

*Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend.* By RICHARD STONEMAN. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008. Pp. 336. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN 978-0-300-11203-0.

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Accounts of Alexander the Great abound from antiquity to the present day in nearly all parts of the inhabited world. Achieving near heroic status while alive, he enjoyed an afterlife as spectacular as the Greek gods and heroes he emulated. In his brief life (356–323 BC) he effected great historical change in the Mediterranean and Near East. Over the next two millennia his legend stretched even farther across different cultures and religious traditions and distant lands.

The British historian and documentary filmmaker Michael Wood has probably done the most in recent years to popularize Alexander. In his bestseller *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great* (1997), which accompanies the TV series of the same title, Wood follows the route of Alexander from Greece to India, linking ancient and contemporary history. The result is that history, well told, can be alive and compelling.

Stoneman, one of the world's experts on the Alexander myths, introduces us first to the historical Alexander and then to the Alexander of legend who has come to represent the heroic ideal in many different cultures of the world. In twelve chapters the author traces the young Macedonian's influence in ancient literature and folklore and in later literatures of east and west.

Chapter 1, "Nativity (Egyptian Origins—356 BC)," sets the tone for the rest of the book. According to Plutarch, *Alexander* 2.3–6 and the *Alexander Romance* I.4 and 6, Olympias and Philip II had extraordinary visions before Alexander's birth, suggesting that he had been fathered by a serpent which marked the birth of a hero. In the *Alexander Romance* the magician Nectanebo II (Nekht-hor-heb), the last Pharaoh of Egypt (360–343 BC), used his astrological arts to ensure the correct moment of birth of a world-conqueror. The chapter, like the whole book, has fine illustrations documenting Alexander's birth and early life.

Chapter 2, "Golden Vines, Golden Bowls and Temples of Fire (Persian Versions)," follows Alexander's conquest and kingship of Persia (334–330 BC). Alexander's entry into the Persian legendary record of the kings established him as a major figure of Persian literature. The 10<sup>th</sup>-century AD Persian poet Firdausi's *Shahnameh*

## BOOK REVIEW

(Book of Kings) is the first to develop the story of Alexander and is a key element in its transmission to central Asia and beyond. The legend of Alexander (Iskandar) was expanded by later Persian writers, the most famous of whom is Nizami (1140–1203). The Byzantine historian Theophylact Simocatta (c. 580–641) is the earliest source to describe activities of Alexander in China during the Mongol dynasty of the 560s. The 15<sup>th</sup>-century Persian poet Jami considered Iskandar not only a conqueror and sage but a prophet of God. Alexander was thoroughly Islamicized as a result of cross-fertilization from the Arabic tradition.

Chapter 3, “Cities of Alexander (Jews and Arabs Adopt a Hero),” presents varying accounts of Alexander’s visits to Jerusalem, including one by Josephus which Stoneman considers fiction, noting a complete lack of evidence that Alexander ever converted to Judaism. There is even less evidence to attribute to Alexander the building of the Pharos, the famed lighthouse at Alexandria, and other marvels.

Chapter 4, “The Marvels of India (329–326 BC),” suggests that Alexander also had a scientific purpose for going to India—an enterprise prompted by his teacher Aristotle—for which expedition he brought along a considerable research staff. For the Greeks, India was a land of wonders and enchantment, and Alexander’s exploits there became the basis of the wonder tales of later ages. His fascination with India is further explored in Chapter 5, “How Much Land Does a Man Need (Alexander’s Encounter with the Brahmans—326 BC).”

With Chapter 6, “From the Heights of the Air to the Depths of the Sea (Alexander as Inventor and Sage),” the Alexander of history meets the Alexander of legend. This second Alexander is clever, a master of disguise and, like Odysseus, has an answer for every adversary, every impasse. The *Alexander Romance* is the basis of his legendary escapades, as when (II.14) he goes in disguise as his own messenger to the Persian court, and gets away with it until he is recognized by a Persian who had been one of the ambassadors to Pella years before. The stories of his exploration of the Ocean in a glass diving bell and his construction of a flying machine typify the Alexander who surpasses human knowledge and capability by way of his ingenuity. That he was a pupil of Aristotle made him a suitable vehicle for all types of wisdom and cleverness. Alexander as sage is further manifested in Arabic and Persian literature.

## BOOK REVIEW

In Chapter 7, "Amazons, Mermaids and Wilting Maidens," Stoneman looks at Alexander's connection with women, real and imagined. To begin, the Alexander of the *Romance* has no erotic element: little attention paid to Roxane; Barsine is not mentioned; and neither is his affair with the eunuch Bagoas. But his relationship with his mother is a central feature of the *Romance*. A major missed opportunity in the *Romance* is the meeting with the Amazons, with whom Alexander communicates only collectively through letters. There are also Semiramis and her descendant Candace of Assyria, and aquatic women, the so-called mermaids of Greek myth and legend.

Chapters 8 through 12 focus on Alexander's flirtation with immortality, his life-long search for something more: all knowledge, all wisdom, universal rule. His visit to the Oracle of Ammon at Siwa in 332 begins his transformation from a mortal to an eastern ruler requiring worship as a god even from his fellow Greeks. In all of the Arabic romances the key to the narrative is the search for the Water of Life and Immortality to transform Alexander into a hero of Islam and prophet of God. Like the Jason of Apollonius' *Argonautica*, the Alexander of the *Romance* is not only a warrior and strategist against human enemies but a fighter of monsters, a dragon-slayer. In the *Romance* Alexander faces his greatest challenge, the Unclean Nations, which is the main vehicle for the insertion of him into the sacred history of the Christian world. According to historical accounts and the *Romance*, Alexander died in Babylon and was buried in Memphis in 321, and then moved to Alexandria in 320. Even after the establishment of Christianity, the figure of Alexander endured in the west.

If at the close of the Middle Ages the Alexander of Romance and legend was being displaced by a colder-eyed view of the Alexander of history, Alexander has remained a living figure in Greek lore. His name has magic properties and he appears in folklore all over Greece. His is certainly a name to conjure with in politics as a liberator among Greeks. Stoneman ends his fascinating account by saying "It is *paideia* ('culture') that makes a Greek, and Alexander's legacy to the world, despite the brutality of his historical career, is *paideia*."

Stoneman's meticulous scholarship and evocative storytelling provides us with an Alexander whose history and legend have universal appeal.

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