
IAN WORTHINGTON

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Interviewed by

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Ian Worthington has been a brilliant voice concerning Ancient Greek History during the last decades. Within his academic production, very diverse in themes, topics and interests, different approaches stand out on Macedonia, Philip and Alexander, side by side with his interest also on the voice of Demosthenes (side by side in Worthington's work with other orators) or the history of Athens. Born in 1958, this Englishman studied Classics in Hull and Durham. He received the highest title of Curators's Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Missouri in 2013, among other prominent awards. He has also taught in many different institutions and countries, including University of New England (Australia) and University of Tasmania. Co-editor with Joseph Roisman of the seminal (and to some point, inaugural) Blackwell's *Companion to Ancient Macedonia*, he is also editor-in-chief of Brill's *New Jacoby*, and, for those who know him personally, a kind, amazing human being (with a great sense of humor!).

[Interviewer]: **How did you get interested in Classics?**

[Worthington] I started reading Theology when I went to university at Hull but halfway through the first semester decided it wasn't for me. A move to Classics seemed a logical one and so I transferred into that department.

How was your time as a student? Did you have a professor who led your path towards a research career?

My time as a student had its moments, shall we say. My first year was a bit of a blur – first time away from home, living with seven other guys in a student house, six of us in the rugby club, so it was wine, women, and song (not always in that order) for much of

the time. I only scraped through my first-year exams; I had a meeting with the professor, Frank (A.F.) Norman, who said ‘not a great year, Worthington, better do better or we’ll drop you to pass degree’. That was a jolt, so I cut back on the partying by about 50% and worked harder!

One lecturer I had who influenced me the most was Tim (T.T.B.) Ryder. He was tough but fair and he knew his stuff. He used to mark essays with a red pen for content and a green one for grammar and spelling, so my essays would come back looking like Christmas wrapping paper. We stayed in contact after I graduated, and he was always a supporter. I sent him copies of my books and when my wife and I visited him one time he told me he was proud of me: that meant the world to me. I dedicated my recent *Last Kings of Macedonia and the Triumph of Rome* (OUP 2023) to him; he died before it was published, and I wished he could have seen it.

Who were the authors that you feel as referential influences when you were a student or an early-career researcher? And later on, there was any author who you feel changed your way of understanding Antiquity?

In this respect probably Peter Rhodes was my biggest influence. I did my MA under him on the Pisisratids, and he changed my approach to everything, especially when it came to using source material. What I learned from him I still carry with me today. Another huge influence on me was Nick (N.G.L.) Hammond, not only for his brilliance but also for how he was as a person. I met him the first time when I was doing my PhD at Monash University and he treated what I was saying with so much interest and respect that I’ve tried to be the same when it comes to dealing with people, especially graduate students and ECRs.

Concerning Ancient Macedonian Studies, you are a referential author thanks to your frequently-cited books and papers, but also by the volume you co-edited with J. Roisman, *A Companion to Ancient Macedonia*. Can you explain how this work was conceived? Is there any further chapter you would have liked to add, either at that moment or later on?

The companion was conceived, to be honest, over a rather boozy dinner with Al Bertrand of Blackwell (who was paying) at the San Diego APA. This was the time when there seemed to be a new companion to something-or-other published every day, but there wasn’t one on Macedonia; it seemed logical to plug this major gap. Once it was underway I had several other commitments, not least *BNJ*, on my plate so I asked Yossi Roisman if he would help as co-editor, and he agreed. He probably regrets that to this day!

As for adding to it, I’d want more archaeological material in it. Indeed, the original proposal included a second volume devoted to the archaeology, but for various reasons that fell through and much of that material ended up in Robin Lane Fox’s *Brill Companion*¹. It would be good even to update the bibliography in our companion – important work has been done since then by e.g. Kottaridi or Saripanidi and that should be included.

¹ R. LANE FOX (ed.) (2011): *Brill’s Companion to Ancient Macedon. Studies in the Archaeology and History of Macedon, 650 BC-300 AD*, Leiden.

Many years have passed by since its publication, but how do you feel about the impact, reception, and influence this book had (and still has) on the learning and understanding of Ancient Macedonia?

I'm proud of this book as it was the first of its kind and was really needed, so it's a standard in ancient Macedonian studies even if it's getting a little long in the tooth now and more recent bibliography, as I said above, needs to be included. The fact that so many of its chapters are still cited shows it's standing the test of time.

You have vastly researched and published on Demosthenes, Philip, and Alexander himself. How did you become interested in their era? What did catch you the most?

In my final year at Hull (1979), I did as my special subject Tim Ryder's 'Demosthenes and Macedon' course, which was not for the faint hearted! You can tell something about the depth into which we got as it was a whole year course, but we got only to the death of Philip. But that really got me interested in Philip more than anything else. Then I went to Durham as I said to do an MA on Pisistratid Athens but never forgot about the fourth century Peter Rhodes suggested I do something on this for a PhD and Douglas MacDowell was the one who said there's work to be done on Dinarchus. Once I'd knocked off my PhD and got the commentary out on Dinarchus I turned more to 'the big three' of the fourth century and the first Alexander book led to Philip, which led to Demosthenes, which led to *By the Spear*, so it was all a natural progression really.

Demosthenes has been object of many different interpretations throughout history. What are your thoughts about him and his resistance to Macedon?

I see Demosthenes as a mixture of cynical opportunist and patriot. Whether he or Aeschines correctly interpreted Philip's ambitions and so proposed the better policy to deal with Macedonia is controversial. But since Philip could not have allowed an independent Athens to retain its influence in Greece after the collapse of the Peace of Philocrates, Demosthenes' policy, though flawed, was arguably the better one –it was the right thing to do. I think this was recognized by the Athenians in 280, when with the benefit of half a century of hindsight they accepted that he had acted patriotically and properly as Demochares' decree attests: 'he had 'advised the people to adopt many other excellent measures and of all his contemporaries he performed the best public actions in the cause of liberty and democracy'.

Your book about Philip can now be considered a Modern Classic, but which book of yours is the one that makes you feel prouder of it? Which is the one you enjoyed most writing it?

That's a tough one because I enjoyed (and enjoy) writing everything, and vanity aside, I'm proud of everything I do. *Philip* pretty much wrote itself in about a year as I had a clear idea what I wanted to say. In that respect it wasn't as 'enjoyable' as books that took me out of my 'comfort zone', such as my *Athens After Empire, From Alexander to Hadrian* (OUP 2021) or *Last Kings of Macedonia* or the one I've just finished on Macedonia under the Argead kings (which, touch wood, will be out with OUP next year). If push comes to shove, I'd have to say my most enjoyable and personally

rewarding is my recent co-authored *The Military Legacy of Alexander the Great: Lessons for the Information Age* (Routledge 2024). My co-author Michael Ferguson is a decorated U.S. army combat vet, and we also had a conclusion written by Gen. H.R. McMaster. I had to be on my 'a-game' working with the likes of them! I'm currently writing a book on Roxane (in OUP's 'women in antiquity' series) so that too will be a new direction and I'm sure an enjoyable challenge.

In 2016, you published a monograph on Ptolemy I. What do you think it singles him out from the rest of Diadochi?

I was never comfortable with the usual views of Ptolemy as a defensive ruler or secessionist wanting only Egypt and started thinking more about him as I was working on *By the Spear*. Things like his desire to marry Alexander's sister, his move into Greece in 306, the supposed will of Alexander, did not align with the usual take on him but more with someone out for power, and that was the thesis of the book. In addition, I remember Richard Billows writing along the lines of if Alexander hadn't died when he did, Monophthalmus would just be a name to us, and Ptolemy would have been the same. I wanted to put him more centre stage then and show he was no different from the Diadochoi in wanting to rule a larger slice of the old empire and becoming a second Alexander with the attempt on Macedonia.

Although during your career you have constantly moved, since 2017 you have been a professor at Macquarie University (Australia). Many brilliant scholars have worked on Alexander and his period from Australia and New Zealand (maybe since Badian?). Can we talk of a distinctive Oceanic School of Ancient Macedonian Studies? What do you think colleagues from Australia and New Zealand have contributed most to the study of the Age of Alexander and the Hellenistic world?

I wish we could talk of that but sadly we can't. When I first went to Monash to do my PhD in 1984 Australia could boast scholars (not just in Greek history) like Brian Bosworth, Bob Milns, Jack Ellis (my PhD supervisor), Peter Bicknell, Alan Henry, Michael Osborne, Robert Ussher, Paul Weaver, Trevor Bryce, Tony Boyle, to name a few. But over the years departments or programmes have been shuttered or offerings reduced and 'household names' have not been replaced by similar. There's no need to rehearse the contributions of Bosworth, Ellis, and Milns to Macedonian studies of course.

Most of the interviews with Classical scholars focus on their research and publications, but, behind the scholar, there is a person. How is Ian Worthington?

I have it on good authority that Ian Worthington is doing well, apart from the usual aches and pains that come with age. He fell victim to Hallyu a few years ago and is addicted to K-dramas and K-pop (IU and Blackpink his favourites), even learning some Korean, and discovering that factionalism in Macedonia and the Joseon era have interesting parallels and is toying with the idea of working on them next.

I know we both share common, non-academic interests, such as Hard Rock and Heavy Metal music... It still shocks some people, but many other fellow Classicists are metalheads too. Do you think Classics and Metal music are mutually appealing? Did you imagine, back in the 80s, that books and conferences would be devoted to exploring the connections between them? What other hobbies do you have? Do you feel they help you to disconnect and think clearer when researching a given topic?

Borja knows all too well my musical tastes –a few months ago, my wife and I were dining at a restaurant in Melbourne when she told me to look around as there was someone she recognized but couldn't place his name: it was Alice Cooper, and Borja was one of the first I emailed with a photo! I think the largest percentage of academics who are headbangers I came across was when I gave talks in Brazil in 2018 –and someone I know in Belo Horizonte is flying to England to see Oasis at Wembley!

The carryover of Classics to Metal is not a surprise when you look at how the ancient world lends itself to such music –we can all give examples but think of Iron Maiden's 'Alexander the Great' on their *Somewhere in Time* album. And of course, not just antiquity –remember Rick Wakeman's *Myths and Legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table* (1975!)? Not to mention it's a natural progression from other musical genres like opera drawing on the classics. Whether AC/DC will ever write an 'Agamemnon' is another matter.... I'm also not surprised about the books and conferences focusing on rock and classics –or really, rock and history; we have them on cinema, so music is only to be expected.

As for other hobbies, I mentioned my interest in all-things Korean above, plus my wife and I enjoy taking advantage of Sydney's fantastic cultural (especially theatre) and restaurant scenes. I don't really disconnect –I try to, but inevitably if something is ticking away in my mind it ambushes me whatever I'm doing. For example, I had only nebulous ideas for my take on Roxane. Then while watching the brilliant K-drama *My Mister* a line in it resonated with me –'The scars I want to hide the most end Up becoming my greatest weapon' – and I realised I'd got my Roxane!

Finally, may I please ask you to share your opinions on the actual situation of Ancient Macedonia's scholarship and what topics you think scholarship on Alexander's age and Hellenism has to focus on in the near future?

I probably won't make friends with this, but I think the **historical** study of fourth century Macedonia at least is a bit in the doldrums at present as too much of the same thing keeps appearing. Coincidentally, the other day I reread Davidson's 'Bonkers about the Boys' in the *London Review of Books* in 2001 and realized I agree with quite a lot of it now. It's time to move past the laser-beam focuses on Quellenforschung and the tired revamps of yet another reappraisal of the Philotas affair or ho-hum reworking of things said multiple times as too many arguments to say *anything* new are a stretch. I think it important to have much more cooperation between historians and archaeologists as there's still too much of a 'ne'er the twain shall meet'. Vivi Saripinidi's work had a great impact on me as I was writing my recent book on the Argeads, for example. I think there's still work to be done on Macedonia from Cassander to Philip V; Yuri Kuzmin is, I think, writing a book on Demetrius II, and that's *needed*. There's also scope for a more in-depth treatment of Macedonia's

relations with other Hellenistic kingdoms, which all too often get treated only when one plays a role at that time in the other.