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ALEXANDER THE GREAT

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AUTHOR OF *THE SPARTANS*

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

The Hunt for a New Past

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PREFACE

There is really no need for any special justification, let alone apology, for a new history of Alexander. He is one of those very few genuinely iconic figures, who have both remade the world they knew and constantly inspire us to remake our own worlds, both personal and more global. What is needed, then, and I have aimed to provide, is a book that does full justice to Alexander's extraordinary achievement, while at the same time respecting the limits of the evidence and of the historian's craft. I have attempted to address that achievement both in its own terms (including some tentative probing into Alexander's deep psyche) and in terms of its subsequent impact – which continues to this day, when Alexander is still prayed in aid by fishermen in Greece, cursed as a 'thief' in Iran, and worshipped as a saint in the Coptic Church of Egypt.

It must also be a book with a distinctive interpretative approach, and mine is indicated in the book's subtitle: 'The Hunt for a New Past'. There are of course several possible keys to unlocking the enigma that was Alexander. Some modern historians, for example, have focused on the Greek word *pothos*, passionate yearning, which is associated in the sources with major projects of Alexander. Others have privileged Alexander's relationship with his father, Philip. One modern historian has tried to explain vital features of his career in terms of his alcohol dependency. My book will not minimize the influence of these factors on Alexander's outlook, personality and aims. But it will lay even more stress on his predilection, or rather grand passion, for hunting game:

human as well as animal, and the bigger, more numerous and more dangerous the better. For that offered him a greater chance for enhancing his standing and his fame.

One of the very earliest probable images of Alexander (p. 93) is painted in a fresco above the front entrance to what most of us refer to conventionally as 'the Tomb of Philip' (whether or not we actually believe it to be the tomb of Alexander's father, as I on the whole do). This monumental edifice was erected at the ancient Macedonian ceremonial capital of Aegae (modern Vergina) at some point in the last third or so of the fourth century BCE. The fresco depicts a series of hunting scenes, so that, if it does indeed feature Alexander centrally, it shows him engaged in what we know to have been one of his favourite pastimes. Except that 'pastime' may give a misleading impression, since hunting in Macedon – as in some other ancient societies, such as Sparta – was a culturally coded marker of social and political status and prestige. In Macedon, you did not become fully a man until you had passed the key manhood test of hunting and killing, without a net, one of the ferocious wild boar that roamed the heights of Upper (western) Macedonia. Only then could you recline – as opposed to sit – when participating in the daily ritual of the symposium: the evening drinking party, at which and through which the Macedonian elite celebrated together and mutually confirmed their elevated social and political status. Another kind of hunting – the killing of an enemy in battle – entitled a Macedonian to wear a special belt, as a visual signal and reminder of his attainment and prestige.

After the two introductory chapters I have aimed to combine sequential chronological narration with in-depth systematic surveys of a number of key themes of Alexander's career. A detailed Timeline right at the start of the book is intended to help convey the flow of events. All dates are BCE (Before the Common Era), unless otherwise specified. The concluding chapter explores Alexander's multiple legacies, from antiquity through the Middle Ages to the present day.

An Appendix explores the limits set by the available source materials to any attempted reconstruction of how it actually was in Alexander's

day. The conclusions reached here condition and inform everything I write in the main body of the book, which ideally should be read in that light. The Appendix also explores in greater detail than usual two vital questions: first, how precisely did Callisthenes, Alexander's official historian, die in 327? And, second, what did really happen at the oracle at Siwah in 332/1? The contemporary narrative sources, as ever, do not survive as such, and the available reports of at least the main authors all tell different stories. This really does matter, because these were issues over which Alexander himself quite certainly took great care to control the flow of information, and one of the many paradoxes of his career is that, despite or because of that concern, the facts are so often murky and controversial. For reasons given here, too, various sorts of material objects lie at the very kernel of this historical enterprise. The illustrations of these objects are therefore not merely an optional extra but a key component of the history – any history – of Alexander. They have been selected with a view to combining the familiar with the unfamiliar, the spectacular with the ordinary, the decorative with the documentary.

The book concludes with a series of technical aids: a Table of Achaemenid Kings, a *Dramatis Personae* (register of prominent individuals), a Glossary (including place names, and a Bibliography). The authors and works referred to in the text can usually be found listed in the relevant chapter's suggestions for further reading in the Bibliography. Some of the suggestions are aimed more particularly at the scholar than the general reader but general readers, too, will assuredly find plenty here to stimulate them further.

Terminology: I use 'Macedon' as a political term to refer to the state or kingdom of Macedon that Alexander inherited and that was the ultimate basis of his position and power. 'Macedonia' is for me a geographical term, referring to the territory that formed the core of the state/kingdom of Macedon. Occasionally, these two terms overlap. 'Greater Macedonia' refers to the enlarged territory conquered and consolidated as a state by Philip, the northern frontier of which Alexander sought to extend as far as the Danube. In much Western

literature 'Persia' and 'Iran' have been used interchangeably, but strictly Persia (*Persis* in Greek) is the heartland of the Persian people, occupying a mountainous region northeast of the Persian Gulf; whereas Iran embraces also ancient Media to the north, and some more. In this book 'Iran' means the area of modern Iran, and 'Persia' the state or empire of the Achaemenid Persians.

Monetary Equivalents: I have not tried to translate ancient monetary figures into modern equivalents. A silver Greek 'talent' (a word of Babylonian origin) contained 100 minas or 6,000 drachmas. Two to three drachmas a day was a skilled workman's wage in Alexander's time. To be seriously rich, the equivalent of a sterling or dollar millionaire, you had to be worth three or more talents, probably. So when Harpalus ran off with 5,000 talents in 324, or when Alexander gained access to Persian treasure worth perhaps 180,000 talents in 330, we are dealing with very big numbers indeed.

Translations: all translations from ancient Greek and Latin sources are my own. I have sometimes deviated slightly from a strictly literal rendering to ease the flow and cadence of the English.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The present book is distantly based on lecture courses I have given at Cambridge during the past twenty-five years, aimed chiefly at undergraduate students reading for either the Classical or the Historical Tripos. Audiences regularly included a sprinkling of graduate students and colleagues from both inside and outside the Classics Faculty, and sometimes more exotic visitors too: for example, Bob Strassler, editor of *The Landmark Thucydides* and benefactor of Classics extraordinary, and my Clare College colleague and Plumian Professor of Astronomy, Jerry Ostriker. To all of these I am grateful for the stimulus of having to convey succinctly, intelligibly and entertainingly something of the thrill of the chase involved in any hunt for a new Alexander.

In the course of researching and writing about Alexander and ancient Greek history and archaeology more generally I have incurred many other debts, especially to my many Greek friends. It is invidious to single out individuals but I must at least mention the following, in more or less alphabetic order: Nikos Birgalias and Nastassia Florou; Kostas Buraselis; Tassos Christidis (my guide to Alexander's Vergina and Pella); Soteroula Constantinidou and Costas Constantinides; Eleni Cubitt (*éminence* of the British Committee for the Reuniting of the Parthenon Marbles); Angelos Delivorrias; Katie Demakopoulou; Matti Egon and Nicholas Egon (an honorary Greek by association); Vincent Gabrielsen; Ariadni Gartziou-Tatti; Costas Grammenos; His Eminence Grigorios, Bishop of Thyateira and Great Britain; Vassilis Karasmanis;

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I am also more indebted than I can say to the following: Dr Jan Parker of the Open University (who read the whole book in pre-publication form, though she is not of course responsible for the published version's shortcomings); my sympathetic and indefatigable agent, Julian Alexander; and my patient and practised editors at Macmillan, Georgina Morley, Natasha Martin and (picture-editor) Josine Meijer, and Peter Mayer and Caroline Trefler of Overlook.

My daughter has been wonderfully supportive, if mainly from the other side of the globe – a side not even Alexander would have dreamed of. My greatest debt, however, as always, is to the book's dedicatee (though I do admit to being tempted to echo the words used by the great modern Alexander historian Ernst Badian when dedicating his *Studies in Greek and Roman History* to his wife).