

Letters

Aristotle Letter to Alexander (ed. Swain, S. 2018. *Themistius, Julian, and Greek Political Theory under Rome: Texts, Translations, and Studies of four key works* (CUP)) (translation of a Greek political tract into Arabic: Swain places the date of its original Greek composition in the mid-Empire)

Aristotle wrote this as a response to the letter (of Alexander) and congratulated him on his conquest of Persia.

(1.1) The continuous nature of your exploits blunts admiration for them.

They have become something old that one is familiar with rather than something new that one admires. But we do not fail to share in the joy at your success because we consider happiness is your lot and because the popular saying that 'one who praises you tells no lie' is true of you. (1.2) News reached us that after the celebrated battle you joined at Babylon, your victory over Darius and his followers, the terrors you confronted and the hardships you endured during the war, you began to turn your attention to another area of your ambitions and aspirations. (1. 3) Even before this you found it necessary to give yourself time to reflect on benefitting the cities and establishing laws for them. For this is an important matter which demands reflection from you and brings you renown and a fair reputation. (1. 4) You are aware of what Lycurgus¹ gained by establishing laws for his city. Your superiority over a man who benefitted a single city will correspond to the scale of your kingdom and the number of your cities, and enduring fame and splendour will be yours because the establishment of laws guarantees prosperity to the people and permanent good order and tranquillity among your subjects.

...

(18.1) You should not stop yourself from discussing subjects which the people will benefit from, for people yield to words more than they yield to violence. And you should not reckon that this detracts from your authority. In fact it magnifies your nobility if you articulate arguments when you are in a position to compel. (18.2) You should know that affection from the weak is held to be flattery while affection from the strong is held to be humility and grandness of ambition. You should not stop yourself from showing affection to the people so that they devote their love to you and you obtain their respect. (18.3) You must know that time ruins everything, erodes deeds, effaces works, and is the death of memory. The only exception is the love engraved in people's hearts, which is the inheritance of future generations. (18.4) Strive to win memory which does not die by leaving in people's hearts a love through which the memory of your exploits and the glory of your endeavours will survive. Greetings to you!

[End of the treatise. Praise and Thanks be to God and His Prayers be upon his Prophet Muhammad and his Noble and Pure Family.]

Alexander's Letter to Aristotle about India

"There are two Latin texts of the Letter to Aristotle. The first belongs to the seventh century at the latest; the second is a translation of the first into Italian-Latin dating from the tenth century... The Latin is certainly a translation of a lost Greek original which is preserved, in abbreviated form, in several of the recensions of the *Alexander Romance*. It appears already in the earliest known version, the alpha-recension, of which there is a single manuscript, A. Alpha was compiled not later than AD 338 when it was translated into Latin by Julius Valerius, and be several centuries earlier. The letter is presented as written by Alexander immediately after his conquest of Porus and describes his adventures in India. In the later recensions of the Romance known as epsilon (eighth century) and gammas (ninth century) the adventure it recounts are told in the third person so that they become explicitly a continuation of the narrative after the conquest of Porus."

Stoneman, R. *Legends of Alexander the Great* (1994 first ed., repr. 2012), pp. xxii-xxiii (has translation of second, pp.3-19)

“The Letter to Aristotle resists summary for it is too long and colorful, but the following is a brief outline. It starts with the conquest of Porus in July 326 B.C., and a description of the palace of Porus [p15] then advances to the Caspian Gates (see below for discussion of the geography) and proceeds through sandy wastes of extreme danger, led by unreliable guides. The river they discover is bitter and undrinkable, but eventually they observe an island in the river inhabited by Indians in a castle built of reeds. Alexander sends some of his soldiers to swim to the island, but hippopotamuses emerge from the water (‘they are called hippopotamuses because they are half men and half horses’) and devour the men. So Alexander has the guides thrown into the river where they too are devoured by the beasts, which “swarm like ants.” Presently, some Indians in a boat appear and guide them to a lake of sweet water. But when the army has pitched camp, they have to endure a ‘Night of Terrors.’³⁴ First there are huge serpents and giant crabs; next to arrive are white lions, bigger than bulls, followed by giant pigs and huge bats with human teeth. Biggest of the lot is “a beast larger than an elephant, with three horns on its forehead. In the Indian language it was called Odontotyrannus or Tooth-tyrant. It looked a bit like a horse and its head was black.” It kills several dozen Macedonians before they overcome it. Before dawn arrives they have to face shrews the size of foxes and bright red vultures with black beaks. It is a relief to be able to strike camp, tired as they are, and march onwards. The letter continues with the campaign against Porus and his elephants, storms, and a visit to a cave where “Father Liber lies sleeping.” The expedition visits the oracular trees of the sun and moon, which predict Alexander’s early death, the valley of serpents which have emeralds in their necks, and more strange peoples. The letter concludes with Alexander erecting two golden statues, 25 feet high, in Babylon and Persis, bearing an account of all his deeds. There are 67 MSS of the Latin text in European libraries, dating from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries, and a further five in the USA. This was the first ‘fabulous’ Alexander text to be translated into a medieval western language:³⁵ the translation into Old English forms part of the unique codex (British Library Cotton Vitellius A XV), which also contains Beowulf and The Wonders of the East, suggesting perhaps that the scribe, or patron, was interested in monsters).”

(Stoneman, R. 2011. ‘Primary Sources From The Classical And Early Medieval Periods’ in *A Companion to Alexander Literature in the Middle Ages* ed. Z. David Zuwiyya)

Stoneman, R. 1994/2012 *Legends of Alexander the Great*, Chapter 1. Alexander’s Letter to Aristotle about India (p3-19) (10th century Italian-Latin translation of earlier Latin version which was a translation of a lost Greek original)

[1] My dear master, I hold you more dear than any except my mother and my sisters, I think of you always even when I am in critical situations in the midst of battle. Since I know that you are interested in philosophy, I thought I would write to you about the parts of India, and the kinds of serpents, men and beasts that are to be found there: whenever a man learns something about a new subject, it increases his learning and his understanding. Although your wisdom is already great, and your learning needs no support from any new knowledge, nevertheless, because of your love of me I would like to write to you about the things I saw in India during the arduous and dangerous journey of the Macedonians:...

(Stoneman, p17-19)

[19] “...The tree answered in Greek, ‘if I tell you who is to kill you, you will kill him in order to change the decree of fate concerning you, and the three Sisters, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, will be you will angry at me for hindering the fulfilment of their decision. You will die in one year and eight months in Babylon, not by the sword as you suppose, but by poison. Your mother will die an ignominious death, and will not be buried, but the birds and beasts will devour her. However, for

this short time you will be lord of all the world. Now, do not question us further, but leave this place and return to Porus in Fasiace.'

Then the priest also commanded us to leave, as the trees were being annoyed by our weeping and wailing. So I addressed all my soldiers and announced that we were returning to Porus in Fasiace; but I instructed the soldiers who had been with me to say nothing of the oracles I had received in answer to my questions about my life, but to keep it all secret in their hearts.

[20] From there we advanced to the valley of Jordia, where there were serpents which had on their necks stones known as emeralds. These serpents will not allow anyone to approach this valley. They live on asafoetida and white pepper. Every year they fight a battle and many of them are killed.

From there we took away only a few emeralds, but quite large ones. Then we were beasts that had a head like a pig's, a tail like a lion's, and through many terrible dangers to reach a place where there two claws six feet broad with which they attacked our soldiers. Mingling with them were gryphons, which had beaks like an eagle's: they swooped down in our faces with great speed, but we defended ourselves against them with arrows and pikes. In that battle I lost 208 soldiers.

[21] Next we came to a river, which flowed into the Ocean. The river was two and a half miles wide, and on its banks grew reeds so tall and broad that 30 soldiers could scarcely carry one of them. In that place there lived many elephants, but these, for I know not what reason, did us no harm. We built ships of the reeds and crossed the river to the other side. There we found men dressed in whaleskins. They gave us white sponges, purple shells and other sea shells, which held two or three gallons of liquid. They also gave us tunics of sealskin and snail shells which held a pint of liquid. They placed before us worms which they had caught in the river, which were thicker than a man's thigh. They had a better savour than any other fish. They also gave us red mushrooms. They placed before us murries which weighed 250 pounds and said that there were even bigger ones in the Ocean, which was 23 miles away. They placed before us Sacred Fish which weighed 150 pounds. In the same river there were women with long hair. When they saw strange men swimming in their river, they caught and drowned them, or dragged them among the reeds, where, because of their beauty, they either killed them in rage or forced them to have intercourse with them until they were dead. We caught two of these women: they were as white as snow and had long hair straggling down their backs.

[22] We saw in the River Ganges many things which would seem marvellous were we to describe them. But I have decided not to write about anything which might seem incredible.

We went on to a castle inhabited by Indians, [and then to Seres, who are said to be the most law-abiding of all peoples. They have no murder, adultery, perjury or drunkenness among them. They live on bread, vegetables and water. They led us by excellent routes through the Caspian Gates to Fasiace and to King Porus.] From there we followed the direction of the east wind until we came upon some wild beasts. They had bones projecting from the tops of their heads like sharp jagged swords. They struck many of our soldiers with these and pierced their shields. The soldiers killed as many as 8,450 of them. So, after many trials and dangers, we reached the kingdom of Porus. There I instructed one of my soldiers, Alcon by name, whom I had made ruler of Persia, to erect two statues of me in Babylon and in Persis. They were to be 25 feet high, of solid gold, and to have inscribed on them all my deeds. Alcon was to erect a further five golden statues of me, ten feet high, in furthest India, where there were a hundred statues in honour of Liber and Hercules.

Now, my dear teacher, I have made a memorandum of my remarkable deeds, which will be an object of amazement to succeeding generations; and I have established a new and durable record for heroic feats, which will both convey my fame to future ages and allow you, my master, to be acquainted with my care for you, my intelligence and my dedication.

The end of the letter of Alexander the Great, King of Macedon, to his master Aristotle.

Orchard, A. 1995. *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf manuscripts*
Appendix IIc A translation of the Old English text [with Old English] pp225-54 [first Alexander text
to be translated into a medieval language]

§ 40. When the bishop arose, I went into the holy place and for the third time I began to ask the tree of the Sun through which man's hand my end was decreed, and what kind of death my mother or my sisters could now expect. Then the tree answered me in Greek and said: 'If I tell you about your life you will easily turn aside your fate and stay its hand. But it is true what I tell you; in the space of one year and eight months you will die in Babylon, killed not, as you expect, with iron, but with poison. Your mother will leave the world by a shameful and lowly death, and she will lie unburied in the street as food for birds and wild beasts. Your sisters will have long and happy lives. And as for you, though you live but a short time you shall be sole king and lord of the whole world. But do not question or ask the pair of us any more, for we have spoken beyond the limit of our light, but turn back to Fasiacen and King Porus'. And because of that my companions wept, because I had so little time to live. But the bishop forbade them to weep, in case the holy trees should be angered by their weeping and tears.

§ 41. And no one else heard the answers of the holy trees except my most trusted friends, and no one was allowed to make it known, in case the foreign kings that I had forcibly brought under my command should be glad that I had so little time to live. Nor was anyone allowed to reveal it further to the army, in case they became dispirited, and more indolent concerning my will and my honour, for which they had to carry me to success. And to me the swift ending of my life was not so much pain as the fact that I had achieved less glory than I would have wished. I write these things to you, my beloved teacher, that you first can rejoice in the success of my life, and exult in the honours. And also my memory shall forever stand and tower as an example for other earthly kings, so that they know the more readily that my power and my honour were greater than those of all the other kings who have ever lived in the world. Finit.