

Movie Commentary: *Alexander*

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Few films in recent times have generated so much pre-release ballyhoo as Oliver Stone's *Alexander*. This was to be expected, as the project was the conjunction of two factors that made it a publicist's dream: one of filmdom's most talented and controversial directors had turned his attention to the career of an ancient king who is arguably the most famous secular figure in history. But what would the director of previous films fraught with controversy and conspiracy do with the enigma of Alexander's character and aims?

Alexander of Macedon had been the subject of a single previous major motion picture, the Robert Rossen production, *Alexander the Great*, released nearly half a century ago. Technically speaking Rossen's effort is not a good film. The process shots are primitive, the sets are cheap and historically inaccurate, the editing is choppy, the continuity is erratic, it is replete with historical errors, and it seems to have lost its dramatic focus as the moody, tortured Alexander picked his way across Asia. This film is not even close to the technical quality found in some other sword-and-sandal epics of the period.

But the early part of the Rossen film, even while suffering from the same condition of shooting-on-the cheap, is a serious study of Macedonian court intrigue, dominated by the powerful performances of Fredric March as Philip, and of Richard Burton in the title role. This part of the story is based squarely on Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*, and it is a faithful rendering of that ancient biographer not only in spirit but also in many details. It accurately captures the mood of court life, during which era Prince Alexander grew into young manhood.

The saving grace of this movie is that it portrays one of the most complex human stories that we know from antiquity, the ambivalent relationship that existed between the warrior-chief Philip and his talented and ambitious son. King Philip II of Macedon was wary of Alexander and his close relationship with his mother, Olympias, now cast aside by Philip in favor of a younger woman. Yet Alexander demonstrated military talent and charismatic leadership, traits that not only threatened Philip but also made him confident that he had fostered a competent comrade and successor. Few kings in history have been so fortunate in their sons. To the extent that we know anything about Philip and Alexander's feelings about one another, Frederic March and Richard Burton provide a memorable account of it. Given the talents of the director and his major actors one wonders what some expert historical/technical advice and a more generous budget might have produced. Now we have another talented director, an exceedingly generous budget, and competent historical/technical advice. The result is incoherency.

Producing an historical epic on this scale requires the film maker to make some choices about what to include. Those choices are determined by a number of factors, including budget, production schedules, availability of actors, and the film maker's own artistic vision: the film must have a structure that reflects the director's point of view. For the moment let us accept Stone's point of view, and deal with matters of historical accuracy within that context.



Colin Ferrell as Alexander (©2004 Warner Bros. Studios)

How historically accurate is Stone's *Alexander*? There is a difference between historical inaccuracies based on ignorance and sloppy research and those which are the result of the director's conscious decision to alter the past in order to support his artistic vision. The film offers a disclaimer tagged onto the end of the interminable credits (which most of the theatre audience will not stick around to read) signifying that the film is "inspired by certain historical events," and that some of those events have been moved around a bit. (At least in the recent film, *Troy*, the disclaimer that the film was "inspired" by Homer was placed at the opening.) Thus, any such film results from a series of compromises, and, if we accept that this is a film version of what in print would be called an historical novel, we will avoid spending an inordinate amount of time at historical nit-picking. *Alexander* is not an historical or archaeological documentary.

Stone has chosen to omit—among other episodes—Alexander in Egypt, the battles of the Granicus River and Issus, the destruction of Thebes and the palace complex at Persepolis, the siege of Tyre, and the cutting of the Gordian Knot. One might quarrel with Stone's choices (What? Exclude the Gordian Knot episode, perhaps the most famous characterizing story about Alexander?), but the choices are consciously his for any of the reasons mentioned above. In the end it is not as important to include everything (as if that were possible) as it is to insure that what *is* included is historically accurate within the bounds of reason and the film's budget. It is with these boundaries in mind that we are justified in exercising an historical critique.

First, the good news. Stone and his historical advisor Robin Lane Fox wisely availed themselves of the scholarly expertise of Lane Fox's Oxford colleagues and other British experts. The sets of Babylon are spectacular, both the external views of the city and the interior of the palace complex, and suggest that the designers did their homework. Less is known about the structure of the royal palace at the Macedonian center of Pella, but the set designers extrapolated from the surviving architectural fragments to produce a simple Doric structure that accords with the relative simplicity of Macedonian court life. It also provides a striking contrast with the lavish style of the East.

The drinking implements, gold royal wreaths, and women's jewelry (including looped earrings) correctly reflect actual items recovered in recent excavations, although it is a bit odd to see the accurately reproduced pebble mosaics from Pella decorating the walls of Ptolemy's palace in Alexandria. Another oddity is that Stone's make-up people created the scarred right eye of Philip II to match the reconstructed head of Philip published in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* in 1984 by the British team of Prag, Neave, and Musgrave. (Philip had lost his eye to a Greek arrow during the siege of Methone in 354 B.C.) The British recreation of Philip is, however, a fantasy, as recent scientific studies of the skull and skeletal fragments from the tomb once believed to be that of Philip—and used by the British team for their reconstruction—have shown that the remains are not those of Philip. But why even bother basing the eye scar on an elaborate modern re-creation when that very tomb has given us a tiny sculpted ivory portrait of Philip that provides a more accurate likeness of the king, showing the scar in a different position?

Macedonian military equipment is by-and-large correctly reproduced, the single exception being the elaborate lions-head helmet worn by Alexander. According to Plutarch, Alexander wore a simple, burnished iron helmet fashioned for him by the Greek craftsman Theophilus. Stone's associates apparently decided to fashion a battle helmet based on later representations of Alexander-as-Heracles, adorned with lion's head imagery. The re-enactment of the enormously complex battle of Gaugemela is impressive, not only reproducing several of the main events of the conflict, but indicating how difficult it was for large armies to operate on a desert plain made opaque by dust and chaotic by the clash of arms. And there is a superb representa-



Reconstruction of the palace at Babylon (©2004 Warner Bros. Studios)



The army of Alexander poised for battle (©2004 Warner Bros. Studios)

tion of the Macedonian infantry phalanx wielding their 17-foot long spears, portrayed by a group of 1500 Moroccan soldiers rigorously trained in Macedonian arms by Stone's military advisor.

The other set battle piece, however—Alexander's monumental battle against the men and elephants commanded by the formidable seven-foot tall Indian rajah Porus—, was set in a light jungle forest rather than along the flat, broad banks of the Hydaspes (Jhelum) river. The historically inaccurate setting of this battle resulted from Stone's conscious decision to use the jungle scene to provide a strong contrast to the barren plain of Gaugamela, an artistic decision, not an error.

But errors abound, and it is not historical nit-picking to suggest that, with a bit more care, they could have been avoided. For example, we are treated to Ptolemy gazing out onto the harbor of Alexandria whose entrance is dominated by one of the "Seven Wonders of the Ancient World," the Pharos. But this great towered lighthouse did not exist during the first Ptolemy's reign—it was constructed by his successor, Philadelphos. Alexander's Bactrian wife Roxane was hardly the tempestuous vixen of the Oliver Stone film. Historically she seems to have been a devoted wife and mother, content to play her traditional female role of producing children for the king, one of whom may have died in India as an infant, the other born after Alexander's death in 323 B.C. Stone does both history and the real Roxane a disservice by portraying her as sexually aggressive in order to draw out some heterosexual behavior from Alexander. This is a solely a dramatic device designed to emphasize the king's ambivalent sexuality—a major theme of Stone's film (see below). Alexander's associate Antigonos (the One-Eyed) did not accompany Alexander to India, as the film suggests; rather he remained as governor of Phrygia until Alexander's death. Both Gaugamela and Babylon are identified as being in Persia, rather than (correctly) in Assyria and Babylonia. While both places were part of the Persian Empire, it makes no more sense to identify them as being Persian than it would be, say, to so identify Troy or Syria or Egypt as Persian because they were ostensibly part of the Persian Empire. And one of Aristotle's nice pebble maps shows "Greece" as spread across the southern Balkans incorporating what today would include not only Greece, but also Albania, Bulgaria, and sections of former Yugoslavia. These regions had never been considered as part of "Greece" in antiquity.

Which leads to an associated problem: the script is inconsistent in describing the ethnicity and cultural aspirations of the army of conquest. The personnel and their goals are sometimes referred to as "Greek" solely, sometimes as "Macedonian" solely, and often by both terms. This must be terribly confusing to an audience not experienced in the nuances of Greek-Macedonian relationships in antiquity. The ancient sources make clear distinctions between Greeks and Macedonians in Alexander's train. The problem is compounded by several references to the goal of establishing a unity and reconciliation between Greeks and barbarians. This is, simply put, wrong, and in contrast to Alexander's own prayer at Opis in 324 BC that there be established a coalition between the two ruling classes of Europe and Asia: Macedonians and Persians. Greeks are not mentioned. Was there no coordination among the three script writers on these issues? The film characters of both Alexander's mother, Olympias, and his general and successor Ptolemy, are made to call our hero "Alexander the Great," whereas in fact "Great" was not added to the conqueror's name until much later, in Roman times.

Then there are some matters that are downright silly: in one scene a reference is made to the Macedonians having conquered "two million square miles," and in another Craterus reminds Alexander that they've marched "ten thousand miles." The anachronism of such comments is embarrassing: with regard to Craterus' comment why not just say that they had marched for seven years? It not only avoids the "miles" anachronism, but it is also more dramatic. Enough

of this. There are dozens of other inaccuracies, some forgivable because Stone sacrificed accuracy to his artistic vision, others unforgivable because they are unnecessary—the result of sloppy research.

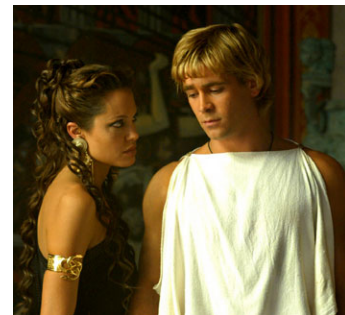
Stone, his co-writers, and advisor Robin Lane Fox have attempted to attribute to Alexander some noble purpose, some lofty justification for the Macedonians' bloody tramp across Asia. Part of this is a conscious rejection of what Lane Fox has repeatedly attacked as the recent "minimalist" trend among Alexander scholars, articulated so forcefully by Ernst Badian, Brian Bosworth, Peter Green, and others. Perhaps one reason for the apparent happy collaboration between Stone and his historical advisor is that they shared a need to give meaning to Alexander's conquests, even where there wasn't any. And so they fell back on that tired old saw, a version of the Brotherhood of Mankind theory, an idea strongly advocated in the mid-twentieth century by the late W.W. Tarn, but which has been thoroughly discredited by most modern scholars as not being rooted in the evidence from antiquity.

The problem for Stone & Co. was that, lacking any purpose beyond conquest for its own sake, they would have been saddled with an Alexander who was little more than a brilliant commander travelling an endless path of conquest. And so the film's creators adopted a corollary to Tarn's Noble Purpose, that Alexander's mission was to spread Greek culture into the nether regions of the world. A sober review of the evidence from antiquity, however, suggests something quite different: there is no doubt that Alexander, who had been a pupil of Aristotle and who continued to be devoted to Homer and Euripides, was enamored of Greek culture. This is part of his personal baggage, but it is not a component of his policy. That is, there is a difference between what Alexander himself held dear, and what he intended for the rest of the world. This is not to deny that, as a result of Alexander's Asian conquests, Hellenism spread, in greater or lesser degree, into Egypt and western Asia. But this is a by-product of Alexander's passage, as his overthrow of Persian rule removed the long-time bloc against the spread of Greek culture into the East. One wonders why Stone and Lane Fox were unable to recognize what Alexander's own army saw so clearly: *there was no point to it all*. And so the army mutinied on the Indian frontier, refusing to go further.

Movie critics everywhere have complained that Oliver Stone's Alexander lacks a coherent vision. But the fault may not be Stone's. It may be impossible to implant a coherent vision into a historical figure who actually lacked one. It is one of the features of Alexander scholarship that, while we know the results of his military genius, the details of the personality that lay behind his achievements remain elusive. That is, we know *what* he did—and it continues to astonish us—but we don't know *how* he did it. We are unable to identify precisely those features of his personality that made him such a charismatic figure among his troops, and also enabled him to become a legend in his own lifetime. He was a mythic figure, no less enigmatic than Heracles or Achilles with whom he identified. The evidence is simply not there. Thus anyone—novelist or film maker or professional historian—is relatively free to create a personality without worrying too much about the historical accuracy of the portrait.

Now, historical nit-picking aside, how is it as a film? As a film, it is a mess. Perhaps Stone and his advisors knew too much, attempting to include more than they could, and then forgetting the continuity of things. For example, as Alexander was preparing to leave the Punjab following the mutiny of his troops, the scene depicts several larger-than-life-size human statues in the Macedonian camp. They look odd, and there is no explanation for their appearance. Yet, there is a charming story in our ancient sources that relates how Alexander ordered the construction of large human figures on the banks of the river frontier that marked the end of their journey, so that any future passersby would think that the Macedonians were a race of giants. We are left with a puzzle:

did Stone have the figures constructed (at some expense), and then forget to depict the story, or was the story actually filmed and then left on the editing-room floor? Too bad: it is a delightful story characterizing Alexander, and it would have taken only a few seconds to tell. I can think



Angelina Jolie as Alexander's mother Olympias (©2004 Warner Bros. Studios)

of a hundred places where a few seconds could have been extracted from the film without loss. The incompleteness of this scene is emblematic of the chaos in continuity and characterization.

The script is largely incoherent, continually searching for some key to Alexander's character and motivation beyond the pseudo-Freudian need to out-achieve his father and to preserve a closer-than-normal relationship with his mother. The set speeches might have been an embarrassment for the actors had they been more competent and concerned about their craft. A few interesting characterizations aside—among them Olympias, Parmenio, and Aristotle—most of the acting is either flat or overly melodramatic. And the less said about Colin Farrell in the title role, the better. It is hard to discover in this amateurish performance the charisma that enabled the real Alexander to take an army to India and back. One wishes for the power of acting that marked that otherwise deeply flawed film, the *Alexander the Great* of Robert Rossen. I found myself yearning for the grand histrionics of Richard Burton. Indeed, I thought that Brad Pitt's performance as Achilles in the recent epic *Troy* was a more consistent and believable bit of acting.

Then there is the matter of Alexander's sex life, a matter that caused outrage among some Greek Orthodox clergy and a group of Greek lawyers who had not even seen the film, but rushed to defend the reputation of the neohellenic national hero. Stone seemed obsessed with the issue of Alexander's sexuality, surely more so than Alexander himself, and more than any other modern critic since W.W. Tarn went to extraordinary lengths to show that Alexander had not been characterized by any sexual behavior with other males. One hesitates to use terms like "homosexual" or "bisexual", as they are modern and loaded with modern social values. Such terms did not exist among the ancient Greeks and Macedonians: in those days one was sexual or one wasn't. That is, the ancients did not adhere to later Christian codes of conduct in sexual matters. A man was relatively free to pursue sexual activity with both males and females. The code of conduct, such as it was, had more to do with social status, age, and fidelity than with gender preferences. In fact, Alexander produced from three marriages at least two children, one of whom succeeded him briefly in the kingship. We also know of at least two male liaisons, one a casual relationship with the Persian eunuch Bagoas, the other a firm and long-standing commitment to Hephaestion, his boyhood friend who rose to be an important and competent administrator in his empire. Stone's obsession with Alexander's sexual conduct is exploitative and unnecessary. How much more a reflection of the reality of the day had Stone treated Alexander's marriages and male liaisons with the casual attitude that actually marked that era.

One wonders if, in the hands of a competent editor, this three-hour-long ordeal could be recast into a comprehensible two-hour film, retaining the successful attempt to portray the appearance of the age, and removing the errors. In the end, Alexander of Macedon has yet to meet his modern film maker.

Writing about Oliver Stone's *Alexander* recalls one of the greatest movie reviews of all time. When charged with the task of evaluating the 1963 Richard Burton-Elizabeth Taylor blockbuster *Cleopatra*, Pauline Kael produced a review that consisted entirely of the following words: "Oh, go see it, anyway." I cannot recommend that Kael's advice be followed in the case of *Alexander*.