

## BOOK REVIEW

*The First European: A History of Alexander in the Age of Empire.* By PIERRE BRIANT and NICHOLAS ELLIOT, trans. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. Pp. viii + 482. Hardcover, \$35.00. ISBN 978-0-674-65966-7.

The history of Alexander the Great is a history of reception. In the absence of contemporary sources, the later histories and Roman commentary about the Macedonian king's crimes and conquests frame the terms of debate: Alexander was either the exemplar of a virtuous king or a warning about the dangers of excesses left unchecked. Within this framework, ambiguities and discontinuities in the source tradition offer ample opportunity for every generation to discover its own Alexander. In *The First European*, Pierre Briant meticulously reconstructs the reception of Alexander the Great in the "long eighteenth century" (c.1645–1831), revealing the emergence of a complicated debate about Alexander's importance to Greek history, to Enlightenment virtues, and to European heritage.

Briant opens his inquiry with an account of the annual essay competition of the Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in Paris (19). The topic for 1769: "Who among the historians of Alexander should be preferentially believed?" The winner that year chosen from the three entries was the Baron de Sainte-Croix, but, more important than the victory, is a curious opinion from the academy's rapporteur that made its way into the published text, namely that "this subject had not yet been treated and was lacking in our Literature." This statement is patently false. Without either judging the comment too harshly or diminishing the importance of de Sainte-Croix' work, Briant uses the competition of 1769 as a fulcrum that balances the traditions that preceded its publication on the one side and its wide-ranging influence on the other.

*The First European* is organized into four broad sections: "A Critical History," "The Conqueror-Philosopher," "Empires and Nations," and "The Sense of History," with each being subdivided into two or three chapters that examine an aspect of how Alexander was applied to contemporary events. In each chapter, Briant traces the intellectual lineage of the major opinions about Alexander across editions, languages, and national borders, revealing the prominent position as-

signed to Alexander in debates about imperial expansion, colonization, and commerce. Briant tallies more than six hundred sources, including the work of luminaries such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, Niebuhr, and Hegel. The catalogue of authors demonstrates how common references to Alexander were, but the shape of the eighteenth-century discourse is most evident in the issues they chose to emphasize.

Campaign narratives and assessments contrasting Alexander with contemporary rulers continued to be published, but advances in global commerce and colonial expansion breathed new relevance into ancient history. Briant identifies an evolution in the moral dialogue that traditionally shaped the interpretations of Alexander wherein eighteenth-century commentators weighed his “beneficial” contributions to world history against his crimes. Providential historians, for instance, latched onto Alexander’s journey to Jerusalem found in the Alexander Romance, which linked the king with the advent of Jesus. A larger number of commentators addressed the history of commerce, setting the destruction of Tyre on the side of the scale with Alexander’s excesses, balanced against the foundation of Alexandria and his opening India to European commerce. Hardly limited to these examples, Briant demonstrates the multifarious ways that eighteenth century Europeans interpreted Alexander through their contemporary circumstances and, in turn, used Alexander as a point of reference in contemporary discourses about empire.

The *First European* is the English translation of the French book published as *Alexandre des lumières: Fragments d’histoire européenne* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012). Changes to the structure, as explained in the preface, have led to minor infelicities, particularly in the first chapter where compression of the argument produced some choppiness, but the translation and editing is, in sum, well done.

Would that the English title were as fitting. “The First European” is an evocative phrase, but one that is deeply misleading and, in my opinion, does not accurately reflect either Briant’s scholarship or the opinions of the eighteenth-century commentators. Only in Chapter 10, “Alexander, Europe, and the Immobile Orient,” is “European-ness” the central issue. Here, though, Briant identifies a strain of European discourse that praised Alexander for his bringing the seat of power from Asia to Europe for the first time. In this instance, the contemporary issue was the Ottoman Empire, particularly because of the Greek War of Independence (1821–1832), to which was grafted the conceit of an ongoing war between “free” Europe and the “despotic” and unchanging Orient. However important Alexander was to this dialogue it did not set him up as “the first European.”

The stated aim of *The First European* is “to rediscover Alexander through the Enlightenment while discovering the Enlightenment through Alexander” (1). Briant is unquestionably successful in the first, but only partially so on the second. His study offers some insight into the Enlightenment, revealing both a series of prominent issues such as the history of commerce and the developments in intellectual and academic practice, but the focus on Alexander necessarily imposes limits on the portrait it can paint. This does not diminish Briant’s accomplishment. *The First European* is an achievement of archival research and scholarship that illuminates an underappreciated period in the Alexander historiography. By Briant’s own admission, though, it tells only part of the story, leaving the synthesis of a “European” Alexander from the Middle Ages to the present for another book (viii).

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