

## REVIEW

### AN HISTORIOGRAPHICAL STUDY OF ARRIAN'S *ANABASIS*

Daniel W. Leon, *Arrian the Historian: Writing the Greek Past in the Roman Empire*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021. Pp. xii + 180. Hardback, \$50.00. ISBN 978-1-4773-2186-7.

**A**rrian, *the historian*. Some may consider the titular epithet unnecessary. What other Arrian from the classical world would deserve monograph-length attention? Of course, there is the fact that the extant ancient references to Arrian recognise him primarily as a philosopher, the disseminator of the *Discourses* of Epictetus. But while Daniel Leon does not make the point explicitly, I would like to think that his title also subtly takes aim at the increasingly outdated opinion that Arrian wasn't really much of an historian. Ernst Badian once expressed this in just so many words: 'Arrian, himself no historian (he was far more interested in literary style and in philosophic "lessons") ...'.<sup>1</sup> Even Peter Brunt, in the midst of his labour on the Loeb edition of Arrian's *Anabasis*—the latter's most important historical work, and arguably our most important surviving narrative of a pivotal ten years of ancient history—concluded that Arrian was 'a simple, honest soul, but no historian'.<sup>2</sup>

Leon sets out to debunk such claims, and succeeds in doing so in this brief but excellent book. He is not the first, of course; Badian and Brunt, though giants in the field, wrote nearly fifty years ago, and (as readers of this journal presumably know) much has changed since then in our approach to and evaluation of ancient historical works. This new attitude has been slower in reaching the post-classical Greek historians, but recent years have seen a veritable flood of such scholarship.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is a passing comment in a thoroughly condemnatory review of Robin Lane Fox's *Alexander the Great* which appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, 19 September 1974 (Badian published another—perhaps even harsher—review of the book in *JHS* 96 (1976) 229–30).

<sup>2</sup> In his introduction to the first volume (1976), p. xxxiv. Chapter 6 of Bogdan Burliga, *Arrian's Anabasis: An Intellectual and Cultural Story* (Gdańsk, 2013), is also (sub-)titled 'Arrian the Historian'. Burliga places greater emphasis on the influence Stoic thought had on Arrian's treatment of Alexander than Leon does (part and parcel of Burliga's overall approach, which is to examine what he sees as the overlap between the 'philosophical' and 'historical' aspects of the *Anabasis*).

<sup>3</sup> Most notably on Cassius Dio and Dionysius of Halicarnassus: see the recent review-discussions, respectively, by Martina Bono (*Histos* 14 (2020) li–lxxxii) and Daniele Miano (*Histos* 14 (2020) clxxv–clxxxvi).

Leon's book joins its twenty-first-century brethren in taking Arrian seriously as someone who took a critical approach to writing about the past.<sup>4</sup> What Leon adds to the discussion can be placed under two broad categories. First, he treats Arrian as a Greek intellectual in the Roman empire. This includes not only the full gamut of relevant areas of thought (literary, historical, philosophical), but also consideration of Arrian's historical thinking in relation to the Second Sophistic. The Greek historians of this era, as Leon points out, have not received a great deal of extended attention from those examining or working within that paradigm. Leon, in fact, emphasises Arrian's 'counter-cultural attitude' (2) with respect to the use of the Greek past. Lest anyone conjure images of a long-haired Arrian getting high at an outdoor concert, it will be best to quote a representative statement to show what Leon means. Near the beginning of Chapter 4, he writes that Arrian's treatment of the issue of Alexander's body as a source of power 'is typical of his approach to writing history. Using a contemporary analytical framework, he reorganizes traditional materials to construct an unconventional argument about the past' (87). Chapters 1 and 2 lay the groundwork for this theme; Chapters 3 and 4 provide detailed case studies of its consequences.

The second theme that emerges from the book, perhaps more implicitly, is Leon's attempt to break down a number of dichotomies that tend to impede our full understanding and appreciation of Arrian as an historian. These include style versus historical accuracy; literary *topoi* versus actual historical problems; and concern with the past versus engagement with the present (thus an extension of Leon's questions about the Second Sophistic). This theme is particularly prominent in the second chapter.

After a brief introduction, in Chapter 1 ('Amateurs, Experts, and History') Leon seeks to establish the distinction between the sophists' virtuosic performance of the past and writers of history in the first three centuries CE. He rightfully argues that, despite the importance of rhetoric and declamation in Greek education, we should not subsume every elite cultural activity under the sophists' purview. In fact, he finds evidence in both Greek and Latin sources that historians in that era—'the intellectual figures most explicitly concerned with the rigorous study of the past' (12)—worked hard to separate themselves from sophists. They were assisted in this task by the founders of the genre, Herodotus and (especially) Thucydides, and their concern for preserving the

<sup>4</sup> Vasileios Liotsakis, *Alexander the Great in Arrian's Anabasis* (Berlin and Boston, 2019); Henning Schunk, *Arrians Indiké: Eine Untersuchung der Darstellungstechnik* (Wiesbaden, 2019), with the review by Sergio Brillante, *Histos* 14 (2020) lxxvi–lxxxiii; Burliga (above, n. 2). This is not meant to dismiss the importance of the earlier work of Philip Stadter, Henri Tonnet, or A. B. Bosworth; but the application of the methods of narratology has added tremendously to our reading of the ancient historians.

memory of past events for future audiences.<sup>5</sup> At the end of the chapter, Leon turns to an analysis of Arrian's methodological statements at the opening of the *Anabasis* as well as his portrayal of Callisthenes in Book 4. Here, in Arrian's comments on the downfall of Alexander's first historian and the question of his role in the so-called Pages' Conspiracy, Leon finds a number of verbal and conceptual echoes from the work's preface. These reveal Arrian 'flexing his critical muscles' as an historian (28)—in choosing to express his frustrations in the challenges involved in getting at the truth, Arrian shows his readers just how difficult it is to do *real* history.

In Chapter 2 ('Novelty and Revision in the Works of Arrian'), Leon argues that the 'anxiety' about competing with the classical models which is often seen elsewhere is absent from Arrian—or at least, he shows more confidence in his own literary production and an openness about what he has borrowed from his models. An important tool in this process consists of variant versions, which tend to cluster at points where Arrian encourages his reader to step back and reflect on Alexander's accomplishment or on general historical truths: for example, the construction of a bridge over the Indus River, or the supposed Roman embassy to Alexander in Babylon (for which Leon offers an intriguing comparison with the Celtic embassy to Alexander back in Book 1). Leon calls this authorial manoeuvre 'strategically deployed uncertainty' (57), and it represents a key theme in his reading of Arrian. In this chapter, Leon calls upon some of Arrian's other works for support, notably the *Cynegeticus* and the prefatory letter to the *Discourses*. One potential criticism of this argument is that the 'novelty and revision' which Leon introduces from Arrian's non-historical treatises is not quite the same as in the *Anabasis*. New things have, in reality, happened in the realms of hunting, military tactics, and philosophy since the days of Xenophon; what is new in the *Anabasis* is, rather, Arrian's critical faculties as author and historian.<sup>6</sup> The final section of the chapter presents Alexander himself in the *Anabasis* as a reader of Herodotus, which Leon suggests is meant to illustrate Arrian's point about combining accurate knowledge of the past with new experiences.

Chapters 3 and 4 zero in on Arrian's portrayal of Alexander in the *Anabasis*. In Chapter 3 ('Alexander among the Kings of History'), Leon proposes that Arrian uses the Macedonian conqueror to develop a 'new and flexible conception of kingship', one which is signalled 'at challenging moments in his narrative' (64, 65). With that theme, Leon traces how Arrian's portrait of

<sup>5</sup> While Leon's Arrian-related bibliography is quite thorough, his discussion of topics beyond his target area could, on occasion, benefit from casting a wider net: in this instance, Jessica Priestley's work on *Herodotus and Hellenistic Culture* (Oxford, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> I am also not convinced that I see the imitation of Thucydides that Leon claims for Arrian in the letter to Lucius Gellius (see pp. 43–4 with nn. 39 and 40); further elaboration of the point would have helped. See below for my comments on the book's brevity.

Alexander as a ruler and leader shifts over the course of the work. From the sack of Thebes in Book 1 through to the victory at Gaugamela, Alexander remains the exemplary Greek leader, with Darius III or other Persian kings as his foil. But after Gaugamela, the changed political circumstances make Alexander's situation more complex: he 'literally cannot be simply a Greek fighting barbarians' (66). Leon illustrates how, in the later portions of Book 3, Arrian employs chronological distortion and stylised episodes to mark this shift as Alexander begins to take on the trappings of an 'Eastern despot'. The process continues into Book 4, where Arrian uses a Herodotean narrative mode (such as similar patterning techniques) and intertextual allusions to move back and forth between the micro and macro levels. By the time we reach the desultory campaigns in Bactria and Sogdiana, the 'volatile nature' (83) of the narrative reflects the lack of coherency in Alexander's campaign now that the motivation for Greek vengeance has disappeared.

Chapter 4 ('Sickness, Death, and Virtue') adjusts the focus from Alexander as a political exemplum to a moral one, specifically 'an exemplum of personal virtue' (85)—but one which also engages with contemporary Roman ideas about the body and proper behaviour. Here, we see the importance of the close connection between monarchy and personal virtue for Arrian. Since the survival of Alexander's empire (or any empire, as Arrian's ancient readers will have understood) depends on the survival of one man, it is crucial for the ruler to suppress his desires in the interests of the whole. But this is exactly where Alexander struggles. In his quest for glory, he increasingly pushes himself beyond limits where his men cannot follow him, thus endangering his own life and his realm. The most well-known incident is the severe wound Alexander suffers in his attack on the Mallians in Book 6. Leon juxtaposes this scene with Arrian's depiction of the Indian king Porus in Book 5 where, dissimilar to other authors' accounts, Porus exhibits the proper restraint, knowing when to submit for the good of his kingdom. Echoes and parallels between the two passages reveal that Arrian meant for Porus to represent how Alexander could and should have acted. In terms of sickness, Leon analyses Arrian's accounts of Alexander's bouts of illness in Tarsus and in Scythia, the deaths of Bucephalus, Hephaestion, and Calanus, and finally Alexander's own death. In each case, Leon compares Arrian's version with other accounts in order to show how the historian frames the narrative, emphasising (or not) certain elements which convey his desired portrait of Alexander. Overall, Leon shows the effectiveness of treating Arrian as an author rather than a data mine, a writer who was 'deliberately crafting' his prose rather than simply lifting it from his sources (90).

Perhaps it will be considered churlish for a reviewer to complain about a short book: 114 pages of text, followed by an appendix on the date of the *Anabasis*, endnotes, and bibliography. But there are places where the brevity of

Leon's treatment leaves something to be desired by obstructing a full understanding of his argument. Thus, as I noted above in regard to Chapter 2, a more explicit statement of the relationship between the 'novelty and revision' found in the historical versus non-historical works would have been useful.<sup>7</sup> The same holds true for Leon's argument about Thucydides and (especially) Herodotus as models for Arrian. When we find (or think we find) Arrian recalling *both* of them, what is the significance of this? In Chapter 3, Leon mentions how Arrian's version of the battle at Thebes in 335 'conflicts with the more plausible narratives' found in Plutarch and Diodorus (67). In a book on 'Arrian the Historian', this would seem to merit further comment on how we should evaluate Arrian's work, especially since neither of those other authors generally enjoys the highest reputation as an historian.

The historical thinking which Leon analyses derives mostly from the *Anabasis*. What still remains to be accomplished is a global consideration of Arrian's entire historical output, including the *Indikē* and the now fragmentary works—a task last attempted by Stadter in 1980. Given Leon's interest in how Arrian brought the past and present together, it would be helpful to investigate how the *Parthica*, for example, fits into this picture.

Nonetheless, Leon has produced an important contribution to the study of Arrian, of Greek historiography, and of the intellectual culture of the second century CE. The book is well written and enjoyable to read.<sup>8</sup> Leon employs a direct, but not casual, authorial voice as he guides his reader along the steps of his interpretive journey (a little like Arrian himself, perhaps). In my opinion, his book will also help to dissolve the larger extensions of those overly restrictive dichotomies mentioned earlier: between history and literature, even between classicists and ancient historians. The study of Arrian (or any other ancient Greek historian) as a literary artist can actually enhance, not diminish, our ability to ask questions about him and the sources he relied upon as an historian.

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<sup>7</sup> I assume Leon is arguing that this is all part and parcel of the same attitude: see p. 50 for the closest thing I could find to such a statement.

<sup>8</sup> I found less than a handful of minor errata. The only one worth mentioning here is on p. 22, where 'CE' should read 'BCE' in connection with the inscription from Lampsacus honouring their envoy Hegesias.