

FRANCISCO JAVIER GÓMEZ ESPELOSÍN

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Interviewed by

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Francisco Javier Gómez Espelosín is one of the most renowned researchers of the Greco-Roman studies in the Spanish-speaking world. A student of Lasso de la Vega and García Moreno, among others, his research has been focused on Hellenistic studies and the Iberian Peninsula in Antiquity. Some of his works include *Introducción a la Grecia antigua* (Madrid: Alianza 1995); *Los griegos: un legado universal* (Madrid: Alianza 2003); *Iberia, mito y memoria* (Madrid: Alianza 2007); *Historia de Grecia: Planteamientos y recursos didácticos* (UAH 2012).

Within Hellenistic studies, his outstanding erudition and curiosity have made him a reference for scholars of ancient geography and a model to be imitated by those who dedicate themselves to the studies of Macedonia and Alexander the Great in our country.

His works on ancient geography include *Tierras fabulosas de la antigüedad* (UAH 1995), *El descubrimiento del mundo: geografía y viajeros en la antigua Grecia* (Madrid: Akal 2005) and *Geografía de lo exótico: los griegos y las otras culturas* (Madrid: Síntesis 2019). He is a founding member of the international association GAHIA (Geography and Historiography in Antiquity), which aims to study ancient geographical thought and its implications for Greco-Roman historiography. From his work in GAHIA, he has coordinated such significant volumes as the homage to Professor Pietro Janni, *La letra y la carta: descripción verbal y representación gráfica en los diseños terrestres grecolatinos: estudios en honor de Pietro Janni* (UAH 2016). One of his passions within this field—which has flourished so substantially through his own studies—is travel. This is reflected in a vast number of articles (“The problem of the credibility of travel narratives in Greek literature”, *Geographia antiqua* 19, 2010,

163-182) and books (*Relatos de viajes en la literatura griega antigua*, Madrid: Alianza 1996) in which he has addressed this specific topic.

His interest in travel has led him to focus on two great figures of antiquity: Herodotus (“*Heródoto, Libya y la geografía de los confines*”, José María Candau Morón, Francisco J. González Ponce, Antonio Luis Chávez Reino (eds.) *Libyae Lustrare Extrema. Realidad y literatura en la visión grecorromana de África: Estudios en honor del Profesor Jehan Desanges*, Sevilla: Universidad de Sevilla 2008, 235-252) and, above all, Alexander of Macedon.

In the figure of the Macedonian king, travel, geography and his love for Hellenistic studies merge. And this does so to such an extent that, to use a word of our interviewee’s liking, we could describe him as an “Alexandrologist”. In 1997, he embarked on a book with A. Guzmán Guerra (*Alejandro Magno: de la historia al mito*, Madrid: Alianza 1997) and since then it has become a recurring theme in his research. This is reflected in titles such as *La leyenda de Alejandro: mito, historiografía y propaganda* (UAH 2007) and *En busca de Alejandro: historia de una obsesión* (UAH 2015). He is also the editor of one of the most significant international companion works in Spanish on Alexander the Great, *El Imperio de Alejandro: aspectos geográficos e historiográficos* (UAH 2016). As principal editor of the publications service at the University of Alcalá de Henares (M. Mendoza, *La irreligiosidad de Alejandro*, Alcalá de Henares, UAH 2019) and thesis supervisor (B. Antela Bernárdez, *Alexandre e Atenas: Historia de Grecia: 338-323 a.C.*, 2004) he has helped to disseminate studies on Alexander among Spanish speakers.

All of this shows that, on his own merits, his worthy to become one of the key voices in our journal’s interviews.

[Interviewer]: ¿Can you talk us about your mentors and those who you consider your main influences?

[Gómez Espelosín]: I studied Greek Philology and not Ancient History, so my first teachers came mainly from that field. I especially remember Professor Lasso de la Vega, with whom I studied such a basic and fundamental subject as textual criticism, which has greatly conditioned my subsequent approach to the subject of ancient history and its sources, both from the teaching and research point of view. I even began to write my dissertation on the fragments of Euripides in Stobaeus under his direction, but, because of my early incorporation as High School’s Associate Teacher of Greek –a post I obtained the same summer I got my degree–, I was unable to continue with this work or to participate in his magnificent doctoral course on the Pindaric Ode. Despite this temporary withdrawal from university life, forced by the circumstances, I always had in mind the need to write my doctoral thesis as an essential requirement for undertaking the task of writing from an academic point of view, even if it was outside university life. However, I had to accommodate myself to the different destinations that secondary school teaching took me to. Already by then, I was fully convinced to devote my preferential attention to the field of history and culture rather than to the strict study of language or literature and, in fact, I always gave Greek history an important part in the Greek language courses I taught in high school. Finally, it was during my stay in Saragossa that I had the opportunity to meet Professor García Moreno, of whom I was a student in his doctoral course during his short stay as a professor at that university, and I asked him to direct my thesis project. His proposal to study the phenomenon of

urban rebellions during the Hellenistic period seduced me completely and, based on the methodology I had been learning with him in the aforementioned course on the indigenous rebellions in ancient Hispania, this is how I began my career as a researcher in the field of Ancient History. I also had the good fortune to meet Eduard Will in person, thanks to the invitation of Professor García Moreno to a summer course, and the conversations I had with him for a few days also enriched considerably my conceptual and methodological baggage when it came to tackling successive research topics. I must also mention in this section my Latin teacher at the High School, Doña Maria Luisa, who, with her classes, attracted to the field of Classical Philology a student aspiring to pursue degrees such as Journalism or Political Science.

¿How do you start of being interested in Alexander of Macedon?

My interest in the figure of Alexander arose somewhat by chance, since my field of research was initially focused on the Hellenistic period, which was the subject of my first academic publications. It was the proposal to write a book for Alianza Editorial, along with Antonio Guzmán, what prompted me to take a particular interest in the figure of the Macedonian monarch. Our initial idea was to depart as far as possible from the traditional outlines of biographies, which tended to characterise existing studies on the figure of the conqueror, and to draw up a more thematic approach, something different that would underline the problems that the historian must face when tackling such a task and that would also highlight broader issues, such as his relationship with the Greeks and the Iranians or the unquestionable relevance of his legendary configuration, already begun in his own time but later consolidated in the literary tradition of the so-called *Alexander Romance*. Although it was a dissemination book, our approach demanded extensive reading on the topic and an effort of critical innovation in its preparation, which surely had its consequences in the way I approached the question later on my own and in greater depth. In any case, I believe that the book broke somewhat the existing trend, at least within the Spanish academic production and many of the most popular books on Alexander, in which the purely narrative perspective of his biography, logically concentrated on the progressive development of the conquest of the Persian empire, was the predominant outline.

Do you dare to say how many books you can count in your personal library about Alexander? Which ones of those do you consider essential?

As a result of the aforementioned book in Alianza, I began an almost feverish impulse to acquire all those studies on the figure of Alexander that were accessible, both on the brand new and second-hand book markets and by photocopying existing articles, thus amassing what I consider to be an important collection in this field. I would not be able to quantify the number of books I own on the topic, but I can say that the essential studies –and some less essential but much-cited ones– are on my shelves. I have even been driven by a certain collector's zeal and, through tireless research, I have managed to assemble a more than remarkable bibliographical collection on the subject. The main references in this field are undoubtedly the various works of Bosworth –whom I was lucky enough to meet in person at Oxford–, those of Pierre Briant –whom I also met during his brief stay in Alcalá to take part in a summer course–, and those of Ernst Badian –now brought together in the volume prepared by Eugene N. Borza and Richard Stoneman– which contains the main articles devoted to the monarch. I must neither

forget the contributions of Waldemar Heckel and Frank Holt, which are equally indispensable.

In your own opinion, which is your greatest contribution to the study of Alexander?

Perhaps the attempt to offer an orderly and complete synthesis of the existing problems when approaching his figure, trying to highlight the burden left by the effects of his official propaganda and the mythology created around the character, orchestrated first by the monarch himself and then by his immediate successors, who based their legitimacy as rulers on the close association with his figure, which completely condition our approach to the authentic historical texture of that individual. The two monographs I published on the subject went in this direction. The first aimed at presenting those rhetorical elements existing in the preserved literary tradition, particularly in Arrian and Curtius, and the way in which mythology, propaganda and the effects of scarcely neutral and objective historiography are almost inextricably intertwined. The second aimed at providing as complete an overview as possible of the successive attempts to reach the real Alexander that have unfolded throughout history, starting with the first historians of his figure, pursuing an elusive historical reality that in most cases has been transformed into a veritable obsession with him and giving rise to a series of images, which are more or less suggestive or stimulating, but which do not quite fit together. Then, my focus on questions of ancient geography has also had its effect on the subject, prompting me to consider more closely certain aspects of the conquest that are closely related to this field.

How would you assess the situation of Macedonian Studies in Spain?

The Spanish tradition on Alexander and Macedonia in general would be worthy of a study that would highlight its limitations, at least until more recent times, and allow us to explain the absence of the scarce academic bibliography generated on the subject in the best-known international *Companions*. Indeed, not many Spanish scholars have worked on the issue. It should be borne in mind that most specialists in ancient history devoted their time to Rome or to the conquest and Romanization of Hispania, with very few dealing with Greece or the Near East. In fact, it has been philologists with their successive translations of Arrian, Diodorus and Plutarch (Antonio Guzmán) or Curtius (Francisco Pejenaute) who have given impetus to this field of study in our country. The study of Alexander had, therefore, to be based by necessity on the great works produced by foreign scholars, some of which have been translated, with better or worse fortune, into Spanish. Fortunately, things have changed, and the number of Spanish scholars dedicated to the topic has increased significantly. The very existence of this journal is an excellent example of the strenuous efforts to achieve a place under the sun for Spanish contributions on the topic, an objective which, with the unquestionable dedication and enthusiasm of its promoters, will surely be achieved in the very short term.

Have you been influenced by the *Achaemenid Studies*, and more concretely, by Pierre Briant's research?

Undoubtedly. Although I have already addressed the prominent role of Pierre Briant's work in a previous question, we must insist on the enormous importance of knowledge

of the Persian world for a better understanding of Alexander, an aspect that the French scholar has insistently pointed out throughout his work. His monumental history of the Persian Empire, his monograph on Darius III, many of his articles, and the work carried out on the website *Achaemenet* –providing indispensable information on the progress of studies in this field for non-specialists– constitute an indispensable tool for any historian of the Macedonian monarch. This role has also been played by the Achaemenid Studies project, originally initiated by the Dutch scholar Helen Sancisi-Weerdenburg and supported in its various volumes by other distinguished scholars, such as the orientalist Amelie Kuhrt –who also translated Briant into English–, and many others who have highlighted fundamental aspects of the Achaemenid world that have a clear impact on our understanding of Alexander. The volume devoted to the sources in that collection, which highlights the *topos* of Persian decline, is an essential contribution in this regard. Alexander’s famous ‘orientalisation’ can only be explained from this perspective, as well as the monarch’s good knowledge of the empire and of the most opportune routes to follow in the course of his expedition.

Your publications also include several articles on Philip V. What makes this king a unique character in the history of the Macedonian kingdom?

My interest in the figure of Philip V derives from my initial dedication to research on the Hellenistic period, being undoubtedly one of its most interesting figures for having faced a desperate struggle of resistance against the unstoppable Roman domination in the eastern Mediterranean. His attempt to turn Macedonia into a new great power within the complicated political landscape that he had to live through is another of the remarkable aspects of his figure. Faced with the expansionist ambitions of the Achaeans and Aetolians in the Greek world and the diverse interests of the new Anatolian monarchies –especially that of Pergamon– in the international context, Philip V tried to row against the tide and to save his kingdom at all costs by means of a tremendously ambitious policy which, however, required great skill in order to avoid a head-on collision with such a power as Rome. The confrontation finally came to pass, and the forebodings and warnings that Pyrrhus had already pointed out after his confrontation with Rome in southern Italy were realized. The prominent place the monarch occupies in the pages of Polybius also gives him a singular appeal, given the unfriendly attitude shown to him by the Achaean historian. At times, he even seems a tragic figure, as Walbank portrays him in a famous study under this title (*Philippos tragodoumenos*). His striving for the political survival of Macedonia in a context clearly hostile to the viability of such intentions, and the apparent greatness and dignity he displayed in the attempt, make him an enormously attractive figure for scholars of this period and of Antiquity in general.

Which other figures in Macedonian history do you see as having the greatest potential for study?

Without the slightest doubt, Olympias, who continues bearing her image as a ‘femme fatale’ constructed by her enemies who outlived her as the victors. Also worthy of attention are Alexander’s other half-sisters –notably Cynane–, the king’s own sister Cleopatra –turned into a ‘bargaining chip’ as a symbol of the Argead power in the all-out struggle of the Diadochi–, Perseus –the son of Philip V, who ended his days in Rome displayed in a humiliating triumph–, and possibly the so-called Pseudo-Philippus

–who tried, unsuccessfully, to mend a path to Macedonian independence from Rome that seemed even back then utterly unfeasible.

The article in this issue, “Alexander and the Ocean”, is a clear example of your two greatest passions: the figure of the Macedonian conqueror and ancient geography. Why was this branch of Alexandrian studies so neglected by researchers until recently? What can more publication on this subject bring us?

The geographical aspects of Alexander’s conquest have indeed been somewhat marginalized in Macedonian studies. Not even recent volumes, such as the *Brill’s Companion* or the *New History* compiled by Lawrence Tritle, offer any perspective on the subject. Curiously enough, the topic has only been addressed from the perspective of ancient geography, as it can be seen from the work that Joachim Gehrke devotes to the subject in *Brill’s Companion to Ancient Geography*. Another German scholar, Klaus Geus, has also devoted an important study relating Alexander’s conquests to Eratosthenes’ map of the ecumenical area. Even the geographical sequence of his conquests itself has only been approached in detail by works such as Paul Pédech’s general book on Greek geography and Jakob Seibert’s *Die Eroberung des Perserreiches durch Alexander den Grossen*. I believe it is essential to study the Macedonians’ perception of the Persian empire and the impact that the vastness of Asia may have had on their imagination during the course of their military experience across those territories, many of which, especially in the easternmost reaches of the empire, were virtually unknown. It has been repeatedly emphasized that Alexander’s expedition constituted a genuine revolution in geographical knowledge, but neither the precise extent of these advances nor the numerous conditions for a correct perception of space and its corresponding description in the course of a military campaign have been addressed. The condition and quality of our sources undoubtedly turn difficult the research of this nature, given the successive filters through which any kind of information in this field has had to pass, but comparison with other relatively better documented moments, such as the Roman conquest, can provide us with valuable clues about the gestation of this process. More direct sources, such as Julius Caesar, and the existence of a larger number of works dedicated to the subject, such as those of Patrick Le Roux or François Cadiou on the conquest of Hispania, or those of Nicholas Purcell, can be of great use to us in tackling a subject as complicated as this.

What do you consider to be the key aspects of the study of geography in Antiquity?

Undoubtedly, those related to the conception and perception of space or the elaboration of the so-called mental maps that configured the image of the orb, both at the level of scholars and specialists and in the more general field, where Daniela Dueck’s recent work, *Illiterate Geography in Classical Athens and Rome*, published this very year, stands out. The Center-Periphery scheme plays a fundamental role in this sense, both at the level of the perception of a State such as the Persian empire – which we have some indications of thanks to its royal commemorative inscriptions–, and at a more popular level –which operated in the reception of all the existing information conveyed through oral accounts–, written histories –in which geo-ethnographic digressions played a prominent role–, or other media, such as theatre or iconography –in which the information was much more condensed and schematic. The study of the ways in which this kind of knowledge was transmitted, and the typology of the agents among whom it was generated is also a fundamental aspect in this field, as it is the possible use of maps,

which is a controversial and polemical issue with contrasting opinions in both directions, well-argued and set out by their most illustrious defenders.

You are currently writing a monograph on this topic, could you give us an outline of your work?

It is a project that is taking longer than expected because of the repeated interruptions that other commitments are causing in the process of continuous writing and reflection that an undertaking of this nature requires for its culmination. My intention is to study the different kinds of geographical images that, in an intertwined and often inseparable way, were present in Alexander's actions, both in the preparation of the expedition and throughout its development, and even in the consequences that these events left on later imagination. Questions such as the possible initial conceptions available to the monarch and his court, those generated in the course of the conquest through direct experience of new territories or information received from various sources, the role of mythical or symbolic geography that inevitably imposed its schemes, the definition of a geography of power once the empire had been conquered, or the existence of different layers of information in our sources, were compiled at a much later time when knowledge was no longer exactly the same as it was at the time of the expedition and had been frequently updated. That is why I want to call it *The Geographies of Alexander*, rather than in the singular form, which may wrongly indicate that it is only a new, more or less detailed description of the different territories covered in the course of the march.

You have recently published a book entitled *In Search of Alexander: History of an obsession* (2015). To what extent can we get to know the historical Alexander and to what extent does the mythical Alexander interfere with our knowledge of him?

The difficulties of approaching the historical figure of Alexander are practically insurmountable in view of the numerous obstacles that stand in our way. It is extraordinarily illusory to compile a biography of him on the basis of the indications we find, above all, in Plutarch's work, which is almost the only one that provides us with news of this kind, which in practice are reduced to a series of anecdotes and clichés of little credibility, despite the efforts made by the Greek author himself to describe the character of his protagonist. It should not be forgotten in this respect that Alexander's biography is the first on that Plutarch wrote of the entire series, and this circumstance may be relevant when assessing its quality as a source of historical information. Beyond the repertoire of clichés and anecdotes, we only know a series of facts that can be more or less contrasted after the relevant comparison of the different authors who transmit the account of the campaign, albeit many of the stories appear in different versions, revealing the inconsistencies and contradictions existing within the preserved tradition. It is also no coincidence that all the surviving authors are from the Roman period and, therefore, they show an Alexander shaped precisely from this perspective, in a time and circumstances in which, more than the historical consistency of the character himself, other more contemporary issues were of concern, for which Alexander's story served as a background or political and moral enlightenment. The very configuration of an eminently legendary profile by the character and his propaganda apparatus has left its indelible traces in all subsequent tradition, notably conditioning our access to an increasingly distant and distant reality due to the different narrative and ideological layers that have been permanently accumulating in this sense. The fascination aroused by an archetype that can be molded according to the expectations and aspirations of

each generation, and even of each of the individuals who have dedicated part of their lives to the study of his figure, has also led to a sequence of different images that it is not always possible to fit into the same scheme, thus, facilitating the existence of different Alexanders, each one according to the right measure of its promoters.

Is there a book you would have liked to write but have not been able to?

When I have considered writing a particular book, I have always borne in mind the existence of a certain lacuna that I would like to fill as far as my modest possibilities allow. Both older books –such as *Tierras fabulosas de la Antigüedad*, *La imagen de España en la Antigüedad*, or *Egiptomanía*– and some more recent ones –such as *El descubrimiento del mundo*, *Memorias perdidas*, or the two monographs devoted to Alexander– seem to me to respond to this circumstance. In other cases, it was a matter of bringing together information that was dispersed and sectioned into different articles or monographs, such as *The Greek Miracle*, on the conception of the Greek world, or of Greece as it is usually called, which has prevailed up to the present day. In this sense, I would like to go deeper one day, if I have the time and the opportunity, into the phenomenon of the invention of Greece, which Paul Valéry said was the most brilliant creation of the modern imagination. The tenacity of a stereotype that has been repeated *ad nauseam* from one generation to the next, and its constant transmission through the channels of popular dissemination, never ceases to amaze me at a time when there are already numerous specialists who devote themselves to the study of Ancient Greece and have demolished several outdated or inconsistent clichés. The historical reality of the Greek world was much less refined and idealized than is commonly believed, and I believe that Burckhardt's famous statement that a prudent and sensible person would not want to live in the time of Pericles is rarely repeated. Among the great existing popularizers, only Mary Beard seems to insist on this aspect, which in no way removes the need to understand a complex and interesting world such as that of Antiquity, but better once it has been stripped of all its sweetened and idealistic charge that completely falsifies a much more complicated, violent and complex reality than this fetishist image of a stage full of philosophers and poets. I believe that this is a pending task to which numerous partial works have been devoted, above all concerning reception in different recent periods, but where I miss a synthesis that highlights those determining elements that have contributed to the process of invention of a similar model.