Waldemar Heckel, *The Conquests of Alexander the Great* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008)

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As a confident, cut and dried engagement with Alexander's exploits throughout the Persian empire, this book should be viewed as Heckel's response to the myriad of other books on Alexander which have been produced since 2004's "Alexandermania" created by the entertainment industry. It is clear that Heckel's intention is to dismiss the romance of Alexander's aggrandized myths, as well as the inaccurate assumptions about his personal character, which generations of previous scholars have used to augment their own research. Through strict source criticism, Heckel provides a much needed stoic evaluation of events during the conquests of Alexander the Great.

Heckel has arranged the book in chronological order from a brief history of Alexander's Macedonian background to his death in Babylon in 323BC. It is prefaced with a brief introduction and an additional chapter dedicated to historical sources. This prelude of extant and lost sources is fitting, since the rest of the book leads the reader step by step from the Battle of Granicus to Issus, Gaugamela and the Hydaspes through primary accounts, punctuating battle descriptions with self-made diagrams of strategy and outcome. Alexander's maternally-driven ambition and passionate nature are never addressed, nor are his brash reactions to direct defiance. Whenever character speculation would have played a more inflated role in the

historical narrative, Heckel instead relies on modern scholarship and parallel situations in war to alleviate presumptions regarding Alexander's temperament. The traditional view of Alexander as megalomaniac, driven to be the ruler of the known world is not of interest to Heckel; rather he details the logical explanations, motivations, justifications and consequences of Alexander's actions.

Several events of Alexander's campaigns are undoubtedly disenchanting when removed from the context of psychological assumption. The narrative surrounding the Gordion knot no longer depicts an abrasive young ruler, audaciously slashing through the knot in order to fulfill a prophecy of becoming ruler of all of Asia. Instead cutting through the knot was for Alexander "sufficient to have averted failure...and [he] had no compunctions about doing what was expedient" (p. 55). Key episodes which have, up until Heckel's publication, given historians valuable insight into the character of Alexander are subordinated to a more "reasonable" conclusion. When Alexander killed his cavalry general Cleitus in a drunken rage, Heckel dismisses male ego and the latter's provocations and attributes the murder to post-traumatic stress disorder induced by "...prolonged combat experience, a desensitized approach to violence, and chronic alcohol consumption" (p. 103). Heckel is quick to argue that behaviors such as Alexander's have been repeated innumerable times in the scope of military campaigns.

Such arguments excuse his use of anachronistic comparisons to conquistadors of the new world, when

referring to atrocities made by Alexander's officials (p. 135). A narrative by Otto of Freising concerning a flash flood of a Holy Land German camp in 1148, and the disaster at Poltava during the campaigns of Charles XII of Sweden are compared to Alexander's ill-fated crossing of the Gedrosian desert. Heckel's aim is to highlight similar historical situations - in this case, unforeseen natural disasters, to relieve Alexander's actions of personal agency. The reader is to forget that Alexander's army had just mutinied again him, preventing him from continuing his campaign in India and were being led home by the jilted leader, and instead accept Heckel's argument that historical repetition proves that this event was "neither unique nor attributable to whim or megalomania" (p. 133). The employment of later military and strategic parallels also emphasizes Heckel's primary interest in Alexander's campaigns: source criticism and subsequent denouncement of the king's propagandists and later hagiographers.

Heckel is not interested in history that is diluted by propaganda. To him, Alexander historians report three types of things: What Alexander did, though this is not always reported accurately; what Alexander wanted the world to believe (i.e. propaganda, which originated with the king in his court); and later propaganda (i.e. the legend) (p. 121). All three in Heckel's opinion are apparent in modern narratives though not totally intertwined. To separate the deeds, the propaganda and the legend seems like a paradoxical approach to the study of military genius, given that Heckel wishes to analyze strategy and tactic without any subjective preconception of the commanding general

himself. True, Alexander scholars are not allotted any unbiased firsthand accounts and a figurative tightrope must be walked if accuracy and not entertainment is the principle focus. Though Heckel is able to remain relatively consistent regarding his treatment of the mythological and propagandistic subject matter, at times even for Heckel, the area is grey. Among the most notable silences is the narration regarding the night of preparation prior to the battle of Gaugamela.

Although written 400 years after Alexander's death, Arrian's *Anabasis* (III.10.2-4) provides an example of the "grey area" information decisively omitted from Heckel's account. Alexander's troops were told to rest and eat the night before the conflict at Gaugamela. It is said then that Parmenion, Alexander's foremost general advised a night attack to which Alexander replied that he "didn't come to steal the battle". Arrian quickly dismisses the lofty words and instead states "In my own opinion they were based upon perfectly sound sense...more often than not Alexander took risks in his battles...he felt a night attack to be too unpredictable...these arguments were sound enough, and I therefore commend Alexander's decision." Of course Alexander was privy to the fact that a night battle would give Darius a reason to claim military inferiority and subsequently chose to attack during the day for propagandistic purposes, but why then does Heckel feel that leaving the entire episode out of his report benefits the reader? He simply begins his narrative of the battle of Gaugamela with the words "Alexander drew up his forces much as he had done at Issus" (p. 75). In an attempt to

understand the role of propaganda without "being duped by it" (p. x) Heckel has created an inconsistency in his treatment of material by omitting events, some completely. Even if one argued that Arrian's personal opinion and his question of the legitimacy of the Parmenion story was still propagandistic and an untrue retelling, what about the army resting before battle? Is there not another account of a military general allowing his soldiers to rest before war, such as Scanderbeg and the Albanians defeating the larger Ottoman force at Torvioll in 1444 after a night of rest?

Though some areas of Heckel's account lack clarity, more often than not his information is thorough, coherent and enlightening. Amongst some of the most beneficial material to students and teachers alike are the aforementioned plans of Alexander's major battles. Separated into Phase 1; which is comprised of initial set up and Phase 2; depicting how the battle completed, each full page plan is interjected into the middle of Heckel's account of the battle itself, which is very useful to those learning about the battles for the first time. By not having to flip back and forth between appendices of plans and maps (also included within the text) it aids the understanding of the relevant strategy and geography. In addition to diagrams which would make any football coach proud, Heckel includes appendices of Alexander's officers and their positions, the numbers of troops broken down into particular battle deployment, the administration of the empire (satrapy, Persian satrap, Alexander's first appointee and subsequent office holder) as well as a glossary of key terms. It is evident that Heckel is well versed in the

language of Alexander's empire, as well as the political nuances of the era and his eagerness to embrace the life of Alexander the Great as anything more than analytical is understandable.

Recent publications concerning the life and times of Alexander the Great have come hot on the heels of Michael Wood's book from 2001, *In The Footsteps of Alexander the Great*, published in conjunction with the BBC television series, and Oliver Stone's less than accurate portrayal of Alexander in the 2004 movie. With renewed academic interest in the tombs at Vergina, and ongoing modern conflict in the Middle East, there is a general interest in the subjugation and unjustified expressions of occidental culture in the orient. Who better to personify such brute, external force and relentless arrogance than a misinterpreted Alexander the Great, known by the Persians as Alexander the accursed?

Being one of the leading scholars of the Hellenistic period with recent publications including *The Marshals of Alexander's Empire* (1994) a collaboration with J.C. Yardley on *Historical Sources in Translation: Alexander the Great* (2004) and *Who's Who in the Age of Alexander the Great* (2008), Heckel's passion is for the nitty gritty facts of Alexander's campaign. Facts, figures, names and diagrams are Heckel's forté, though his approach is not as analytical as Donald W. Engels, who simply provides the logistics of the Macedonian army (1978). By weaning students off fanciful tales, informing them of the importance of source criticism and alerting them to the difference between an Alexander biography and a list of accomplishments, Heckel

has provided students a venue to learn history, without being caught in the mythological filler.

Heckel's *The Conquests of Alexander the Great* comes at a time when students wishing to pursue Late Classical and Early Hellenistic studies are more intrigued by Alexander's life. His supposed affinity for young men, his awe inspiring taming of Bucephalus, his drunken debauchery, and his underlying passion for Panhellenism, excellence, liberty and dominance are all facets of his life which are taught without correction or caution to undergraduates (This book being one of three introductory level publications in Cambridge Universities *Key Conflicts in Classical Antiquity* series). Recent "biographies" by Agnes Savill, Mary Renault and Robin Lane Fox literally leave nothing to the imagination, affording students little to no opportunity to be provided with solid fundamentals of the military career and companions of Alexander the Great.

Overall, The Conquests of Alexander the Great is a refreshing, straight-to-the-point summary and analysis of each of Alexander's battles, void of theory and interpretation, emphasizing the equations of pros versus cons and demonstrating the linear thinking of the young king. There is certainly room for its accommodation in the bevy of Alexander works already published. One is left wondering however, if Heckel has done the scholarly world a slight disservice by separating the man from the myth. Though he handles his subject matter with an unmatched mastery and understanding, the subordination of Alexander's inherent character leaves the reader feeling that Heckel may have argued one extreme over another.