

Alexander: Great Then, Grating Now

By Frank L. Holt

THIS YEAR fortune favors the old. The earliest war in Western civilization came roaring back in a Greek revival that pitched Brad Pitt into Bronze Age Troy. From another Greek text, Mel Gibson pulled a grisly portrayal of the Passion so disturbing that many watched with one eye closed, not to mention their minds. The Olympic Games returned to Greece for the first time in more than a century, and just the second time since the dying days of the Roman Empire. And who could miss the ubiquitous Alexander, whose history has become the holy grail of Hollywood's A-list directors? Oliver Stone's film, starring Colin Farrell in the title role, has just hit theaters ahead of the competition and may single-handedly revise an old genre to gratify a new generation: the sword-and-scandals epic. Old is in, the Greeks are back, and Alexander has never been greater.

Enjoy the moment, but mistake none of this for Alexander's proverbial 15 minutes of fame. He had that back in his own lifetime, and 82 million times since. So much of modern culture revolves around movies that we sometimes credit a film for making the famous famous. Not Alexander. He constitutes a one-man media industry that has consumed no end of papyrus, parchment, paper, and film. In fact, nearly 30 years ago Professor Ernst Badian, of Harvard, called for a moratorium on major publications about Alexander the Great. He lamented the glut of books "from glorious tomes for the coffee table" to "works of journalism, launched with all the skill and resources of Madison Avenue or its London equivalent." Badian complained that "in English alone, books on Alexander have been appearing at the rate of at least one a year."

Apparently no one listened: Within five years the publication rate had doubled. Last year there were seven big books; this year, 12; and already I have read 3 (and written another) to appear in 2005. Those numbers, which do not include novels, reprints, or works in foreign languages, only hint at the hundreds of articles about Alexander that appear each decade, in everything from prestigious academic journals to slick magazines.

Alexander's popularity sells far more than books and periodicals. The king has provided good copy for ad campaigns pushing cars, watches, soaps, and cigarettes. Bidders on eBay love his T-shirts, coins, costume jewelry, and paperweights. He has a palatial suite decorated and named in his honor at the Trump Taj Mahal, in Atlantic City (a bargain at \$10,000 a night). You have seen him in the comics: "The Far Side" (1980), "Doonesbury" (1995), "Rubes" (1999), "Prince Valiant" (2002), and "Get Fuzzy" (2004).

In 1964 an ABC-TV pilot cast William Shatner—the future starship captain—as Alexander, with Batman-to-be Adam West playing the conqueror's sidekick



Cleander. The show opened with drumbeats de rigueur and a voice-over that declared ancient Persia a wasteland until "one day from Greece, from the West, came a man to bring life to the soil, and civilization, and peace."

In a more lucrative venture, Elizabeth Taylor as Cleopatra stood before the coffin of Alexander and lectured Rex Harrison's Caesar about her dead hero's dream of "one world, one nation, one people living in peace." All of this came nearly a decade after Richard Burton droned on about his divine mission to civilize the world in Robert Rossen's *Alexander the Great*. Using a noisier medium in 1986, Iron Maiden screamed Alexander's prais-

es and reminded rockers everywhere that "he paved the way for Christianity." Heavy mettle, indeed.

BORN A BASTARD in the eyes of some Macedonians, raised a prince, crowned a king, hailed a hero, and proclaimed a god (all by the age of 32), Alexander is still overachieving in a world he helped make but could never imagine. He prevails as the one obvious exception to Emerson's dictum: "Every hero becomes a bore at last." He learned the art of war from his brilliant father, King Philip II, who was hailed as Europe's first nation-builder. Philip gave his son a decisive battle command at Chaeronea in 338 BC, when Alexander was just 18. In quieter moments Alexander enjoyed the tutelage of Aristotle.

More than a trained killer, Alexander became deeply cultured and carried his love of Greek art and religion as far east as India. He destroyed and built with equal fervor. Alexander's ambitions puzzle only those unfamiliar with the fourth century BC. He conquered because he could. Alexander's abilities, however, prove harder to understand. Few people of any era have possessed his determination, skill, charisma, intelligence, or personal bravery. Leading from the front in an army that always sent its kings first into the fray, Alexander survived wounds to his head,

neck, shoulder, chest, thigh, shin, and ankle. Even off the battlefield, life hung in the balance. Assassins could be anywhere. In fact, nearly everyone in Alexander's family was eventually murdered, including his father, mother, sister, son, and two wives.

Against such odds, Alexander reigned for 13 years (336-323 BC). He invaded the mighty Persian Empire at the age of 22, conquered the territories of 10 modern nations by the time he was 26, reached India at 30, and died on his return to Babylon before his 33rd birthday. For the next 300 years, Alexander's marshals and their successors ruled the Middle East. Then came Rome, whose poets gave Alexander the enduring title "the Great," and whose emperors shamelessly admired him so much that they dressed in the hero's clothes, wept at the feet of his statues, worshiped his genius, and tried fruitlessly to become his equal.

Over the centuries Alexander's legend grew more elaborate and eventually took root in regions from Iceland to Indonesia. To some he became a shining exemplar of chivalry, to others a frightening proof that power corrupts and inevitably destroys. Across the ages, people sought in Alexander's life a guidebook to good and evil, making him a man (and his story a manual) for all seasons.

This hodgepodge of history and myth provides modern writers and filmmakers with a wealth of material from which to fashion any Alexander they please: hero, monster, despot, dreamer, saint, serial killer. A little truth lurks behind each label, but no single one will do. Fill in

Key Works Discussed in This Essay

- Alexander*, directed by Oliver Stone (2004)
- Alexander the Great*, directed by Robert Rossen (1955)
- Alexander the Great: Journey to the End of the Earth*, by Norman F. Cantor (Harper Collins, 2005)
- Alexander the Great: The Hunt for a New Past*, by Paul Cartledge (Overlook Press, 2004)
- Envy of the Gods: Alexander the Great's Ill-Fated Journey Across Asia*, by John Prevas (Da Capo Press, 2004)
- The Virtues of War: A Novel of Alexander the Great*, by Steven Pressfield (Doubleday, 2004)

Alexander the Blank too dogmatically, and you are bound to be more wrong than right.

Not so long ago leading scholars held to a monolithic view of the man as Alexander the Visionary. The British author Sir William Tarn convinced himself and millions of others that the ancient boy wonder was the first person ever to believe in the brotherhood of all mankind. That one-sided interpretation took little account of the atrocities reported in our sources; Tarn dismissed most of the murders and massacres as just bad press, the hostile ramblings of writers who held grudges against the great king.

It is the half-truth of Tarn's visionary Alexander that lies behind all those old movie lines and rock lyrics extolling the conqueror's life and legacy of peace, harmony, and universal religion. These days, that academic dogma has been replaced by another, which I have christened the "new orthodoxy." Alexander the Visionary has become Alexander the Vicious, a reprehensible megalomaniac driven mad by paranoia and alcoholism. A man never to be admired, this Alexander wrecked the world and left behind nothing better than a heritage of bloodshed and bitterness.

You will find this new Alexander in any number of recent books. One of the better treatments, by Paul Cartledge, of the University of Cambridge, portrays Alexander as a borderline fanatic whose mystical, su-

Alexander is still overachieving in a world he helped make but could never imagine.

perstitious, and cruel side can at least be balanced against his military genius and administrative pragmatism. This book has a few historical lapses, and the narrative keeps circling back upon itself so that some topics and events are needlessly covered many times, but the prose is clever and the research commendable.

More capricious is the forthcoming biography by the late Norman F. Cantor, a noted medievalist but a middling Alexander-dabbler. He read a (very) few books and misremembered a lifetime of Western-civilization lectures to produce a biography so inept that I have never encountered anything like it that didn't have a freshman's name on the cover. Somehow Cantor confused the basic facts of ancient history and completely misunderstood the sources for Alexander's reign. He claims that the works of Quintus Curtius Rufus, Diodorus, and Strabo do not survive. That is entirely false. No matter, perhaps, since Cantor obviously never bothered to look any of them up or to read them. That said, reluctantly, he knew just enough of the new orthodoxy to allege that Alexander was "probably clinically insane."

In a more useful book, by the adventure-travel writer John Prevas (*Envy of the Gods*), which at least pays close attention to the Persian side of Alexander's wars, the conqueror at the end of his life "had become eccentric and bizarre, if not outright mad." Alexander the Mad leaves us a little confused as to how he managed to lace his boots, much less win an empire.

Oddly enough, a work of fiction rather than history, Steven Pressfield's *The Virtues of War*, does a better job of capturing the genius of Alexander, at least in matters military. The dialogue can grow stilted (twice we must read "Thou villain!"), but the novel slaps you in the face with the authentic sights, smells, sounds, and tastes of Alexander's world.

IN FILM, the differences between Burton's Alexander of 50 years ago and Farrell's today have surprisingly little to do with those important aspects of the new orthodoxy. I expected Oliver Stone to follow the scholarly trend and render Alexander a ruthless, tyrannical warmonger on the cusp of insanity. Instead, Alexander remains a benign visionary who yearns (*more* misty-eyed, if anything) to unite all peoples into one world state, an "empire of the mind" that uplifts the oppressed masses and fosters peace.

The speeches of Farrell's Alexander echo those of Burton's. Often it seems impossible to separate the films, especially when they amalgamate the Persian battles in the same way, hurry the ending so that Alexander can die on cue, and rely on Ptolemy's narration to fill in the huge historical gaps.

Where you cannot possibly confuse the two movies, however, lies in their treatments of Alexander's personal life. Here the new orthodoxy apparently suits Stone very well. Scholars have become increasingly fascinated by the psychology not only of the king's ambition and power, but also of his passions for man, woman, and beast. The vicious side of the conqueror has been mated with all the sex our reticent sources will allow and often more. The motion picture of 2004, with love and lovers a dominant theme.

The old Alexander may have been sexy but hardly sexual. The most shocking scene in Rossen's film depicts the dying Alexander attended by his distraught troops, with his deathbed flanked by his wife, Roxane, and his mistress, Barsine. This was the Bad Boy of the 1950s at his worst. Even so, such a view went far beyond what scholars of Tarn's generation condoned. Apologizing for even discussing such things, Tarn argued strenuously in his biography of the king that Alexander had conquered all of his carnal desires, took no mistresses (the author dismissed Barsine as an ancient fabrication by slanderers), and certainly did not love men (Tarn acknowledged "not one scrap of evidence for calling Alexander homosexual").

Fast-forward 50 years to Alexander the tormented bisexual at the heart of Oliver Stone's film. Treating old views as a cover-up of the king's true self, Stone's Alexander kisses passionately the eunuch Bagoas and shows obvious affection for his beloved Hephaestion. Women, on the other hand, do not interest Alexander nearly as much. In 1955 Hephaestion had little to do with the plot (and certainly nothing sexual), whereas in 2004 Barsine has disappeared.

The two most graphic sex scenes in Stone's film involve violent heterosexual acts: Philip and Olympias (witnessed by a young Alexander hiding under the covers), and, later, Alexander and his bride, Roxane (which reprises the earlier scene). Those bedroom episodes may be the most savage moments in this world-at-war movie. Stone's script takes its cue from the new orthodoxy. Cartledge, for example,

notes Alexander's ambivalence toward the opposite sex. Men and horses, the author alleges, dominated Alexander's affections: "It is tempting, indeed, to say that the two greatest loves of his life were both dumb brutes," meaning Hephaestion and the horse Bucephalus.

The most revealing relationship of all may be the one between Alexander and his mother. The Olympias of 1955, played by Danielle Darrieux, was no Ozzie-and-Harriet housewife. That Olympias conspired against her husband and raised a rebellion; Philip divorced her on grounds of infidelity. But the 2004 edition offered by Angelina Jolie gives us much more to think about, thanks to the new orthodoxy. She acts the part of a sinister, overly protective mother, an *éminence grise* for the Greek world to match Rome's Livia in *I, Claudius*. But add a dash of sex. The movie makes it painfully clear (subtlety is never a feature of this film) that Alexander ravages Roxane as a substitute for his mother. Freud may as well be sitting there on the set, intoning commentary.

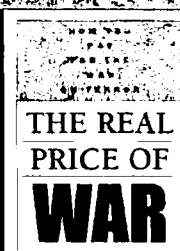
In print, Cantor suggests that young Alexander "was so sexually attracted to his mother that he fled from her presence." Cantor's imagination allowed him to write of Alexander: "Killing his father and making love to his mother were probably images that flickered through his conscious mind and were more prevalent deep in his unconscious." Cartledge, too, supposes that Alexander lusted after Olympias, and that this "repressed Oedipal complex" turned him off women. At least this author then cautions that we should not get "too Freudian" about

Alexander—a wise caveat considering that we have no reliable access whatever to the king's actual thoughts on any personal matter.

It would be safer to psychoanalyze a lamppost on which strangers have hung assorted fliers about addiction clinics and lost puppies than to pontificate on the intimate Alexander. Was the king homosexual, bisexual, asexual, Oedipal? If our sources make it difficult to discern such things with any certainty, then why strive so hard to work them into every new book and film? I suppose because this guesswork scintillates and therefore sells—not because it makes much historical difference.

Alexander the Great will remain famous and fascinating in spite of, not because of, Oliver Stone's latest movie. That depiction fails not only as an accurate and balanced portrayal of the king's life (it is only a movie, after all), but more tragically because it somehow misses the subject's inherent drama and excitement. The film does not do justice to Alexander, to those who rode and ruled with him, nor certainly to those he fought and vanquished. Trying to be uplifting and audacious at the same time, Stone's *Alexander* combines the worst of the old and new orthodoxies into a weepy confessor, not a conqueror. The Oscar goes to any viewer who can make believe that Stone's Alexander rocks.

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what it all means, and Kingsley has left us, to a large extent, guessing about that.

Finally, Kingsley's polemic—and it is definitely a polemic—relies on a sharp distinction between the rational and the irrational, between science and religion. Since Kingsley never thoroughly confronts these distinctions but only comments on them in passing, it is not completely clear whether he rejects them, modifies them, or accepts them. At times he seems to appreciate that there are kinds of rationality and no exclusive separation between reason and the irrational, but at other times he seems to be arguing that ancient philosophy ought to be viewed as a religious rather than a scientific activity, as if the two were completely different enterprises. Throughout the book, to be sure, one has the sense that he wants to cast off this terminology or to stand on the intimate interpenetration of scientific and religious thinking and practice, and I for one would certainly endorse this tendency. But in the end he fails to make clear exactly what he has in mind. The reader is left with some significant doubts to go along with a great deal of new light shed on ancient philosophy and the interpretation of it.

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P. M. FRASER. *Cities of Alexander the Great*. New York: Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press. 1996. Pp. xi, 259. \$72.00.

A small number of readers will appreciate the originality of this book and the contribution that it makes to Alexander studies. On the one hand, non-specialists will no more plod through it than they did through P. M. Fraser's earlier, magisterial study, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (1972). Once again, Fraser demands of his readers fluency in the classical languages. He also favors abstruse vocabulary ("metonymasy," "tralatitium") and rambling sentences that routinely exceed one hundred words. Fraser has done nothing to make his work accessible to the casual student of Alexander's career. On the other hand, even some specialists will be challenged to find the wheat amid the chaff. Most will look for fresh insight into Alexander's policies as a city-founder and will focus on which cities the king actually built and where. These matters are addressed in the text (most notably in chapters three and five to seven), but without much that is really new.

Fraser offers no detailed discussions of city-founding procedures, classifications of settlers and settlements, or the larger issues of colonialism/imperialism that we find in, say, Richard Billows's *Kings and Colonists: Aspects of Macedonian Imperialism* (1995). More simply, Fraser concludes that Alexander founded far fewer cities than reported by Plutarch and others; that these foundations in places such as Bactria (roughly modern Afghanistan) did not long endure; and that for various reasons these sites cannot easily be located today, except, of course, Alexandria in Egypt. These findings are not much different from those

sketched over thirty years ago in a single paragraph of Bradford Welles's well-known article "Alexander's Historical Achievement" (*Greece and Rome* [1965]: 225–26). And when Fraser argues that Alexander founded cities for practical mercantile and military reasons rather than to spread Greek culture, he hardly stands on new ground.

Rather than in its reconstruction of Alexander's actions and ideas, the originality and enduring worth of this book rests on its exegesis of later texts and traditions. In three appendixes and chapters one, two, and four, Fraser explores the making of myth as history. He takes us from Alexandria to Asia, showing how fact, fantasy, and folklore were woven together around the theme of Alexander the city-founder. He traces the evolution of the Alexander romance, and boldly postulates the existence of a *Liber de Urbibus Alexandri*, a propaganda list of Alexander's cities born out of the rivalry between Ptolemaic Egypt and Seleucid Asia. He next examines Persian, Arab, and Chinese traditions regarding Alexander place names as recorded by early travelers and encyclopedists. Quite interesting are his new calculations for distances between cities as preserved in the works of ancient geographers having access, directly or indirectly, to the surveyors' records of Alexander's march. Here lies a mine of fresh information and insight that tells us, as Fraser makes plain, less about Alexander's life than about his legend.

The lack of a bibliography places an added burden on the footnotes, but there the relevant titles, dates, and authors are too often missing or mistaken (e.g. "Bernstein" for Burstein on pp. 12 and 217). Some influential books and articles by important scholars (e.g. Ernst Badian, Alan Bosworth, Pierre Briant) find no place in the notes or discussion. Place names, a fundamental element in this source study, will not stay put in Fraser's text. The Syr Darya becomes the Amu Darya further south (p. 72), and Alexandria-Eschate mysteriously vanishes from Fraser's list of Alexander-foundations (pp. 73, 99). This city reappears in the final enumeration of Alexandrias (p. 201), but others suddenly disappear in turn (compare these six foundations with those accepted in chapter five and marked on the two maps). Here lies the very textual problem that the author so skillfully exposes in the various lists and legends of antiquity. This does not sink the whole enterprise, of course, but it leaves us listing awkwardly.

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EMMA DENCH. *From Barbarians to New Men: Greek, Roman, and Modern Perceptions of Peoples of the Central Apennines*. (Oxford Classical Monographs.) New York: Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press. 1995. Pp. xiii, 255. \$55.00.

This is an intriguing book, and not just for individuals interested in the Central Apennine peoples of Hellenistic Italy. As Emma Dench immediately makes clear,