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**J. Degen, *Alexander III. Zwischen Ost und West. Indigene Traditionen und Herrschaftsinszenierung im makedonischen Weltimperium*. Stuttgart, Steiner Verlag, 2022, 489 pp. [ISBN 9783515132831].**

Paraphrasing some famous lines by Majakovsky, it can be rightly argued that of the life of Alexander, son of Philip every detail is known: yet, the life of Alexander III of Macedon (the Great) still deserves to be written and rewritten again. In the profusion of biographies that, at least since Droysen's time, almost every year enriches the landscape of the scholarly (and popular) literature in several languages around the world, it is surprising how little attention has so far been paid to the topic of the Empire built by Alexander (thus as an institution, functioning following specific rules of the game, and in accordance with well-defined languages) as opposed to the details of the military campaign and the psychology of the conqueror. In other words, even though some authoritative critical voices (especially Briant) have not failed to note the shortcomings of this methodological positioning, the phenomenon of Alexander the Great continues to be treated, Hegelian-style, as a one-off case (the cosmic-historical hero), rather than as a product, however peculiar, of the time in which he lived (as every attentive reader of *War and Peace* would suggest).

The implications of all this are manifold, significant, and not always adequately understood by scholars. This is particularly true, it should be noted, in the case of those who come from the background of Classics, which almost exclusive focus on the Greek (and secondarily Roman) world, both in turn systematically detached from the broader Mediterranean and Near Eastern context of which they were part and parcel, continues to affect, often negatively, contemporary research. The most immediate consequence of this backdrop is that the historical analysis of Alexander's actions during his lifetime and the overall assessment of the empire he built (not –only– conquered) continue to rely, almost exclusively, of the accounts of Greek and Latin authors, without taking into account the fact - of paramount importance, usually stressed in every introductory section to a work devoted to the topic, but then mostly forgotten once dealing with the evidence - that the available literary sources are nothing but the outcome of a process of transformation and interpretation by the primary authors (who took part to the campaign, later further filtered by well-read men such as Arrian or Curtius Rufus) of events that they only partly understood and that were at the same time adapted in deference to circumstantial interests, to a specific world-view, and not least in the wake of an influential tradition - with the Herodotan model being particularly influential - addressing a specific audience, and thus imposing specific constraints in terms of, for instance, themes and style: in other words, of literary genre.

Secondly, the now time-honored scholarly tradition on Alexander and his empire seems to have remained almost impervious to a systematic reflection on the meaning of the concept of kingship (with its consequent expressions, for instance in symbolic terms) in the territories conquered by the Argead; nor has it been adequately discussed - except, once again based on Greek and Latin sources, in terms of «Persianization», when not Orientalism - whether and, above all, how such a discourse on Empire might have impacted on the communication (and political) strategies adopted by Alexander in the course of his campaign and in the aftermath of the momentous conquest.

The first comprehensive and coherent attempt to answer these (and other) questions can rightly be considered *Alexander III. Zwischen Ost und West. Indigene Traditionen und Herrschaftsinszenierung im makedonischen Weltimperium* by Julian Degen. Methodologically rock-solid, a remarkable example of erudition in the wake of the loftiest German historiographical tradition, and at the same time a highly enjoyable read, this fine volume tackles the apparently most worn-out topic possible (*Alexander the Great between East and West*) from a radically new perspective, namely that of the interaction between different discursive frameworks for the purpose of constructing an imperial model before, during, and after the Macedonian conquest of the Persian Empire, down the road demonstrating that, in the absence of this highly sophisticated symbolic and negotiating endeavor, the much-celebrated Anabasis itself could never have succeeded.

To be fair, it is worth mentioning that Degen's work could benefit from a very recent (Stuttgart 2020) and influential precedent, namely the collection of essays entitled *The Legitimation of Conquest: Monarchical Representation and the Art of Government in the Empire of Alexander the Great* edited by Kai Trampedach and Alexander Meeus. However, what singles out *Alexander III. Zwischen Ost und West* is its author's first-hand knowledge of the Near Eastern context (not only Babylonian and Achaemenid, but also Assyrian): it is in fact against the backdrop of the traditions of kingship and within a discourse on what a universal Empire –predating the Argead dynasty by centuries– means, how such a polity is built, and how it stands up, that Degen succeeds in investigating in all their density episodes of Alexander's campaign that otherwise, in the light of the accounts provided by classical authors alone, remain incomprehensible and the interpretation thereof inevitably ends up being reduced (in trivialized) to this or that variation of an Alexandrian psychogramma. This is an approach which, despite its clearly discernible Romantic roots (and in some cases shamelessly colonial, as masterfully illustrated by Christopher Schliephake in his *On Alexander tracks*), has by no means lost its appeal, and against which on several occasion Degen rightly takes a highly critical stance.

Following a detailed introduction (11-51) devoted to a wholesome survey of the vexatae quaestiones still taunting contemporary scholarship and an exposition of the methodological principles underlying the subsequent treatment, the volume is divided into three parts, each of which explores different contexts, aspects, and strategies underlying Alexander's construction of his role as universal and legitimate monarch. The, so to speak, Western section of the essay focuses on the relationship between Alexander and the Corinthian League (52-249). Against an established tradition of scholarship insisting on the instrumental nature of the league on the one hand and, on the other, claiming its progressive loss of relevance as the campaign moved towards the East, Degen instead emphasizes how the role as hegemon of the Greek world taken on by Alexander upon Philip's death should rather be understood as one of the king's self-representations in the context of a multicultural empire, demonstrating several times through the chapter how this role never lost its importance. This is because Greece, and Macedon, being part of Alexander's domains, compelled him to deal with audiences (the city élites, the Aegean court, the army) whose expectations and interests he could not afford to ignore. Based on these assumptions, famous –and hitherto furiously debated– episodes such as the burning of Persepolis or the granting of ἐλευθερία and αὐτονομία to the cities of Asia Minor finally receive adequate context, and become comprehensible, among other things, as phases of a bidirectional negotiation strategy aimed on the one hand at sanctioning Alexander's position and, on the other, that of his

sparring-partners in the context of an Aegean world in which the retreat of Achaemenid influence opened up entirely new political horizons.

Heading Eastwards, the sections devoted to the relationship between Alexander and Babylonian kingship on the one hand (250-301) and his *imitatio Persica* on the other (302-408) demonstrates in a careful and exhaustive manner the extensive familiarity of the Argead court with the mental maps and language of an imperial tradition, that of the Ancient Near East, which for centuries if not millennia represented the inescapable touchstone against which to measure the (in)success of any project of universal rulership in Eurasia –probably with the sole exception of China. Thus, to name but a few particularly instructive examples, incidents such as Hephaestion’s lavish funerals (299-300), the expedition beyond the Syrdaryo (363-375) or the search for traces of Dionysos’ passage across India (382-402) suddenly lose their episodic character –the frenzy of a megalomaniac who set out as a brave and sober conqueror and turned into a debauched tyrant which is dear to an inveterate tradition of moralists - suddenly revealing themselves to be astute symbolic actions and carefully considered positionalities endowed with multiple meanings targeting different audiences in different ways and consciously adopted by Alexander within the framework of an agonistic dialogue with the only model of universal Empire available to him: the Ancient Eastern tradition that the empire of Cyrus and Darius had in turn adopted and developed to its extreme limits. The outcome is a landmark achievement, destined to significantly influence future research on both Alexander’s time (and its context) and the Hellenistic world which, it is usually argued, resulted, by no means *ex novo*, from this contested dialogue between East and West.

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