

## ***The Anabasis of Alexander* by Arrian**

### An analysis of a narrative of colonialism and its legacy on 19<sup>th</sup> Century British imperialism

Subject: History

*“Are you not aware that if Heracles, my ancestor, had gone no further than Tiryns or Argos – or even than the Peloponnese or Thebes – he could never have won the glory which changed him from a man into a god... Come, then; add the rest of Asia to what [we] already possess...”*

Alexander the Great (Arrian, 1971, p. 294)

*“We tread in the footsteps of Alexander the Great.”*

Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India (1899-1905)

#### *Introduction*

Arrian's *Anabasis of Alexander* is considered the most authoritative historical narrative of Alexander the Great's military campaigns and conquests.<sup>1</sup> It is also arguably the most successful in cementing an awe-inspiring legacy for a person, given that Alexander the Great and colonialism are rarely synonymous terms. Instead, Alexander is best remembered for his conquests which were made possible by his heroism, military genius and ambition for glory, as extolled in Arrian's *Anabasis*. Whilst there are differences with 19<sup>th</sup> Century European colonialism such as the lack of industrial capitalism, Alexander's empire-building nonetheless exhibited major characteristics of any successful colonial power; namely, territorial expansion, the establishment of colonial outposts, exploitation of conquered peoples, and imposing one's culture on others.

Together with the likes of Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Suetonius and Livy, Arrian was widely read by the British elite in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, since Greek and Latin texts were central to a classical education at the country's leading universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. Unlike the days of the East India Company when the filling of positions was heavily dependent on aristocratic patronage, Britain formally embraced a more meritocratic recruitment system with the Government of India Act 1853 which introduced a selection process based on examinations so as to attract the very best Oxbridge graduates to apply for imperial administration positions (Ferguson, 2003, p. 186). As arguably the key source to

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<sup>1</sup> Some historians have questioned the complete accuracy of Arrian's *Anabasis* as otherwise it presupposes that Arrian's primary sources (Ptolemy and Aristobulus) were both fully reliable in themselves and faithfully reproduced by Arrian.

understand the man who over the centuries had assumed mythic proportions, Arrian's *Anabasis* was no doubt read and appreciated by British officers and administrators. With the likes of Caesar and Napoleon having greatly revered Alexander, Britain's 19<sup>th</sup> Century colonialists were no different; and, at that time, as Britain was seen by many as the successor to the ancient world empires, understanding more about Alexander's leadership and military campaigns was of great relevance. Winston Churchill, for example, admired Arrian and drew comparisons between Alexander's campaigns and Britain's foray into empire. As such, as far as it can be argued that historical narratives can compel people into action, this essay explores how the manner of Alexander's exploits as described in Arrian's *Anabasis* were appropriated by 19<sup>th</sup> Century British colonialists possessing similar imperial ambitions.

### *Territorial expansion*

The main thrust of Arrian's *Anabasis* is a thorough description of Alexander's conquests. Alexander's genius and heroics on the battlefield are clearly stated in no uncertain terms by Arrian when he says that there is "no city, no single individual beyond the reach of Alexander's name; never in all the world was there another like him..." (Arrian, 1971, p. 398). It is therefore unsurprising that Arrian does his best not to discuss Alexander's less admirable deeds. For example, there is no mention of the 2,000 Greek mercenaries employed by King Darius III who were massacred after the Battle of the Granicus, or of the 7,000 Indian mercenaries who were slaughtered when they attempted to desert. Meanwhile, several of the massacres committed by Alexander that are mentioned are glossed over and presented as very matter-of-factly. To give just one example, when discussing the massacre and enslavement after the siege of Gaza<sup>2</sup>, Arrian writes, "Every one of them [defenders] was killed at his post. Their women and children were sold as slaves. People from neighbouring tribes were settled in the town and Alexander used it as a blockhouse for possible future operations." (Arrian, 1971, p. 147) Even murder by Alexander's own hand is excused; when discussing Alexander's killing of Cleitus, one his most loyal and erstwhile generals, Arrian surmises, "Personally, I strongly deprecate Cleitus' unseemly behaviour to his sovereign; and for Alexander I feel pity..." (Arrian, 1971, p. 216).

It is therefore clear that Arrian does not wish to overly criticise his young hero. Arrian is not alone in this regard as the misdeeds of most European conquerors are forgiven if their military exploits – which invariably involve overt imperialism and/or colonialism – are great enough to warrant such forgiveness; Caesar and Napoleon naturally come to mind. Whereas for most non-European conquerors, their overriding image is one of being destroyers and barbarians despite the greatness of their military exploits and them demonstrating similar tactics to Alexander. For example, Genghis Khan is well-known as a destroyer of cities but he, like Alexander, typically committed massacres in retaliation to resistance and as a warning to others. Using terror as a tactic for military expediency was no different to Alexander, who famously burnt down Persepolis, permitted the massacre at Thebes and at many other cities such as Gaza as discussed above. Attila the Hun is another classic example who is best known as the 'Scourge of God'. And yet the same man spared the Roman world's two greatest cities – Rome and Constantinople – by declining to sack them in exchange for

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<sup>2</sup> The author felt it poignant to refer to the Gaza massacre as an example of Alexander's actions given the troubling events in modern-day Gaza at the time of writing this essay.

tribute, forgoing untold riches and glory, and instead showing great restraint, pragmatism and diplomacy. Similarly, Alexander used public clemency (clementia) as a tool of manipulation for political gain rather than because of any inherent virtue<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, is the reason for why 19<sup>th</sup> Century British colonialists perceiving Alexander so much differently when compared to the likes of Genghis Khan and Attila because of a biased narrative underpinned by racial ideology? Are Genghis, Attila and other great Asian conquerors in need of an Arrian unprejudiced by orientalism so as not to be perceived as the ‘other’? If their deeds had been extolled by some great writer, then perhaps one of the most prolific exponents of British colonialism, Cecil Rhodes, would have been known as the Attila of Africa rather than the Alexander of Africa; and perhaps Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India, may have deemed it more permissible as it is more appropriate to say that in India Britain was following in the footsteps of Babur or Akbar given that the Mughals actually conquered most of India unlike Alexander.

Instead, because of the image created by classic works such as Arrian’s, the British imitated Alexander (and the Romans) to reflect their imperial ambitions and military power. Like Alexander adopting the Persian ceremony of prostration (proskynesis), the British were keen to incorporate local imperial customs to strengthen their legitimacy with the locals, such as adopting the imperial durbar ceremony in India. 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain also relied on Graeco-Roman architecture to frame their own military victories and transfer mythical and heroic status onto its celebrated military commanders. This was best expressed in the neoclassical monumental architecture of Nelson’s Column and Wellington Arch.

### *Establishment of colonial outposts*

Arrian’s description of the founding of Alexandria in Egypt (the most famous of the many settlements founded by Alexander) leaves no doubt in the reader’s mind that the city was ordained for greatness and intended for the benefit of the inhabitants of Egypt when he speaks of the excellence of its site, its agora and temples serving both Greek and Egyptian gods. (Arrian, 1971, p. 149) There is, however, no mention of its strategic importance: maintaining military and naval dominance in and around Egypt, serving as a gateway to the economic riches of the Nile Valley, and supporting Alexander’s claim of political legitimacy. Like his other settlements, Alexandria in Egypt was, in effect, a colonial outpost originally intended to maintain Macedon’s military, economic and political control over Egypt; no different to Britain’s many colonial outposts such as Bombay, Calcutta, Hong Kong, Singapore and Sydney. This is one of many instances when Arrian fails to examine the darker side of Alexander’s intentions.

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<sup>3</sup> The use of clemency was studied by Cicero and when discussing Caesar, he concluded that his public clemency was merely a means of manipulation as opposed to actual virtue. As a student of Epictetus, Arrian was quite possibly familiar with Cicero’s works but does not make the same disparaging conclusion about Alexander as Cicero did about Caesar.

### *Exploitation of conquered peoples*

Arrian mentions the many times Alexander extracted annual tribute from the peoples he conquered. Infantry from the Corinthian League, 100 talents and horses from Aspendos, 100 horses, 500 mules and 30,000 sheep from the Uxians, and so on; not to mention the immeasurable plunder and prisoners taken. Whilst Alexander lived for glory and fame, exploitation is the *raison d'être* of conquest. Power comes from military might which is dependent on relative economic strength. Without exploiting the peoples he conquered, Alexander's road to empire would have ended before he even had the chance to reach Asia.

To counter this image of an exploitative ruler, Arrian portrays the peoples of the Persian Empire as "slaves" and in need of Alexander's intervention to help them achieve "freedom" from being ruled by the supposedly barbaric Achaemenid regime. Such a narrative justifies the colonised being conquered by the coloniser as they are shown as being passive and in need of salvation. This is especially difficult to counter when the colonized peoples lack their own literature and the only narrative available belongs to the colonial power. This reinforcement of the superiority of the coloniser's civilisation, in turn legitimises and perpetuates colonialism (Said, 1993). This is particularly true of Imperial Britain; as a metropolitan power, its exploitation of its colonies is legendary. When Britain reached its global zenith in 1860 and with only 2% of the world's population, it possessed 45% of the world's industrial capacity, 33% of the world's merchant shipping, 20% of the world's commerce, and 40% of the world's manufactured goods (Kennedy, 1988, p. 151). To temper this image of exploitation, Britain, like Alexander, would seek to impose its culture on others.

### *Imposing one's culture on others*

People laud Alexander for his Hellenizing mission but do not ask how this apparent altruistic aim co-exists with his personal ambition for glory and military aggrandisement. Similarly, were the motives of Britain's civilising mission in countries such as India any different?

Alexander's Hellenization should not be seen as a civilising mission. Indeed, its *reductio ad absurdum* presupposes that, aside from organising an effective war-machine, the great ancient civilisations of Persia, Egypt and India were inferior. Instead, it was a process to impose Greek language, culture and forms of political and social organisation on the people of the East to further Alexander's imperial mission (Said, 1993). The importance to effective colonialism of imposing one's culture and/or language has not gone unnoticed down the ages: Queen Isabella of Castile was told in 1492 – the exact same year she founded her own colonial empire - that, "Language is the perfect instrument of empire" (Elliott, 2001, p. 167); while in his chapter on Mixed Monarchies, Machiavelli asserts that having a shared language makes holding onto a conquered land that much easier (Machiavelli, 2011, p. 8). Britain was especially adept at this, overseeing the Anglicization of North America, Australasia, India and elsewhere, which ultimately led to the internationalisation of the English language.

Taking the example of India, the English Education Act 1835 gave effect to the East India Company no longer needing to fund Hindu or Muslim education, or publish works in Sanskrit or Persian. Instead, they were to fund a British curriculum using the English language. This resulted in the Anglicization of the Indian elite and English becoming the language of government. Some may argue that this was part of Britain's civilizing mission. Others will

argue that any such cultural exchange is a form of inherent domination with the culture of the colonised considered as inferior. The English Education Act was heavily supported by Thomas Macaulay who wrote *Minute on Indian Education* in 1835 which argued that an English education was key in creating a class of Indians who would be culturally British and therefore more amenable to British rule. He was also of the school of thought that considered British culture as superior given his famous quote: “A single shelf of a good European library is worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia” (Keay, 2010, p. 644).

As well as language, religion is also often used as a tool for unification. Alexander is commonly shown as being favoured by the gods, lending him divine justification for his conquests and rule. One such infamous example is when Arrian relates the story of Alexander seeing a sign sent by the gods from heaven that he was ordained to undo the Gordian Knot and was therefore prophesised to become the lord of Asia (Arrian, 1971, p. 105). Similarly, as part of the East India Company’s charter renewal in 1813, the company needed to allow Christian missions to operate in India. Such missionary work was paramount for the more evangelical of Britain’s establishment; even the great abolitionist, William Wilberforce declared that such work was the “greatest of all causes, for I really place it before Abolition [of the slave trade]” (Keay, 2010, p. 640).

The perceived threat to the religions of the Hindus and Muslims of India was one of the contributing factors of the Indian Rebellion of 1857, which ultimately compelled the British to abandon their evangelical missionary enterprise given that it was then seen as dangerous to public order and therefore contrary to their overriding concern for wealth and power through trade and industry. The British had clearly not read *Anabasis* carefully enough as one of the few criticisms Arrian lays at Alexander’s door is his interfering with peoples’ religious beliefs when he attempted to unify the peoples of his empire through his person as a divine god and declaring that his father was not Phillip but the god Ammon; something even Alexander’s most ardent supporters mocked and rejected (Arrian, 1971, p. 217).

## Conclusion

If I learned anything in writing this essay, it is that historical narratives of repute can describe individuals with language that have the power to shape the perception of their deeds as conquerors and colonisers. In the case of Arrian, his *Anabasis* has ensured that for almost two millennia, Alexander remains synonymous with greatness and a man who continues to command our universal admiration despite him pursuing typical colonial behaviour: territorial expansion, the establishment of colonial outposts, exploitation of conquered peoples, and imposing one’s culture on others; and in the process, committing atrocities – like any colonial power - such as the massacre at Gaza.

One common theme throughout history is the “supplanting of societies” regardless of whether the society occupying the land of the other is imperial or colonial in nature or just domestic within a nation-state (“internal colonialism”) (Day, 2007). Arrian himself touches on this concept: “Destiny had decreed that Macedon should wrest the sovereignty of Asia from Persia, as Persia once had wrested it from the Medes, and the Medes, in their turn, from the Assyrians” (Arrian, 1971, p. 111). What is ever-changing, however, are the acceptable moral standards by which people conduct and justify conquest coupled with the added complexity

of biased historical narratives. As such, all men are the product of their time and their perception dependent on available sources, and Alexander and those of Imperial Britain are no exception to this rule. Therefore, whilst it is difficult to assess Alexander's life and Britain's colonialism from a 21<sup>st</sup> Century perspective given that our standards are fluid over time, what is clear is that whatever standard we choose for a particular period of history, that standard should be the same and applied without bias regardless of whether we are judging the coloniser or colonised, ourselves or the 'other'.

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