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REVIEW

ALEXANDER ENLIGHTENED

Pierre Briant, *Alexandre des Lumières. Fragments d'histoire européenne*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2012. Pp. 739, 20 illustr. Paperback, €29.00. ISBN 978-2-070-13171-6.

Over the years the work of Pierre Briant has helped to redefine how historians approach both the study of Achaemenid Persia and of Alexander. This is his seventeenth book (not to mention his collaboration in a further eight). It is unlikely to be the least in terms of its impact. Now in his seventies, he has recently turned his attention to a neglected, and, as he shows, a highly revelatory, dimension to Alexander-studies, namely, the treatment of Alexander in the European history-writing of the Enlightenment. He points out that two of the last century's greatest names in the study of ancient history, Elias Bickermann and Arnaldo Momigliano, both realised independently that the history of Alexander by the German historian Johann Droysen (1833), a prelude to Droysen's famous *Geschichte des Hellenismus* (2 vols., 1836, 1843), had roots in what Briant now shows to have been a very considerable and geographically diffuse interest taken in Alexander by eighteenth-century historical writers: in Enlightenment France, above all, but also, since the Enlightenment became an international movement, in England, Scotland, and Germany, to name the three further main foci of Briant's research. He omits the treatment of Alexander in the literature of czarist Russia, where Catherine the Great was a famous (if qualified) patron of the Enlightenment, only from ignorance of the language. As it is, Briant has consulted more than 600 works of European literature in his chosen period (see below), not just substantive works but also the more 'trivial' writings of the age of the Enlightenment, now largely forgotten, including learned reviews in the burgeoning journal-literature of the age; he also emphasises re-editions and translations of works in gauging the impact of such-and-such an author.

His aim is to characterise the image(s) of Alexander found in these works and to place them in a contemporary context, cultural, intellectual, and political. This is a redoubtable undertaking and it should be said at the outset that in the reviewer's opinion it is a successful one. Briant shows clearly how the figure of Alexander chimed with the particular historical contingencies of eighteenth-century Europe. This was, after all, an age of European king-conquerors (still) and, even more so, one of European mercantilism, exploration, and colonisation. At a time when the commerce of nations such as Hol-

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land, Portugal, France, and England was vigorously engaging with the East Indies, the ancient traditions about Alexander, a European 'King of Asia', lent themselves to historical—and geographical—contemplation. This was, as well, an age in which Greece and Rome, alongside Holy Scripture, provided the base-line for all reflection on the *longue durée* of Christian Europe's past. In exploring what is, in historiographical terms, essentially *terra nova*, Briant also maps the emergence of a critical approach to the Greek and Latin writings about Alexander just as new standards of historical inquiry challenged the contemporary tendency, widespread until well into the eighteenth century, merely to 'parrot' (Voltaire's expression) the classical historians of Alexander. By the end of Briant's period, the 'problem of the sources' in any critical study of Alexander was an established crux in the way that it has remained ever since.

Briant's period starts well before the death of Louis XIV (1715) largely so as to accommodate what he sees as a defining moment in the Enlightenment re-evaluation of Alexander. He reproduces (61) a photograph of the first page of a manuscript treatise dated to 1667, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale, with the heading 'Histoire sommaire du commerce et de la navigation des anciens, à Monsieur Colbert, Ministre d'Estat'. This was a commission by the famously mercantilist Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619–83) from a certain Pierre-Daniel Huet, which was only published in 1716, when its author was eighty-six; it went on to enjoy an exceptionally wide readership in France and abroad. The importance of the book was that it was the first to address, in its chapter on Alexander, his impact on ancient commerce and navigation and to see his conquests as marking an (at this stage) still vaguely adumbrated 'great revolution'. In its developed form, this new way of thinking about Alexander would challenge the oft-repeated view at the time that Alexander's conquests did not bring benefits to his subjects 'by commerce on land and sea and by the arts': the view of Charles Rollin, author of a thirteen-volume *Histoire ancienne* (1731–8), a work clearly in dialogue with Baroque views of the ideal king, particularly in France, where Voltaire on the first page of his *Siècle de Louis XIV* (1751) would claim that only four 'centuries' in the history of the world counted, defined as those when 'les arts ont été perfectionnés'.

Otherwise, in the seventeenth and on into the eighteenth century, Alexander's main function in French literature was to serve as a moralising model in educational histories, not least in ones addressed to young princes such as Louis XIV's son and heir (1681) or (1730) the Regent's grandson. These echoed the moralising tone of the ancient Alexander-historians themselves, but added a providential dimension at a time when history and religion still walked hand in hand—so the story in Josephus of the alleged encounter at Jerusalem between Alexander and the Jewish high priest was received approvingly as a demonstration of God's plan for the protection of his Chosen People. This moralising reflection on Alexander clearly demonstrates a Eu-

ropean ear highly attuned to the perceived failings of kings in general and in particular Alexander (the killings of courtiers, the assumption of Persian luxury, the quest for deification etc.) as well as their alleged virtues (such as Alexander's treatment of the Persian princesses, the subject of a painting commissioned from Le Brun by Louis XIV for hanging at Versailles). In an age of absolute monarchy, writers then, as in the time of the Roman emperors, held up Alexander as a mirror. On the threshold of the Enlightenment there were also critical stirrings in the face of a general tendency to compile in the manner of a Diodorus. Pierre Bayle, author of a *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697), rejected Alexander's supposed adoption of an Achaemenid-style harem as evidence for his 'impudicity', using the contemporary Ottoman parallel to insist instead on ostentation and luxury as a function of royal power. Among Frenchmen of the age of Louis XIV, display as a tool of absolutism hardly passed unnoticed.

Moving on into the era of the Enlightenment proper, Briant provides a particularly rich and penetrating commentary on the uses of Alexander in the writings of those whom he calls *historiens-philosophes* to distinguish them from the more specialised philologists and antiquarians of the time. A review cannot pretend to do justice to all of Briant's findings, but his emphasis on the enormous influence of Montesquieu's *De l'Esprit des loix* (1748, the original spelling) is cardinal. In a chapter devoted to Alexander, Montesquieu developed the findings of Huet in order to make a new argument about Alexander: following a Christianising *communis opinio* that conquerors should make reparation by bringing benefits to the conquered, Montesquieu challenged Alexander's modern critics by claiming that, far from being a mere slaughterer and pillager, he did in fact have a premeditated plan to benefit his subjects, partly by effecting a commercial revolution, achieved by the effacement of Tyre (and thus of Phoenician trade), the founding of Alexandria, and the discovery of India, the trade from which would reach Europe using the route charted by the voyage of Nearchus. Montesquieu also attributed to his 'intelligent' Alexander both a civilising mission and (somewhat paradoxically) a mission of reconciliation through his 'Persianising' policy. The latter, in Montesquieu's view, was particularly effective, since 'a people always knows, loves, and defends its customs more than its laws' (an observation which should still give food for thought today). Briant then traces Montesquieu's considerable impact on other eighteenth-century writers and thinkers both in France (Linguet) and abroad, especially in England and Scotland (Robertson, Gillies, Vincent).

Briant shows that both Voltaire and Montesquieu displayed signs of a critical awareness of the Alexander-historians (although not enough to prevent Montesquieu from relying heavily on Plutarch's two treatises *On the Fortune or Virtue of Alexander*). Briant offers an extended discussion of the French scholar who changed for ever the way in which serious writers have ap-

proached the Alexander-sources, namely the baron de Sainte-Croix (1746–1809), whose *Examen critique des anciens historiens d'Alexandre le grand* appeared in 1771, with further editions in 1775 and 1804, and an English translation in 1793. The baron was the first to stress the need to identify and evaluate the (lost) primary sources drawn on by the extant secondary sources and in effect to arrange these last into a hierarchy, at the pinnacle of which he placed Arrian, whose value as a military manual was already well established and who had been gaining ground over Quintus Curtius since the publication of Le Clerc's *Ars critica* (1697 and 1712). Although not a history as such, the work of Ste-Croix was highly critical of Alexander (notwithstanding Montesquieu), especially his destructions and massacres, here anticipating the predominant tenor of the Alexander-scholarship of the last half-century or so.

After a roughly chronological approach in the first part of the book, in the second and third parts Briant introduces thematic chapters which resume and extend analysis of authors already encountered. Briant himself alludes to this backtracking in his acknowledgments, where he refers with characteristic frankness to 'the gestation of a work the construction of which only imposed itself on the author after multiple second-thoughts, hesitations and retracing of steps' (569). It is indeed a huge achievement to have welded such a mass of material into a reasonably coherent structure, and the reader who still experiences a certain indigestibility consuming what is in effect an extended literature-review is nonetheless greatly aided by the copious use of subtitles to break the mass down. These thematic chapters deal from a range of perspectives, national and other, with the projection onto Alexander in the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century of debates about the nature of contemporary European imperialism(s), the necessity (or not) of the flag preceding trade, the rôle of navigation and discovery in preparations for conquest, the merits or not of colonisation, and whether assimilation or toleration of difference offered a better means of accommodating (non-Christian) Asiatic subjects. Around the turn of the century Alexander's conquests also offered an historical perspective on the emerging Eastern Question following a series of European victories over the Ottomans, when the opportunity to effect a 'regeneration of the Orient' offered a validation of the European penetration of Ottoman Asia and Persia. A conceptual opposition between 'Europe' and 'Asia' now assumed a much harder form. In these debates Alexander continued to be viewed through a contemporary prism, sometimes in unexpected ways, as when Napoleon on St Helena claimed that, had he succeeded in founding an empire in Asia (Aboukir had put paid to that dream), he would have visited Mecca, 'where I would have prayed and prostrated myself', just as Alexander (as Napoleon believed) had won over Egypt by his pilgrimage to Ammon (322, citing Las Cases, *Mémorial de Sainte Hélène*).

To say that Briant has succeeded in excavating the 'prehistory' of Droysen's studies both of Alexander and of the Hellenistic age *tout court* is an un-

derstatement. He has opened up a new subject as much for students of the Enlightenment and of classical 'reception' as for historians of Alexander. For the latter, it is salutary to reflect that almost all the chief debates today about how to write the history of Alexander turn out to have already been identified in the pre-Droysen era. For the ancient historian today, the great pleasure of reading Briant is also the nostalgic one of being led back into an age when historical precedent contributed enormously to contemporary debates more often than not essentially political in nature. Finally, any teacher today who has despaired at the insistent admiration for Alexander's conquests encountered in undergraduate essays will sympathise with the German Georg Foster who wrote (1791) of 'this incomprehensible force' in human nature which drives history's hero-conquerors, and of how it is that consciousness of their crimes 'does not spoil our pleasure—even that of the *philosophe*—in contemplating them' (291).

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