

Richard Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, XVII + 314 pp., ISBN 9780300112030.

Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend is an overview of the conqueror's legends throughout Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The author, Richard Stoneman [= S.], is currently the most important expert on the myths of Alexander, and his book is the result of over twenty years of work in the field. He translated a Greek version of the *Romance* and he is the author of several articles concerning, for instance, the Jewish tradition or oriental motifs in the *Romance*. He is also the author of several books: and historical guides, for example, *Legends of Alexander the Great, A Literary Companion to Travel in Greece and Palmyra and its Empire: Zenobia's Revolt against Rome*, the comprehensive treatment of Roman Syria. S. worked longtime as an editor at Routledge. He is now a Honorary Fellow at the University of Exeter.

The main source of materials on Alexander's fantastic adventures is the *Alexander Romance*, frequently rewritten in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The author also assume that the *Romance* is the best source of legends, but he do not precise it in the title of the book.

In a very useful introduction the author presents the most important works inspired by the *Romance*, explains how the histories of Alexander evolved and briefly presents the contents of each of the twelve chapters. The reader will surely appreciate the two appendices. The first of these enumerates all the formative versions of the *Romance* as well as its main derivatives and illustrated editions. The second appendix, in turn, contains a handy table of all versions, translations and derivative texts composed in Asia and Europe throughout Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The book is also richly illustrated with both colour and black-and-white images collected from numerous translations and manuscripts on Alexander and depicting scenes from the life of the conqueror and his famous adventures like flying (image 6) or penetrating the bottom of the sea in Diving Bell (image 7). Moreover, the book is appended with a historical timeline and an extensive bibliography (pp. 284–305).

The first chapter, *Nativity: Egyptian Origins (356 BC)*, describes the celestial phenomena accompanying Alexander's birth, such as storms or flashes of lighting, which traditionally meant that the baby was destined to be a great hero and a demigod. The author discusses the role of the last pharaoh Nectanebo II in the legend of Alexander and shows the consequences of legendary Alexander's belief in his being a son of Ammon. S. also emphasizes the importance of the popular Greek motif of the seduction trick, that is, of a disguised god making love to his bride (as, for example, in the story of Nectanebo and Olympias). Moreover, S. discusses the story of golden eggs and garlic from the Persian Book of Kings *Shahnameh* by Firdausi, from which we learn that Iskander (Alexander) was in fact a Persian king, which would imply that the empire has actually never been conquered.

The next chapter, *Golden Vines, Golden Bowls and Temples of Fire: The Persian Versions*, develops the theme and presents other Persian stories of Alexander. One of them tells us that, dying on Alexander's lap, king Darius appointed Alexander as his successor and gave him his daughter as a wife in order that the royal line would be maintained. This chapter shows how the Persian versions differ from others and proves the influence of local culture and geographical location upon such stories as these of, for example, Alexander's visit to China and the invention of the mirror, the latter of which is absent from other versions of the tale. S. presents also Jewish and Arabic stories (*Cities of Alexander: Jews and Arabs Adopt the Hero*).

In the following chapter, *The Marvels of India (329–326 BC)*, S. briefly discusses the works of such Greek authors interested in India as Ctesias of Cnidus and Megasthenes and compares

the legends preserved in the *Alexander Romance* with the testimonies of the above-mentioned authors. One of the subsections of the chapter covers Alexander's famous letter to Aristotle about India in which Alexander writes about the mysterious land, describing the palace of the defeated king Porus and the visit to the temple of Taxila and the Sanctuary of the Sun and the Moon where Alexander received the oracle about his death. S. analyses also these adventures whose setting is debatable, such as the passage through the Caspian Gates. By including the *Tabula Peutingeriana* and a thirteen-century *Mappa Mundi* in Hereford Cathedral, with Jerusalem at its centre, the author gives his explanation about the doubts concerning the localisation on those Gates. Most likely the problem of localisation is a result of merging of two places – Caspian Gates of Derbent (between the Caspian Sea and Caucasus Mountains) and Pass of Dariel. These two “maps” enables to visualise how the ancient people perceived the geography of the world. expressed by several Alexandrian historians. S. analyses a number of stories that take place “somewhere in the East” and appear in the later *Romance* recensions, such as the tale of the River of Sand (the gamma and epsilon recension) or of Poison Maidens, present not only in Indian legends (*Katha Sarit Sagara*, or *Ocean of the Streams of Story*, and *Arthashastra*) but also in *Secretum secretorum* which is attributed to Aristotle and Jacob van Maerlant's *Alexander geesten*.

The next chapter, “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” *Alexander's Encounters with the Brahmans* (326 BC), the title of which elegantly calls to mind a short story by Leo Tolstoy from 1886, covers Alexander's famous onversation with the Brahmans, known also as the gymnosophists or the naked philosophers. During the first part of the meeting the king puts a series of questions to the philosophers. The dialogue structured around a conundrum is popular in Greek philosophy, but S. pays attention to Indian examples, such as the one in the *Mahabharata* where Yudhisthira has to answer over one hundred questions in order to save his brothers. The author notices also that Alexander's encounter with the king of the Brahmans, Dandamis, remains in accordance with the Cynic philosophy and perhaps its source may be Indian.

The famous exploration of the sea and Alexander's flight are discussed in the chapter *From the Heights of the Air to the Depths of the Sea: Alexander as Inventor and Sage*. S. argues that these feats suggest that Alexander was a great inventor and that he transcended human limitations. We learn that in the Talmud Alexander's flight enables him to see the world that is under his rule. The author presents also the most important depiction of the flight, that is, the mosaic floor of the Otranto Cathedral, but unfortunately the book does not contain any pictures of the image. The author shows Alexander as the one who seeks the philosopher's stone (for example, he finds a gold magnet which attracts gold, silver, meat, water, and fish) and as a wise man who resolves problems just like the king Salomon.

Another interesting chapter is *The Search of Immortality*, which deals with the main subject of the *Alexander Romance*, that is, Alexander's attempts at a feat that would surpass all human achievements. Alexander wanted to be immortal and to see and experience things available only to gods. Legendary Alexander really believed that he had been a son of Ammon and a descendant of Heracles and that he had to outdo him by, for example, reaching the end of the world and the Paradise, visible, as was believed, from the top of the Hindu Kush. The first tale about the search for immortality appears in a Gilgamesh story, where the hero finds the Plant of Immortality but loses it. S. devotes one subsection to the Arabian tales of immortality. In Umara ibn Zayd's (767–815) *Romance* Alexander's mother is an astrologist who discovers the existence of the Water of Life while studying her books. Alexander sets off for a quest in search of it. His companion Khidr bathes in the water but Alexander denies his chance for immortality. Next he sets off for Mount Qaf, the holy mountain of Islam, where he has to answer the question why, having achieved all, he came as far as there. In another Arabian recension of the *Romance*, the angels warn Alexander against excessive ambitions.

The chapter *Death in Babylon* (323 BC) gives an overview of all the prophecies concerning Alexander's death, delivered both during his expedition and before entering Babylon, where he died. The most famous oracle is the one received in India, where Alexander visits the Sanctuary of

the Sun and the Moon and where Indian-Greek speaking trees foretell his death in Babylon. The author analyzes also Syrian and Arabic tales, where Alexander wrote the last letter to his mother, asking her to prepare a great banquet for all his subjects, and the motif present in *Iskandarnameh*, where Alexander wants his hand to be placed outside the coffin in order to show that at the moment of death he must leave all that he managed to win. The previous text is known as the *Sayings of the Philosophers*, where twenty philosophers (twenty nine in the Syriac text) ponder over the meaning of Alexander's life, conquests and death.

The last two chapters of the book, *Universal Emperor: The Christian Hero and King of the World: Alexander the Greek*, show how the legend of Alexander evolved and how it influenced Christian tradition. S. discusses the pagan revival in the Middle Ages, when talismans bearing the image of Alexander, which were believed to bring good fortune to its owner, frequently won in popularity with traditional Christian artefacts. The increase in the interest in Alexander's legend was caused by the discovery made by Leo the Archpriest of Naples, who brought the Greek *Romance* from Constantinople. The conqueror's legend spread all over Europe and influenced various tales as for example Arthurian legends. We also learn that in Greek tradition the legend of Alexander has been cultivated for a long time. The great example is the *Phyllada tou Megalexandrou*, first published in 1680, which, with its 43 editions, constitutes the most compelling retelling of Alexander's adventures.

The book is the result of many years of the author's work and S. is a great researcher of Alexander's legend. The author presents an immense number of sources and works influenced by the legend of Alexander and interprets all the motifs of the legendary quest. Unfortunately, the author does not specify the range of the examined traditions, neither does he give any explanation as to why some of them have been omitted or only mentioned, as e.g. Malayan or Polish tradition (the author refers only to the translation from 1550, but there is an earlier version, from 1510). The Eastern European traditions are only mentioned in terms of e.g. Serbian or Czech tradition. The two appendices are very helpful, and, as a result, the reader receives a clear overview of all the versions, motifs and editions of the *Alexander Romance*. Each legend is cautiously interpreted and the author shows both its source and local evolutions. He deals with all the versions and retellings of Alexander's legendary adventures, searching their traces in numerous texts written throughout history from the *Mahabharata* and *Gilgamesh* story to Umberto Eco's *Baudolino*.

The vast material presented in the book makes a detailed analysis impossible, which may leave the reader unsatisfied. Moreover, the mass of data requires the reader to consult the appendices in order not to get lost in the material. S. does not mark also that the legends presented in his book originated from different versions of the *Romance*, so the reader may have an impression that there is one, main *Alexander Romance*, while the legends grow together with its versions. In the appended table, which features all versions of the *Romance* and derivative texts, reaches only to the year 1500, although the author mentions also later publications, such as *Phyllada tou Megalexandrou*, published in 1680, and several others. Also, a broader outline of the history of Alexander's life would make it easier for the reader to compare legends and historical facts in the course of reading. The index also does not facilitate passing through this vast material. Unfortunately, it does not include all important geographical places, e.g. Tibilisi, Ordzhonikidze (or its present name Vladikavkaz), or Polish and other less important (for the author) recensions of the *Romance*. It hardly diminishes the value of the book.

Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend is a great work, indispensable to all scholars interested in Alexander. The most recent works on Alexander and his legend are included in the bibliography. The two appendices let the reader get precise information on all the versions, translations and derivatives of the *Romance*. The work constitutes a great overview of all the legends and myths of Alexander and is a real pleasure to read.

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