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REVIEW

A NEW READING OF ROMAN ALEXANDER NARRATIVES

Jennifer Finn, *Contested Pasts: A Determinist History of Alexander the Great in the Roman Empire*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022. Pp. x + 234. Hardback, $70.00. ISBN 978-0-472-13303-1.

There is no end to the books on Alexander the Great. On one level, this is simply a reflection of the fact that he changed the world, and pretty much all subsequent history of the Greek and Roman world is affected in some way or another by his conquests. That the surviving literary sources for Alexander are Roman in date or were written under Roman rule has not gone unnoticed, but the movement in scholarship to examine the Alexander historians—Diodorus, Justin, Curtius Rufus, Arrian, Plutarch—as products of their Roman cultural milieu and authors in their own rights, rather than as ciphers for studying or attempting to retrieve the lost first- or second-generation Hellenistic historians of Alexander, is a relatively recent phenomenon.[1] Study of the Alexander historians has moved, or at least is moving, away from the old *Quellenforschung*. It has long been acknowledged that the Alexander we have in surviving historiography is a 'Roman' Alexander—Diana Spencer's *The Roman Alexander* (Exeter, 2002) remains the classic work—a character written under and influenced by the end of the Hellenistic empires and the rise of Rome to oikoumenic rule. Specifically, the image is heavily influenced by the cultural and political milieu of Augustan Rome, as outlined in characteristic style by Piero Treves.[2] In addition to focused case studies of Alexander's reception in different regions, cultures, and periods, Alexander's afterlife in the Roman empire is one of the main areas of genuinely original scholarship on the Macedonian.

[1] One might note E. Baynham, *Alexander the Great: The Unique History of Quintus Curtius* (Ann Arbor, 1998); C. Muntz, *Diodorus Siculus and the World of the Late Roman Republic* (Oxford, 2017); V. Liotsakis, *Alexander the Great in Arrian's* Anabasis*: A Literary Portrait* (Berlin, 2019).

[2] P. Treves, *Il Mito di Alessandro e la Roma d'Augusto* (Milan, 1953), a work that does not feature in Finn's *Contested Pasts*.

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Jennifer Finn's *Contested Pasts* examines 'the ways in which Roman authors manipulated narratives about Alexander to accommodate for the rise of Rome and its empire, recognizing the influence of the reign of Augustus as a catalyst for these revisionist histories' (20). This she successfully achieves with a strong focus on ancient literary efforts to alter the narrative of his life in order to situate and examine Rome's place as the dominant power in the ancient world. Alexander affords, therefore, a useful model for thinking about Rome's place in the world by offering an example of an oikoumenic conqueror who achieved a tri-continental empire that melded east with west and encompassed much of the then known world, while leaving open through his unfinished last plans the space for Roman commanders to exceed Alexander's achievement and complete the project of world rule. Key to Finn's analysis is the idea of revisionism in ancient historiography, the fact that Greek and Roman historians writing under the Roman empire create their Alexander with a clear awareness of his place in the narrative of Rome's greatness. In that regard, Alexander serves to prefigure Rome's inevitable greatness: 'Alexander's greatness was determined by Rome's; Rome's greatness, by default, was also determined by Alexander's' (5). To a certain degree, there was a phenomenon in the literature of Augustan Rome to present Rome as the end of history, the ultimate culmination, and collapsing, of the east–west dichotomy that had fixated and structured Greek thought since Homer.

Finn's argument that Roman writers saw the rise of Rome as inevitable and wrote their accounts of Alexander's reign in this light requires the application of concepts such as 'intentional history' (Gehrke), 'cultural memory' (Assmann), 'collective memory' (Halbwachs), and 'mnemohistory' or *Gedächtnisgeschichte* (Assmann). This she does both sensibly and clearly. A rather useful discussion of sources on pages 11–20 argues strongly against the old *Quellenforschung*-influenced division of the Alexander historians into the trustworthy 'Arrian' and the nebulous and somewhat dubious 'Vulgate'. Finn emphasises that Arrian, as much as the others, was writing his 'personal motivations in a contemporary Roman context' (20).

Contested Pasts is divided into six chapters, each of which is a case study that can be read on its own, but it is rewarding to read them in a linear fashion. After an introductory chapter outlining the book's focus, scope, and methodology, Finn moves to her first case-study in Chapter 2, 'Trojan War Reprisals'. Ever since Simonides' *Plataea Elegy* the Trojan War has been a model for Greeks writing about and commemorating the events of the recent past. The situation is no different for Alexander where the Homeric (and Herodotean) resonances of his campaign are unmistakeable in the surviving sources. Like Heckel and Bowden, Finn argues that the 'Achilles complex' that ancient historians attribute to Alexander is predominantly, though not exclusively,

historiographic rather than historic—Heracles was the primary model for Alexander—though she does concede that Homeric and Herodotean motifs were 'likely already applied to Alexander's kingship in his own day' (24).[3] Finn treats Xerxes' visit to Troy 'as an interaction with an Iliadic mnemotype that was stirring for a Greek audience' (32) and that can be directly compared with Alexander's visit to Troy in 334. Accounts of both visits may contain historical detail, but they are based on literary tropes influenced by Homer, Herodotus, and Arrian's own concerns as an author (34). The discussion of Protesilaus' tomb as a literary mnemotype for stories on east–west conflict, perhaps even an imaginary boundary between east and west, is particularly interesting.

A long discussion of the importance of Susa as a focal point for the Persian War themes of Alexander's life is quite neatly done. As a/the literary capital of Persia (Aeschylus' *Persians* takes place at Susa) and the site of the mass weddings of 324, Susa was a locus for Roman authors to play out Alexander's role in melding Greco-Persian relations. For Arrian, the only surviving author to describe the Susa marriages in detail, Alexander's act becomes the end of history whereby, so to speak, the Iliadic conflict between east and west, which began with marriage of Helen and Paris, reached its culmination with Alexander's melding of east to west through the mass marriage of Greeks and Persians. The weddings at Susa are, in literary terms, the conclusion of Atossa's dream in Aeschylus' *Persians* and the fulfilment of Xerxes' yoking of Asia and Europe together via the bridge over the Hellespont. For the Romans, the Susa weddings could be paralleled with Romulus and the rape of the Sabine women: the early history of Rome reveals inter-marriage leading to inevitable greatness.

Finn's third chapter examines the battle of Thermopylae as a paradigm for the succession-of-empires story. Beginning with Herodotus' account of the Battle of Thermopylae, which developed perhaps from a mythologised Spartan account and marks the beginning of the shift of empires from Persia to Sparta in 480, Finn moves to Macedon in 331 with Alexander's battle at the Persian Gates, before finishing the theme with Rome's victory over Antiochus III at Thermopylae in 191, which was presented by Livy (36.16), and perhaps Polybius, as marking the shift from a Hellenistic to a Roman world. Literary descriptions of Alexander's victory at the Persian Gates, which leads into the burning of Persepolis, fits perfectly into the narrative of the Panhellenic revenge mission and goes back perhaps to Callisthenes. Interestingly,

[3] W. Heckel, 'Alexander, Achilles, and Heracles: Between Myth and History', in P. V. Wheatley and E. Baynham, edd., *East and West in the World Empire of Alexander: Essays in Honour of Brian Bosworth* (Oxford, 2015) 21–33; H. Bowden, 'Alexander as Achilles: Arrian's use of Homer from Troy to Granicus', in T. Howe and F. Pownall, edd., *Ancient Macedonians in the Greek and Roman Sources* (Swansea, 2018) 163–79.

Diodorus uniquely describes a night attack on the Persian Gates, which parallels his account of the night raid undertaken by Leonidas at Thermopylae, suggesting that he too paralleled the Persian Gates with Thermopylae and the *translatio imperii* from Persia to Sparta in Europe and Persia to Macedon in Asia, though based on a different historiographic tradition. Finn concludes that while the succession-of-empires idea, based around the juxtaposition of Thermopylae and the Persian Gates, is likely there in Ptolemy, Callisthenes, and perhaps Cleitarchus, Roman authors situate and adapt the narrative within a Roman view of their rise to hegemony, with conscious foreshadowing of their victory over Antiochus at Thermopylae in 191.

In her fourth chapter, Finn examines Alexander's last plans as recorded in Diodorus 18.4 and argues that they 'served, in microcosmic form, to place the semi-mythical Alexander directly in the center of a historically determined line that derived from the mythological hero Heracles and concluded at the apex of Roman history as Diodorus knew it: Augustus' (85). Finn argues, in line with recent scholarship, that Diodorus reflects the intellectual and political climate of the mid- to late first century BC and should be given authorial credit for how Alexander's 'last plans' are framed and presented in his account. Diodorus, she argues, uses the 'last plans' to link Alexander to Heracles and Greek myth-history, but also to reflect contemporary resonances of the civil wars and the Augustan age: Heracles, Egypt, and the blending of east and west. While the general contention is well-argued, one could critique some of the specific links between certain of Alexander's last plans and the Augustan parallels that Finn adduces. Some sections work better than others, or in some cases the links are more clearly evidenced. So, Augustus' rebuilding of Carthage and renovation of the Heraclean Way can be read within the context of Scipio's and other Romans' conquests in north Africa and Spain that fulfilled Alexander's last plan by conquering the western half of the world (93–6). Notably, stories circulated of Alexander (Plut. *Alex.* 2–3), Scipio (Gellius 6.1.1; Livy 26.19.7–8), and Augustus (Suet. *Aug.* 94.6; Cass. Dio 45.1.2) being sired by snakes. The attempt to link Alexander's planned synoecism of peoples from Europe and Asia with Roman imperial foundations, such as Pompey's and Augustus' Nikopoleis, and the Roman discourse of Trojan origins under Augustus (97–100) is a bit more tenuous.

Tenuous too is the attempt to find Augustan links for Alexander's alleged plan to build a tomb for Philip bigger than the pyramids, which Finn reads as Diodorus' 'authorial addition reflecting an early Augustan desire to connect his emperorship to Egypt—and Alexander the Great' (110–11). The Augustus–Egypt link only works post-Actium, which may be too late for Diodorus as the latest dateable event in his history can be placed in 36 BC (16.7). A specific link with Augustus need not be necessary, however. Egypt and the pyramids were

part of the first century BC *zeitgeist* (note the pyramid of Cestius) and perhaps 'building a tomb bigger than the pyramids' was a shorthand for showing the megalomania of Alexander's ego just before his death. Claiming that Alexander intended an Egyptian-style burial for Philip may also fit the historical context of 323. Since Alexander wanted to be buried at Siwah, and Perdikkas intended to bring his body to Macedon, perhaps Perdikkas' attribution of the Egyptian-style burial in the Last Plans to Philip, and having the army reject it, was a way of finding popular rejection for Alexander's own planned burial in Egypt.

Chapter 5 examines some shared models associated with Alexander, namely Pompey against Sertorius and Octavian against Antony, as paradigms for the use of the Alexander parallel. The use of such shared models allowed Roman writers to examine both protagonist and antagonist through the prism of *imitatio Alexandri*. Key here is the long-held contention that while the Romans might have approved generally of Alexander's achievements as a soldier and conqueror, the negative features of his character—his tyrannical disposition and corruption by barbarian excess and luxury—were more problematic. The Alexander model was, therefore, useful in times of civil war when *imitatio* or *aemulatio Alexandri* could be a historical feature of the protagonists and a useful tool of literary *comparatio* for later authors who had to differentiate between 'good' and 'bad' rulers, who were most often the same as 'winners' and 'losers'. At its worst, the Alexander paradigm exemplified eastern corruption and decadence; at its best it revealed him to be a great general, commander, and expander of empire (123–4); Alexander as *pankrator* and oikoumenic unifier was an attractive model for numerous warlords during the last generations of the Roman Republic.

Finn's final case-study examines Alexander at Tyre, Babylon, Jerusalem, and Alexandria through the prism of Josephus and Jewish traditions regarding Alexander, specifically his comparison with Nebuchadnezzar. Finn identifies the Augustan era specifically, and the first centuries BC and AD generally, as particularly important for a nexus of issues relating to Alexander's association with Jewish tradition, such as Roman rule over Jerusalem, the sieges of 63 BC and 70 AD, and the first-century BC popularity of Megasthenes, who may have been the first to align Alexander with Nebuchadnezzar. Alexander is represented as an anti-Nebuchadnezzar in Josephus, who is the earliest surviving author to record Alexander's visit to Jerusalem, though the story likely existed in oral tradition long before Josephus. Finn argues that Josephus' Alexander should be read in a post-Titus context as an attempt to write the Jews into a deep history of leadership engagement in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. Moving to Babylon, Finn argues that Alexander's entry into the city and order to rebuild the ziggurat had deep near-eastern echoes and were part of the

tradition of Mesopotamian kingship with specific echoes of Nebuchadnezzar (158) who, along with Semiramis, was developed in the Hellenistic period as a proto-Alexander with conquests in the east and west. The conquests attributed to such proto-Alexanders in the literary sources meant that the extremes of Alexander's empire became harmonised as a single space and he was faced with numerous direct precedents to emulate and surpass.

The conclusion to the book is quite short, but it satisfactorily sums up the author's main points and closes by repeating the argument that the Alexander historians, all of whom wrote in the shadow of Rome, presented Alexander as a predecessor to Rome's greatness, a cog fitted into the Herodotean cycle of the rise and fall of empires, the penultimate step before Roman oikoumenic conquest. Finn handles the theory well, but the analysis does occasionally slip into Star-Trek-style jargon, of which perhaps the most egregious example can be found on page 50: 'In a macrocosmic gesture of the liminal blip in the space time-continuum, he [Arrian] allows Alexander to take ownership of the Trojan War and close the historical loop … with himself.'

The basic premise of Finn's work is clear and argued with learning and lucidity, though readers will find some of the links she draws more tenuous than others. Take Sertorius and Alexander as one example. On p. 134–8 Finn examines parallels between Sertorius and Alexander, such as anecdotes regarding Sertorius' white doe—'this behavior will of course recall Alexander's taming of the horse Bucephalas' (135), but will it?—and journeys to or contact with the Isles of the Blessed, which she parallels with Alexander's visit to Siwah. Similarly, Finn parallels the Susa weddings and Alexander's recruitment of the *Epigonoi* with Sertorius' training of Spaniards and establishment of a school. These are interesting ideas, and Plutarch's lives of Sertorius and Alexander share some interest in reversals of fortune, but Finn merely places these parallels side by side without detailed analysis. Further, since these events/actions are not explicitly paralleled in the sources, it is open to debate whether they constitute historical *imitatio* by Sertorius, literary *comparatio*, in which case closer source analysis is needed, or non-deliberate similarity that seems like *imitatio* to the modern author. To be fair, though, Finn does acknowledge the difficulty of dealing with Sertorius, for whom the source tradition is generally quite late and negative.

It is refreshing, and very useful, to have a focused discussion of Alexander and surviving the literary-historical sources for his reign that prioritises analysis of the authors on their own terms and within their own cultural contexts.

Contested Pasts is a serious addition to the scholarship on Alexander the Great and complements nicely recent work on the cultural context of our Roman Alexander.[4]

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[4] Such as Liotsakis' *Alexander the Great in Arrian's* Anabasis (n. 1 above) and Jaakkojuhani Peltonen's recent book *Alexander the Great in the Roman Empire, 150 BC to AD 60* (London and New York, 2019).