

Alexander the Great. By KEYNE CHESHIRE. Greece & Rome: Texts and Contexts. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. viii + 189. Paper, \$25.00. ISBN 978-0-521-70709-1.

Alexander the Great never seems to go out of fashion as a topic of controversial debate. This is due as much to his inscrutable character as to the astonishing impact of his brief life and career. These very factors make him ideal for study in upper secondary and undergraduate curricula. The challenge for instructors is choosing texts appropriate for students coming to the study of Alexander for the first time, who are not yet (and most likely will not become) either serious scholars or enthusiasts of ancient and military history. Keyne Cheshire's (C.) book attempts to close the gap between two types of texts readily available, both of which can be intimidating or confusing for those with little understanding of the social and historical context, much less the complicated nature of Alexander historiography. Full translations of the Alexander historians or selective collections of sources in translation may be desirable, but the context is largely lost on "beginners." [[1]] Biographies of Alexander synthesizing the ancient evidence abound, but a drawback with both venerated standards and more recent books that take a thematic approach is that a different "Alexander" seems to emerge from every serious book published on the subject. [[2]] This may be well and good for scholars interested in new insights, or even for a general readership of enthusiasts, all of whom have likely already found their own "Alexander" and will beg to differ. C.'s book should appeal to instructors seeking a middle ground, who want to offer their students an approach to the study of Alexander the Great as he appears in the ancient texts, while at the same time encouraging students to form their own opinions about him.

C.'s book, published in the Cambridge series "Greece & Rome: Texts and Contexts," is strictly speaking a "textbook" designed with the instructional features one expects in such volumes: copious illustrations, maps, diagrams, boxes of inserted text, etc. The stated aim of the series is to provide students with "new" translations of extracts from ancient sources and—what makes this volume different from other collections of Alexander sources in translation—to set them within their historical, social and cultural contexts. C.'s extracts are, perhaps regrettably, restricted to passages from Arrian's *Anabasis* and Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*, although students are frequently directed to other ancient sources for comparison. For example, in reference to a passage from Arrian (3.14) describing Darius' flight from the battle of Gaugamela, students are asked to contrast Arrian's account with the versions given by Curtius and Diodorus, as well as

BOOK REVIEW

Plutarch (p. 82). C. does not explain why he extracts only Arrian and Plutarch. It appears that his choice is due to the fact that they offer a “statement of historical method,” so that “one can readily track how these authors’ aims and perspectives shape their accounts” (p. 4).

In keeping with the aim of the Cambridge series, C.’s approach is heavily historiographical. He begins in the Preface with the all-important question: “But who is this Alexander?” (p. v) and follows with the caveat, “Conflicting ancient accounts accompany nearly every episode of Alexander’s life...” (p. viii). In the Introduction, C. confronts the politically volatile “Macedonian question” and provides background on Philip II’s military reforms. He also addresses the problematic relationship between Philip II and the Greeks, a relationship Alexander inherited, and the “state” of the Persian empire at the time of Alexander’s accession. Next C. presents the extracts in a chronological progression through Alexander’s life and career, birth to death, divided into six “Chapters” that follow standard divisions: From birth to kingship; Into Asia; Issus and Egypt; Gaugamela to the death of Darius; East to India; Back towards Babylon. An Epilogue summarizes the Successors and the establishment of the Hellenistic kingdoms; this I find too brief to be adequate. C.’s selection of extracts is a mix of military narrative and anecdotal material covering many of the major events while avoiding overlap—Plutarch’s account of one episode, Arrian’s account of another. The translations are lucid, close to the Greek and, for the most part, capture its nuances. [[3]]

C. effectively achieves the second aim of the book, that is, placing the texts within their context, in large part through explanations of key terms and phrases, which are highlighted in blue in the text with footnote-like commentary at the bottom of each page. Admirably, these are not restricted to persons, places and obligatory transliterated Greek words (e.g. “sarissa,” p. 33) but also provide commentary on social customs (e.g. *ad* Arr. 2.7 “slaves and free men,” p. 45) and cryptic phrases (e.g. *ad* Plut. 10 “those complicit in the plot,” p. 23). Each chapter contains periodic colored boxes with thought-provoking questions pertaining to the extracted passages. These are designed to launch discussion of crucial “problems” in Alexander’s career (*ad* Plut. 27 “What do the responses of the oracle’s prophet [i.e. priest of Ammon] imply about Alexander’s parentage?”, p. 69) as well as in the historiography (*ad* Arr. 4.8 “Why do you suppose Arrian uses the passive voice (‘he was struck by the sarissa’), in depicting the moment of Cleitus’ death?”, p. 107). And admirably, many questions do not preclude “correct” answers (*ad* Arr. 7.6 “On

BOOK REVIEW

reading this passage closely, do you believe Alexander's policies [i.e. 30,000 Epigoni] are an attempt to make the Macedonian army more Persian or the Persians more Macedonian?", p. 160). Students are thus encouraged to think critically about the nature of the sources and to form their own opinions about Alexander. The volume is well illustrated with useful color maps of Alexander's route, color-coded reconstructions of the four main set battles, images of works of art depicting Alexander's life, and photographs of various locations as they are today. A timeline of important dates is included in the Introduction. An appendix provides brief blurbs on the ancient sources, both extant and (selectively) lost; this is followed by a very brief list of further reading and references highlighting some important studies in English. The restriction to English works is understandable although the impact on Alexander studies of scholars such as Jacoby and Berve ought not be left unacknowledged. An easy-reference glossary of terms concludes the volume. Unfortunately, there is no index.

C.'s book certainly has pedagogical merit. The color-coded reconstructions of the battles at Granicus, Issus, Gaugamela and Hydaspes are particularly useful for sorting out the convoluted ancient narratives. Although these reconstructions may not be historically accurate (as C. acknowledges on p. viii), they are true to the passages extracted and should help students not only to follow the tactics, move by counter-move, but to form opinions about Alexander's generalship as it is represented in the sources. The explanations of key terms and phrases eliminate the need for historical commentaries, which for non-classics/history majors are likely to be tedious, though for comprehensiveness one still must turn to Bosworth and Hamilton. [[4]] It is worth reiterating that C.'s book is intended for upper secondary and undergraduate students, but its appeal doubtless will diminish at higher undergraduate levels. Some instructors at any level will be reluctant to move away from the full texts of Arrian and Plutarch, or to omit Curtius, Diodorus and Justin from their reading lists. Others will prefer to formulate their own questions and steer their own course through Alexander's life. Even so, many instructors of courses at lower levels will be grateful for the book's virtual self-teaching design and for the groundwork C. has done. His book offers a topic of broad appeal through which students can develop skills in critical thinking and debate. Its strength lies in its presentation of an inscrutable Alexander within his historical, social and cultural context. As for the content of C.'s extracts, those hoping for the full military narrative will miss the northern campaign immediately following Alexander's accession, the "liberation" of the

BOOK REVIEW

coastal cities of Asia Minor, and much of the Bactrian and Indian campaigns. Most of Arrian Book 6, in fact, is omitted, while the map of *Alexander's route east to India and back to Babylon* (p. 99) does not show his march all the way down the Indus to the India Ocean. [[5]] What C. does offer is a well-rounded view of Alexander as both general and man, and a balance between detailed extracts of the major battles and sieges and extracts on Alexander's drinking habits, manner of dress and sex life likely to appeal to a broad range of students in upper secondary and undergraduate courses. Most importantly, C. allows each student to discover his and her own Alexander.

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[[1]] Recent selections in translation: W. Heckel and J.C. Yardley, *Alexander the Great: Historical Sources in Translation* (Oxford, 2003); P. Mensch and J. Romm, *Alexander the Great: Selections from Arrian, Diodorus, Plutarch and Quintus Curtius* (Indianapolis, 2005).

[[2]] Among the venerated standards, those of U. Wilcken, *Alexander the Great* (London, 1932; repr. 1981), J.R. Hamilton, *Alexander the Great* (London, 1973; pb Pittsburgh, 1974), and R. Lane Fox, *Alexander the Great* (London, 1973; , 2004) are still in print.

[[3]] One notable exception, *ad* Arr. 4.29: "Ptolemy son of Lagus, who was a Bodyguard and *leader* of the Agrianians..." (my italics). For "Bodyguard" Arrian uses the article and noun, but in reference to the Agrianians he uses the participle "leading" without repeating the article. Ptolemy was by this time named a Bodyguard, and on this occasion was "leading" rather than "leader" of the Agrianians.

[[4]] A.B. Bosworth, *A Historical Commentary on Arrian's History of Alexander*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1980; repr. 1995); J.R. Hamilton, *Plutarch: Alexander* (Oxford, 1969).

[[5]] The impression left by both text and map is that Alexander never reached the Indian Ocean, but left the Indus part way down and headed across the Gedrosian desert.