

## **ALEXANDER THE GREAT: HIS LIFE AND HIS MYSTERIOUS DEATH**

(ANTHONY EVERITT)

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Different eras view Alexander III of Macedon differently. Though always honored as a hugely successful military leader and conqueror, in the ancient world, he got mixed press, seen as a blend of virtues and faults. In the Middle Ages, and really until the twentieth century, he was usually regarded as among the greatest men of history, and surrounded by myths exaggerating his accomplishments. More recently, without detracting from his military abilities, he has been classed as a killer mad for power. Anthony Everitt, British writer of slick popular histories, tries to move the needle back toward a favorable view of Alexander. But revisionist popular history is a difficult genre to pull off well, and Everitt does not succeed.

The general frame of the book is a recitation of Alexander's career, from his youth in Macedon, to the assassination of his father Phillip, to his marching into Asia to defeat the Great King, the Achaemenid Darius III. As is well known, after conquering Persia, Alexander marched onward, ultimately reaching, and conquering, Northwest India (today's Afghanistan and Pakistan). Along the way, he had various adventures and challenges, including defeating attempts at mutiny and assassination. At India he stopped, though whether he wanted to continue is uncertain, and died suddenly during his return. Alexander's successors, his generals fighting over his conquests, remade the Middle East, a topic excellently covered in James Romm's *Ghost on the Throne*, but not one Everitt covers; he ends his book with Alexander's death.

The reader learns something about Alexander, I suppose, at least if he knows nothing to begin with, but it's not a particularly enjoyable ride. Everitt's writing is choppy and bounces around in time; at the beginning of the book he describes Alexander's death, then ends the book without even a summary reminder of the details, even though he's trying to spin up the old question of whether Alexander was poisoned (he thinks not—despite the breathless title, Everitt sheds no new light on the question). Far too much modern slang is used, much of it British slang opaque to Americans. Moreover, rather than admitting

the problem that there exist today zero contemporaneous, or even near-contemporaneous, sources for Alexander's life, Everitt repeatedly substitutes melodramatic fan fiction and identifies it as fact.

The author is most famous for his 2003 biography of Cicero, which was excellent, followed by a 2006 biography of Augustus, which I have not read. In 2009, he offered a biography of the Emperor Hadrian, which got less attention, and now this book, which has gotten even less. I can't directly speak to *Hadrian*, but what really cripples *Alexander* is its ham-handed efforts to be a revisionist history. The author has two main projects, both requiring that Alexander be cast in a positive light, thus requiring withdrawing the focus of modern scholarship on his mass killing. The first project is to defend Alexander against the common ancient criticism that as he made conquest after conquest, he abandoned his roots, "going native" and engaging in practices despised by the Greeks, such as self-deification and a variety of "effeminate," "Eastern" practices. The author instead tries to interpret Alexander as a crusader against racism, as embodied by the conservative Macedonian warriors, even though the concept of racism itself is a wholly modern concept, and Everitt's execution of this defense is just clunky. The second project, since Everitt is obsessed with homosexuality, is to attempt to prove that Alexander is, and should be, an wonderful "gay icon." Forcing these modern fascinations into the book, and Alexander into a shape wholly alien to the ancient world, ruins what would otherwise have been a serviceable, if easily forgotten, biography.

Although he tries to conceal the sparsity of the sources and their contradictions of his claims, if you pay attention Everitt relies nearly exclusively on two obvious sources and one less obvious. The first obvious one is Plutarch, who wrote nearly five hundred years after Alexander, and famously covered him in his *Parallel Lives*, comparing and contrasting him to Julius Caesar. The second is Lucius Flavius Arrianus, known to us as Arrian, who also wrote nearly five hundred years after Alexander. The less obvious source is Quintus Curtius Rufus, a mysterious Roman of uncertain date (maybe around A.D. 50, thus four hundred years after Alexander) who wrote one book, on Alexander, much of which is missing and is, as Everitt says, "tendentious and moralizing," not to mention highly suspect as to its accuracy. All these sources are very thin and, as typical of the Ancient World, unreliable at best as to most

specific incidents. I have multiple copies of each of these books, and I reviewed them while reading Everitt's book, and while writing this review. Everitt uses them appropriately when discussing Alexander's military campaigns, or the disputes among his lieutenants. But he uses them mendaciously to advance his revisionist projects.

Now, "the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." We are well-informed (though not by this book) about the Classical Greek institution of male homosexuality, or rather pederasty. This had nothing to do with the modern belief that some people are born homosexual. Greek non-slave men (citizens, all of whom by definition were also warriors) frequently engaged in highly formalized homosexual relations during, and only during, a defined period of early life, prior to marriage and procreation. In a society where women were mostly regarded with contempt and the need to bind men to each other for success in battle was primary, the Greeks found that pederasty—the temporary sexual domination of a puberty-age boy by an older man in his twenties—was a desirable social structure, as odd as it appears to us. As Paul Rahe says in *The Ancien Régime in Classical Greece*, "Strange though it may seem, the Greeks regarded the homoerotic passion linking a man with a boy as the cornerstone of political liberty. . . . Throughout much of the archaic period and the entire classical age, pederasty was one of the means by which martial communities of ancient Hellas sought 'to remove the causes of faction' and to promote civil courage 'by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests.'"

None of this had anything to do with modern homosexuality. There is no reason to think any more than the same tiny fraction of men who are homosexual today were homosexual then. Most normal men are viscerally repelled by male homosexual acts, which they find disgusting. (And as Jonathan Haidt has pointed out, disgust is a perfectly reasonable and very common basis for moral beliefs.) Still, we know that this disgust can be overcome, temporarily, by certain groups of men under certain circumstances having nothing to do with "gay pride." This appears to be what happened in Ancient Greece. The best example of such an overcoming, though, is not Ancient Greece; it is modern prisons. In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, when the newly imprisoned Tim Robbins is being eyed by a group of men, and asks "I don't suppose it

would help if I told them that I'm not homosexual?", Morgan Freeman responds, "Neither are they." On a semi-consensual level more similar to the Greek, certain military cultures engage in moderately frequent homosexual behavior—the classic modern example is the National Socialist SS, and more broadly the pre-war Prussian military. Maybe it has something to do with spending all your time with men, exalting masculine virtues, and having contempt for women, yet needing a substitute for women. Beats me; fortunately I have never been in any of prison, the SS, or Ancient Greece.

Nowadays, of course, most or all the Greek behavior endorsed by Everitt would be considered criminal child sexual abuse. It is undeniably true that throughout history, including today, a standard, perhaps the standard, ideal manifestation of male homosexual activity has been the grooming of attractive pubescent boys for homosexual domination. Milo Yiannopoulos, because he was already a target, was deplatformed and made an unperson for admitting this inconvenient truth. Why this is a male homosexual ideal, I have no idea. Maybe it is a way of making the teenager a substitute woman; the Greeks were very emphatic that the dominated boy be "beardless"; it was considered disgusting and beyond the pale for two "bearded" men to engage in homosexual activity. It doesn't really matter why; the facts speak for themselves, and Greek practice is one of those facts.

As to Alexander, the opinion of the ancient world was not that he was a homosexual, but that his sexual interests sublimated into a desire for power, and that as a result he simply wasn't very sexually active, especially for a dominant alpha male. Plutarch devotes an entire chapter of his analysis of Alexander to his disinterest in sex, claiming "And he used to say that sleep and sexual intercourse, more than anything else, made him conscious that he was mortal, implying that both weariness and pleasure arise from one and the same natural weakness." Plutarch, like all ancient writers, was not shy about identifying the sexual desires of those he was writing about. Everitt doesn't deny any of this. After nodding to it, he simply ignores it, to turn to spinning his fantasies, which, like all modern attempts to rewrite Alexander, mostly revolve around Alexander's close lifelong friend Hephaestion.

Everitt conveniently ignores that none of the sources on which he relies suggest in the slightest that Alexander and Hephaestion were

lovers. As the British academic Richard Stoneman notes in his discussion of Alexander attached as an Appendix to the recent heavily annotated Landmark edition of Arrian, "Only twice in the entire ancient record is [Hephaestion] referred to as a lover, and both times by sources who seem not to have had any privileged information." Strong friendships between men that today would be looked at askance because of the rise of open homosexuality are historically the rule, so this is really no surprise. Still, Everitt sums up his lurid fancies, "The ancient world was in no doubt that Alexander was ruled by Hephaestion's thighs." That is simply a lie. And all evidence to the contrary Everitt simply ignores or waves away. So, for example, Alexander, after defeating Darius, adopted the custom of having a harem of 365 concubines. Everitt, though, assures us that "from what we know of his sexual interests," of course he ignored them all, even though nothing of the sort is implied in the ancient sources.

On the other hand, of Everitt's sources, both Curtius and Plutarch suggest that Alexander had a sexual relationship with a Persian eunuch, Bagoas (though Stoneman notes he may be imaginary). Everitt, no surprise, droolingly refers to him repeatedly as "lovely Bagoas," and tries to interpret a famous painting of Alexander's wedding to the Bactrian princess Roxana as including Bagoas in the picture as "Alexander's other love interest," although nobody in history before Everitt has made that interpretation of the painting. But forced sex with a eunuch, beautiful or not, isn't the image of gay pride that Everitt is going for, so Bagoas plays second fiddle in Everitt's fantasies. Moreover, both Plutarch and Curtius view this "relationship" as a mark of Alexander's degeneration and subjection to, as Curtius says, "a male whore's judgment." Since Everitt's other project is to show that Alexander was not degenerate at all, rather enlightened, it is little surprise he prefers to focus his imagination on Hephaestion.

Trying to reinforce his tale, Everitt tries to redefine what is known about Greek male homosexuality. For example, he claims that all the Greeks saw the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in the *Iliad* as that of homosexual lovers, skipping over that is nowhere implied in the *Iliad* (written at a time before formalized pederasty was introduced), is not often suggested even among later Greeks, and doesn't even make any sense in the later Greek framework, since Achilles and Patroclus were the same age (as were Alexander and Hephaestion). He

then uses this fantasy, combined with his (not coincidental) emphasis throughout the book on Alexander's supposedly basing his life on the Iliad, to claim that both Achilles and Alexander both only "mimicked pederasty" while really living the lives of modern proud gay men. This culminates in the wild claim that Alexander was "determined to live his life as one of a loving and inseparable male couple." It is all so tiresome, when we are in no actual doubt about Ancient Greek practices, which did not include such relationships.

Similar drivel about how the far-seeing Alexander tried to combat the racism of his generals pervades the book as well; I just don't feel like subjecting you or me to a lengthy exegesis about it. On the plus side, however, not a single word is said about Donald Trump or any aspect of present political battles, and I am thankful to Everitt for that. When I started writing this review, I thought I was going to write about what a modern Alexander might look like, or, more broadly, what would be the characteristics of a similar successful man, of unbridled power, discipline, and luck, in the present day, but I think that topic will wait for another time.

Oh, I suppose homosexuals, like all cultural subgroups, need myths and heroes. It's therefore no wonder that Alexander has been reimaged into a homosexual icon, and that similar ludicrous claims are now made for scores of other famous men throughout history. Those with an inferiority complex always try to rewrite history in their favor; this is just another example (and, I believe, Everitt borrowed much of his unsupported certainty from Robin Lane Fox's 1974 biography of Alexander). Then why do I care, you ask? Because this sort of thing is propaganda, a distortion of reality, designed to pretend that the modern exalted position of homosexuals in some Western countries has historical precedent, rather than being the wholly new thing it is. Whether that position deserves to be an exalted one, and related questions, such as whether Drag Queen Story Hour is harmless fun or an abomination that should be put down with fire and sword, we can discuss another day (hint: the answers are "no" and "yes"), but I'd like my history to be straight, no pun intended. That's not what we get here.