

# The construction of alexander the great's reputation

People



A great body of myths, legends, and historical facts about a person have always been accepted in the written or oral tradition. This is the way people understood historic figures. For some of the chief peoples of the world like those of the Near East and of ancient Europe, the attempts to particularly distinguish between legends and historical fact have been a long and hard.

According to (Stoneman, 1991), it is not only legends that must be separated from historical events and conditions, but also myths and a people's mythology. This is true in the case of Alexander the Great's mythology, which has been supported for political and military purposes. The historic interpretation of this famous figure is reflected in the understanding of the Macedonian and the Midettheranian cultures whose social and cultural development was highly affected by various degrees of confusion in this whole image of myth and historical data, (Stoneman, 1994).

Alexander the Great (356–323 B. C.) is considered the greatest military genius of the ancient world. He conquered countries from Greece to Egypt and through Turkey, Iran and Pakistan. He succeeded in building a kingdom and at the same time expanding it. Alexander spent thirteen years of his reign working to unite East and West through military campaigns and cultural exchange. Alexander's reputation grew so quickly that by the time of his death at age 32 he was seen as having divine aspects. This is why historians mentioned that it isn't easy to separate fact and myth from the stories told about Alexander over the centuries, (S?©lincourt, 1997).

Green, (1991) mentions that those familiar with the Greek and Roman literature know how full it is with allusions to myths and legends. Readers of

the biography of Alexander the Great realize how saturated with shadows, and even mirages of tradition it is. Plutarch, a Greek writer who wrote about the lives of great Roman and Greek figures in history, wrote about Alexander the Great. Plutarch lived four centuries after Alexander died. He discussed the earlier years of the Macedonian conqueror. The first aspect he described were the legends about Alexander's birth and his divine ancestry. According to the legend, Alexander's mother Olympias dreamed that her womb was struck by lightning on the day she married Alexander's father, Philip II. Waterfield (1998) mentions that also his father had a dream in which he secured his wife's womb with a lion's image. Plutarch's interpretations for these dreams were that Zeus was the father of Alexander. Another legend Plutarch mentioned is that because Olympias was accompanied by a serpent lying by her side, Philip II believed that Olympias was the partner of a superior being.

Ancient sources differ in their opinion about these legends, but some state that Alexander's mother told him all the time about his divine parentage. Macedonian coins which were made during Alexander's reign illustrate this legend. This indicates that Alexander the Great believed or at least valued these legends enough to implement them in such a way. These legends made use of religious mythology,(Waterfield, 1998).

Cartledge (2004) points that these legends about Alexander's divine parentage were not considered strange in the time of Ancient Greece and Macedonia. There were so many examples in history where a king or any member of the ruling family claimed to have a divine father. Because the

Greek and Macedonians had multiple gods, it was not difficult to do so. Greek and Macedonian religion was not a one-god religion, so there was enough room for nobles to make such claims. This had an effect on the way Alexander saw himself and the way he was viewed and treated by people. This is so evident when we see coins from the Alexandrian period. Also, Alexander's helmet was ornamented with the picture of a snake. Additionally, His mother believed he was descendent from Achilles and Alexander also adopted the Persian customs that implied his superiority over his companions, (Cartledge, 2004).

According to Bosworth (1988), the reception of the myth of Alexander the Great in during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in particular, was shown in the medieval art and history. In art, Alexander was shown as a legendary, almost fairy-tale, figure and in the historical image, he was shown as a model of virtues and military courage. In the corpus known as the Alexander Romance, Alexander was described as a fabled explorer and knight, (p. 67) whose wonderful battles were popular not only in the literary tradition but also in the visual arts. At the mid-fifteenth century, the cultural setting changed due to the rise of humanism. This medieval perception was replaced by a different image of Alexander, based on the ancient historical facts written by Plutarch, Curtius Rufus, and Arrian,.

Briant (1996) points out that the most important factor in Alexander's reputation was his military power. When Alexander succeeded his father to the throne of Macedonia, he began to expand the Macedonian empire by launching wars. An important part of establishing Alexander's achievements

as a conqueror was the role his behavior played in his military success. The behavior Alexander showed when he launched a war was something old books and most historians agree on. He was able to use his reputation awarded to him as the son of a god. However, historians do not deny that his intelligence made it possible to achieve his goals in the battlefield. In wars, he fought with both intelligence and tactics, which made it possible for him to flourish.

Arrian, the great historian, describes Alexander's as an exceptional person. In the eyes of this author, he could clearly do no wrong. He sees Alexander as a clever hero who had control over every aspect of himself with a brave self and that he was a king with a lot of integrity. In fact, historic facts show a quite opposite image. However, Arrian only writes about Alexander's success and does not aspects like how he socialized with people. For instance, Arrian claims that Alexander was secure from being entrapped by sly opponents. In contrast, historical facts showed that an attempt to kill him failed because of a mistake made by the assassin. Arrian excuses the mistakes made by Alexander and he gives external reasons that explain his wrongful behavior. Even when he described a behavior that was against Macedonian and Greek civilizations, he does not blame Alexander for it, but blames factors that were outside his control, (Worthington, 2003).

Worthington (2003) mentions examples from Arrian's description. Arrian wrote that Alexander's angry battles and his adoption of Persian customs are due to his subjects' disapproval of his strategies due to his youth. He even praises Alexander because he repented his mistakes and thinks that his

wrong actions were aimed at ensuring the obedience of his subjects. He describes Alexander's attempt to deify (p. 84) himself as a strategy to win his subjects in a clever manner. These aspects of Alexander's personality show that Arrian twists these mistakes and describe them as either a clever tactic or excusable since he is seen to be vexed at his former errors,(p. 86).

The way Arrian defines Alexander's mistakes and shortcomings that lie beyond his control can be attributed to the fact that Arrian lived in the Roman Empire in the first century. He lived in the time of the first Emperors who began to cast divine parenthood on themselves and that practice was so normal then. He adds while this is normal of rulers in the Hellenistic age as they enjoyed absolute power, it is considered a peculiar behaviour in today's perceptions, even if the consulted ancient sources do not condemn this behavior, (Worthington, 2003).

In conclusion, the ancient sources were collectively positive about Alexander the Great, however it is difficult to find objectivity within these writings. Because of Alexander's great military successes, the result is that the ancient authors of the books describing Alexander's life, personality and his campaigns believed that he was a great military leader without condemning his wrong doings or behavior. The most reliable sources were written in the first and second centuries AD and as it is said: history is written by the victorious. However, historians were always able to draw their own conclusions when analyzing the way in which the authors interpreted the life of this historic figure.