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# Alexander the Great —or the Terrible?

Alexander of Macedon died more than 2300 years ago, but he is a subject of perennial fascination. This year alone has seen the publication of at least seven mainstream books about his life, based not on new material (barring the unlikely discovery of the conqueror's long-lost corpse, it seems dubious whether there ever can be much new material) but essentially rehashing and redigesting the old, familiar sources—Plutarch, Arrian, Quintus Curtius, Diodorus Siculus, et al. Alexander is also the subject of Oliver Stone's latest effort, a big-budget epic in the Cecil B. DeMille tradition.

Why the continuing obsession? It derives, I think, from the fact that posterity has never been able to decide whether Alexander was a good guy or a bad guy. As with Napoleon, his genius had both good and evil sides, and though he has gone down in history as "the Great," he might just as easily have been known as "the Terrible." In Asia, as a matter of fact, in the territories he conquered, he is frequently referred to as "the accursed one" or "two-horned Satan." Europeans have chosen to see him as "the best of the West," spreading the joys of Hellenic culture over a benighted part of the world (the former Persian Empire) enslaved by Oriental despotism. But to Asians he was a dispenser of death and destruction on a gigantic scale that the world would not see again until Genghis Khan.

Each succeeding era seems to re-create Alexander in its own image. To nineteenth-century Britain, itself a conquering power with an ostensibly civilizing mission, Alexander was a secular saint: this view was most notably expressed by the Victorian historian Sir William Tarn and was still the authorized version

when Mary Renault wrote her extremely popular historical romances about the conqueror. Even Robin Lane Fox, writing as late as the 1970s, has told Alexander's story as one of inspirational heroism on the Homeric scale—very much as Alexander himself would have wanted it told, steeped as he was in the *Iliad* and determined to model his life on that of the glorious Achilles. The opposing view, disseminated by the German historian Ernst Badian and picked up by contemporary writers who have witnessed the disastrous legacy of Western imperialism in the Middle East, has emphasized Alexander's dark side. This interpretation sees him as a precursor of Hitler and Stalin, the inventor of political purges, show trials, and systematic genocide.

There is much truth in both views, though each is, on its own, a caricature: Alexander was no saint, though as the historian Frank Holt has complained, "The danger now . . . is that the new orthodoxy—a reprehensible Alexander beset by paranoia, megalomania, alcoholism, and violence—may gather a deleterious momentum of its own." Let's take Oliver Stone's film, in which Alexander is portrayed as a sensitive visionary whose dreams of a benign, multiracial empire are destroyed by his crass and earthbound companions. This version is so patently ridiculous that even the audiences in the 42nd Street Loews seemed to know better, snickering audibly whenever he embarked on his idealistic flights of fancy. Stone has claimed Robin Lane Fox as his historical mentor, but he takes his positive spin on Alexander even farther than Lane Fox, editing the tale so that every brutal act of Alexander's life—and there were very, very many—is omitted.

What about Alexander's wholesale destruction of Thebes, when he razed every house in the city (with the exception of the poet Pindar's), killed all the men and enslaved 30,000 women and children? Many historians have called this, not unreasonably, an atrocity. Not shown in the movie. What about his burning of the magnificent holy city of Persepolis, the symbolic heart of the Persian Empire? Whether this was done from policy or in a moment of drunken yahooism—both theories have been persuasively argued by historians—it was a dreadful act. Not shown in the movie. What about the murder of Alexander's father, Philip of Macedon? Many contemporary sources believed Alexander to have been, if not the author of the crime, at least complicit in it.

But in the movie he actually tries to *save* Philip—a scenario that not even pro-Alexander sources like Arrian ever imagined. What about Alexander's massacre of the Branchidae, whose only crime was to have been the distant descendants of Greeks who had surrendered the temple of Apollo in Miletos to Xerxes more than a century and a half earlier? Not shown in the movie. What about his execution of Batis, the governor of Gaza? After Alexander conquered the city, he had Batis tied to a chariot and dragged round the city's walls until he died an excruciating death. This was clearly another imitation of Achilles, but as Paul Cartledge points out in his new book, *Alexander the Great: A New Life*, at least Hector was already dead when Achilles dragged him around Troy—Batis was very much alive.[1] Again, this doesn't make it into the movie; instead, we're treated to moving set-piece scenes like that of Alexander being generous and courtly to the wife and mother of the conquered Persian emperor.

This brings us to a heretical but unavoidable conclusion: there is, at least to modern eyes, something problematic in the Achilles style of heroism, a style that Alexander refined and perfected until he became the *stupor mundi*, literally a demigod in his day. Alexander was steeped in the Homeric military ideal—indeed, he traveled with his copy of the *Iliad*, annotated by his court historian Callisthenes, under his pillow—and Achilles epitomized that ideal, as summed up by the military historian John Keegan: "Disregard for personal danger, the running of risk for its own sake, the dramatic challenge of single combat, the display of life-and-death courage under the eyes of men equal in their masculinity if not in social rank."

Such heroic leaders are both splendid and inspirational: as Cartledge says, Alexander "gave his soldiers the sense that, with him, nothing was impossible," and clearly the same was true of Achilles, as the leaders of the Greek campaign against Troy knew when they begged him to join their coalition. But it is hard not to avoid the fact that Hector, the peace-loving prince who goes to war only because he must, makes a more attractive hero for our era than the glorious Achilles. America in the early twenty-first century, far from being heroic, is a culture in which personal safety has attained the status of a primary virtue: seat belts, low-

[1] ALEXANDER THE GREAT: A New Life, by *Paul Cartledge*. The Overlook Press. $28.95.

carb diets, just-say-no, and anti-smoking crusades loom large. Such values are blatantly anti-heroic, and when our leaders want to incite us to war they appeal to our fears—yellow alert, red alert—rather than to any heroic, self-subsuming impulses. The Homeric philosophy as summarized by Keegan survived the ancient world to reappear in the ethos of medieval chivalry and lasted in this form right through the Second World War—particularly in England, where schoolboys received a heavily Hellenizing education. Now it is gone, or at any rate dormant. Yet some of the less admirable attitudes it conditioned—a love of pomp and worldly glory, an atavistic, groveling wish to be dominated and admiration for the dominator—survive; probably they are an indelible part of the human psyche. How, then, are we to interpret Alexander?

The current crop of books runs the gamut, as one might expect in our morally confused culture. To begin with the most negative, let's take John Prevas' *Envy of the Gods: Alexander the Great's Ill-Fated Journey across Asia.*[2] Prevas' Alexander is a supremely destructive megalomaniac, and his civilizing mission is not only arrogant but spurious. "The burning of Persepolis shows just how thin was the veneer of the Hellenistic civilization that many of Alexander's biographers over the centuries would have us believe he was carrying to the East," Prevas writes, and points out that his reign was characterized by purges. This is hard to dispute, though of course by using a word etched in recent memory by the vile Stalin, Prevas loads the dice a bit. The murder of Attalus and his supporters at the time of Philip's death, an act that cleared the way for Alexander's succession, and the dispatching several years later of the old general, Parmenio, and his family are only two examples of the practice.

Alexander's character, Prevas says, was "often a volatile mixture of self-centered adolescent exuberance and feminine hysteria," but he was gifted with a "special mixture of charisma, flattery, and intimidation." This talent lured many thousands of hapless soldiers to follow him eastward: "In the years ahead they would climb some of the highest, coldest, and most treacherous mountains in the world and cross some of the driest and hottest

[2] ENVY OF THE GODS: Alexander the Great's Ill-Fated Journey across Asia, by *John Prevas.* Da Capo Press. $26.00.

deserts for no perceptible reason other than simply to pillage the lands they invaded and add to the glory of a man who would never be content with his accomplishments."

Prevas speaks with a certain authority, having physically retraced Alexander's footsteps, at least insofar as that is possible given today's political upheavals: he traveled to Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and the border of Tajikistan, although he was denied entry to Iraq, the central part of the empire Alexander wrested from Darius III, containing the ruins of Alexander's chosen capital, Babylon. Among the cities he saw were Dubai, Shiraz, Peshawar, Islamabad, Tashkent, Samarkand (the site of Alexander's murder of his veteran soldier Cleitus), Bukhara, and Al-Maty. "One cannot help but notice," he comments, "that the source of so much of the hatred toward the West today and the radical movement to eradicate Western ideals and values comes from those very areas of the world that were most devastated by Alexander and his Greeks more than twenty-three hundred years ago: Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan."

Here Prevas infers a cause-and-effect that he never really proves, but it certainly gives cause for reflection. It is true, certainly, that Alexander's army "looted and obliterated much of a rich and developed culture they neither understood nor valued," and that "There was nothing noble or heroic about Alexander's operations in Bactria and Sogdiana. Wherever his army moved, the countryside was devastated in order to deny the rebels any sort of support. All males of military age whom Alexander's army encountered were routinely killed to decrease the pool of potential soldiers." There and along Alexander's subsequent route through what is now Pakistan, civilians were massacred by the thousand: along the Indus River he killed 80,000 of the Sambastae tribe alone. And after the death of Hephaiston, his dearest friend and lover (not as a result of enemy action but of overindulgence in food and drink while suffering from a fever), Alexander's habit of slaughtering every human who stood in his way grew ever more extreme.

Not much of a civilizing influence, certainly. When he moved along after conquering or "pacifying" a region, Alexander tended to leave behind a satrap who would rule autocratically in his name: not much democratizing, either. Alexander was a Macedonian rather than a Greek (though he claimed Greekness when

it was politic to do so), and Macedon had no tradition of Athenian-style democracy: it was a monarchy, theoretically elective but hereditary in practice, with plenty of coups and assassinations to ease along the transfer of power. The king was a military as well as political leader, *primus inter pares* with his band of supporters and companions—not a divine being, in the Persian manner, but not a fellow-citizen in the Athenian one either.

Hence the absurdity of the thesis put forward by Guy MacLean Rogers, author of *Alexander: The Ambiguity of Greatness*, the most adulatory of this recent bunch of books: "Democracy and autonomy for Greek cities [in Asia Minor, former Persian possessions that Alexander had gained in his defeat of the Persian forces at the Battle of the Granicus River] were raised by Alexander to the level of general principles."[3] What is this supposed to mean? Even Macedonians didn't enjoy democracy and autonomy under Alexander, and as for the mainland Greeks, their autonomy had been effectively crushed in the Battle of Chaeronea in 338 B.C. (won by Philip and Alexander jointly) and by the destruction of Thebes three years later. The Asian Greeks were left under the tender or not-so-tender mercies of Alexander's satraps, enforcers directly ruled by the king. In subsequent generations the Greeks would in fact see Alexander, and Antipater, his regent in Greece, as responsible for "the final annihilation of Greek political liberty both in old Greece and in Asia," according to Cartledge, and when the conqueror's death was reported in 323 B.C., one Greek politician claimed to doubt the veracity of the rumor, saying that if it were true the stench of his corpse would have spread across the whole world. As for non-Greek Asia, there was not even a pretense at democracy. "Alexandrias" were founded in strategic spots (often at ports, like the famous Alexandria in Egypt, or along trade routes) and populated, sometimes forcibly, by the rejects from Alexander's army: the maimed and wounded, the sick, the excess camp followers, anyone who might drag down the army's lightning speed.

Rogers' attempts to exonerate Alexander are sometimes downright comical. "[U]nlike Genghis Khan or his generals, to

[3] ALEXANDER: The Ambiguity of Greatness, by *Guy MacLean Rogers*. Random House. $26.95.

cite one example, Alexander never made it a *policy* to wipe out the civilian populations of the cities or territories he conquered." Again: "Alexander never contemplated any 'Final Solution' with respect to any ethnic group he encountered. . . . Alexander never attempted or committed genocide against any of his enemies." That all depends on semantics. He might not have made it a *policy* to wipe out civilian populations, but often he did it anyway, and he certainly *did* make it a policy to capture and enslave all the women and children. He may not have committed "genocide" (although that contention is certainly arguable), but he did wipe out entire cities, and even Rogers admits that he was responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths. But before judging him, Rogers insists, we should remember that "Alexander at least was willing to pay the price that accomplishing great deeds in combat has always required. He never sent out anyone to do what he himself would not dare to venture. That is much more than can be said of many of the modern tyrants to whom he has been fashionably compared." So what? Few of his soldiers, one assumes, shared Alexander's suicidal tendencies or his conviction that a glorious Homeric death in battle would necessarily assure one's status as a demigod *post mortem.*

Historians are apt to credit Alexander with having created a new, Hellenic civilization that covered much of the old Persian Empire, spread the glories of the Greek language and culture and formed a geographical unity—what would become the Eastern half of the Roman Empire—in which the Christian religion would take root and flourish: here the Hebrew Bible would be translated into Greek at Alexandria, and St. Paul would address the early Christians in *koine*, Common Greek. Rogers is hardly the first to claim that Alexander was "the original architect of an amalgam Greco-Roman civilization in the Near East" that eventually became an "empire of the redeemed." But this was hardly something Alexander planned; it was, rather, an accident of history. The events of the last few years of his life give us every reason to think that he valued Persian customs and Persian administrators and meant to maintain them in conquered Asia. In fact, Alexander brought on himself tremendous criticism and even mutiny from his Macedonian soldiers and companions for assuming the dignities of an Oriental monarch, for retaining Persians in various important positions, for establishing a

program to train Persian boys to become officers in his armies, and for expecting his underlings to perform *proskynesis*, a Persian gesture of abasement before the monarch that the Macedonian old guard found intolerably demeaning.

Had Alexander lived another twenty years or so, long enough to develop an administration style for his enormous empire, it is probable that he would have administered it not as an enlightened "Greek" ruler but very much as Darius himself had done, governing the various provinces through satraps, whose power depended on their personal favor with him, and presenting himself as a god—he had already, in fact, worked hard to make his troops accord him divine honors, an attempt that did not go down at all well among the Macedonians in his entourage. He did not plan, and certainly did not envision, the breakup of his empire into a series of smaller kingdoms ruled by a few of his Macedonian companions who had succeeded in grabbing power after his death—the *diadochi*, or successors. It was these men and the Greek dynasties they founded in the East who really created what we now know as Hellenistic culture. Alexander's function in this process was, in Cartledge's formulation, that of a fertilizing power—"one of the supreme fertilizing forces in history." Cartledge, in his well-balanced and untendentious book on Alexander, puts his case well: "I am prepared to allow Alexander a . . . sincere and deep attachment to Hellenic culture. . . . Yet I believe that he advertised and disseminated his attachment only so long as it furthered, or at least did not obviously hinder, his other, more basic aims—above all else, conquest and glory-bringing empire."

Cartledge steers a middle line between the excesses of Prevas and Rogers by remembering that *success* and *character* are two different things. Few will deny that as military leaders go, Alexander was one of the most successful of all time. Probably *the* most successful, for he never met a military defeat; there was no Waterloo waiting for Alexander (though his early death before his thirty-third birthday might have had something to do with this fact). Alexander was a perfect military machine, and the important theme that runs through all of these books, though not all of their authors mention it or seem to understand its implications, is that for Alexander, absolutely every other motive and emotion was subsumed by military expediency. Alexander was religious, as

everyone points out, and sacrificed diligently and frequently to the gods; yet he was not above manipulating the signs and omens to harmonize with his own plans, and he was said to have manhandled the oracle at Delphi physcially when she did not give him the answer he sought. He was humane; when he defeated the Indian leader, Porus, he treated him with dignity and kept him on as governor of his former territories. It suited his own plan to do so, since Porus promised subservience to Alexander. But when it came to the Persian Bessus, who had murdered Darius after the decisive battle of Gaugamela and tried to usurp his royal title, Alexander needed to make an example of him, so he had him crucified and then tortured before finally executing him. The king's undeniable ruthlessness can be seen either as needless brutality, or as necessitous firmness in his utter determination to achieve total victory.

Alexander made many enemies, of course, especially among those closest to him. Two of the new books to come out deal with the long-acknowledged possibility that rather than dying of natural causes, Alexander was poisoned by one of his entourage: *The Death of Alexander the Great* by Paul Doherty, and *Alexander the Great: Murder in Babylon* by Graham Phillips.[4] Both these books present their case with a melodramatic flourish worthy of Agatha Christie, but Doherty's is by far the more interesting to read and comes up at the end with the more interesting—and persuasive—solution. Doherty, the headmaster of an English school, has already written on the deaths of Edward II and Tutankhamen and has developed a lively style with plenty of panache; his interpretation of Alexander's character, too, is quite persuasive. (As a youth he was a "ruthless, ambitious, self-centered prig," as a mature man "implacable . . . ruthlessly dedicated to his own ambition, determined to prove that he was invincible, resolute not to be frustrated whatever the cost might be to others.") Doherty's comments on what, exactly, Alexander chose to retain from the impressive education he was given by his tutor, Aristotle, make sense: the concept of *anikelos*, or invincibility; the idea that if the *arête*, or virtue, of a leader is superior to that of all others, then

[4] THE DEATH OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT: What—or Who—Really Killed the Young Conqueror of the Known World?, by *Paul Doherty*. Carroll & Graf Publishers. $25.00. ALEXANDER THE GREAT: Murder in Babylon, by *Graham Phillips*. Virgin Books. $27.95.

kingship is justifiable; faith in one's own destiny; *pothos*, a spiritual and intellectual yearning. (Oliver Stone was surely trying to communicate the concept of *pothos* when he directed his hapless star, Colin Farrell, to gaze mooningly out to the horizon at regular intervals.)

Doherty's book makes a delightful read, but Phillips' is disappointing: awkward, inelegant, and, in the end, unpersuasive, in spite of the fact that he consulted various doctors and scientists in the course of his researches. Another disappointment is *Alexander the Great: Selected Texts from Arrian, Curtius and Plutarch.*[5] Tania Gergel has edited a streamlined version of Alexander's life in the words of three of the major early sources we have for it. These are not original biographies: none of the original sources, written by Alexander's contemporaries, has survived. The greatest loss among these was the account by his general, Ptolemy, who later became Pharaoh of Egypt and founded the Ptolemaic royal line.

Gergel's idea seemed like a good one, but it falls flat because what is interesting is not so much the straight narrative of Alexander's life, which we can get in any number of other books (such as the attractively illustrated new *Alexander the Conqueror* by Laura Foreman[6]) but the possibility of comparing the various sources with one another—the friendly Arrian, the hostile Quintus Curtius, etc. Instead of the fun of getting three different and conflicting versions of the same episode—for example, Alexander's last days, which would certainly be of interest considering the various hypotheses about his death, or varying accounts of the big battles—we simply get the story of his life, but in a rather fragmented form due to the differing styles and agendas of the chroniclers. The reader would really do better to go directly back to Plutarch for the whole life, then consult other versions in other chronicles, if interested.

No earth-shattering new discoveries about Alexander have been made by these authors (unless Doherty or Phillips turns out to be right about the murder). The best approach to this consummate but dark genius is by remembering that Alexander was a man of his times. This cannot be stressed enough. When we

[5] ALEXANDER THE GREAT: Selected Texts from Arrian, Curtius and Plutarch, ed. by *Tania Gergel*; Introduction by *Michael Wood.* Penguin Books. $10.00.p

[6] ALEXANDER THE CONQUEROR: The Epic Story of the Young Warrior King, by *Laura Foreman*; Foreword by *Professor Eugene N. Borza.* Da Capo Press. $35.00.

deplore the conqueror's extreme brutality, we must remember that all great warriors of the times were brutal. Alexander was more brutal in that he was a more successful warrior. John Keegan, writing in the 1980s, deplores "the harshly limited nature of his achievement. He destroyed much and created little or nothing. The Persian empire, a force for order in the ancient world . . . did not survive the Alexandrian conquest. . . . His dreadful legacy was to ennoble savagery in the name of glory and to leave a model of command that far too many men of ambition sought to act out in the centuries to come."

Alexander was the first to dream of world domination and to come close to achieving it. He may have hoped to be a benign ruler—he may even have been "a kind of proto-multiculturalist"—but there is no doubt that he wanted the glory, and the booty, to be his and his alone. Others, in the succeeding centuries, tried to match his feat, and none of them proved any more benign than he did. The ambition for world domination is always, perhaps, grounded in pure narcissism, and no one who seeks it—whether he be a Hitler, a Napoleon, a Caesar, or a Dr. No—does so from altruistic motives.