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Alexander the Great and
Aristotle's Philosopher King

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Alexander III of Macedon has often been regarded as the prodigal student of Aristotle, acting on and bringing into fruition his tutor's ideas of what it is to be a good ruler¹. While this was fulfilled in part with regards to Alexander's battlefield prowess and his embodying a god-like status as ruler, there are many other ways in which he falls short of Aristotle's ideal philosopher king². Such examples include disregarding the advice of his men and being guided more by passion than by reason. In this paper, I will assess evidence for both of these positions with regards to how Alexander both did and did not fit Aristotle's idea of a perfect ruler as described in his *Politics*.

Divinity and the Perfect Ruler

The line that is most often quoted in support of the divine status of Aristotle's philosopher king is in Book III, Chapter 13 of Aristotle's *Politics*, where he says that "If, however, there be some one person... whose virtue is so pre-eminent that the political virtues of all the rest admit of no comparison with his or theirs, he or they can no longer be regarded as part of the state... Such a one may truly be deemed a God among men³." This is where we get the intimations at the Divine Right of Kings, for the more someone has the ability to stand above

¹ Chance, Roger, *Until Philosophers are Kings: A Study of the Political Theory of Plato and Aristotle's Relation to the Modern State*, (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1968), 195.

Green, Peter. *Alexander of Macedon, 356-323 B.C.: A Historical Biography*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013). 57.

King, Carol J. "Macedonian Kingship and Other Political Institutions." in *Alexander the Great: A Reader*. Edited by Ian Worthington. Second edition. (London: Routledge, 2012). 32.

Tarn, W. W. "Alexander's Deification." in *Alexander the Great: A Reader*. Edited by Ian Worthington. Second edition. (London: Routledge, 2012). 325.

² Allen, Brooke, "Alexander the Great: Or the Terrible?," in *The Hudson Review*, vol. 58, No. 2 (Summer, 2005), pp. 220-230

Aristotle. "Politica," in *The Works of Aristotle*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett, Edited by W. D. Ross. (Oxford: Clarendon Press.1966) 1284a.10.

Chance, *Until Philosophers are Kings*, 212.

³ Aristotle, "Politica," 1284a.3-10.

Miller, Fred D. "Aristotle on the Ideal Constitution," in *A Companion to Aristotle*. Edited by Georgios Anagnostopoulos. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. 2009). 548.

Taylor, C.C.W., "Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, edited by Jonathan Barnes, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2006). 239.

Nagle, D. Brendan, "Alexander and Aristotle's "Pambasileus""", in *L'Antiquité Classique*, vol. 69 (2000), pp. 121.

everyone else and command the lives of thousands rather than just their own, the more it appears as though they have the gods on their side in being able to control the world around them.

Indeed, Alexander did promulgate that the gods were on his side, seen most clearly in his claims to divine parentage.

Son of Ammon

Alexander's mother, Olympias, had an enormous effect on Alexander's conception of his own divinity. Even from a very young age, Alexander was reared by her to think that he was descended, not just through the family bloodline, but by immediate parentage from the gods⁴.

The story she fostered in him was that she was visited one night by Zeus in the guise of a serpent, and this is what caused her to become pregnant with Alexander⁵. The ambition of

Olympias for her son grew along with him, for all through his upbringing, Alexander was groomed for the throne and told by Olympias to think of himself as a king in his own right⁶.

These thoughts did not escape him while he was conquering through Egypt, for his conquests of that land only strengthened his conception of divinity.

The most important event that occurred to solidify his godhead was his expedition to consult the Oracle of Siwah. The exact details of what transpired between the Oracle and Alexander are not particularly known, but it is generally understood that Alexander had inquired

⁴ Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 36.

Arrian. *The Landmark Arrian: The Campaigns of Alexander*. Translated by Pamela Mensch. Edited by James Romm, series editor Robert B Strassler. (New York: Anchor Books, 2010). 165

Fredricksmeier, E.A. "Alexander's Religion and Divinity." in *Alexander the Great: A Reader*. Edited by Ian Worthington. Second edition. (London: Routledge, 2012). 344.

Worthington, "Alexander's Aims: Introduction." in *Alexander the Great: A Reader*. Edited by Ian Worthington. Second edition. (London: Routledge, 2012). 59

Worthington, "Man and God." in *Alexander the Great: A Reader*. Edited by Ian Worthington. Second edition. (London: Routledge, 2012). 331

⁵ Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 36.

Arrian, *Campaigns of Alexander*, 165.

Fredricksmeier, "Religion and Divinity," 344.

⁶ Green, *Campaigns of Alexander*, 56 and 92

Fredricksmeier, "Religion and Divinity" 336.

as to his divine parentage⁷. What Arrian tells us is that he “heard what his heart desired,” if he even got a direct answer at all⁸. Another account states that the Oracle refused when Alexander wanted to consult with him. In response to Alexander’s continued protestations, the Oracle announced that “you are invincible!” which seemed to satisfy him⁹.

Whatever the response Alexander got, at the very least his conquering of Egypt strengthened his ties to godliness in the fact that the Pharaohs of Egypt were seen as being gods in their own right. Therefore, it made perfect sense to the Egyptians to regard him as a god and address him as “Son of Ammon¹⁰.” As the years went on, Alexander tried more and more to assert himself as a god-like ruler by attempting to instate *proskynesis*, or what could be described as ritual bowing, as a court practice. This, however, was met with great opposition from such people as Kallisthenes, Aristotle’s nephew and Alexander’s court historian, for such acts of obeisance were seen as being owed only to the gods¹¹.

This all seems to be well and good to achieve what Aristotle described as the perfect ruler. Alexander apparently got approval from the Oracle of Ammon at Siwah that what Olympias had told him was correct, and the ritual bows seemed an all too appropriate respect to pay to such a ruler who was so vastly superior to his subjects, as Aristotle claims the best ruler would be. The only problem, however, is that Alexander was going about such claims completely backwards from how Aristotle intended.

⁷ Arrian, *Campaigns of Alexander*, 105-106.

Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 272.

Nagle, “Pambassileus,” 127.

Worthington, “Alexander’s Aims,” 59.

⁸ Arrian, *Campaigns of Alexander*, 106.

⁹ Worthington, “*Alexander and Deification*,” 322.

¹⁰ Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 274.

¹¹ Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 372.

Arrian, *Campaigns of Alexander*, 169.

Brunt, P. A. “The Aims of Alexander.” in *Alexander the Great: A Reader*. Ed. by Ian Worthington. Second edition. (London: Routledge, 2012). 65.

Allen, “Alexander the Great, or Terrible?,” 227.

While Alexander's ideas of his own godhead grew and grew, it did not change the fact that, in Aristotle's views, a ruler is not chosen because he is himself a god, but because he demonstrates superior virtue to a degree that it surpasses everyone else's¹². It is this point that makes Aristotle's stance on government as being one of merit, not of divinity.

Virtue Politics

What makes a ruler godlike is not the fact that they themselves are gods, but because their virtue or excellence, described by Aristotle as *arete*, is so great that it is comparable, or even superior, to the laws in place to govern those of lesser virtue¹³. From what is apparent above, it definitely looks as though Alexander was claiming right to rule solely through his allegedly divine lineage. But, there are some ways in which Alexander showed himself to be superior in a more pragmatic than spiritual way. After all, Alexander was able to conquer his way to Siwah and beyond, and this ability to command troops marked him out as a superior military man beyond that of any other.

Outstanding Alexander

The speech that Alexander gives at Opis is a very telling statement of just how much had been accomplished under his leadership¹⁴. The lands that had been conquered under Alexander's command stretched from Egypt to India, going to the ends of the known world. The amount of territory traversed by Alexander rivals that of the gods Heracles and Dionysos, who themselves went as far as India¹⁵. For Alexander to walk so closely in their footsteps was a clear

¹² King, Carol J. "Macedonian Kingship and Other Political Institutions." in *Alexander the Great: A Reader*. Edited by Ian Worthington. Second edition. London: Routledge, 2012. 27-43.

Aristotle, *Politics*, 5.1310b

Taylor, "Politics," 246.

Nagle, "Pambassileus," 119 and 131.

Allen, "Alexander the Great, or Terrible?," 228.

¹³ Aristotle, *Politics*, 5.1310b and 1254b.5

¹⁴ Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, 286.

¹⁵ Fredricksmeier, "Alexander's Religion and Divinity," 346

sign of how close a relationship he shared with the gods. Not only had he traveled so far, but he was able to conquer so much thanks to an undefeatable ability to command. If the Oracle's prediction of Alexander being "invincible" was correct, it showed itself most aptly on the battlefield.

In every engagement Alexander entered, he came away victorious¹⁶. In both the battle of Gaugamila and the Issus, the Persian king Darius III turned in fear and fled the battlefield causing in his troops to fall into disarray and thus result in two decisive victories for Alexander¹⁷. Not just with armies, but also in hand to hand combat such as battling with the Malloi in India did Alexander prove his worth. He was engaged against dozens of enemies at once and still managed to hold them off until an arrow shot into his chest brought him down¹⁸. Even the Rock of Aornus, a mountain fortress said to be so high that no bird could mount it, and so impregnable that no army could take it, could not hold out against Alexander¹⁹. Even Heracles had tried to capture the fortress and failed. But, by raising a mound, the fortress was quickly overwhelmed by the Macedonians²⁰.

All of this demonstrates Alexander's virtue as a military commander, which was so superior that it left him undefeated for his entire career and allowed him to achieve feats unparalleled by others. But, there is another element that to Aristotle is essential to being a good ruler, or even a good person in general. This is *phronesis*, or 'practical wisdom,' and it is this

Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, 303.

¹⁶ Brunt, "Aims of Alexander," 65.

¹⁷ Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, 74-75 and 122.

Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 232 and 294.

¹⁸ Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, 245.

Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 420.

¹⁹ Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, 245.

Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 385.

²⁰ Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, 190.

element of practicality that makes Alexander vastly different than Aristotle's long-hoped-for philosopher king²¹.

Passion and Politics

Similar to his mentor Plato, Aristotle believed that a person ought to be guided by reason in order to lead a good life, and the key to being guided by reason is wisdom. But, this is an important point on which Plato and Aristotle differ, for while Plato advocated a purely theoretical kind of philosophical pursuit, regarded as *sophia*, Aristotle preferred a more practical kind of wisdom; *phronesis*²². As we look deeper into what this distinction means for Aristotle's Philosopher King, the more we come to see the deviance between it and Alexander.

Phronesis has the key distinguished of being 'practical' because the wisdom of the philosopher king ought to be applicable to the real-world that we live in, rather than mere theoretical realm that we think in. As part of this practicality, Aristotle encourages the statesman to "avoid impossibilities" when creating the perfect state²³. It could be argued that impossibilities were not an issue for Alexander, for most everything Alexander did was thought impossible until he made it possible. As we said previously, he was able to accomplish any endeavor set before him, and even the great Rock of Aornus, thought to be impregnable, was not impregnable to Alexander. Difficult though this debate may be between what 'could have' happened and what 'did' happen, a discussion can be held on the manner in which he went about achieving these goals.

²¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254b.5

²² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1277a.16.
Chance, *Until Philosophers are Kings*, 197.
Miller, "Ideal Constitution," 546.

²³ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1265a.17.
Chance, *Until Philosophers are Kings*, 197.
Chroust, Anton-Hermann, *Aristotle: New Light on His Life and on Some of His Lost Works*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press) 1973. 218

To help the prospective ruler stay in touch with what is realistic and practically possible, an excerpt attributed to a lost work of Aristotle's entitled *On Kingship* encourages the ruler to "listen to, and take the advice of, true philosophers. In so doing, he would enrich his reign with good deeds and not merely with fine words²⁴." This, again, is subject to debate depending on what exactly is meant by 'philosophers', for indeed, Alexander did have an active interest in philosophy. Alexander is known to have been a great admirer of Diogenes, and during his conquests of India, he matched wits with the *gymnosophists* he met there²⁵. But, it seems unlikely that Aristotle would wish the ideal ruler to stay away from philosophical abstraction, only to surround himself with other people who will be doing just that. It seems more appropriate to think of these other philosophers as being comparable to a council of other people with practical wisdom in their own unique *arete* or excellence. But, when we look at ways in which Alexander reacted to the advice of his subjects, or even his peers, we begin to see that Alexander drifts away from what Aristotle describes as the perfect king.

Disregard Troops

A sign of how well a leader considers the good of their followers is by assessing their morale and looking at how content they are to be under that leader's command. What is telling about Alexander's leadership is that his subjects rebelled against him, not once, but twice; first at the Hyphasis River in India and again at Opis near Babylon²⁶. Not only is it revealing that

²⁴ Chroust, *New Light*, 216.

²⁵ Liebert, Hugh, "Alexander the Great and the History of Globalization," in *The Review of Politics*, vol. 73, No. 4 (Fall 2011). 551.

Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, 274

Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 123 and 427

²⁶ Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, 227 and 283.

Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 408-409 and 454.

Badian, E. "Alexander the Great and the Loneliness of Power." in *Alexander the Great: A Reader*. Edited by Ian Worthington. Second edition. (London: Routledge, 2012). 367.

Nagle, "Pambassileus," 128.

Worthington, "Alexander the 'Great'?", 391.

Alexander's troops were so dissatisfied with his rule that they rebelled twice, but Alexander's reaction to their resistance gives an idea of how he felt about the relationship between ruler and ruled.

After having learned of disgruntled troops at the Hyphasis, Alexander called his battalion officers to him so that either he could convince them to continue or they could convince him to turn back. After having presented his case, Alexander then allows his officers to speak, of whom Koinos reluctantly steps forward. What is interesting is that Koinos opens his speech by saying that, though he speaks on behalf of the army, he will advise on "what will be most advantageous in the present circumstances and what will bring the most security in the future²⁷." Thus far, everything is going well according to what Aristotle would have wanted. As we can see, the King is seeking advice from someone who is more knowledgeable than him about the condition of his troops, and this advisor is giving him very practical advice.

The only problem, however, is that after being told that Alexander ought to return back to Macedonia to revive his exhausted troops, the King proclaimed that he will continue East, and anyone who turned back would be considered a deserter²⁸. Clearly, Alexander had no intent of following anyone's advice. From this, Alexander proceeded to give his troops the silent treatment by sulking in his tent, which is a very mild rebuff compared to what he did at Opis.

Having finally returned to Babylon, Alexander prepared to dismiss his older Macedonian troops to replace them with Persians²⁹. Dismayed that Alexander would not be returning his entire force home to Macedon and afraid that he was trying to continue his campaign with an

Worthington, "Alexander and Conspiracies: Introduction." in *Alexander the Great: A Reader*. Edited by Ian Worthington. Second edition. (London: Routledge, 2012). 357.

²⁷ Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, 231.

²⁸ Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, 232-233.

Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 410.

²⁹ Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, 283.

Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 454.

oriental fighting force, many of the soldiers began to protest and jeer at their commander. However, unlike at the Hyphasis, Alexander did not arrange for a council with his generals, but instead immediately took matters into his own hands and had thirteen of the major instigators executed on the spot. Once again, the King says that anyone who leaves will be regarded as a deserter and goes to put in his tent with a small number of Persian nobles to accompany him rather than Macedonians³⁰. Clearly, at this point, the idea of Alexander taking advice from anyone else on how he ought to rule does not hold true. The fact that Alexander was so quick to provoke made him a poor candidate for Aristotle's philosopher king in another aspect.

In chapter 16 of book III of the *Politics*, Aristotle discusses whether it is prudent for a nation to be governed by laws or by man. To this, he says that "he who bids the law rule may be deemed to bid God or Reason rule" since the law, to Aristotle, was reason uninhibited by passion. "But," he continues, "He who bids man rule adds an element of the beast; for desire is a wild beast, and passion perverts the minds of rulers³¹." It is with this in mind that we see how the idea of Alexander the Great being the embodiment of Aristotle's Philosopher King breaks down even further. Not only was Alexander passionate in the sense that he was short tempered, but he was passionate in the sense that he was full of boundless desire, and in the case of Alexander, the word to describe this kind of desire is *pothos*.

Pothos

Pothos appears repeatedly in biographies of Alexander including Arrian's *Anabasis Alexandrou*, and is used to describe the desire to achieve that which had not been accomplished, and is just beyond reach. We have already seen an example of this in Alexander's deeply rooted

³⁰ Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, 287.

Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 455.

³¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1287a.27.

Allen, "Alexander the Great, or Terrible?," 229.

Chance, *Until Philosophers are Kings*, 195-196.

desire to conquer the Rock of Aornus, which up until his time had remained untouched. Others include his desire to speak with the Oracle of Ammon at Siwah, to found the city of Alexandria in Egypt, and to travel East to conquer India and see Ocean all of which had less than strategic motives behind them. Perhaps the most costly example of Alexander's desire to achieve the unachievable was his desire to cross the Gedrosian Desert³².

Such a task as this had been attempted only once before, and with disastrous results. King Cyrus the Great of Persia had attempted the crossing, but survived with only seven people remaining in his entourage³³. The venture would prove to be no less devastating for Alexander and his troops. Where he started off with an original force of approximately 85,000 men, by the time he emerged from the desert, he had with him a scant 25,000; a mere 30% of what he had gone into the desert with³⁴. The startling thing about this is that it served no strategic purpose whatsoever. Alexander had just sailed his entire force down the Indus River, and it would have been just as feasible to keep the ships and follow along the coastline with the rest of his force.

This occurrence is perhaps the clearest example of how Alexander does not fit Aristotle's description of the Philosopher King as outlined in his *Politics*. Such desires to conquer and achieve the unattainable make Alexander a creature of passion, who is more eager to follow the whims of his spirit than listen to reason. His refusal to take the advice of others, nor focus on the wellbeing of his subjects, causes a definite lack of practical wisdom necessary for being a good ruler. Though Alexander may be godlike through his invincibility and virtue as a military strategist, this is not enough to make up for the fact that when he made decisions, he made them based on what his own interests were, and not of his countrymen.

³² Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 431
 Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, 258
 Worthington, "Alexander the 'Great'?", 391

³³ Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 431

³⁴ Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 435

The element that identifies Kingship, the more noble form of monarchy, from Tyranny, the perverted form of monarchy, in Aristotle's mind is how much the ruler governs for the good of the people rather than himself³⁵. Considering just how much Alexander ruled based on his own personal desires rather than reasoning what would be best for his people, it would be justifiable to say that Alexander the Great was not the Philosopher King that Aristotle had hoped for.

³⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1279b
Aristotle, *Politics*, 1314a
Chance, *Until Philosophers are Kings*, 212
Nagle, "Pambasileus," 127-128.

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