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THE CONQUESTS OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT



WALDEMAR HECKEL
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY



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For Julia and Darren

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PREFACE



THE AIM OF THIS BOOK IS TO PROVIDE AN INTELLIGENT INTRODUCTION to the conquests of Alexander the Great (334–323 BC). This is not a biography, and I have said little or nothing about Alexander’s youth, his sexual orientation, the breaking of Bucephalas, and the like. Nor do I go into detail concerning the nature of Alexander’s death. Some aspects of Alexander’s personality are discussed, since they pertain to our understanding of his “divinity” and his “orientalism”; but even here the emphasis will be on the political impact of Alexander’s attitudes and personal actions. In short, this book was never intended to be an exhaustive treatment. Although the emphasis is on military and political (including administrative) aspects, the battle descriptions focus on key developments rather than providing blow-by-blow accounts. More attention is given to aims and impact, to political consequences of military action, and especially to the use of propaganda for both motivation and justification. Conspiracies and mutinies are viewed within the context of the campaign, as reactions to Alexander’s policies and the apparent changes in his personality, as symptoms of battle fatigue or disenchantment with career progress. But, again, little space is devoted to the intricacies of the plots or to cloak-and-dagger scenes.

While it is important to consider Alexander and his military achievement in the context of his times, one must also remember that the basic goals of conquest and keys to military superiority (once allowances have been made for technology) have not changed dramatically over the millennia. Indeed, Field Marshal Montgomery thought that even in the twentieth century the fundamental principles of war had not changed since ancient times.¹ Those who persist in seeing Alexander as a reincarnation of Achilles, as an irrational youth on a heroic quest for fame and immortality, have been taken in by the myth-makers who shaped the Alexander legend, and they run the risk, in my opinion, of reducing one of the world’s greatest military strategists to a childish

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daydreamer and a spoiled brat under the spell of sycophants and his own delusions.² This is reflected not only in the trendy subtitles of many books that are published today but in the naïve approaches taken by those who sell Alexander as a cultural icon. Even children are courted with titles such as *Alexander: The Boy Soldier Who Conquered the World* (by Simon Adams, for ages 9–12) or *Kids Who Ruled: Alexander the Great* (author's name not given). Worst of all, too much biography and not enough history has put the cart before the horse. No longer do we judge Alexander by his actions, policies, and historical achievement. Rather, we interpret his actions and his motives on the basis of preconceived notions about his psychological makeup and his social and sexual orientations. Too many of those who write about Alexander today claim to know what Alexander “would have” or “would not have done.” This is, in fact, a process that has been handed down for several generations. For example, C. L. Murison, in an article that actually attempts of vindicate the actions of Darius III, comments: “In general, we should remember that Alexander was an impulsive young man, whose dash and vigor frequently led him into trouble: the idea of him lurking amid narrow places like some suicidal Quintus Fabius Maximus, *is so unlike the character we are familiar with* [my emphasis], that we must reject it, unless it is proved to the hilt.”³ I am entirely in sympathy with G. L. Cawkwell, who remarks that “those who tend to think that Alexander the Great could make no mistakes and that his victories . . . followed as night follows day . . . should be left to their hero-worship.”⁴

Instead of accepting the arguments of Alexander's own propagandists and later hagiographers, I have chosen to take a minimalist view, attempting to understand the role of propaganda without being duped by it. The man who arrogantly dismissed the suggestion of a night attack with the words, “I shall not steal victory,” had no compunctions about cheating when he cut through the Gordian knot with his sword; nor did he lose sleep over the fact that he had broken his word to the Indian mercenaries, whom he slaughtered after promising them free passage; perhaps, despite official claims to the contrary, he had been intimate with Darius' wife, a helpless captive. Hence, I make no apology for repeating my view on Alexander at the Hyphasis – which some have

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rejected as heretical – because it is, to my mind, what the evidence suggests rather than the theory that confirms a subjective preconception of the king. In the opinion of Professor E. A. Fredricksmeyer: “Alexander was *in truth* [my italics] so much a product of the ancient cult of the hero, which placed martial honor and personal glory above all ethical considerations, . . . that the notion of him as the deceiver who contrived to be defeated by his own men at the Hyphasis is not easy to countenance. What of his pride?”⁵ If the aim of introducing *proskynesis* was, as a majority of scholars contend, an attempt to recognize Alexander’s divinity, would not the rejection of this experiment have been an even greater blow to his pride? Such assumptions about Alexander’s psychology are best avoided.

On the other hand, I have no desire to join the ranks of those whom novelist Mary Renault accuses of “blackwashing” Alexander (Renault 1974: 413) or to see Alexander as a precursor of Hitler and Stalin, men with an unrivalled talent for devising evil but, to some extent at least, also creatures of modern mythology. Indeed, these “blackwashers” are little more than biographers, who, as one writer noted, “divert attention from the work of a man to his petty or perhaps vicious habits . . . or direct interest from the best and lasting accomplishments of their subject to the utterly unimportant private matters of which he was ashamed.”⁶

My aim is not to retell in full the story of Alexander’s conquests. This has been done so many times that it seems pointless to repeat the exercise. Instead, I have tried to highlight major themes and, in places, to challenge accepted interpretations. When I do so, I have chosen to avoid the cumbersome priamel of scholarship – “some say this, others say that, but I say . . .” – in the belief that it should be obvious that what I present is my own interpretation (or most often one of those interpretations of other scholars that I accept) and should be treated as such by the reader. I have also referred in my notes and bibliography to a range of literature, including several popular titles that are readily accessible and thought-provoking. In a few places, I have referred to popular works that are likely to mislead the student, with the aim of preempting erroneous notions (e.g., the persistent view of Darius as a coward) or of illustrating how a superficial reading of the ancient

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evidence, with little regard for bias or practicalities, can lead to unlikely conclusions.

Those who study medieval, premodern, and even modern history regularly adduce parallels from antiquity. Not surprisingly, since the “Classics,” for a long time, formed the basis of humanistic education. Some may consider it preposterous to attempt to understand the past in terms of later events. My own experience, particularly from lecturing on Alexander, suggests that students are more often helped than confused by such an approach. The use of analogies from other periods of history is not meant to imply the existence of exact parallels⁷ – and certainly I make no claims to expertise in other areas – but rather to show that similar situations and problems often call for similar solutions.⁸ I would draw attention to the observations of William H. Prescott, made in 1847, on the military training and official recognition of the Inca prince: “The reader will be less surprised by the resemblance which this ceremonial bears to the inauguration of a Christian knight in the feudal ages, if he reflects that a similar analogy may be traced in the institutions of other people more or less civilized; and that it is natural that nations, occupied with the one great business of war, should mark the period, when the preparatory education for it was ended, by similar characteristic ceremonies.”⁹ Many aristocratic and conquest societies are, to my mind, remarkably similar in their basic aims and organization. There is an emphasis on military action and honor, deeds and rewards, and the intertwining relationships of land, social status, military leadership, and patronage – or, to view it in another way, of king, companions, soldiers, and serfs. Hence, the persistent view of Alexander as the instigator, manipulator, and practitioner of all things, exercising power rather than restrained by it, strikes me as naïve and untrue. If he imposed his will, it was in most cases upon the willing, or on those whom defeat had rendered incapable of further resistance. All else was, ultimately, a matter of one form of negotiation or another.

I wish to thank Beatrice Rehl of Cambridge University Press not only for suggesting this book to me but for encouraging me to complete it. Thanks are due also to Peter Katsirubas, who oversaw the production of the volume, to William Stoddard, for his careful editing, and to James

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Dunn, for producing the maps. The battle plans are my own, created with MS PowerPoint by someone unskilled in the art. Hence, they will not be as aesthetically pleasing as those done by professionals. I would particularly thank my informal military history group (our little “Army of Darkness,” dedicated to *Risk*, wine and whisky): Chris Collom, Chris Jesse, Ryan Jones, Alison Mercer, Jordan Schultz, Carolyn Willekes, and Graham Wrightson. Finally, I have dedicated this book to my children, in the hope that one of them may, one day, actually sit down and read it.

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE



EVENTS

776 BC	The first Olympic Games
750–550	Age of colonization
7th/6th cent.	Age of tyrants
594	Archonship of Solon
547–540	Ionia conquered by Cyrus the Great of Persia
513	Darius I conquers Thrace
510	Expulsion of Hippias, tyrant of Athens
508/7	Cleisthenes' democratic reforms
499–493	The Ionian Revolt
490	Battle of Marathon
480–479	Xerxes' invasion of Greece
479–431	The "Fifty Years": Delian League becomes Athenian Empire
449?	Peace of Callias
431–404	Peloponnesian War
401/0	Battle of Cunaxa; retreat of the Ten Thousand
404–371	Spartan supremacy in Greece
371	Battle of Leuctra
371–350s	Theban supremacy
362	Battle of Mantinea
359–336	Reign of Philip II
346	Peace of Philocrates
338	Battle of Chaeronea
337	First meeting of the League of Corinth Philip II marries his seventh wife, Cleopatra

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- 336 Assassination of Philip; accession of Alexander III (“the Great”)
- 335 Alexander’s Thracian, Triballian, and Illyrian campaigns; destruction of Thebes
- 334 Beginning of the expedition against Persia
- spring 334 Alexander leaves Macedonia and travels via Amphipolis to the Hellespont, which he crosses unopposed
- 334 Persian satraps meet to discuss strategy at Zeleia; the Battle of the Granicus River
- 334 Surrender of Sardis by Mithrenes
- 334 Sieges of Miletus and Halicarnassus
- 334/3 Alexander rounds Mt Climax, where the sea appears to perform *proskynesis*, withdrawing before the future King of Asia
- Arrest of Alexander the Lyncestian
- 333 The army reunited at Gordium; Alexander cuts the Gordian knot and claims to have fulfilled the prophecy, which promised him lordship of Asia
- Alexander in Cilicia; illness at the Cydnus River; (November); battle of Issus; defeat of Darius III and capture of his family
- 333/2 Capture of Darius’ treasures at Damascus; surrender of the Phoenician cities, except Tyre
- 332 Siege of Tyre (January–August); defection of the Cypriote and Phoenician contingents of the Persian fleet; fall of Tyre; capture of Gaza
- 332/1 Alexander in Egypt: visit to the oracle of Amun at Siwah; foundation of Alexandria in the Nile Delta
- 331 Return from Egypt. Alexander crosses the Euphrates at Thapsacus and then crosses the Tigris; defeat of Darius III at Gaugamela; surrender of Babylon by Mazaeus and Susa by Abulites; Alexander defeats the Uxians, overcomes the Persian satrap Ariobarzanes at the Persian Gates, and enters Persepolis
- 331/o Symbolic destruction of Persepolis

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE xvii

330	Alexander marches against Darius, whose forces are at Ecbatana. Flight of the Persians; arrest and death of Darius at the hands of his own generals and courtiers. Alexander dismisses the allied troops – some at Ecbatana, others at Hecatompylus
autumn 330	Philotas affair; execution of Parmenion in Ecbatana
winter 330/29	Defeat of Satibarzanes; Alexander in Arachosia
329	Arrest and death of Bessus
329/8	Campaigns in Bactria and Sogdiana; capture of the Rock of Ariamazes
328	Death of Cleitus in Maracanda; capture of the Rock of Sisimithres; Alexander marries Rhoxane
327	Failure of Alexander's experiment with <i>proskynesis</i> ; the Conspiracy of the Pages (Hermolaus); death of Callisthenes
327/6	Swat Campaign and capture of Aornus (Pir-sar)
May 326	Battle at the Hydaspes River
September 326	The Macedonian army returns to the Hydaspes
October– November 326	Departure of the Hydaspes fleet; Mallian campaign. Alexander near death
mid-325	Subjugation of Sindh
autumn 325	Beginning of the march west Gedrosian march
beginning of 324	Alexander in Carmania
March 324	Return to Susa
May/June 324	Alexander at Opis
June/July 324	Harpalus in Athens
July/August 324	Proclamation of the Exiles' Decree
October 324	Death of Hephaestion in Ecbatana

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end of 324	The Cossaeon campaign
spring 323	Alexander returns to Babylon
June II, 323	Death of Alexander

KING LISTS

THE ACHAEMENID KINGS OF PERSIA

560–530	Cyrus the Great
530–522	Cambyses
522	Smerdis (Gaumata or Bardiya)
522–486	Darius I
486–465	Xerxes I
465–424	Artaxerxes I
424	Xerxes II
424/3	Sogdianus
423–404/3	Darius II
404/3–359	Artaxerxes II
359–338	Ataxerxes III (Ochus)
338–336	Artaxerxes IV (Arses)
336–330	Darius III (Artashata; Codomannus)
330–329	[Artaxerxes V: Bessus]

ARGEAD KINGS OF MACEDONIA

393–369	Amyntas III
369–368	Alexander II
368–365	Ptolemy of Alorus (regency)
365–359	Perdiccas III
359–336	Philip II
336–323	Alexander III
323–317	Philip III
323–310	Alexander IV

SOURCES

LOST SOURCES AND APPROXIMATE PUBLICATION DATES

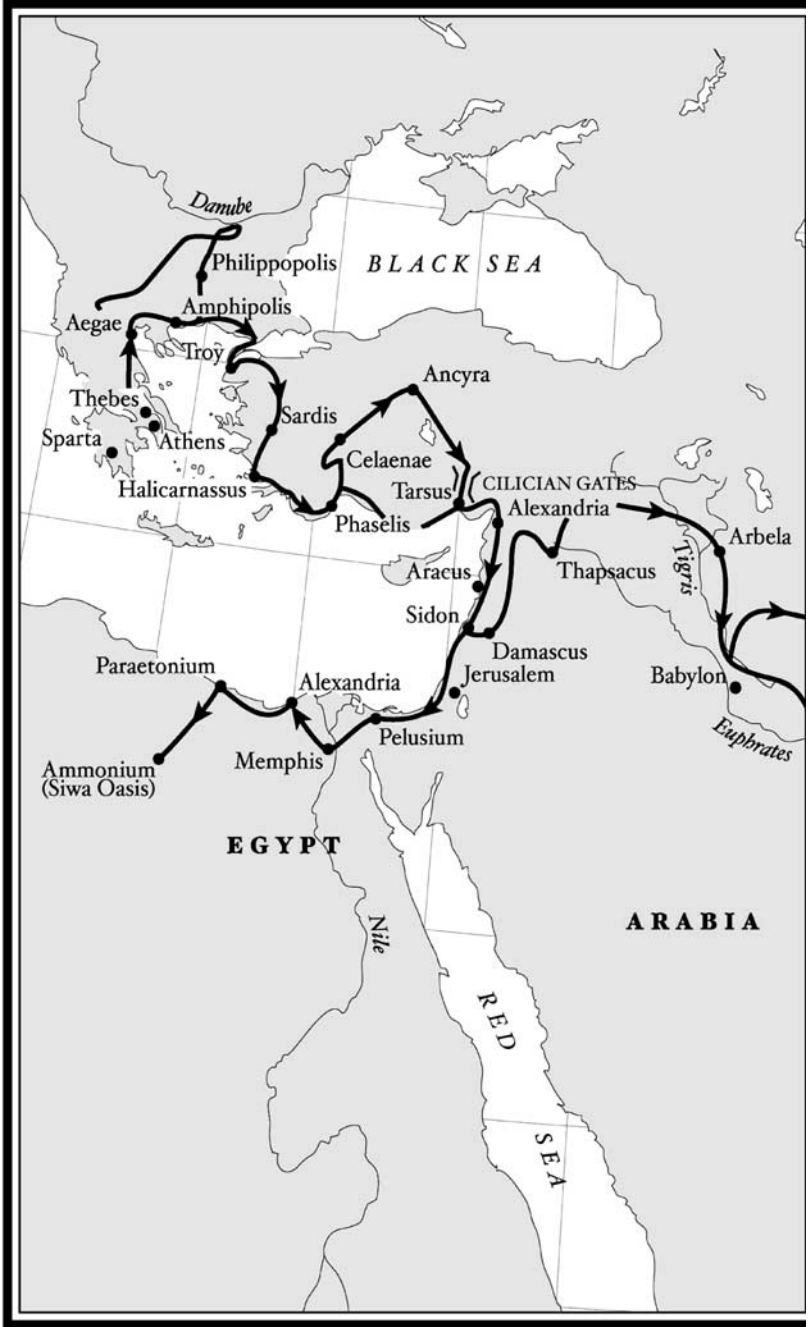
336–323	<i>Ephemerides</i> or <i>Royal Journal</i>
334–329	Callisthenes of Olynthus, <i>Deeds of Alexander</i>

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soon after 323	Onesicritus of Astypalaea, <i>Education of Alexander</i> Nearchus
310–305	Cleitarchus of Alexandria Marsyas of Pella
before 300	Chares of Mytilene Medius of Larissa Ephippus of Olynthus
285–283	Ptolemy son of Lagus
270s	Aristobulus of Cassandreia

EXTANT SOURCES

late first century BC	Diodorus of Sicily
middle of first century AD	Quintus Curtius Rufus
early second century	Plutarch, <i>Life of Alexander</i> , <i>De fortuna Alexandri</i>
middle of second century	Arrian, <i>Anabasis of Alexander</i>
second/third century	Justin, <i>Epitome of Philippic History</i> (Pompeius Trogus)



MAP I. *Alexander's Empire.*





MAP 2. *Greece and Macedonia.*