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The Campaigns of Alexander:

How Arrian's Character of Alexander Influences How He is Portrayed in Writing

Peyton Myers

World Historiography 105

Mr. Gavitte

Introduction

It is very reasonable to make a claim that Alexander III of Macedon was one of the most influential and important men in history, considering the fact that we still talk about him today though he lived nearly 2,300 years ago. He ascended the Macedonian throne at just 20 years old following the assassination of his father, Phillip II. The small empire his father had fought for was threatening to fall apart-- the smaller, "barbaric" civilizations to the North, East, and West threatened to renounce their subjection, and the Greeks of the South began ignoring the treaties they had signed with the late king. Without hesitation, Alexander took his army and regained control of his empire.¹ Next, he famously set his sights on the powerful Persian Empire, and lands beyond.

It is important that we do not forget why we are still able to talk about him and analyze the more important part of his life: his campaigns after his restoration of his father's empire. Historians owe almost all of it to Arrian, who courageously took on the challenge of compiling what he thought was the most important and reliable information about Alexander's conquests. Without it, much of what historians now know about Alexander the Great would have been lost to time.

It is quite clear that in his books Arrian did exactly what he wanted to do: solve the mystery of Alexander's campaigns given the contradictory information of those who personally knew him. Arrian pulled from Ptolemy and Aristobulus' biographies primarily, usually favoring Ptolemy when the two authors remembered an event or fact differently. And while his books are very reliable, that does not mean they are not free of issues.

It has been hotly discussed in more recent years how Arrian very clearly makes Alexander out to be better than he might have been. He discusses in the beginning of the very first book that he chose to use biographies written after Alexander's death in hopes that they would be completely honest about who the king was as a person. It seems, however, that Arrian still managed to give a somewhat biased history of Alexander's campaigns. There are several instances throughout the books when acts that make Alexander appear to be good are focused on, and instances when he would appear evil are briefly mentioned.

So, why is this important? Since there are so few primary sources left that describe Alexander and his conquests, and arguably show him for who he is, researchers-- and more specifically-- writers, are left with Arrian's *The Campaigns of Alexander*, or *The Anabasis of Alexander*. Alexander the Great's more good and noble characteristics are highlighted in writing because of the way Arrian chose to portray him in his books.

Other Writers' Alexanders

The first work of nonfiction is by Frederic Augustus, Prince of Brunswic wrote *Critical Reflections on the Character and Actions of Alexander the Great* in 1767. He wrote it with the intention of using it to teach young princes the do's and don'ts of ruling. Augustus pulled on famous good actions by Alexander (such as crying over Darius' consort's death) while also holding him accountable for his more evil actions (such as torturing Betis of Gaza for defending the city against Alexander's attacks).

As mentioned in the introduction, Arrian seems to be more apologetic towards Alexander in some of his writing. Much of Augustus' writing seems very similar. When Alexander entered Thebes, he destroyed almost the entire city as punishment for trying to start a revolution against his rule. He did, however, leave the house of Pindar, a famous poet who had died about three years prior. Augustus never mentions the violence that took place in the city, and insteads gets straight to praising Alexander, saying "the action in itself is deserving of the greatest commendation."²

The second work of nonfiction is *The Life of Alexander the Great*. It was written by Reverend John Williams and first published in 1829. Williams' and Arrian's titles give a clue as to where they differ in their writing about Alexander, with Williams focusing in part on Alexander's days before campaigning and Arrian focusing solely on the campaigns. An interesting part of Williams' book is that in the preface, while he states it is a nonfictional history of Alexander, it is intended for "youthful readers."³ This does not, however, mean that he intentionally romanticized the life of Alexander. Though, his use of Arrian as one of his primary sources might have.

As compared to Augustus' writing of the event, Williams' does a much better job of describing the destruction of Thebes. He tells the reader of all the atrocious things Thebes had done before Alexander reached the city, such as burning neighboring cities to the ground and selling women and children into slavery. He says that it shouldn't have surprised them that Alexander would treat them the same way, seemingly justifying Alexander's violent actions while condemning Thebes for the exact same actions. Williams' then adds that Alexander was "said to have regretted in the after-life his severity against Thebes."⁴

In this, Williams seems to be very similar to Arrian in the way he writes about these evil actions. While there are events similar to the destruction of Thebes that Arrian chooses to ignore throughout his books, there are also instances where Arrian does write about these actions, but seems to give justifications. Both these types of Arrian's writing are discussed later in this paper.

The next works are all works of fiction. Each story comes from the 20th century, which was not done on purpose. While Alexander is a topic of great discussion in nonfiction, he isn't explored much in fiction. I found a few more fictional stories about Alexander when doing research, but they either predated Arrian or were in languages I do not speak.

The first piece of fictional literature I looked at was the *Adventure Play*. Written in 1949 by Terence Rattigan, the play follows Alexander as he fights to overthrow the Persian king Darius III and take control of his empire. The story focuses on how Alexander changes for the worse as a king, and how the power he sought out brings him to his end.

While it is clear to the audience that at Alexander's weakest moments he becomes cruel, it is also very clear that at his core he is a good person. An entire subplot of the play revolves around how well he treats Darius's family when they are captured. Even when Darius was killed and his mother swears an oath of silence against Alexander, she breaks it because he has become like a son to her. Darius openly admires Alexander for his kindness and his leadership skills, which he shows by making Alexander his successor as he dies.⁵

Obviously, parts of this play are not based entirely in fact. Arrian did not say that Darius made Alexander his successor, but he did say that Alexander treated the royal family well and knew how to lead his men. Arrian made special note of how he treated the royal family, saying that he could not but "admire Alexander for treating these women with such compassion,"⁶

whether or not the story may be true or exaggerated. Arrian also made sure his reader knew how much he appreciated his men, noting each time he let his physically unable men go home. He also noted each time he gave his men generous bonuses or raises.

One part of the play and of Arrian's *Campaigns of Alexander* that show Alexander in a more realistic light is his capture and sentencing of Bessus after the death of Darius. In this situation, Arrian chose to go with Ptolemy's more detailed account of the event. When asked how he would like Bessus brought to him, Alexander ordered that "he must be stripped of his clothes and led in dog-collar and made to stand on the right of the road along with which he and his army would pass."⁷ When Alexander saw him, Bessus told him he had killed Darius in order to win Alexander's favor. At this, Alexander had him scourged, and with each whip a man repeated Bessus' reason for treason. Afterwards, Bessus was sent to Bactra to be executed.⁸ Arrian, of course, made no comment on this, instead informing the reader of how exhausted the horses were. While it could be argued that this was a situation where Arrian was trying to be impartial towards Alexander's actions, it is very easy to read it as Arrian silently excusing the inhumane treatment of a captive, whether or not they committed regicide against his enemy.

Rattigan also appears to be forgiving of Alexander's actions, but in a different way than Arrian. In his play, Alexander doesn't mistreat or humiliate Bessus to anywhere near the extent that Alexander actually did. Instead of whipping Bessus naked in a dog collar, he simply denies Bessus' request to be executed as a soldier in Alexander's camp rather than as a felon in the court of Medes.⁹ It is an unkind act (which Cleitus even mentions), but it is an altered, almost romanticized version of Alexander's darker side.

The second work is *The Sands of Ammon* by historian Valerio Massimo Manfredi, published in 1998. This story also follows Alexander as he takes down the Persian King Darius, but also focuses more on his rivalry with Memnon of Rhodes. Alexander sees Memnon as a worthy opponent, but he is poisoned by Alexander's worried men before they can meet again on the battlefield. The book also deals with the idea that Alexander could be a demi-god, which gives it a more fantastical feel. At the end of the book when Alexander and his men finally reach Ammon, Alexander visits a temple. He asks the oracle if there are any of his father's murderers

left unpunished, to which the oracle replies, “Take care! Measure your words, for your father is not a mortal man. Your father is Zeus Ammon!”¹⁰

Of the three fictional stories chosen, Manfredi’s book seems to cross the line of fiction much further than the others. Alexander and Memnon never came face to face in the intimate way they did in his book. And, of course, Alexander was not a demi-god, but did entertain the idea for propaganda. However, the benevolent Macedonian king who simply wanted to rule the world is still the character portrayed in the book, which demonstrates Arrian’s influence even in fictional stories.

Manfredi leaned a lot more into the great leader that Alexander is best known as, though *The Sands of Ammon* focused a lot more on battles than *Adventure Story*. Alexander led his men into battle every time, leading as many out alive as possible. He made a name for himself in the book for being a great general, both in how he valued his men’s lives and how he treated his enemies with respect. This can be seen in how he treats Memnon. When Alexander was awoken to the news that Memnon had set a trap for his men, Alexander was furious, cursing Memnon’s name.¹¹ For a majority of the book, it seemed to be this way. Alexander would win a battle or gain the upperhand in a siege, but Memnon would come back with something to set him back at square one. When Memnon challenged him to a one-on-one duel, Alexander was very just, refusing to let his friends poison Memnon because Alexander believed the battle should be won fairly. Almost offended by his friends’ idea, Alexander called Memnon “a valiant man and he deserves to die with his sword in his hand, not poisoned in his bed or stabbed in the back as he crosses through the shadows.”¹²

Another trait of Alexander’s that Arrian made sure to emphasize was his generosity towards and appreciation of his soldiers. Examples were given of each time Arrian mentioned this in his books, as stated earlier in this paper. Manfredi also included this trait in his books. After he and his men captured Halicarnassus, Alexander made plans to continue marching East through the winter, something his men protested. Rather than becoming angry and punishing them, Alexander told them he understood that they wanted to go back to their wives. Each of the 693 men that asked to leave were given two months off and 100 Cyzicus staters, the currency

used in Ancient Macedonia after Phillip II's rule.¹³ This generous gift to his soldiers was given even after Alexander heard the news that Memnon was receiving more money and men from King Darius III, proving how selfless and thoughtful a general he is.

However, while Memnon and Alexander's relationship showed how noble a person Alexander was, Memnon also seemed to represent Alexander's darker side-- or at least brought it into view of the reader. When Memnon and Alexander first meet, he asks Alexander why he has started war. Alexander responds by saying that he wants to have a vast empire, then asks Memnon why he is preventing him from making that a reality. Memnon tells him that he hates "young, reckless madmen such as yourself who want to achieve glory by spilling blood all over the world."¹⁴ It is a side of Alexander that both Arrian and Manfredi chose not to explore beyond giving one or two examples of Alexander's more violent actions, and because of this the reader never sees a reason to question the wars he started.

Throughout the rest of the book, Memnon is always bringing to light the side of war that wasn't discussed much in Arrian's books, which is how it affects those being conquered. As previously stated, Memnon is only mentioned a handful of times in *The Campaigns of Alexander*. One of the first instances Arrian mentions him is when he tells the reader about Memnon's warning to other Persian generals not to engage Alexander in combat.¹⁵ Alexander's men far outnumbered the Persians, and were much better trained. In *The Sands of Ammon*, Memnon gives the same warning, telling the generals that it would be a grave mistake to underestimate the Macedonians.¹⁶ Both passages subtly praise Alexander, reminding the readers of just how great a leader he is while, again, not addressing the violence that comes with war.

Manfredi also entertained the idea of Alexander being a demi-god. Alexander's actions throughout the book caused his men to question whether or not he was doing it for show or because he was a god. Before a battle, he ran around the tomb of Achilles, which inspired his men because they believed it meant he was Achilles reincarnated. Callisthenes and Ptolemy discussed how Alexander said he didn't believe in legends like this one, but performed it as if he did.¹⁷

Arrian made it very clear that Alexander was a talented military leader. He couldn't have hid that if he wanted to. But he also showed that he was equal to his men on the battlefield. Arrian noted that he led his men into battle each time. Where Arrian and Manfredi differ is how they chose to write about Alexander's demi-god status. Arrian did not like to entertain the stories of Alexander being more than human or having the gods on his side, rarely mentioning the local stories. An exception would be when he brought up the story of the Gordian Knot. It was said that whoever managed to untie the knot was destined to be king of the Persian Empire, and when Alexander saw it, he cut it. Arrian included Aristobulus' account that Alexander simply took out a pin that undid the knot, but tells the reader that no matter what happened, the general feeling was that the prophecy had been fulfilled.¹⁸

The third work is *The Virtues of War*, which Steven Pressfield wrote the story in 2004. It, again, follows Alexander as he takes over Persia, but is not as focused on this period of his life. It flashes back to when he was still a child watching the way his father, Phillip II, ruled, and the reader sees where they are similar and different. The reader sees where his love of military was born and continued to grow. Pressfield's story is different from other sources used because he portrays Alexander's conquests beyond Persia and into India.

Pressfield highlights Alexander's love of military, making it seem like he would rather be a soldier than a king. The book starts with, "I have always been a soldier. I have known no other life."¹⁹ While he loves the battlefield, he doesn't like having enemies. He would rather make peace with them than kill them. However, this does not mean Alexander won't do what is necessary to reach his goal of ruling the known world.

We see that from a young age Alexander is exposed to the gruesomeness and violence of war and politics. His father brings him and Hephaestion to battles and political meetings, exposing them to harsh realities. One of the first times this happens is when Phillip brings the two to a night of partying meant to create a friendship between Macedon and their neighboring clans. Alexander quickly learns the night won't be as professional as he expected, as his father starts the night off boasting that he can "outdrink, outfight, and outfuck" them all. The night quickly descends into drunken chaos, and Alexander was revolted by the men. But, his father also taught him a valuable lesson: war is a brutish business.²⁰

Pressfield did what Manfredi and Rattigan did very little of: focus on Alexander's faults. There are a few times throughout his books that Arrian condemns Alexander's actions, and the reader can't help but feel that Alexander might not be as benevolent as Arrian led them to believe. At the battle of Granicus, Arrian expresses his disappointment in Alexander for rounding up the surviving Persians and killing them.²¹ Arrian also tells the reader he believes that Alexander burning the palaces at Persepolis was "bad policy."²² For his book, Pressfield pulled on this Alexander Arrian let the reader see for a moment, but there were still moments in *The Virtues of War* that Alexander's forgiving qualities were highlighted.

Conclusion

Arrian's *The Campaigns of Alexander* is inarguably the definitive source for Alexander the Great's conquests of the East, which is why there are similarities in the way he and writers after him portray Alexander. He openly admired Alexander, writing his opinions of him or his actions several times throughout the books. He oftentimes seemed to align more with Aristobulus' apologetic narrative, ignoring his drinking habits or more merciless actions in war. Still, there were moments when Arrian held Alexander accountable for his actions, openly admitting to the reader that while he admired Alexander, he still made bad choices.

Writers like Terence Rattigan, Valerio Massimo Manfredi, Steven Pressfield and Frederic Augustus all had similar narratives in their writing. In stories, Alexander was written to be any other good man, just with a crown on his head. He had his great moments, and he had his bad moments. He was based in reality, but also quite fictional. In non-fictional stories, he was again a good man at his core who simply made mistakes, some bigger and more shameful than others.

Notes

1. Williams, John, *The Life of Alexander the Great* (New York City: A.L. Burt Company), 18.
2. Friedrich, August, *Critical Reflections on the Character and Actions of Alexander the Great. Written Originally in Italian by His Serene Highness Frederic Augustus, Prince of Brunswic* (London: MDCCLXVII), 41.
3. Williams, *Life of Alexander*, 11.
4. *Ibid.*, 55.
5. Rattigan, Terence, *Adventure Play* (London: Samuel French Ltd.), 158.
6. Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander* (New York City: Dorset Press), 123.
7. *Ibid.*, 198.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Rattigan, *Adventure Play*, 161.
10. Manfredi, Valerio Massimo, *Alexander: The Sands of Ammon* (New York City: Washington Square Press), 481.
11. *Ibid.*, 180.
12. *Ibid.*, 252.
13. *Ibid.*, 247.
14. *Ibid.*, 169.
15. Arrian, *Campaigns*, 69.
16. Manfredi, *Ammon*, 23.
17. *Ibid.*, 9.
18. Arrian, *Campaigns*, 105.
19. Pressfield, Steven, *The Virtues of War* (New York City: Bantam Dell), 1.
20. *Ibid.*, 10.
21. Arrian, *Campaigns*, 75.
22. *Ibid.*, 179.

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