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Alexander of Macedonia and His Transformation Into Despotism

Brandon Tran
Clackamas High School

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Brandon Tran

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Alexander of Macedonia and His Transformation Into Despotism

Alexander of Macedonia paved the way for the spread of Greek culture and conquered nearly all of the known world. He did it all before he turned 40, and he never lost a single battle. Despite his incredible accomplishments, scholars have long debated the ethics of Alexander's campaign, and have not been able reach a consensus as to whether or not Alexander was actually great. While some scholars glorify his actions, others reprimand his atrocious acts of murder and destruction. In order to make a definitive statement about Alexander, it is vital to analyze more than just his military campaign or acts of violence to understand the full picture of his legacy. As a conqueror, he broke records, conquering lands from Greece to India in only 15 years. However, his methods were nothing short of cruel. While Alexander has proven his political and military ingenuity, his atrocious and cruel acts gradually increased during his campaign, turning him into a more despotic ruler, rather than a great one.

Within the scholarly world, Alexander is regarded as a unique military and political genius. For instance, Hugh Liebert believes that Alexander's eagerness to connect the world was the beginning of globalization:

Political economists have found in Alexander's explorations by sea and his strengthening of pre existing overland trade routes intimations of the modern global marketplace. And cosmopolitan theorists have seized on Alexander's humanity toward non-Greeks and his

willingness to mix Macedonian customs with those of the foreigners he encountered; according to one such thinker, Alexander “proclaimed for the first time the unity and brotherhood of mankind. (Liebert 544)

So, Alexander didn’t just conquer the land, he changed it and improved it. His sea travels provided new routes for trade towards the northern tip of Africa and India. He created a global environment where an Athenian could buy spices from India. The trade combined cultures, but Alexander’s embrace of other ethnicities united them. He even married Persian princesses on multiple occasions. After defeating Darius of Persia, he married Barsine and adopted their culture, beginning to dress and act Persian. His unifying political acts helped his empire flourish economically, and his undefeatable army helped solidify his political power.

Despite inheriting a well-trained army, Alexander went to great lengths to improve it into an undefeatable force. While his father Philip fought defensively, Alexander developed a more aggressive yet strategic style to war: “By using a combined force of light infantry, heavy infantry, and shock cavalry on his right, Alexander was able to consistently pry apart his enemy’s connection with his flank and run a column in between the enemy’s center and flank, isolating them” (Grant 28). Besides improving on his father’s infantry tactics, Alexander developed the infamous Macedonian Phalanx formation where soldiers formed a square of shields with spears pointing out in all directions. It became a highly efficient method for armies, and became the most prominent formation in the years following Alexander’s death (Grant 28). Alexander had revolutionized the ways war was fought. He used these innovative methods to conquer land from Greece to India, the fastest time in history.

Despite Alexander’s military and political prowess, his accomplishments are not reflective of a great man. When Alexander’s father Philip II died of poison, Alexander inherited

everything his father owned: Macedonia, armies, generals, and resources. At the age of 20, Alexander began his military campaign. In only 15 years, he conquered lands stretching from Greece to India, pushing his troops to the point of exhaustion. Despite his accomplishments, he was never actually venerated as a great man. In reality, the people of his time hated him for his disregard of temperance and moderation.

He wasn't called that [great] during his lifetime, and the Athenians celebrated when he died. The title first became popular after Pompey's eastern campaigns, when he was awarded the cognomen, "Magnus". Pompey's early career was filled with attempts to connect himself with Alexander, the other great conqueror of the east, and the use of the moniker "The Great" was among the most important. But the "Great" title did not become synonymous with Alexander until a couple centuries later, when Greek writers of the Second Sophistic age revived interest in Alexander. The Second Sophistic was a literary movement among Greek authors whose primary purpose was to revive the great history of the Greeks -- it's to this movement that Plutarch, Arrian, Lucian and others belonged. (Grant 23)

Therefore, the greatness of Alexander was only established after his death. During his lifetime, Greeks, Romans and all his subjects judged Alexander on his intolerable acts of violence, not his military conquests; even his advisors and generals "recognized that he was prone to excess, fits of madness, a total lack of temperance and moderation, and bloody rages..." (Grant 34). As the Hellenistic age progressed, authors ushered in a period of historical revival, where people emphasized his political and military ingenuity and glorified his actions. Politicians such as Pompey began to associate Alexander with greatness, without recognizing the despotic ideals and methods that Alexander utilized during his campaign.

Historians like Arrian and Lucian published famous histories of Alexander the Great, aiming to bring a revival of great Greek history. Arrian created a romanticized version of Alexander's life, stating that "I cannot but feel that some power more than human was concerned in his birth...I am not ashamed to express ungrudging admiration" (Mensch 334). While Arrian glorified Alexander the Great, Plutarch stressed the point that "my design is not to write histories but lives. And the most glorious exploits do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of virtue or vice in men..." (Plutarch 1). Given his statement, Plutarch attempted to encompass the entirety of Alexander's life, good or bad. He provided details that no other primary source has, and provided deep insights into Alexander's personal life. In small, simple outbursts of anger or moments of ignorance, his despotic personality shines brighter than his major accomplishments.

Plutarch tells Alexander's story right from the beginning. Even at an early age, Plutarch sees that Alexander is "so addicted to drinking and so choleric...(Plutarch 3). Also, besides an alcoholic addiction, Alexander "was extremely eager and vehement, and in his love of glory, and the pursuit of it, he showed a solidity of high spirit and magnanimity far above his age" (Plutarch 3). In short, Alexander displayed maturity uncommon for his age, but he also demonstrated a love for excess, glory, pleasures and alcohol. These insatiable habits were looked down upon in society, and his tendency for alcohol actually led to him killing a close friend, Callisthenes. While at a party in Asia Minor, Callisthenes had begun criticizing Alexander's adoption of Persian customs. Alexander became outraged at Callisthenes judgments and killed him in cold blood. Despite Alexander's tendency for excess, many were unaware of the despotic traits he possessed. Even his father believed that Alexander was destined for a much greater and larger empire than Macedonia, exclaiming "O my son, look thee out a kingdom equal to and worthy of thyself, for Macedonia is too little for thee" (Plutarch 4). Although Philip II recognized a son

destined for military and political greatness, he was blind to Alexander's abuse of alcohol and ignorance of temperance. These two intolerable traits were the foundation for Alexander's future instability.

A major contributor to Alexander's political education, Aristotle, provided Alexander with a liberal arts education, centered around Morals, Forms, and Homer's *Iliad*. Aristotle had hoped that Alexander would become the ideal ruler, a philosopher king or *pambasileus*, but Alexander began to idolize the violence of *The Iliad* (Nagle 120). He idolized the wrathful side of Achilles and loved the endless pursuit of glory. At times, Alexander was unpredictable in his fits of violence; in one town, he would allow his men to rape the women, plunder entire towns, and enslave children, while in other towns, he would demonstrate compassion, mercy, and forgiveness. For example, in the sack of Thebes, Alexander killed nearly all the men, and enslaved over 30,000 women and children (Allen 221). However, in Athens, Alexander appears merciful, and accepts their culture with open arms and allowed them self-rule. Plutarch notes this discrepancy: "Whether it were, like the lion, that his passion was now satisfied, or that after an example of extreme cruelty, he had a mind to appear merciful, it happened well for the Athenians..." (Plutarch 8). In other words, his violent nature was unpredictable and deadly; it was like a passion that needed to be sated. Thebes was not the only murderous act Alexander was noted for. Towards India and Asia Minor, Alexander began showing more violent tendencies, burning the countryside and ravaging towns. It was here that Alexander burned the Persian capital of Persepolis. He allowed his soldiers to rape the women, plunder the capitol and kill all the men. In many ways, the burning of Persepolis resembled Alexander's sack of Thebes. Besides destroying the capitol, Alexander also executed Persian soldiers using cruel methods, such as dragging them around in chariots.

Alexander not only ravaged the countryside, but he lost credibility through breaking his alliances. What Plutarch regards as “a blemish upon his achievements in war” was an occasion when Alexander went against his word (Plutarch 40). When Alexander allied with the Indian King Taxile, he promised gifts, self-rule, and no bloodshed. Only a few weeks later, Alexander would forcibly take over towns in Taxile’s domain and murdered innocent soldiers. He had taken back his promises of self-rule and peace, and aggressively took the land. Even when there was a peaceful path, Alexander decided to take the violent path instead. Clearly, Plutarch acknowledges Alexander’s flaws and recognizes that it’s the little details that determine a man’s character. Unlike the other authors of his time, Plutarch did not romanticize Alexander, and revealed every moment of outrage and every instance of instability.

Besides providing Alexander with an education, Aristotle also constructed an ideal government consisting of a combination of sovereignty and democracy. The ruler was supposed to be the “best man” - a man that was aware of his decisions and made decisions for the betterment of the people. On the other side of the spectrum was a despotic ruler that ruled over unworthy people. As a ruler, Alexander fails to embody either end of the spectrum, and it is here that it is most evident that he is not worthy of a title. In his paper studying the political relationship between Alexander and Aristotle, Nagle shows the depreciating state of Alexander through the eyes of Aristotle: “He [Aristotle] must have watched the progress of Alexander’s despotism closely...the murder of Cleitus; the events at Bactra; the execution of Callisthenes; the heavy handed treatment of the Greek states of Asia Minor, the humiliation of the veterans at Opis...”

He continues to list the atrocities of Alexander, arguing that Aristotle’s ideal view of a ruler is not present in Alexander. Alexander continues his downward trend of despotism, and becomes

obsessed with power and land rather than the caretaking of his empire. In fact, he never actually has the chance to rule over his empire and is more widely regarded as a conqueror. The people left in charge of his provinces were close friends such as Ptolemy or local government officials, such as Porus in India (Plutarch 41). As Alexander approached Asia Minor, the condition of the Macedonian empire continually depreciated; the state of his empire was of no importance to Alexander the Great.

It is no secret that contemporary scholars are having trouble with coming to a consensus. Alexander's case is riddled with conflicting ideals, and scholars of all eras are divided in their opinions. The differing opinion mainly stems from Alexander's almost bipolar personality. In his book, *Alexander the Great and the Mystery of the Elephant Medallions*, Frank Holt is able to summarize the conundrum historians have been facing for centuries:

Alexander personally dreamed up the lofty ideal of world brotherhood and paved the way for universal religions of peace and love. We learn, too, that he conquered and killed with epic abandon, unable to sate his lust for innocent blood. He exhibited the noblest virtues of friendship and chivalry, and he butchered his closest companions out of raging insecurities. He was enlightened, intelligent, and temperate; he was insane and addicted to violence and alcohol. (Holt 5)

His contradictory actions have left scholars of all ages puzzled and divided in their opinions.. On one end, Alexander's honorable intentions outweigh his murderous actions. Scholars acknowledge his attempts of globalization and his adoption of Persian customs, proving that Alexander was unique and great. He connected lands from Greece to Asia Minor, befriendng the civilizations as he went. On the other hand, scholars recognize that Alexander's murderous actions demonstrate his despotic nature, proving that he was not so great after all. One thing is

for certain, Alexander's deadly intent was a blemish on his political and military accomplishments. Whenever Alexander's legacy is brought up, his intolerable atrocities come with him. The sack of Thebes, executions by chariot, burning of Persepolis, drunken murder of Callisthenes; even the Macedonian subjects were conflicted (Grant 30). In reality, many of his own Macedonians were not content with his increasingly despotic campaign. It is at this point that the negatives outweigh the positives. Even though contemporary scholars have not come to a consensus, there are an increasing amount of devastating acts being discovered. With time, we will only learn more about the despotic acts Alexander has committed. No amount of political power or military ingenuity could hide the cruelty behind those actions, and

Alexander's aggressively destructive campaign mirrors that of Adolf Hitler's reign in Germany. At first, both rulers gave faith to their people, providing a new hope towards a stronger nation. They politically and economically revived their land giving the false illusion of peace. But they were too focused on power, too obsessed with land. They depreciated, becoming unstable and committing countless atrocious acts. Furthermore, they taunted wars against other nations, thrilled at the thought of mass destruction. These types of rulers are beneficial at the start, providing economic stability, but as their true intentions become apparent, their empires go down a long-spiraling path towards despotism. However, now that Alexander is regarded as an unstable dictator, we can move on from Great Man History, and examine more broad subjects. Moving away from great man history, we can look at "ethnicity, ideology, the economic, political, and social impact of the conquest on the peoples of Greece and Asia..." (Flower 417). These issues are more pressing matters and give more insight to the history at the time, rather than one man's thoughts and intentions. No matter how influential or destructive one man can be, history is ultimately in the hands of the masses, and not even Alexander can change that.

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