here much silver was carried off and no little gold, and many expensive dresses, embroidered with purple or with gold, fell as prizes to the victors.

But the great royal palace, famed throughout the inhabited world, had been condemned to ... total destruction. The Macedonians spent the whole day in pillage but still could not satisfy their inexhaustible greed. [...] As for the women, they dragged them away forcibly with their jewels, treating as slaves the whole group of captives. As Persepolis had surpassed all other cities in prosperity, so she now exceeded them in misfortune.

Alexander went up to the citadel and took possession of the treasures stored there. They were full of gold and silver, with the accumulation of revenue from Cyrus, the first king of the Persians, down to that time... Alexander wanted to take part of the money with him, for the expenses of war and to deposit the rest at Susa under close guard. From Babylon, Mesopotamia and Susa, he sent for a crowd of mules, ... as well as 3,000 pack camels, and with these he had all the treasure conveyed to the chosen places. He was very hostile to the local people and did not trust them, and wished to destroy Persepolis utterly...

The Olympic Games of 324 BCE

Not long before his death Alexander decided to bring back all the exiles in the Greek cities, partly to increase his own glory and partly to have in each city many personal supporters to counteract the risk of revolution and revolt among the Greeks. ... Consequently, as the celebration of the Olympic Games [approached] he [sent] Nicanor of Stagira to Greece with a letter...; his instructions were to have it read out loud to the assembled crowds. Nicanor carried out the order, and ... read out the following letter.

'King Alexander to the exiles from the Greek cities. We were not the cause of your exile, but we shall be responsible for bringing about your return to your native cities, ...'

This proclamation was greeted with loud approval by the crowds; ...those at the [Olympic games] joyfully welcomed the king's favor and repaid his generosity with shouts of praise. All the exiles had gathered together at the [Olympic games], being more than 20,000 in number. The majority of Greeks welcomed the return of the exiles as a good thing.

Arrian

Soldier, governor, and philosopher

Excerpts from "The Anabasis of Alexander," A.D. 171

[Alexander] was ... very [famous] for rousing the courage of his soldiers, filling them with hopes of success and dispelling their fear in the midst of danger by his own freedom from fear ...

For I myself believe that there was at that time no race of mankind, no city, no individual [to whom] the name of Alexander had not reached. And so not I can suppose that a man quite beyond all other men was born without some divine influence.

He was ... very heroic in courage, ... He was very clever in recognizing what was necessary to be done, when others were still in a state of uncertainty; ... In ... ruling an army, he was exceedingly skillful; and very renowned for rousing the courage of his soldiers, filling them with hopes of success, and dispelling their fear in the midst of danger by his own freedom from fear. He was likewise very [dedicated to] keeping the agreements and settlements which he made.

His adoption of the Persian [way] of dressing also seems to me to have been a political device in regard to the foreigners, that the king might not appear altogether alien to them.

...what a height of human success he attained, becoming without any dispute king of both continents," and reaching every place by his fame.

Anonymous Author

From the 4th century A.D.

Excerpts from "Itinerarium Alexandri" Translated by Iolo Davies, 1998

Alexander's campaigns

...Alexander boasted that he had won his victories for himself alone, and became the more cruel to his friends as his success increased...

...Alexander went straight on to found the Macedonian empire, by his kingly skills, bringing the whole Peloponnese under his rule.

...Accordingly Alexander first settled the affairs of the whole kingdom of the Persians, giving it his own laws and appointing its administrators...

[Alexander] founded for himself a city (not unequal in size to the other cities named after him), Alexandria. He did this as a practical precaution in case he ever had to campaign in that region again. [Some] continued to intrigue against Alexander, however, calling him the oppressor of the world...

...Alexander's behavior and extravagant life-style... were causing intense disgust among large numbers of his men... They took offense at his luxuries at table, his expensive attire, his vanity in assuming the royal Persian head-dress... This cast a shadow over all the former glorious achievements of his spirit...

...the fault in him grew worse: he now wanted himself worshipped as a god and would have none of being saluted in the manner of mortals.

Name _____

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| Author | How do I know the information is valid? | When was it written? What was its purpose? | What is the point of view of the author on Alexander? |
|-----------|---|--|---|
| Plutarch | | | |
| Diodorus | | | |
| Arrian | | | |
| Anonymous | | | |

Answer Key / Teacher's Guide

Teachers: You can also access an editable [Google Docs version of this activity here](#). Thank you so much for the support and best of luck! If you would like more resources for World History, please check [out my subscription site](#)!

| Author | How do I know the information is valid? | When was it written? What was its purpose? | What is the point of view of the author on Alexander? |
|------------------|---|---|---|
| Plutarch | Plutarch is evenhanded in his description of Alexander and considered himself a historian. | 90 AD His purpose was to describe Alexander's personality and how he came to become King of Asia. | A positive view of Alexander – Plutarch references the tenderness and respect that he showed to others. |
| Diodorus | He references a letter and quotes it from Alexander and also describes events without inserting his own opinions. | 1st Century BC To describe the destruction of Persepolis and what Alexander did with the plunders of war. | A somewhat negative view of Alexander in describing the destruction of Persepolis, but still an even-handed historical look. |
| Arrian | These 2 sources show their bias in Arrian's glowing praise of Alexander and the Anonymous account having the opposing negative opinion of him. | 171 AD Arrian was a soldier himself and writes about Alexander's bravery and his skill and intelligence in ruling his conquered lands. | He believed Alexander to be an amazing man, born of divine influence. |
| Anonymous | | 4th Century AD To tell about Alexander's extravagances and that he was not as great a man as some have written about. | He sees faults in Alexander and writes that his extravagance and behavior cast a shadow over all of his accomplishments. |