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978-0-521-76748-4 - Alexander the Great: The Story of an Ancient Life

Thomas R. Martin and Christopher W. Blackwell

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ALEXANDER THE GREAT

The Story of an Ancient Life

Everything we know about Alexander comes from ancient sources, which agree unanimously that he was extraordinary and greater than everyday mortals. From his birth into a hypercompetitive world of royal women through his training under the eyes and fists of stern soldiers and the piercing intellect of Aristotle; through friendships, rivalries, conquests, and negotiations; through acts of generosity and acts of murder, this book explains who Alexander was, what motivated him, where he succeeded (in his own eyes) and where he failed, and how he believed that he earned a new “mixed” nature combining the human and the divine. This book explains what made Alexander “Great” according to the people and expectations of his time and place and rejects modern judgments asserted on the basis of an implicit moral superiority to antiquity.

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College of the Holy Cross

Christopher W. Blackwell

Furman University



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We dedicate this book to our students, who demand that we reconsider the past, and to our families, who are our joy in the present and our best hope for the future.

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INTRODUCTION: THE GOAL OF THIS BOOK

Ancient writers agree that Alexander was extraordinary, more like a god than a human in everyone's eyes – especially his own. In writing this brief biography for non-specialists, we accept the word of those writers based on what seems plausible to our (necessarily limited) understanding of Alexander's time and place. Our book, therefore, stands on the assumption that the opinions of the ancients must be given great weight, or the story of Alexander's life will make no sense at all. We are therefore diverging from the approach of some prominent modern scholarship on Alexander, especially the opinion that rejects the value of writing the life of such an enigmatic man. We are writing the story of an ancient life.

Guided by that goal, we pay special attention to the ancient Greek literature that Alexander treasured as sources of inspiration and reflection. His knowledge of these texts reached a depth that is difficult for a modern age to appreciate: to the end of his life, whether sober or drunk, he could recognize, quote, and even enact passages from the authors that meant so much to him, especially Homer and Euripides. The surviving remnants of this literature offer clues to the meaning of Alexander's words and deeds, and we have tried to include this evidence often (and there would be still more citations in a longer book!). By emphasizing Alexander's reliance on these texts in understanding his world, his status, and his action, we hope to contribute to a return to a tradition of interpreting Alexander that offers

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a more source-based view than the modern tendency in some scholarship to see Alexander as little more than a pathological mass murderer.

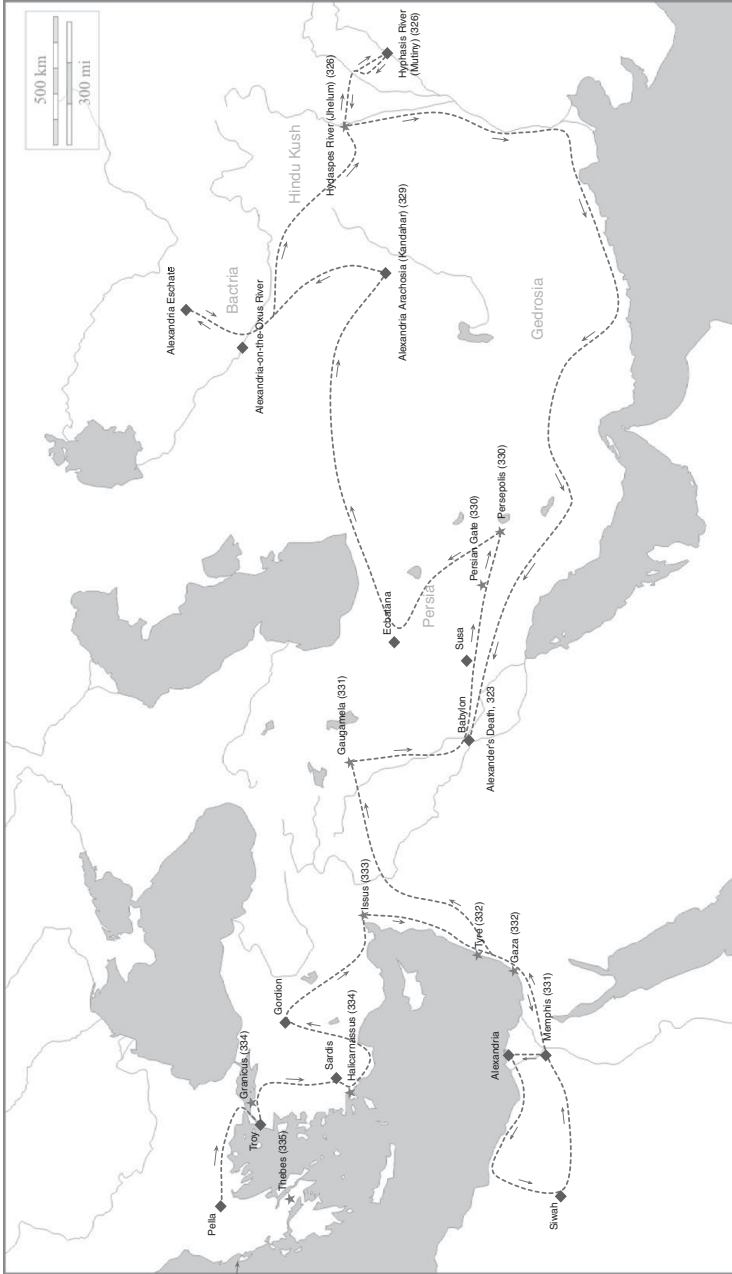
This biography strives to show that Alexander, like most people of his time and place, viewed proper character as grounded in the hard values of performance, respect, honor, and loyalty. Modern Western ideals of what makes for good character can seem to place less worth on these traits, but Alexander was not a modern man, for better or worse. We have tried to avoid the arrogance of moral judgment that self-righteous modernity can impart. In our considered opinions, people who recall the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the course so far of the twenty-first, have little to feel morally superior about compared to other times and places in human history. We sincerely hope that the future will prove Steven Pinker and those who agree with him correct that the “better angels of our nature” are making our world less violent than it was in the past. But, inspired by Alexander and remembering our ancient Greek literature, we dread the *nemesis* that inevitably follows upon *hubris*, the unjustified and self-righteous arrogance in one’s moral superiority that is perhaps even more dangerous in the modern world than it was in the ancient.

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Map 1: European Greece, Macedonia, and Northern Lands

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Map 2: Alexander's Expedition