

BOOK REVIEW

Lucian. Alexander or the False Prophet. Translated with Introduction and Commentary by PETER THONEMANN. "Clarendon Ancient History Series." Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. xii + 234. Hardback, \$115.00. ISBN: 978019886824-8.

Thonemann's addition to this valuable series of thirty-five texts chosen for ancient historians will benefit students of religion, classics, admirers of the Samosatene satirist and his humor, and inquirers into the arts of "coercive persuasion"—its weapons, many of its self-interested practitioners (con men), and sorry consequences. Alexander founded an oracle cult of Asklepios in a small Paphlagonian Black Sea town during the reign of the Roman Emperor Antoninus. Accompanied by his Asklepiian avatar, the snake Glykon (six images of coins and statues included), and with "gullible idiots" in abundance, his scam (in Lucian's eyes) produced a considerable following, reputation, and income—and a luxurious lifestyle. Lucian, presenting himself as an intrepid detective, debunks the fraudster in an exposé that has amused many generations, some of them devoted to other bizarre cults—some of those still flourishing. The ancient author was uninterested in psychological theories of "brainwashing" or the nature of cult-adherence. He had a good sorcerer story to tell and sympathetic audiences among the educated public (*pepaideumenoí*) of the Greek East. His appearance as a participant in his own work is unusual (8), not least as intended victim of Alexander's alleged murder plot (56). His theatricalization of his subject may reflect both the nature of Alexander's chosen priest and prophet "roles" and Lucian's mockery of a fake.¹

Francis Allinson's 1905 *Lucian. Selected Writings* and Matthew MacLeod's 1991 *Lucian. A Selection* both included the comparably acidulous *Death of Peregrinus* at Olympia, but neither contains the *Alexander*. Allinson's "College Series" provided a Greek text with introductions and helpful grammatical notes on eight essays;

¹ One might here compare (66-67) Plutarch's portrait of Demetrios, a king posturing royally for his ruler-cult in Athens and elsewhere. Beyond his inherent theatricality, Plutarch applies many stage metaphors to this Macedonian's pretentious career.

MacLeod (Aris & Phillips, also editor of the OCT Lucian) provided introduction, a Greek text, English translation and brief commentary on literary artistry for nine essays. Marcel Caster's 1938 *Etudes sur Alexandre*² offers text and translation with clarifying notes but no commentary. Therefore, Thonemann's textless *Commentary* fills an important gap, but students still need to find an annotated Greek text, since Thonemann's notes are chiefly historical (never aiding construal). His studies and publications in the history, epigraphy and archaeology of Western Anatolia uniquely prepare him for this deconstruction of Lucian's obvious animus and this reconstruction of the structures, spiritual and material, although not the anxieties, of Roman Paphlagonia and neighboring provinces remote from the capital.

The "long con" denominates a theory of mind and suasion to explain the delusion of crowds. Success in bringing about mass conviction and lunacy constitutes a sorry subject of social psychology and a *topos* for intellectual elites. Ingenious hoaxes, from Lucian's satirical account of Alexander and provincial Abonouteichos³ to current newspaper articles describing Keith Raniere's sex cult Nxivm and Donald Trump's "Stop the Steal" and its outlying multi-media "industries," exemplify mass delusions of self and others. They seduce and deceive large and disparate audiences ranging from illiterate farmers to army generals, medical men and other professionals. To create and sustain faith in ideas and creatures that are patently false, when not ludicrous, remains a matter needing constant explication and exposure, to judge by current cult leaders, social media "influencers" and political demagogues. Even Lucian admits that Alexander was gifted, handsome, bright and charismatic. He bit Alexander's hand (55), an act beyond philosophical dispute and investigative journalism, and contrary to his pose of Epicurean calm. Lucian generously reports that Alexander kept his minions from beating or strangling to death the impious desecrator.

² Repr. 1987 with *Lucien et La Pensée religieuse de son Temps* (1937). More recent: U. Victor's 1997 *Alexandros oder der Lügenprophet* with text, translation and *apparatus criticus*.

³ Thonemann offers introduction, translation and extensive notes. He disentangles the oracular and religious context in north shore Anatolia from Lucian's exposé of the leader's charlatanry and his unforgiving condemnation of the psychological fallibility exhibited by converts. Alexander's hometown—which under Roman authority issued local coinage with his humanoid snake Glykon—competed with the nearby bigger burghs of Amastris and Sinope. An innovative Asklepiian cult of its own raised its profile from coastal fortification to polis, one now named Ionopolis, to be precise.

Thonemann successfully excavates a cult⁴ like many other, more traditional oracles, at a time and place when oracular cults were flourishing, competing and bringing tourist revenues to shrines throughout the Greek East. Previous scholars of Lucian and mid-2nd century literature have focused on the nature of this narratorial “Lucian” in Lucian’s exposé and his target flim-flam artist in the text, and on the generic polyvalence of the essay (characteristics of biography, satire, fiction, dialogue). Thonemann, however, delineates, from the contemporary Anatolian context and despite Lucianic mud-slinging, a real and respectable shrine, a legitimate Paphlagonian cult in the Roman province of Bithynia-Pontus (25). “Cult” here denotes—without prejudice in a world of many cults—a new form of worship: thought, feelings, words, rituals and material presence. The large last category comprises objects, creatures (snakes), and structures. The priest brings these and his spiritual seekers into contact with supernatural forces, and Lucian, for his own purposes, provides the modern reader with many relevant details.

This refreshingly historical approach resurrects Alexander as no worse than his contemporaries—an agent of a revamped Asklepiian god—and Lucian as no better than other elitist scornors of non-traditional modes of communication that boast of non-present sources of practical advice for maladies and other problems. And the *Alexander* essay closely engages, more than most of Lucian’s works, with contemporary civic and religious life (5). Thonemann is no naive historicist; he recognizes the difficulty of drawing a line between Lucian’s fabrications and historically verifiable data, even visual details, for Alexander’s cult, especially insofar as Alexander himself was poaching on standard operating procedures for oracles, epiphanies and mystery cults.⁵

Thonemann’s unexpected conclusion is that Alexander’s project was not a loner’s fraud but “an eminently civic project” (29). Alexander was a bizarre but charismatic entrepreneur of the supernatural. His punk town needed a draw—a new name and a snazzy game—and ostentatious piety remained fashionable in many 2nd-century Anatolian cities (Klaros, Didyma, Patara, Pergamon) and beyond. Glykon’s “New Asklepios” fit perfectly the PR needs. His pre-announced birth, his false humanoid head and hair, his self-proclaimed prophecies for the future (*autophonos*) and his healing bear-fat ointment (*kytmidēs*) drew “stampedes”

⁴ Definitions of a cult range from “a relatively small group of people having religious beliefs or practices regarded by others as strange or sinister” to more amusing ones, such as “tomorrow’s religion.”

⁵ No literary evidence other than Lucian’s attests the prophet or his serpent (21). Abonuteichos, modern Inebolu, has not been excavated.

(24: δρόμος οὖν καὶ ὠθισμὸς ἀπανταχόθεν ἐγένετο καὶ θυσίαι καὶ ἀναθήματα). Thonemann claims (34), and we cannot gainsay him, that his interpretation makes “a little more sense of the unlikely success-story” than Lucian’s. The translation is attractive, more colloquial than A. M. Harmon’s “Loeb Classical Library” version, now nearly a century old.

Following the eminent French epigraphist Louis Robert, the editor has tried to separate the historical facts from the tendentious spin to be found in Lucian’s farcical rewriting of a preposterous biography—one starting with the prophet’s descent from the Homeric surgeon Podaleirios. For example, Thonemann believes (88-89) that Alexander was a member of the local aristocracy (assuming there was one), since he claimed descent from Perseus and the Persians (flaunted by outlandish dress and *harpê*-sword) rather than Lucian’s claim that he was a descendant of paupers and in youth prostituted himself to buy food. Lucian surely recycled tropes of Hellenic invective, but that does not prove all the details wrong—the trade did and does not change radically from one generation of prophet to the next.⁶ For those of us unfamiliar with 2nd-century northern Anatolia, and we are many, the essay and Thonemann’s detailed explications are a valuable introduction to a place and period in which sources are abundant but diffused.

Lucian enriched his idea of debunking another false prophet by hybridizing it with comedy (oracle-monger in *Birds*) and historical and philosophical exposures of supernatural frauds—especially, Thonemann argues, by the shadowy Oinomaos of Gadara’s *Exposure of Sorcerers*, a text partly preserved in Eusebius’ *Preparation for the Gospel*. The editor conveniently translates the surviving fierce excerpts and context in Appendix I.

Thonemann contributes to the historical semi-rehabilitation of Alexander. Anyone so successful in the dicey business of prophecy for so long, charming so many strata of the population—from the Roman governor P. Mummius Sisenna Rutilianus (who married one of Alexander’s many daughters) to parochial bumpkins—must have done something right. Indeed, Lucian’s unrelenting animosity drives scholars uninvolved in religious partisanship to some sympathy for

⁶ Lucian provides the bad man’s death from maggots (59), cutting life far shorter than the 150 years he had predicted for himself. Phthiriasis, hearkening back to Herodotos’ Pheretime (4.205), is a popular punishment for tyrants, sinners and religious persecutors, as Thonemann notes.

the always grand, often gracious and generous swindler.⁷ Alexander gave hope to the hopeless and jobs to the local jobless (19, 23, 49—sacred personnel), having created his own healing sanctuary, an eastern Lourdes.

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⁷ He did not direct mass murders/suicides like the subsequent self-proclaimed prophet, Jim Jones of Jonestown (November 1978). Lucian's unforgiving but humorous "journalistic" exposure refrains from Oinomaos of Gadara's tedious "philosophical" frothing.