ALEXANDER THE GREAT'S LINGUISTIC ARTEFACTS

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Abstract

The paper deals with different contexts in which the name of Alexander the Great (or hints of it) appears either literally, referring to the person itself, or in idiomatic expressions and phrases, connected with different activities and customs. The perspective is diachronic and envisages all walks of life.

Introduction

Alexander the Great has been the subject of more than 25,000 books — this, in itself, an extraordinary posthumous achievement. The majority of these books will, undoubtedly, mention Alexander's legacy: the Hellenistic period and the language of the Hellenistic world — Greek. The main centres for the diffusion of the Greek language were the cities founded by Alexander — the most renowned being Alexandria. However, the focus of this article is a more obscure linguistic accomplishment of Alexander the Great: his legacy to the English language.

His name in Greek is Alexandros (Arabic forms are Iskandar, Iskander or Sikandar) and his name matched his exceptional destiny: it means 'repeller of men' (Stewart 1993: 239). Arrian, writing in the second century CE, stated: "It is my belief that there was in those days no nation, no city, no single individual beyond the reach of Alexander's name" (Arrian 1971: 398). The observation is no less true in the present. Alexander's name, as well as deeds, survives in numerous linguistic artefacts. All words have a history in the etymological sense but, as will be demonstrated, some also have a history in the historical sense.

A talismanic name

When Macedonians sing in the folk-song, 'King Alexander, you great Macedonian, your name will never die. You will shine like a star through the ages', they unmistakably panegyrize Alexander III (356-323 BCE) — not his ancestral namesakes: Alexander I and Alexander II. It was Alexander III who immortalised the name 'Alexander'. Thus, when a child was (and is) named 'Alexander' or one of its derivative forms, it was in order to imbue the newborn with the qualities of the heroic, invincible conqueror.

The simile **as brave as Alexander** is used to describe someone who possesses the attributes of bravery, prowess and courage. These traits could be reproduced by appellation at birth or by magical means in the womb. For instance, a Roman stele outside the town of Philippi was popularly known as the 'stall of the mare of Alexander the Great'. From this stele, Macedonian villagers used to scrape marble dust which was

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dispensed to pregnant women so that they could produce boys as brave as Alexander the Great (Sakellariou 1988: 387-88).

Tailor-made poems

The Greek *Alexander Romance* was translated into Latin in the 4th century CE. This, in turn, was translated during the medieval period into every major, and minor, language including ancient Egyptian, Ethiopic, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, Turkish, Bulgarian, Serbian, Czech, Polish, Magyar, Romanian, Italian, Spanish, French, Dutch, English, Scots, German, Norwegian, Swedish, Russian, Hindustani, Mongolian, Siamese, and the languages of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago (Ismail Hamid 1983: 143; Stoneman 1991: 7).

The *Romances* spawned heroic poems and another of Alexander's linguistic legacies was the term **Alexandrine**. It refers to an iambic verse in English or French, of 12 or 13 syllables, divided into two parts between the sixth and seventh syllable. Alexandrines were thus named because they were first used in a French metrical *Romance* of Alexander. The final line of the following Spenserian stanza is an example (cited in *Brewer* 1993: 31):

A needless Alexandrine ends the song,
Which like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along.

A man of religions

Cross-cutting the colossal linguistic lattice of Alexander *Romances* and Alexandrines were the sacred books of the monotheistic world religions. Alexander found his way into the Bible (Daniel 8: 3-25; 11: 3-4) and the Qur'an (18: 82-96). In a series of anachronisms, Alexander became a pious Christian and a devout Muslim (Ismail Hamid 1983: 142).

Jewish legends of Alexander also abounded. The most popular was the legendary encounter in Jerusalem between Alexander and the Jewish high priest recorded by the historian Josephus (c. 38-100 CE). Nevertheless, predating this historical myth was the historical reality. The word **synagogue** is traced to the decree issued by Alexander the Great regarding the freedom of worship of the various Jewish assemblies (Martis 1984: 61-62).

Philosopher-in-arms meets philosopher-in-tub

Alexander, who was tutored by the philosopher Aristotle, was widely recognised as a 'philosopher-in-arms' (Hamilton 1969: xxxi). The Greek philosopher Diogenes (c. 400-325 BCE), founder of the Cynic school, was widely recognised as an eccentric: he lived in a wooden tub in mockery of worldly possessions. The celebrated meeting in Corinth between Alexander and Diogenes generated a memorable dialogue.

Alexander came upon Diogenes, who was lying in the sun, and the king invited him to ask of any favour he chose. The great philosopher simply requested that the king move aside as he was blocking the sun. Later, one of Diogenes' pupils joined Alexander's

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expedition and embroidered or concocted the king's answer: **If I were not Alexander, I should be Diogenes** (Arrian 1971: 349-50; Hamilton 1969: xxv). The epigram still retains philosophical currency.

Of knots and destiny

Of Alexander the Great, one commentator concludes that his greatest contribution to the history of the world was made by "severing 'the Gordian Knot' with the Greek past" (Touratsoglou 1999: 26). Figuratively, the **Gordian knot** means any apparently inextricable difficulty or deadlock and the figure of speech **to cut the Gordian knot** means to solve a problem by drastic measures or, alternatively, by evading the conditions.

The historian Plutarch (c. 46-120 CE) tells the episode of a knotted cord around the shaft of an ancient wagon, with which Alexander was confronted at Gordium (present-day Turkey) in 333 BCE. An oracular prophecy held that whosoever untied the knot was destined to become master of all Asia. None had succeeded in undoing the knot since the ends of the strands were impossible to find. Alexander solved the dilemma by cutting the knot apart with a decisive stroke of his sword, announcing, 'I have undone it!' (Arrian 1971: 105).

Of sex and mortality

After Alexander's victory in the battle of Issus (333 BCE), the family of the Persian King, Darius, fell into his hands. The fact that the women of the royal household were treated with chivalry and decorum impressed all biographers. Many stories were told of Alexander's continence and his consideration for women (Lane Fox 1986: 57). His behaviour gave rise to the saying **the continence of Alexander**, used for any man of self-restraint and chivalrous values.

Historians have offered additional insights into the proverbial continence of Alexander, suggesting it was not solely the expression of moral scruple. Plutarch related that for Alexander only two activities made him conscious of his mortality: sex and sleep. Alexander's asceticism was often equated with his will to power: "self-mastery translated into mastery over others" (Stewart 1993: 185). This mastery was also consolidated by three dynastic marriages: to a Bactrian noblewoman in 327 BCE and to two Persian princesses in 324 BCE (Stewart 1993: 181-82).

The absent beard

Unlike all previous Macedonian kings, Alexander was beardless, a feature which his enemies ridiculed as effeminate, but Alexander's beardless fashion set a precedent for all his successors (Lane Fox 1986: 40). The term **Alexander's beard** is an intriguing turn of phrase for it denotes the exact opposite. Once Alexander had instituted the fashion, legend later had it that he ordered the whole Macedonian army to shave — the rationale being that beards provided a handhold for the enemy in close combat (Renault 1983: 66).

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Thus, 'Alexander's beard' was the distinguishing mark of a smooth chin and it was also the mark of the eternally youthful hero, in imitation of the beardless Greek gods sculpted in their divine youthfulness. The young Alexander ascended the throne aged 20, was crowned Pharaoh at the age of 24, and conquered the Persian Empire when only 25. Interestingly, in Persian manuscript illustrations, Alexander is often remade in the image of Persian kings, that is, bearded (Fildes & Fletcher 2001: 93).

Crossed thoughts

The expression **You are thinking of Parmenio and I of Alexander** refers to a situation in which two minds are thinking at cross-purposes. It originated in a tale about Alexander and one of his generals, Parmenio. Traditions maintain that persistent hostile relations existed between the two men: one in his early twenties commanding the other in his mid-sixties. In this tale, Alexander's words are reputed to have been: 'I consider not what Parmenio should receive, but what Alexander should give' (*Brewer* 1993: 30).

A Greek tug-of-war

The adage **When Greek joins Greek, then is the tug of war** alludes to a fight between two men or armies equally matched in courage and capability: in other words, the contest will be severe (*Brewer* 1993: 549). The expression originated in Nathaniel Lee's drama *Alexander the Great*, in reference to the stubborn resistance of the Greek cities to Alexander and his father, Philip — historical events which occurred prior to Alexander's accession to the throne in 336 BCE.

Two Alexanders

The Greek painter Apelles (flor. 352-308 BCE) was Alexander's official artist, considered by some as possibly "the greatest painter of antiquity" (Sakellariou 1988: 184). The opaque phrase **only two Alexanders** is taken from a statement attributed to Alexander the Great: 'There are but two Alexanders — the invincible son of Philip, and the inimitable painting of the hero by Apelles' (*Brewer* 1993: 30). The phrase may be applied to the superlative work of any artist.

Countless Alexanders

While he was alive there were 'only two Alexanders'; after the demi-god's death in 323 BCE, Alexanders proliferated. His name spoke the universal language that all men of ambition understood: youth, glory, power, invincibility, and immortality. Multitudes of men tried to emulate the greatness of Alexander or imagined themselves his peer in heroic deeds and military genius.

Julius Caesar (c. 102-44 BCE) invited comparison with Alexander by visiting Troy in his footsteps and by erecting an equestrian statue of himself, astride a horse plundered from an Alexander monument (Grant 1969: 161, 196). An oft-cited anecdote from Caesar's history exhibits the extent of Alexander's spell. While reading a history of the latter, Caesar began to weep "because Alexander had died at the age of 32, king of so

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many peoples, and he himself had not yet achieved any brilliant success" (Lane Fox 1986: 26).

Emperor Augustus (63 BCE-14 CE) had many of his portraits bear a likeness to Alexander and, conversely, many of the portraits of Alexander resembled his own figure (Andronikos et al. 1980: 13). Augustus also bequeathed to history an aphorism inspired by Alexander. After the emperor had journeyed to Alexandria to the tomb of Alexander the Great, he was asked if he wished to see the mausoleum of the Ptolemies, Alexander's successors. His famous riposte was: 'I came to see a King, not a row of corpses' (cited in Fildes & Fletcher 2001: 159).

Of the hundreds who styled themselves Alexanders, it is only possible to catalogue but a few: Sultan Husayn Mirza (1473-1506) of the Persian Safavid dynasty, who had his own features portrayed in manuscript illustrations of Alexander; Raja Iskandar Shah of Perak in the Malay Peninsula, who chose the regnal title 'Iskandar Zulkarnain' (Alexander the Great) upon accession in 1752; and Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), who kept Alexander's history as bedtime reading and whose favourite artwork was *Alexander's Victory* (for details, see, Andaya 1979: 161; Andronikos et al. 1980: 19-20; Lane Fox 1986: 26).

The most fortunate were honoured with the title 'Alexander'. John Hunyadi, the Voivode of Transylvania who later became Regent of Hungary, assumed the leadership of the Romanian forces, thereby blocking the Ottoman advance in front of Belgrade in 1456. Hunyadi's heroism and courage earned him the attribution of 'a second Alexander the Great' in popular Greek songs (Fossier 1986: 335). The accolade of 'Alexander of the North' was conferred on Carl XII (r. 1697-1718), a great warrior-king of Sweden, because of his military achievements (*Brewer* 1993: 30).

CONCLUSION

The name of Alexander is invoked as a word of power in Ethiopic spells (Budge 1978: 277), and the word still weaves its spell in the form of a talismanic name or as a figurative expression. Perhaps, it is not hyperbolical to read Alexander's brief but brilliant life as a manual in how 'to cut the Gordian knot' — of the Greek parochial past, of entrenched systems of governance, and of outmoded military strategies.

Indeed, much of the conflict between Alexander and his general Parmenio stemmed from tactical issues. If the great king had been thinking like Parmenio instead of Alexander, he would never have conquered the known world, nor received the title 'the Great', which was bestowed upon him several decades after his death by Roman playwright Plautus.

The phrase 'only two Alexanders' was a fitting tribute to his gifted artist Apelles. Unfortunately, none of Apelles' paintings is extant and, similarly, of the works by his official sculptor, Lysippus, no certain original survives. Although these tangible artefacts of Alexander have vanished, there remains a historical museum of his linguistic artefacts.

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Despite the passage of two millennia, his linguistic treasures can still be found in English, as international a language as Greek once was in the ancient Hellenistic world.

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