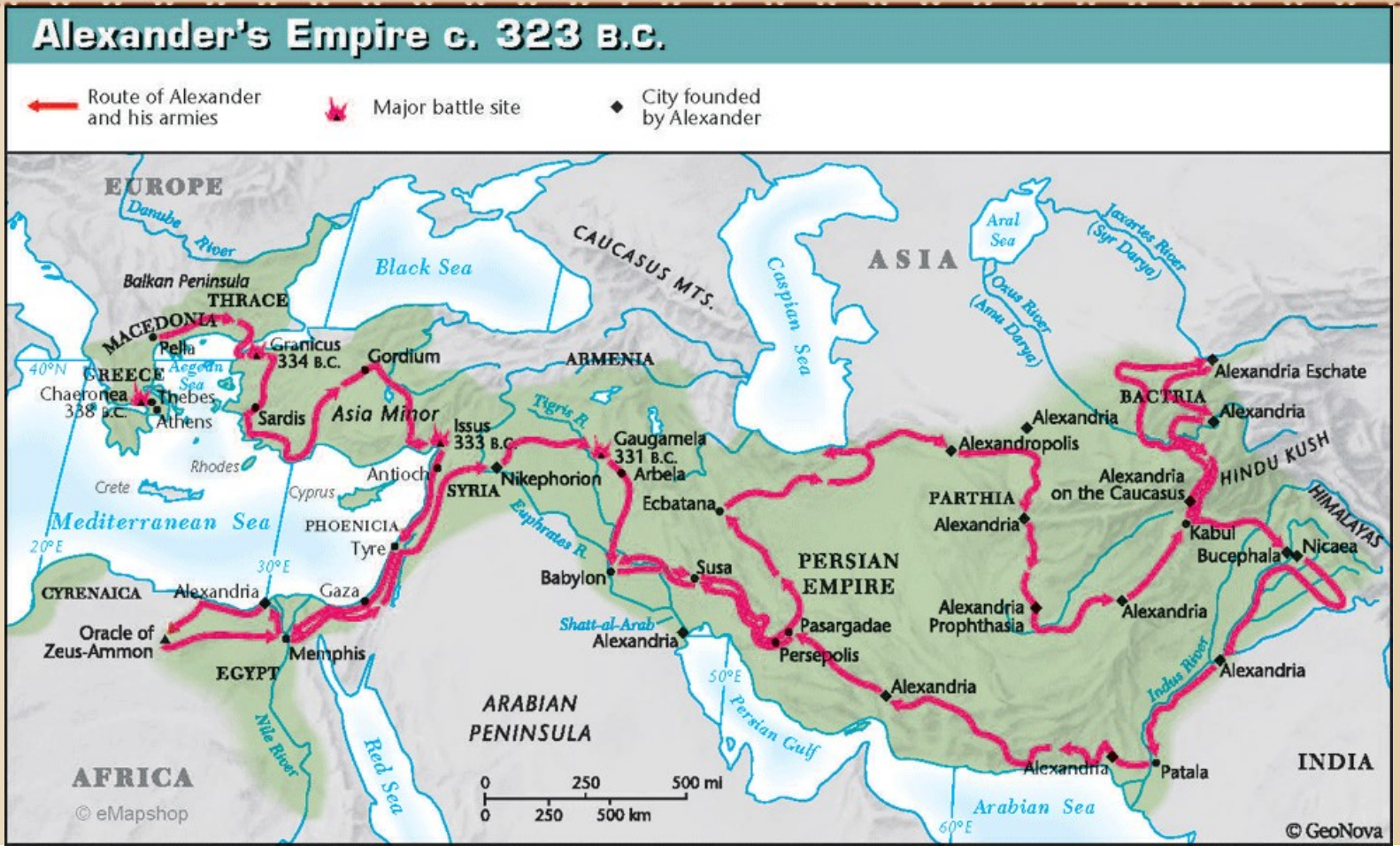
Classical Mythology and Legends in Roman and Medieval Times: sources continued



Sources after Alexander's time

- Strabo (C1st BCE)
- Athenaeus (C 2nd/3rd CE)
- the *Ephemerides*
- Plutarch's writings e.g. 'On the Fortune or Virtue of Alexander';

  'Life of Alexander' (*Parallel Lives*)
- the *Alexander Romance*

Sources

- **Diodorus Siculus** ([Greek] C1st BCE); **Quintus Curtius Rufus** ([Latin] C1st CE?); **Arrian** ([Greek]C2nd CE); **Justin** ([Latin] C3rd CE but who epitomized Pompeius Trogus' history of the world which dated from C1st CE) (i.e. Justin/Trogus)

"Whether they had access to the early works in their entirety is unknown, but presumably they had more to read than we do. For example, Nearchus' account of his voyage around India was used extensively by Arrian and Strabo, Ptolemy's essentially unromantic and military account of Alexander's reign lay at the heart of Arrian's account, and Cleitarchus was the principal source for Diodorus, Curtius, and Plutarch." (Ian Worthington 2012:2)

Sources

"the early writers are often in dispute with each other; for example over the numbers of Alexander's invasion force in 334 (cf. Sources 19 and 20), matters of geography (cf. Sources 36–37, 60–61) matters affecting conspiracies (cf. Sources 108–110), and the death of Callisthenes (cf. Sources 111–113)." (Worthington 2012:2)

"all too often our extant sources, all of which date from the Roman period, are treated as mere ciphers for the lost contemporary histories of Alexander, rather than being treated as authors who have something interesting to say in their own right. Indeed, the study of Alexander has always been obsessed with the vain attempt to recover those lost histories through the alchemy of source criticism... **Each of our major sources** gives a coherent view of Alexander and **has its own particular themes and concerns**." (Flower, Michael A. "Not Great Man History: Reconceptualizing a Course on Alexander the Great." *Classical World* 100.4 (2007): 417-24: 423)

Sources: Individualism

"Arrian, Plutarch, and Curtius each present a kind of gospel of Alexander, an aretalogia. Like the Synoptic Gospels, they draw upon a common tradition; but each presents a different image for the moral instruction of his audience. In determining this purpose, **it is critical to know the political and cultural climate in which the work was written**...It is not a coincidence that our two celebratory accounts of Alexander, Arrian and Plutarch,were written at a high tide of imperial emulation of Alexander, under Trajan. Curtius presents a kind of counter gospel. Instead of virtues to emulate, Curtius' Alexander is an exemplum of vices to be avoided." (Fears 2001, *American Journal Philology*)

Bosman: "One can expect that stories about his superhuman qualities and fantastical exploits sprung up rapidly and abundantly. We may assume that some stories arose deliberately, according to Eratosthenes to please Alexander (Plut. *Alex*. 3.3; Arr. 5.3.1; Strabo 15.1.7-8). Onesicritus is one of the primary sources implicated in deliberate myth-making (Plut. *Alex*. 46.4; Strabo 15.1.28 calls him the 'chief pilot of lies').

Onesicritus and Plutarch

"...Plutarch mentions Onesicritus as one of a host of authors who relate a meeting between Alexander and the queen of the Amazons, which Plutarch himself characteristically rejects in favour of a letter of Alexander to Antipater, in which Alexander tells of an offer by the Scythian king to marry his daughter but omits any mention of the Amazon (46.1-3; cf. Romance 3.25-27).12"

n 12: "Plutarch's mention of the story, only to discard it, is typical of his technique: while acknowledging that the story's truth or falsity is immaterial to our estimation of Alexander (46.5: ταῦτα μὲν οὖν ἄν τις οὔτ' ἀπιστῶν ἧττον οὔτε πιστεύων μᾶλλον Ἀλέξανδρον θαυμάσειε — 'neither a trusting nor a distrusting person will admire Alexander less or more due to these stories') he nevertheless includes it in his narrative; cf. Brenk 1987:318." (Bosman P. 2011 'Signs and Narrative Design in Plutarch's Alexander', *Akroterion* 56: 94)

Quintus Curtius Rufus: *Historiae Alexandri Magni* (10 books: 2 pentads)

- first two books are lost, and the fifth, sixth, and tenth lacunose; dating controversial

(probably first century C.E like under Claudius or Vespasian; other possibilities e.g. = under Caligula or (Fears) after the assassination of Caracalla and in the reign of Elagabalus)

"Perhaps his Alexander, the raging monster who had nevertheless achieved more than any other man, was intended as a double indictment of Caligula's grandiose dreams of conquest, but depraved and sedentary rule" (Stewart, A. 1993. *Faces of Power: Alexander's Image and Hellenistic Politics.* p17)

Quintus Curtius Rufus

- sources: (Hellenistic) Cleitarchus a main source +? (Ptolemy, Diyllus and Trogus?)
- poor reputation; tendency of scholars to select episodes rather than look at whole and not appreciate how history was written at that time

"Rewriting the past—the intrusion of fiction—into what was taken to be history becomes from this period of Lucillius and Martial an increasingly conspicuous feature of the Greco-Roman world" (Bowersock, *Fiction as History* 1994: 9)

Quintus Curtius Rufus

"In the intellectual climate of the Roman imperial age there would have been nothing uncommon or reproachable if Arrian, Plutarch, and Curtius believed noble fictions to be as serviceable to their purpose as historical fact." (Fears, *American Journal of Philology* 122.3, 2001, review of Baynham's 1998 *Alexander the Great: The Unique History of Quintus Curtius*)

Factors influencing Quintus Curtius Rufus' account

- Romanness (see Heckel 1994p 74 on "Roman passages")

"His friends were ashamed that a father-in-law had been chosen amidst wine and feasts, but after the death of Cleitus, with freedom of speech having been taken away, they agreed to it with a facial expression that is most slavish." (Curtius 8.4.30, on facial approval of Macedonians to Roxane marriage)

Alexander's love life e.g. Barsine; reticence; Curtius omits (though refers to child later)

Cf. a more modern historian, Tarn (1948): "Tarn strove to project him rather as a man who found the necessity for sex tedious and regrettable, but who was securely heterosexual when necessity called, and disinclined to extramarital adventure." (Ogden 2009 in *Alexander the Great: A New History,* 204)

Barsine

"[7]But Alexander, as it would seem, considering the mastery of himself a more kingly thing than the conquest of his enemies, neither laid hands upon these women, nor did he know any other before marriage, except Barsiné." (Plutarch *Alex*. 21.7)

"And since she had received a Greek education, and was of an agreeable disposition, and since her father, Artabazus, was son of a king's daughter, Alexander determined (at Parmenio's instigation, as Aristobulus says) to attach himself to a woman of such high birth and beauty. [10] But as for the other captive women, seeing that they were surpassingly stately and beautiful, he merely said jestingly that Persian women were torments to the eyes.11 And displaying in rivalry with their fair looks the beauty of his own sobriety and self-control, he passed them by as though they were lifeless images for display." (Plutarch *Alex*. 21. 9-11)

Quintus Curtius Rufus

“Curtius had just praised Alexander for his self-control (*continentia*) with respect to the Persian princesses and their mother ...(iii 12. 21-23). In the case of Barsine, we are dealing not with a member of Darius' immediate family (though she did, of course, have Achaemenid ancestry) but with another female Persian captive. Curtius would have stultified his entire argument if he had proceeded, in the following chapter, to recount how Alexander was overcome with desire for the beautiful captive, Barsine, and how he fathered on her the child Hercules! For it was Alexander's *continentia*, and condemnation of sexual impropriety in general, at least early in the campaign..., which mattered more than the status of the woman.” (Heckel 1994: 72)

- theme of Alexander’s moral decline (nb link with East: Roman ideas)

Quintus Curtius Rufus

“The king, taking her hand and raising her to her feet, said: “You were not mistaken, mother; for this man too is Alexander.” (Quintus Curtius Rufus 3.12.17, Sisigambis mistaking Hephaestion)

“And indeed, if he could have continued to practise such moderation to the end of his life, I could believe that he would have been happier than he seemed to be when he was imitating the triumphal procession of Father Liber [Dionysus/Bacchus], passing victorious over every nation all the way from the Hellespont to the Ocean.

Then he would surely have mastered pride and wrath, faults which he did not conquer, thus he would have refrained from murdering his friends at banquets, and he would have feared to put to death without a trial men distinguished in warfare, and in company with him the conquerors of so many nations.

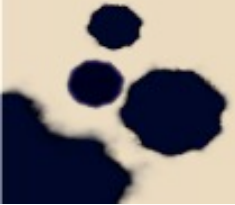
Quintus Curtius Rufus

But not yet had Fortune overflooded his mind. So true is it that he who bore her stream so temperately and wisely when it was rising, at the last was not able to contain her flood when it became great. But at that time, at any rate, he so conducted himself that he surpassed all former kings in continence and clemency; the royal maidens of surpassing beauty he treated with as much deference as if they had been born from the same mother as himself: the wife of Darius, who was also his sister, whom no woman of her time surpassed in personal beauty, he was so far from violating, that he took the greatest care that no one should make shameful sport of her person while she was a prisoner." (Quintus Curtius Rufus 3.12.18-22)

Quintus Curtius Rufus: characterization

"Curtius' depiction of Alexander is not simply a portrait of an initially morally upright king who becomes a cruel tyrant. Granted, a portrayal of the changing nature of Alexander's character and *regnum* is at the heart of the historian's work. … the negative aspects of Alexander are also there right from the start; *fortuna* simply gives them scale and sanction"

(Baynham *Alexander the Great* 1998 p129)



Quintus Curtius Rufus

"But Alexander, as soon as a mind which was better qualified for coping with military toil than with quiet and ease was relieved of pressing cares, gave himself up to pleasures, and one whom the arms of the Persians had not overcome fell victim to their vices: banquets begun early, the mad enjoyment of heavy drinking and being up all night sport, and troops of harlots. There was a general slipping into foreign habits. By emulating these, as if they were preferable to those of his country, he so offended alike the eyes and the minds of his countrymen, that by many of his former friends he was regarded as an enemy. For men who held fast to their native discipline, and were accustomed with frugal and easily obtained food to satisfy the demands of nature, he had driven to the evil habits of foreign and conquered nations. Hence the more frequent making of plots against his life, mutiny of the soldiers, and freer expression of resentment amid mutual complaints, then on his own part now anger, now suspicions aroused by groundless fear, and other similar evils, of which an account will be given later." (Quintus Curtius Rufus 6.2.1-4)

Moral decline

"In the first excursus, Curtius stresses that Alexander's spirit was better suited to the pressure of military life than to leisure, since as soon as he was free of immediate martial cares, he gave himself up to pleasure and fell victim to the vices of the Persians, namely, early banquets, heavy drinking, and *greges pelicum* (flocks of harlots). For an author who elsewhere displays knowledge of Macedonian customs, Curtius has apparently sacrificed accuracy for rhetoric, for, as I noted earlier, heavy drinking at banquets was already an established Macedonian practice." (Baynham *Alexander the Great* 1998)

Moral decline according to Quintus Curtius Rufus

“It was in fact at this time that Alexander gave loose rein to his passions, and changed continence and self-control, eminent virtues in every exalted fortune, to haughtiness and wantonness. Regarding his native customs and the discipline of the Macedonian kings, wholesomely restrained and democratic, as too low for his grandeur, he strove to rival the loftiness of the Persian court, equal to the power of the gods; he demanded that the victors over so many nations in paying their respects to him should prostrate themselves upon the ground, and gradually sought to accustom them to servile duties and to treat them like captives. Accordingly, he encircled his brow with a purple diadem, variegated with white such as Darius had worn, and assumed the Persian garb, not even fearing the omen of changing from the insignia of a victor to the dress of the conquered. In fact, he used to say that he was wearing the spoils of the Persians; but with them he had assumed also their customs, and insolence of spirit accompanied the magnificence of his attire. ..

Moral decline according to Quintus Curtius Rufus

"The letters also which were to be sent to Europe he sealed with the device of his former ring; on those which he wrote to Asia, the ring of Darius was impressed, so that it appeared that one mind was not equal to the fortune of the two realms. Moreover, he compelled his friends, the cavalry, and with them the leaders of the soldiers, to wear the Persian dress, which was indeed repugnant to them, but which they did not dare to refuse. Three hundred and sixty-five concubines, the same number that Darius had had, filled his palace, attended by herds of eunuchs, also accustomed to prostitute themselves." (Quintus Curtius Rufus 6.6.1-8)

characterisation

"Curtius' description at 6.6.1-12 is close enough to the other vulgate accounts to suggest a common source…. Alexander's former *continentia* [self-control] and *moderatio* [moderation], which were outstanding virtues in the highest *fortuna*, change to *superbia* [pride] and *lascivia* [wantonness]. By using key words, such a *continentia* and *fortuna*, Curtius deliberately reminds us of and reverses the Alexander of 3.12.18-22. Yet his portrayal is far more complex than a simple change from king to tyrant: as stated earlier, the inconsistencies of *regnum* form a major theme of the second pentad." (Baynham *Alexander the Great* 1998 p171)

Structuring

“To return to Curtius’ organization of his material, the so-called architectonic method of Livy, or his use of episodes, is also applicable to Curtius. Scholars do not deny that Curtius’ structure is episodic, but is should be stressed that the episodes are placed with an eye towards thematic balance and unity. One may note, for instance, the contrast and balance between Darius and Alexander that Curtius achieves in books 3 and 4, a possible bipartite division in books 5 and 10, and his placement of episodes in his depiction of Alexander as *rex* [king], *dux* [leader], and *tyrannus* [tyrant] in books 6, 7, 8, and 9. Again, Curtius’ plan for each book must be given due consideration: he may have owed the overall concept to Livy, but his design and execution were his own” (Baynham, *Alexander the Great* 1998, p42)

motifs/ allusion and intertextuality

- e.g. Achilles' motif to suggest moral decline; Vergil's Achilles (Vergil *Aeneid* 2 figures Neoptolemos, Achilles' degenerate son)

Vorhis 2017: "By setting up the Achilles motif with virtually the same formula as in the previous passage (8.4.26 ~ 4.6.29), Curtius seems, by extension, to allude to the same *Aeneid* 2 verse as in the previous passage: *Achillem quoque, a quo genus ipse deduceret* Achilles, too, from whom he himself traced his descent (Curt. 8.4.26) *at non ille, satum quo te mentiris, Achilles* But not that Achilles, from whom you lyingly claim to be born (Verg. *Aen.* 2.540)

motifs/ allusion and intertextuality

With these Curtian and Vergilian phrases, we find, of course, the same similarities as noted above: first, Achilles functioning as the antecedent of a relative clause introduced by *quo*, and second, a relative clause concerned with someone tracing his descent from the Greek hero. Consequently, I suggest that Curtius means to cast Alexander here, once again, in the role of the Vergilian, rather than Homeric, Achilles." (Vorhis 2017: 39)

Allusion to Vergil

"Whereas Alexander's Achillean role served in the previous passage to foreshadow the king's moral transformation, it serves here, I suggest, to mark its fulfillment. Like Vergil's Achilles, the Alexander of the second pentad is not only a figure of greater *ira* [anger] and *vis* [force]; he is also, as seen in the present passage, a figure of greater passion, another quality closely associated with the Vergilian Achilles. In contrast to the Alexander of the first pentad, who famously manages, as Curtius here pointedly recalls, to contain his passion in the presence of Darius' wife and daughters, reputedly among the most beautiful women in Asia (8.4.25), the Alexander of the second proves unable to do the same in the presence of the equally beautiful Roxane." (Vorhis 2017)

Allusion to Vergil

"rather than treating Roxane as something similar to but not quite a wife, à la Achilles, Alexander treats her as a full wife, à la Neoptolemus, thereby breaking with Greco-Roman cultural norms and aligning himself, from a Greco-Roman moralizing perspective, with the decadent and corrupting East. Finally, within this same role-playing context, Roxane's role as Briseis can be seen to further reflect Alexander's tyrannical status in the second pentad. Particularly in Homer, but also in other authors, Briseis functions as the catalyst for the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon and, ultimately, for the breach between Achilles and the Greek army. By comparing Roxane to Briseis, therefore, Curtius, I suggest, hints at Roxane's potential, and that of the broader Orientalizing policy she represents, to create a schism between Alexander and the Macedonians." (Vorhis)