

## REVIEW

# THE WORLDWIDE RECEPTION OF ALEXANDER

Richard Stoneman, ed., *A History of Alexander the Great in World Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. xv + 454. Hardback, £120.00. ISBN 978-1-107-16769-8.

**R**ichard Stoneman's edited volume *A History of Alexander the Great in World Culture* offers another contribution to the field of the reception of Alexander the Great. Its scope extends from the ancient world to medieval, early modern, and modern interest in Alexander's life. Many of the contributors of the volume—including Stoneman himself—have composed various books and articles on the reception of Alexander.

This volume highlights the basic truth—often repeated in previous scholarship—that every period and writer seem to create the Alexander of their dreams or nightmares. At the same time, it also underlines how influential a figure Alexander has been in the history of mankind. His life and deeds have clearly inspired various people who have represented different values and cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In my research on the Macedonian world-conqueror in Roman literature I emphasised that the past is often used in the present to support the arguments and views held by contemporaries, and that the historical facts frequently seem to be a side issue for the writers.<sup>1</sup> This can be applied to many of the periods dealt with by the articles in this volume. Most of the papers focus particularly on *how* Alexander has been portrayed in texts and visual arts, while the harder question of *why* Alexander has been such a popular and often-cited figure in history receives perhaps less attention. In the following, I will give a summary of the eighteen chapters.

In the 'Introduction' Stoneman gives an overview of the diffused images of Alexander in world history as well as the literary sources for Alexander. Dorothy J. Thompson's 'Alexander and Alexandria in Life and Legend' deals with Alexander's visit to Egypt, the burial of Alexander, and the search for his tomb. Olga Palagia, in 'The Image of Alexander in Ancient Art', gives an overview of the Greek and Roman visual sources for Alexander. She deals with some pieces of art that are widely known to all scholars and students of ancient

<sup>1</sup> J. Peltonen, *Alexander the Great in the Roman Empire: 150 BC to AD 600* (London and New York, 2019).

history (e.g., the ‘Alexander mosaic’) as well as those less known. Additionally, Palagia suggests that there might exist portraits of Alexander which are not commonly recognised as such. One example may be a portrait found on an Attic grave relief that commemorates an Athenian who died at the battle of Chaeronea. According to Palagia the Athenian’s opponent, a young horseman with long hair, could be Alexander, who participated in the battle (43).

Sulochana Asirvatham’s ‘Alexander, Philosophy and Rome: A Trajanic Moment’ deals with the image of Alexander as a philosopher appearing in the works of Dio Chrysostom and Plutarch. Asirvatham has previously written articles on the reception of Alexander in the Second Sophistic, and here her main point is that the image of Alexander as philosopher and civilised king was a Trajanic product. In drawing this conclusion, she compares the ways Musonius, Epictetus, Pseudo-Diogenes, and Maximus of Tyre either do not mention Alexander or mention him in a different light from Chrysostom and Plutarch. I myself am inclined to think that the idealistic image of Alexander as a civilised philosopher-king and his interest in Homer must have existed in some of the now lost contemporary works such as that written by Onesicritus, and that writers such as Chrysostom and Plutarch exploited and refashioned this image when they wrote their works. In this way, the image appearing in their works was not only a reflection of the Trajanic moment, but it was also about taking from the literary tradition something that suited the artistic and rhetorical interests of Dio Chrysostom and Plutarch.

Christian Thrué Djurslev, in ‘Christianising Alexander Traditions in Late Antiquity’ makes points that are covered more thoroughly in his monograph published in 2020.<sup>2</sup> Ory Amitay’s ‘Alexander in Ancient Jewish Literature’ functions as an overview of the Jewish tradition that greatly influenced early and late medieval as well as early modern views of Alexander. Like Djurslev, Amitay has written a monograph on the material which he addresses in this article.<sup>3</sup> An important observation of his regarding the Jewish reception of Alexander concerns how Alexander’s hubristic vainglory is expressed in Daniel, in 1 Maccabees, and in Philo’s *That Every Good Man Is Free*.

From Maud Pérez-Simon’s ‘The Medieval Alexander Art and Politics’ we get the impression that medieval artists attached to the images and imaginations of Alexander motifs the concerns and themes that were popular in their own society. Perhaps the most popular image in the medieval visual portraits of Alexander is the king’s ascension to heaven. Pérez-Simon suggests that for medieval people the story either represented deadly pride or was a reference to Christ’s ascension to heaven. Mark Cruse, in ‘Alexander the Great and the Crusades’, underlines that Alexander’s history was assimilated to Crusade

<sup>2</sup> C. T. Djurslev, *Alexander the Great in the Early Christian Tradition: Classical Reception and Patristic Literature* (London and New York, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> O. Amitay, *From Alexander to Jesus* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 2010).

ideology in medieval Europe. Naturally, the fact that the Macedonian expedition was directed to the same lands that the western European knights attacked, with the encouragement of the pope himself, increased the interest in seeing Alexander as a precursor of the Christian monarchs who aimed to conquer the holy land. Cruse's article examines a topic that has not been previously recognised in its extent and offers an important contribution to the field. The topic is wide. In my own work, I have observed that Crusade ideology can be read also in many lines of Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis* as well as in *Libro de Alexandre*, which are not dealt with in this chapter.<sup>4</sup>

Susana Torres Prieto's 'The Slavic Alexander' focuses on the adaptations of Alexander in the Slavic realm. One of the main texts she analyses is an adaptation of Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis* into Old Czech composed by an anonymous poet either at the end of the thirteenth century or the beginning of the fourteenth. In this work Alexander is Christianised and fights with God on his side. Anthony Kaldellis' 'Alexander the Great in Byzantine Tradition, AD 330–1453' offers a treatment of Alexander's reception in Byzantine literature. He makes the important point that the Byzantines had better access to ancient Greek texts on Alexander than did other post-classical writers. Additionally, they could read several contemporary texts (listed by Kaldellis) that were unknown in the medieval west and which we can no longer read. The Byzantine texts referring to Alexander themselves make up a vast corpus even though, as the writer convincingly shows, they did not have one single view or image of Alexander. Perhaps the most Byzantine use of the figure of Alexander is the presentation of the Macedonian king as a proto-founder of Constantinople and thus as a proto-Byzantine emperor (219).<sup>5</sup>

Richard Rabone's 'The Spanish Alexander: A Figure of Praise and Blame' contains detailed analysis of the *Libro de Alexandre*, composed possibly at the beginning of the thirteenth century by an anonymous Spanish poet.<sup>6</sup> The author of the *Libro* used Châtillon's *Alexandreis* as one of his sources, and in his treatment Rabone pays attention to the similarities and differences between the *Libro* and the *Alexandreis*. In his analysis Rabone shows how the Spanish poet not only eulogises Alexander's qualities and conquests but also criticises his greed and pride which comes through clearly in the end of this

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J. Peltonen, *Masculine Ideals and Alexander the Great: An Exemplary Man in the Roman and Medieval World* (London and New York, forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Another important article on the Byzantine reception of Alexander is C. Jouanno, 'Byzantine Views on Alexander the Great', in K. Moore, ed., *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Alexander the Great* (Leiden, 2018) 449–77.

<sup>6</sup> Rabone has produced, with Peter Such, a translation with a rich and lengthy introduction and notes: see P. Such and R. Rabone, *Book of Alexander (Libro de Alexandre)* (Liverpool, 2009).

monumental work. This critique itself is directly connected with the medieval morals that clergy in particular promoted in their works and sermons.

Haila Manteghi, in ‘The Persian Alexander (1): The Royal Alexander’, gives an overview of the Persian presentation of Alexander which is twofold: there is a negative tradition of him as a cursed figure who burnt the holy scriptures of the Persians, as well as the positive tradition of Alexander as Persian king and hero. Manteghi has previously written a monograph on Alexander in Persian literature, and in this contribution she focuses on the ways the stories told about Alexander were assimilated to those of other Persian hero figures such as Kay Khosrow.<sup>7</sup>

Richard Stoneman’s ‘The Persian Alexander (2): Amir Khusraw and the Philosophical View of Alexander’ pays attention to the ways Alexander is frequently presented as philosopher or philosophical king in the Persian tradition. The article focuses on Amir Khusraw’s poem *Mirror of Alexander*, composed at the end of the thirteenth century, which portrays the king’s encounter with Plato and their imagined discussion. Khusraw Amir operated at the court of Delhi Sultan Ala a-Din Khalji when he composed this poem. Undoubtedly, the image of Alexander as an idealised king who devoted his time to discussions with learned men was related to Khusraw’s flattery of his patron and his wish that the Sultan would value him as an educated man.

Faustina Doufkar-Aerts’ ‘Alexander in Medieval Arab Minds’ deals with how Alexander is remembered in Arabic literature.<sup>8</sup> Most Arab authors saw Alexander and the *Dhu l-Qarnayn* (‘Two-Horned’) mentioned in the Qur’an (18:83–100) as the same person. This becomes evident in the name ‘al Iskandar Dhu l-Qarnayn’ that was often used by these writers. One of the striking features of Alexander in the Arabic tradition is that he is presented as a believer in one God, which underlines how the images of Alexander have frequently been adapted to suit the values of contemporary writers and artists.

Richard Stoneman, in ‘Alexander in the Age of Shakespeare: The Monarchic Tragedies of Sir William Alexander’, examines two plays composed by Sir William Alexander first published in 1603–5. Alexander’s plays have received very little attention previously. Stoneman’s analysis shows that this educated poet, who based his works mainly on Curtius’ *Historiae*, succeeded in producing unique compositions that have a value of their own. Jon Solomon, in ‘Alexander the Great in Opera’, states that Alexander is a frequently portrayed historical figure in operas from the second half of the seventeenth to the first decades of the nineteenth century. The image of the

<sup>7</sup> H. Manteghi, *Alexander the Great in the Persian Tradition: History, Myth and Legend in Medieval Iran* (London, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> For her monograph on Alexander in Arabic literature, see F. Doufkar-Aerts, *Alexander Magnus Arabicus: A Survey of the Alexander Tradition through Seven Centuries: From Pseudo-Callisthenes to Šūrī* (Leuven, 2010).

king in these works varies, including both the enraged monarch and the magnanimous lover, which underlines the fact that in opera there existed many ways to portray Alexander.

Pierre Briant, in ‘Alexander in the Long Eighteenth Century (c. 1660–1830)’, translated by Stoneman, focuses on the positive image of Alexander in the historians of eighteenth-century England, Germany and France. The most important point he makes is to show that the image associated with German historian Johann Gustav Droysen was not as unique and exceptional as has previously been thought; rather, Droysen’s presentation can already be traced in various works written in the eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Josef Wiesehöfer’s ‘Images of Alexander in Germany: Hero, Explorer of New Spaces, Cosmopolitanist and Champion of the West’ summarises various German Alexanders, extending his approach from the Middle Ages to the contemporary world. He makes clear that the images of Alexander appearing in the historiography of the past have been much connected with the political and nationalistic ideologies of the past. At the end of his article Wiesehöfer makes the demand that every scholar writing on Alexander should not only take into account the Orientalistic images of the East but also make sure she or he does not use them in her or his research.

L. Llewellyn-Jones and Shaun Tougher, in ‘Alexander the Gay and the Gloryhole That Was Greece’, offer us perhaps the most exceptional topic among the contributions of the volume by exploiting social media and other digital media as source material. In this innovative paper they examine how modern gay communities have welcomed the king’s sexual orientation and seen it as a way to construct their identity. At the same time, this article demonstrates there are people who do not want to see Alexander as gay since this would mean that he no longer conformed to their view of the exemplary man and cultural hero.

One thing that draws my attention is that women are clearly in the minority among the group of writers and artists who have portrayed Alexander. One exception I am aware of is Christina, Queen of Sweden (1626–89), who was very much interested in Alexander as an exemplary figure and hero. This lack of women writing and being fascinated with Alexander is of course related to the position of women in premodern societies. In addition, it also derives from the fact that Alexander has normally been connected with ‘manly’ traits and male roles in various communities, while women have normally had different role models. It could be argued that a minority position has always been held by those writers and artists who have intended to

<sup>9</sup> This point is conveyed in more detail in Briant’s vast monograph, P. Briant, *Alexandre des lumières: Fragments d’histoire européenne* (Paris, 2012), also available as *The First European: A History of Alexander in the Age of Empire*, N. Elliott, trans. (Cambridge, Mass., 2017).

deconstruct or destroy Alexander's position as an idealised and heroic warrior-monarch.

What remains a mystery is whether the fascination with Alexander will last another 2000 years, or whether people will in future find new role models that will last as long as his. According to Stoneman it is clear that the fascination with Alexander and the tendency to use his figure for different ideological purposes will continue: 'But one thing remains certain—new historical movements and sensitivities will emerge, which again will employ the figure of the great Macedonian to articulate their concerns' (11). Based on current trends and gender ideals, one 'sensitivity' might be the image of Alexander as the representative of a third gender and a person who did not recognise gender boundaries at all. Time will tell.

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