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FROM EARLY ON TO BECOME A HERO ('HELD'):  
MYTHICAL MODELS OF ALEXANDER'S IMAGE  
AND BIOGRAPHY\*

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THE QUEST FOR ALEXANDER'S 'GREATNESS'

Alexander III of Macedonia, as a historical figure, significantly exceeded the dimensions of the classical Greek concept of human beings: this was endorsed by posterity through granting him the epithet 'the Great'. By his 'greatness' he followed the heroes of myth in many respects: this was universally remarked in historical accounts. In particular, he traced his descent back to Herakles from his father's side and to Achilles from his mother's, and moreover presented himself as the son of Zeus: this is clearly attested by ancient authors.<sup>1</sup> Modern scholars hold very diverse views about the significance of these manifestations of Alexander, and have expressed very diverging judgements on his general historical role, reaching from a rational army leader to a heroic conqueror, from a great founder of culture to a ferocious destroyer. In particular, controversies have arisen about the impact of Homeric heroism on Alexander's personality, behaviour, and achievements.<sup>2</sup> The intention of the following considerations is not to resume these old discussions on Alexander's references to specific heroes of myth but to widen the horizon of the question: first, by a reflection on categories of heroism in antiquity, and secondly, by a shift of the perspective from Alexander's punctual manifestations to the general conceptualisation of his public persona and role. In this way one might get a better understanding of how deeply rooted and how comprehensively conceived these references to the figures of myth were in Alexander's mind, and how early this

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1 Herakles: HUTTNER 1997, 86–123. – Achilles: AMELING 1988; A. COHEN 1995; VON DEN HOFF 1997. – Zeus: BOSWORTH 1988a, 282–284. – In general on Alexander's claims to heroism and divinity: BOSWORTH 1988a, 278–290.

2 Recent positive voices: LONDON 2005, 115–139; GEHRKE 2013a. – Critical: HECKEL 2015; MAITLAND 2015.

self-image was formed, i.e. whether he started his war against the Persian Empire from the beginning with such far-reaching ambitions, or conceived his role in such dimensions only after his first victorious battles against the Persian Empire and the Great King.<sup>3</sup> Behind this specific issue the general question arises as to how far such ideal (or ideological) concepts should be understood either as the results of previous real historical situations and experiences or as efficient and powerful agents in historical reality. The following contribution will argue in favour of the early origins of Alexander's claims to heroic status.<sup>4</sup> Regarding the intensity of Alexander's reference to the heroes of myth it is essential to ask how far he conceived of himself as their genealogical descendant, or rather compared himself and his historical feats with their mythical deeds, or else considered himself a hero of his own, equivalent to them. In order to approach these questions, two phenomena will be dealt with that do not directly concern these heroes but will lead immediately to Alexander's individual person: on the one hand his appearance, i.e. the concept of his visual self-image, on the other hand the design of his life, i.e. his conceptual biography. Both aspects imply an approach of cultural anthropology, based on literary as well as iconographical testimonies.

For the early stages of Alexander's life, the reliability of the literary sources is notoriously under debate. Without aiming to enter too far into these controversies, the following considerations are based on such testimonies that seem to have some intrinsic plausibility.

#### THE GREEK CONCEPT OF A HERO AND THE CATEGORIES OF MYTHICAL HEROISATION

As is well known, the concepts of hero and heroism are widely diverging in intercultural comparison. Even within Greek culture there are diverse notions: on the one hand the mighty recipients of religious cult who were venerated as *hērōes*, on the other hand the famous 'heroic' figures of myth, in the German sense of 'Held/Helden', as it is adopted here.<sup>5</sup> Regarding Alexander, it is important to note, contrary to current assumptions, that ancient heroes, even the mythical 'Helden', are fundamentally beyond ethical and moral categories. An ancient hero as such is neither 'good' nor noble, and not even successful, neither setting examples nor norms of ideal character or behaviour – he is just in an elementary sense 'great': exceeding

3 For this controversy see e.g.: BOSWORTH 1988a, 19: 'From the outset heroic emulation was an abiding spur to action'; *ibidem* 281: 'There is no evidence for Alexander's early conception of his divine or heroic status'.

4 For a similar view see A. COHEN 1995. The opposite position was forcefully defended at the conference by Andrew Monson.

5 See BURKERT 1977, 312–319; BREMMER 1994, 12–13; BOEHRINGER 2001, 25–46; HIMMELMANN 2009, 7–28, 81–85 and 2010; GEHRKE 2010; MEYER / VON DEN HOFF 2010. Cf. the thoughtful essay on an alternative concept of 'hero' by FINKELBERG 1995.



the normal measure of mankind, acting and suffering in super-human dimensions. This neutral notion of 'greatness' has its equivalent in a value-free concept of glory, *kleos*: what is widely reported.<sup>6</sup> In this sense heroic figures first of all arouse a sort of value-neutral fascination – which can turn into admiration as well as into fright and horror. However, it would be totally misleading to set off positive and negative aspects against one another since both belong inseparably together. Herakles would not be the greatest culture hero without his horrendous atrocities, Achilles would not be the most glorious war hero without his cruel and bloody furor<sup>7</sup>. The same goes for Alexander who, in his personality as well as in his actions, exceeded the standards and norms of classical *polis* citizens and *polis* states, thus forming his unique historical role. And as with the heroes of the mythical past, this role was not designed to constitute an example for imitation and emulation but to demonstrate his individual uniqueness. Indeed, neither Herakles nor Achilles were general models of ideal behaviour, they were just unique and unreachable figures which only equally ambitious persons could claim as models and equivalents, such as Demetrios Poliorketes, Pompeius, Iulius Caesar, Augustus.<sup>8</sup> As we shall see, the concept of historical 'greatness', which was established in this sense, kept this absence of ethical categories beyond classical antiquity – as a measure of pure historical energy and power.

The elevation of present-time persons to a sphere of super-human quality always implies, explicitly or implicitly, some reference to the heroes of the mythical past. Such references can be constructed in different ways, implying different strategies of endowing a person with glory, power or legitimacy:<sup>9</sup>

*Paradigmatic references.* In this strategy the referential mode is comparison. Statesmen or army-leaders take heroes of myth as their model, comparing their own achievements and power with a specific hero's deeds and force. Here, the primary focus is on factual accomplishments and their underlying personal qualities. Such glorifying comparison with figures and achievements of the mythical past was open to all who might plausibly comply with such a claim. In this sense Perikles compared his campaign against Samos with the Trojan war, declaring it even superior to its mythical model. Often, however, such comparisons only refer to single aspects, in the case of the Samian campaign to its military expenditure, without *eo ipso* elevating the protagonist to a mythical level.<sup>10</sup>

*Genealogical references.* Here the referential mode is descent. Noble families trace their origins back to mythical ancestors. Thereby they do not so much insist on unique heroic achievements or exemplary ethical qualities but make a general

6 NAGY 1979, 2013, esp. 26–47.

7 In this sense see also GEHRKE 2010.

8 *Imitatio Alexandri*: MICHEL 1967; KÜHNEN 2000; TROFIMOVA 2012; MOORE 2018; PALAGIA 2018; see now DORKA MORENO 2019.

9 For what follows see already HÖLSCHER 1999. – For a different attempt at categorisation see A. COHEN 1995: *aemulatio, imitatio, comparatio*.

10 Plut. *Per.* 28.



claim to noble rank and social prestige – without elevating the descendants *eo ipso* to the level of mythical heroes. Often such mythical ancestors are not the greatest heroes of the past but those of secondary rank: In Athens not Theseus but Neleus for the Peisistratids, Boutes for the Eteoboutadai, in Rome not Hercules and Aeneas but their sons, Anton for Antonius, Iulus-Ascanius for the Iulii.<sup>11</sup> It was above all the great royal dynasties of Sparta and Macedonia that traced their origins back to Herakles himself. Compared with paradigmatic models, genealogical references make a stronger claim for an exclusive relation of an individual family or person to a specific mythical ancestor. Thus, all great generals of the Late Roman Republic venerated Venus in a paradigmatic sense as their victory goddess, but then Julius Caesar claimed her as his genealogical forebear, detracting her from his rivals, and creating a nightmare for Pompey. Likewise, Aeneas had been the founding hero of all Romans, until Julius Caesar promoted him as the forefather of the Iulii.<sup>12</sup>

*Local references.* Here the referential mode is local succession. The historical Athenians conceived themselves, without claiming a specific genealogical descent, as the successors of the mythical Athenians under the kings Kekrops, Erechtheus, and Theseus. In the same way, Kimon and his co-strategoi were celebrated after their campaign against Eion as worthy successors of king Menestheus, the leader of the Athenian army against Troy. Thereby, again, the historical protagonists were not raised into the sphere of mythical heroes, but here too an exclusive relation to those figures of myth was created which could not be claimed outside of Athens.<sup>13</sup>

*References of identity.* A much more pretentious claim is made when historical persons pose as re-incarnations of a mythical hero. Already before Alexander the local tyrant Klearchos of Herakleia Pontike presented himself as a son of Zeus, with clothes, attributes and a purple face assimilating him to the father of the gods. Nikostratos, an army-commander in the service of Artaxerxes Ochos, also went to war against Sidon in the attire of Herakles. The physician Menekrates from Syracuse used to dress up as Zeus, surrounded by adherents clothed as Apollon and Hermes.<sup>14</sup> Alexander himself is reported to have appeared at banquets with attributes of Herakles, Hermes, Ammon, and even Artemis.<sup>15</sup> The painter Apelles portrayed him holding the thunderbolt of Zeus, and with the same attribute he is represented on the obverse of the exceptional silver medaillons, with the reverse depicting Alexander's fight against king Poros riding on an elephant.<sup>16</sup> As is well-known, Hellenistic rulers liked to present themselves as a 'New Dionysos' or a 'New Herakles'.

11 See, however, AMELING 1988, 661–664 for non-royal families tracing their origins from great heroes.

12 Venus and Late republican army leaders: SCHILLING 1954, 267–345.

13 Kimon and Eion: Aeschin. 3.183–185. RÜCKERT 1998, 100–103; DI CESARE 2015, 59–70.

14 Klearchos: Souda s.v. Klearchos. – Nikostratos: Diod. 16.44.3. – Menekrates: Ath. 7.289b–c. See WEINREICH 1933, 9–19.

15 Ephippos (*FGrHist* 126) F5.

16 Apelles, Alexander with thunderbolt: Plin. *NH* 35.92. – Poros medaillons: HOLT 2003.



*Personal equality.* The ultimate referential mode is equivalence. In this sense, present-time protagonists presented themselves as authentic heroes, equal to the heroes of myth in 'greatness'. This strategy was on the one hand particularly risky because it totally depended on the individual person's forcefulness. On the other hand, if it was applied successfully, it could achieve great effects: for all other references quoted above could only be realised through punctual manifestations and achievements, whereas a man's own heroic 'greatness' could be permanently demonstrated in his entire persona, appearance, and *habitus*.

### ALEXANDER AND HIS MYTHICAL MODELS

Starting from these categories of reference to the heroes of myth, it may become more precisely understandable 1. which concepts and messages Alexander aimed to express and distribute by his reference to the heroes of myth, 2. whether and to what degree he was unique in doing so, and 3. from what time these concepts shaped his self-conceptualisation as a ruler.

Without doubt, Alexander took Herakles as well as Achilles as paradigmatic models of his own heroic role. Herakles was to him the great hero who had accomplished the most glorious individual deeds, penetrating to the edges of the known world, often getting to the brink of exhaustion and destruction – but in the end gaining the recognition as the son of Zeus and reception among the immortal gods. Achilles, on the other hand, was the radiant model of a youthful hero, phenotypically almost undistinguishable from himself: the central hero of the war against Troy, which Alexander interpreted as the archetypal war of the Greeks against Asia, and in general the war hero par excellence, especially in his combination of raging furor and invincibility. Alexander's fate to follow Achilles also by his early death was of course not intended but was in some respect implied in this extreme concept of a heroic life.

Yet, Herakles as well as the heroes fighting against Troy had already been taken as exemplary models by other statesmen and army-leaders.<sup>17</sup> Therefore it was essential for Alexander to claim both these heroes exclusively as his genealogical forefathers. By doing this, he became unique in a double sense: firstly, while these greatest paradigmatic heroes could be chosen as models also by others, they belonged to him personally through genealogical ties; secondly, while the genealogical ancestors of others were normally heroes of second rank, Alexander claimed for himself the greatest protagonists of the mythical past.

These references to the heroes of myth start early in his life, and they follow a significant structural pattern. The primary intention is to assimilate Alexander to the model of those heroes, but *de facto* the heroes are assimilated to the model of Alexander. In order to appear as pre-figurations of Alexander, the heroes are made

<sup>17</sup> Herakles: above n. 14. Heroes against Troy: above n. 13.

compatible to him in those aspects in which they are meant to appear as his models. It is a reciprocal interrelation in which Alexander is taken as a model of gods and heroes – in order that gods and heroes become the models of Alexander.<sup>18</sup>

The head of Herakles appears from the beginning of Alexander's own coinage on the obverse of his tetradrachms, juxtaposed with the seated Zeus on the reverse.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, the date of the introduction of these types, either at the beginning of his campaign in 334 or after the battle of Issos in 333 BC, is still controversial. The old debate, however, whether the head wearing a lion's cap depicts Herakles himself or Alexander in the hero's guise, has recently been concluded: it can only represent Herakles himself, as an autonomous mythical figure, in his quality as Alexander's genealogical forefather and paradigmatic model. This reference of Herakles to Alexander remained mostly implicit, presupposing the viewer's knowledge of the king's mythical lineage, but in some specimens, as Martin Dorka Moreno has demonstrated, it was made explicit by raising locks over the hero's forehead, assimilating him to Alexander's *anastole*. These heads too do not portray Alexander as a New Herakles: they depict Herakles with the traits of Alexander, in order to make the present king appear as the reflection of the mythical hero.<sup>20</sup>

Achilleus became an important point of reference for Alexander early in his life.<sup>21</sup> His *paidagogos* Lysimachos is reported by Plutarch to have gained favour at court by speaking of Alexander as Achilleus, of his father Philip as Peleus, and of himself as Phoinix. In a period when rulers and military leaders posed in the roles of mythical heroes (see above), and in the atmosphere of the Macedonian court where some years later a statue of the king was carried in a procession among the images of all gods and where Aristotle read the *Iliad* with the young prince, such heroic acclamations are anything but improbable; Plutarch may well have gotten his information from Kallisthenes, a pupil of Aristotle who was a colleague of Lysimachos and an eyewitness of Alexander's education.<sup>22</sup> After the death of Philip II, Demosthenes ridiculed Alexander's – obviously well-known – ambitions by calling him a Margites, a parody of the Homeric Achilleus.<sup>23</sup> At the outset of his campaign to Asia Alexander made a programmatic sacrifice at the alleged tomb of Achilleus near Troy; before the battle of Issos he called Thetis, Nereus, and the Nereids for

18 See HÖLSCHER 1971, 43–51.

19 PRICE 1991, esp. I, 85–88; TROXELL 1991; TROXELL 1997; LE RIDER 2007, 8–16; MITTAG 2016, 164–165. The ideological concept of the coins' iconography – Zeus and Herakles on silver, Athena and Nike on gold – is already apparent in Alexander's sacrifice rituals for Zeus, Athena, and Herakles on altars built by him at the European and the Asian side of the Hellespont: Arr. *Anab.* 1.11.7. In my view the mostly accepted date of the beginning of Alexander's coinage after Issos is not yet the last word.

20 DORKA MORENO 2019, 121–140.

21 HECKEL 2015 holds the view that even Arrian presents all anecdotes on Alexander and Achilleus as pure *logoi*; but see *Anab.* 7.14.4, quoted by Heckel himself on p. 24.

22 Plut. *Alex.* 5.5, cf. 24.6–8.

23 Aischin. 3.160; Plut. *Dem.* 23.3; Marsyas (*FGrHist* 135) F3. See LANE FOX 1973, 60–61; below p. 40–41. I owe the reference to this important fact to Kai Trampedach.



help and protection.<sup>24</sup> In the visual arts the reciprocal assimilation between Alexander and Achilleus begins somewhat later, around 300 BC: on coins of Larisa Kremaste in Thessaly Achilleus appears, as Ralf von den Hoff has shown, with the *anastole* and long curled locks of Alexander; and the famous statue of the so-called Alexander Rondanini depicts Achilleus putting on his armour, with heroic hairstyle, his head vigorously turned up and his wide open eyes looking into the distance: an ideal brother of Alexander.<sup>25</sup> One may add Pompeian paintings of an Alexander-like Achilleus at the court of Lykomedes, setting off for the Trojan war, that are often thought to reproduce an original Greek painting of around 300 BC.<sup>26</sup> Achilleus, too, is assimilated to Alexander, in order to appear as Alexander's prefiguration.

### IMITATION OF HEROES VERSUS AUTONOMOUS HEROISM

Nevertheless, one may also observe that in the literary sources references from Alexander to Achilleus and Herakles are often not made explicit, not even when they seem to be obvious. When he visited Delphi in order to get a positive prediction for his war campaign against Persia, he is said to have dragged the reluctant Pythia into the temple. To some degree he followed Herakles who allegedly had robbed the Delphic tripod in order to get an oracle from her, but this act was not so much an imitation of but an equivalent to his ancestor's daring deed<sup>27</sup>. During his campaigns Alexander underwent, like Herakles, immense labours and hardships, like Herakles he penetrated to the 'end of the world', heard of and even ran into the Amazons, and at the point of his final turn back he built twelve towering altars, obviously as counter-parts of the famous 'Columns of Herakles' – but his great mythical prototype is rarely mentioned<sup>28</sup>. When he conquered the gigantesque rock mountain of Aornos, he even surpassed Herakles who had failed to do so.<sup>29</sup> And to extend this series with another model: when Alexander after the death of Dareios captured the usurper Bessos, he is reported to have bent down two trees, tied up his victim and let him be torn into pieces. This is hardly conceivable without thinking of Theseus and Sinis, but again the reference is not made explicit by Plutarch.<sup>30</sup>

24 Troy, Tomb of Achilleus: Arr. *Anab.* 1.12.1; Plut. *Alex.* 15.4; Diod. 17.17.3. AMELING 1988, 676–679; A. COHEN 1995, 484–485. – Issos: *FGrHist* 148, 44, col. II.

25 Coins of Larisa Kremaste: VON DEN HOFF 1997, 20–22. – Alexander Rondanini: VON DEN HOFF 1997 *passim*.

26 KOSSATZ-DEISSMANN 1981, nr. 54; HÖLSCHER 1971, pl. 9, 1.

27 Plut. *Alex.* 14.4. I am grateful to Kai Trampedach for having pointed out this case to me. The authenticity of this story may be controversial but the lack of an explicit reference to Herakles is significant.

28 Labours and hardships: see Arr. *Anab.* 3.18.6, 20.1, 21.6 etc. For the ideal of heroism see FINKELBERG 1995. – Amazons: Arr. *Anab.* 4.15.4, 7.13.2–6; Plut. *Alex.* 47. – Twelve altars: Arr. *Anab.* 5.29.1–2; Plut. *Alex.* 62.4.

29 Arr. *Anab.* 4.28.1–4, 4.30.4.

30 Plut. *Alex.* 43.

This feature may be understood as an indication that the authors did not so much want to present Alexander as an imitator of specific figures of myth but as a hero equal to them, with his own heroic qualities. And this again could mean that Alexander himself did not always make such references explicit but left things more or less open. If he had explicitly referred in those situations to Herakles, Achilles, or Theseus, should we not expect that the earliest authors in particular, such as Ptolemaios, Aristoboulos, and Kallisthenes, who had participated in his campaigns, would have mentioned it?

Of course, this is speculation *e silentio*. But in fact there are clear indications that Alexander increasingly conceived of himself not only as a paradigmatic imitator, nor only as a genealogical successor, but as a hero of his own, equal to the great protagonists of myth. Particularly significant is his relation to the Dioskouroi. Before the banquet which eventually led to the murder of Kleitos, Alexander is reported to have made a sacrifice to the twin heroes: according to Arrian, 'for some reason or other, this came to his mind'.<sup>31</sup> In the subsequent conversations some of his companions flattered him by saying that the deeds of the Dioskouroi, and even those of Herakles, were not comparable with his own achievements. In fact, however, the Dioskouroi were not particularly convincing paradigms for Alexander to identify with, nor did their dual number comply with Alexander's basic uniqueness. On the other hand, however, this sacrifice was not a single momentary action, for the great painter Apelles painted a famous picture of Alexander, crowned by Nike, standing between the Dioskouroi.<sup>32</sup> Obviously the heroic twins, being the sons of Zeus, were chosen in order to attribute the same rank to Alexander. With his claim of being an offspring of Zeus, Alexander was also equal to Herakles, and even more to Achilles, who would likewise have been Zeus' son, if the father of the gods had not withdrawn from Achilles' mother Thetis because of an oracle saying that she would give birth to a son who would surpass his father in strength and power. Alexander was not only the genealogical successor of these heroes but at the same time their (quasi) 'brother'.

In this sense, the following observations and reflections will focus on two specific aspects of Alexander that reveal the essence of his personality – not, however, his individual psyche but his public role: on the one hand his 'image', on the other hand his biography. Both notions do not focus on contingent reality but on conceptual construction: not Alexander's factual physique and physiognomy, but his intended public appearance; not the multifarious course of his life but the conceptual order and sequence of his public roles.

31 Arr. *Anab.* 4.8.2–3; Plut. *Alex.* 50.4.

32 Plin. *NH* 35.93–94.



## IMAGE AND BIOGRAPHY BETWEEN CONTINGENT REALITY AND INTENTIONAL CONCEPTUALISATION: PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Here, again, some theoretical preliminaries seem to be appropriate. Alexander's visual appearance is known to us only from his portraits and through written descriptions; his life is only attested in the form of literary texts. This poses problems of methodology. Regarding the art of portraiture as well as the literary genre of biography, scholars now agree that these are basically interpretative products, presenting the visual appearance and the factual course of life of individual persons from the perspective, i.e. according to the conceptual categories and the intended messages of their authors. Modern theories of the media and of constructivism make these insights irreversible. As a consequence, historians either try to find out, through critical analysis, the author's intention in order to uncover the underlying reality of the historical 'Lebenswelt': this is the normal procedure with biographies. Or they take the artistic/linguistic product in its specific medium as the only accessible reality, without any possibility to penetrate to some kind of real historical 'Lebenswelt' behind it: this is the way portraits are normally dealt with.

This *aporia* can be resolved by a theoretical reflection on what is meant by 'reality'<sup>33</sup>. The reality of the 'Lebenswelt' is not a pre-given contingent fact which is transformed by 'art' into some meaningful cultural product, text or image, for the reality of the 'Lebenswelt' itself is already a product of cultural conceptualisation. On the one hand, human beings perceive the reality of the 'Lebenswelt' in the categories of their cultural systems, on the other hand they shape their 'Lebenswelt' according to the concepts of the culture in which they live. In this sense, the real 'Lebenswelt' is a construct: a medium in which we perceive, and through which we express cultural meaning. Therefore, representations of the 'Lebenswelt' in art and literature are not transformations of meaningless material reality into a fundamentally different product of cultural meaning – an assumption that inevitably creates problems of uncovering the underlying reality: they are translations of meaning from the medium of the conceptually shaped 'Lebenswelt' into the conceptualising media of literary texts and visual forms.

These general considerations become immediately evident in the concrete visual appearances as well as in the paths of life of individuals in specific societies. Both are strongly moulded by cultural concepts.

Human beings, as social actors, shape their appearance and behaviour in many ways: by clothes, jewellery and attributes, hairstyle, beard or beardlessness, cosmetics and skin decoration, mimics and gestures, postures and movements. Thereby they express social roles and claims, personal character, occasional psychological states and reactions, or intentional messages. By such visual self-styling humans present themselves as living images.

<sup>33</sup> On what follows see HÖLSCHER 2016 and 2018, 209–211, 217–228. See also the thoughtful reflections on 'art and reality' in A. COHEN 2010, 17–19.

Likewise, human lives are shaped by cultural models and social structures: by concepts of gender differences, by the order of age classes, by social and political grouping, and by the expectations regarding the roles and forms of behaviour connected with these structures. Individual biographies are strongly moulded by such conceptual models.

#### ALEXANDER'S APPEARANCE AND SELF-PRESENTATION

The portraits of Alexander, in particular those created in his own lifetime, are strikingly different from each other. From such diverging versions no reliable idea of his individual physiognomy can be deduced. Obviously, these variants are expressions of diverging views of patrons, artists and their public regarding Alexander's character and his public role. These differences have been fully explored in former scholarship and are set aside here.<sup>34</sup>

All of his portraits, however, follow one and the same basic type which apparently goes back to Alexander's real appearance. To sum it up briefly: he is beardless and wears full curly locks, raising over his forehead in the form of the so-called *anastole* and falling down to his neck. Long hair, together with a beardless youthful face, constitute the appearance of a bright youthful hero. In art, this was the appearance of youthful gods and heroes, like Apollon and Helios, Achilleus and Theseus. Raising forelocks, in general, were understood, and used in art, as a sign of physical strength: in wild disorder for giants, satyrs, also for Poseidon, in majestic symmetry for mighty father gods, such as Zeus or Asklepios. Alexander's *anastole*, in particular, was interpreted as an indication of his lion-like manliness. In addition, some further traits were considered characteristic of him: the emphatic turn of his head towards one side, directing his gaze into a far distance, and the vivid glow of his 'humid' eyes, both appropriate expressions of the great conqueror's *pathos* and *pathos*.

At the time, such images of a king and army-leader were a sensation without precedents. Leading statesmen of classical times, like Perikles, had been represented as bearded middle-aged dignitaries, embodying paternal authority. Alexander's father Philipp II still had followed this model. Alexander, it is true, had indeed come to power at a very young age, but normally beardless young men of the age of junior citizens, *neoi*, were portrayed with the short-cut hair of athletes. How consciously Alexander broke away from this model becomes clear from his representations together with Hephaestion: His companion is short-haired, he himself wears

34 On the portraits of Alexander see in particular: HÖLSCHER 1971; STEWART 1993; REINSBERG 2004; HÖLSCHER 2009; VON DEN HOFF 2014; DORKA MORENO 2019.



long heroic locks. It was a unique programmatic appearance which Alexander significantly kept in his iconography until the end of his life.<sup>35</sup>

Yet, although the elements of Alexander's portraits were pre-given in earlier representations of youthful gods and heroes, he is not assimilated thereby to any specific divine or mythic figure. Alexander is depicted as a hero of his own, with his characteristic combination of youthful brightness and manly vigour, and in this visual form he became vice-versa a powerful model for later images of youthful heroes.<sup>36</sup>

The historical power of this heroic type, however, was founded in the fact that this image was not confined to art but was embodied by Alexander himself in his actual appearance. This is, firstly, to be concluded from his portraits: if the most diverging variants of his images coincide in the afore-mentioned fundamental traits, then there is a high degree of probability that these correspond to his real appearance. Secondly, and even more important: if Alexander wanted to be represented in his portraits as a youthful hero, beardless and with long hair, then he could easily realise this 'image' also in his physical apparition. Thirdly, confirmation comes from written sources reporting that Hellenistic rulers like Demetrios Poliorketes and Roman *imperatores* like Pompey aimed to imitate Alexander's appearance, referring obviously not to his images but to his real physical look.<sup>37</sup> Fourthly, and in the same vein, Alexander's beardlessness was soon received in the entire Hellenistic world as the normal male fashion: this too must have been caused by his real visual appearance, not only by his portrait statues.

This *habitus* of a young 'heroic' ruler was formed in a reciprocal interplay between art and life. Alexander followed the 'image'-type of youthful mythical heroes which basically existed in imagination and in works of art. But he transformed this imagined 'image' in his real corporeal appearance into a living being – and thereby, vice versa, he strongly influenced not only the forms of real-life self-styling among his followers but also the representation of mythical heroes and living rulers in art.

This unprecedented heroic image of Alexander is first attested in his early portrait type represented by replicas from the Athenian Akropolis and at Erbach (fig. 1).<sup>38</sup> Its

<sup>35</sup> For Alexander's self-stylisation, beardless and with long hair, see HÖLSCHER 1971 and 2009; ALONSO TRONCOSO 2010. Alexander and Hephaestion: STEWART 1993, 209–214, 338–339, fig. 72, 136, 144–145, 146–153. – Before Alexander, long hair is exceptionally worn by one of the – anonymous! – young horsemen on the Parthenon frieze: the ideal was 'in the air'.

<sup>36</sup> HÖLSCHER 1971.

<sup>37</sup> *Imitatio Alexandri*: see above n. 8.

<sup>38</sup> STEWART 1993, 106–110; DORKA MORENO 2019, 52–56. Dorka Moreno denies any 'decidedly heroic or even divine connotation' in the Akropolis type, interpreting it as a purely youthful appearance, an exemplary model of Athenian youths. This, however, means to negate the very exceptional character of this portrait type – which cannot be disproved by two single (and equally exceptional) horsemen on the Parthenon frieze and on a recently discovered grave relief. Like these figures, the Akropolis Alexander is elevated by his appearance above the normative

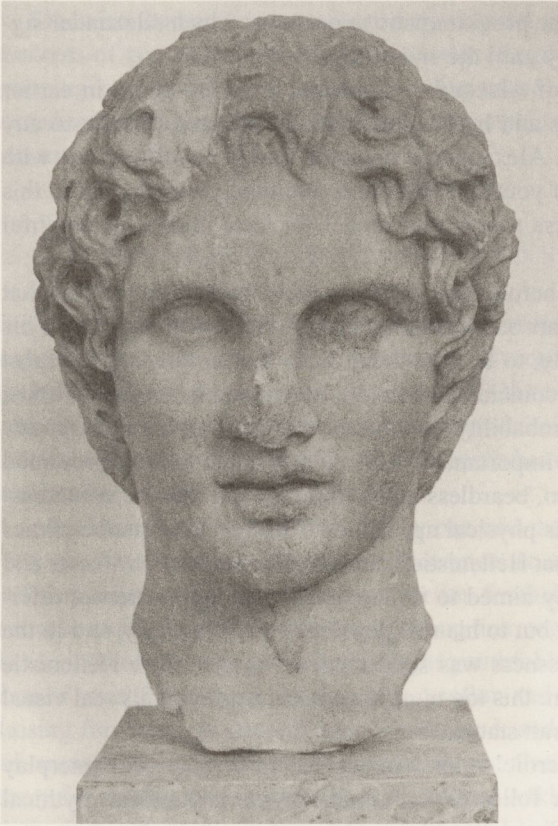


Fig. 1: Portrait of Alexander the Great. Athens, Akropolis Museum, Inv. 1331. Late Hellenistic copy after original of ca. 340–336 BC (Greece). Photo Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Athen.

approximate date can be fixed on the basis of its style to around 340–330 BC. The age of the young king, as he is represented here – which in Greek portraits is not a very reliable indication – at least does not contradict this. A more precise date of the Akropolis-Erbach type, before the campaign against Persia, can be derived from a comparison with other portraits: Alexander looks younger here than in his later portraits by Lysippos which seem to have originated in Asia Minor and Egypt and thus must date to ca. 330 BC (fig. 2–3). This is confirmed by this type's Attic character: Alexander is characterised as a beautiful youth, of charming *charis*, in the *habitus* of classical youthful Athenians, and in the style of Athenian workshops. Conceptually, this portrait belongs to the early phase of Alexander's life: after his departure to Asia his portraits are more stamped by the dynamic concept and style of Lysippos. Most

type of athletic youths, not in the religious sense of 'heroic' or 'divine' status, but in the sense of a striking heroic ('heldenhafte') appearance.



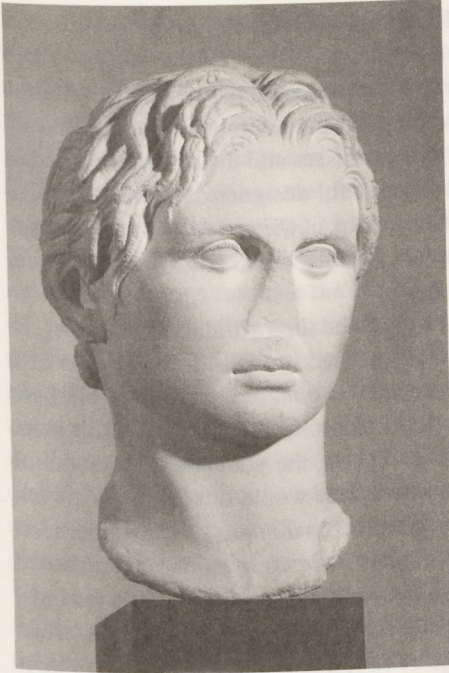


Fig. 2: Portrait of Alexander the Great. München, Glyptothek, loan Schwarzenberg. Roman copy after original of ca. 334–330 BC (Asia Minor?). Photo Hubert Vögele after plaster cast Institut für Klassische Archäologie der Universität Heidelberg.

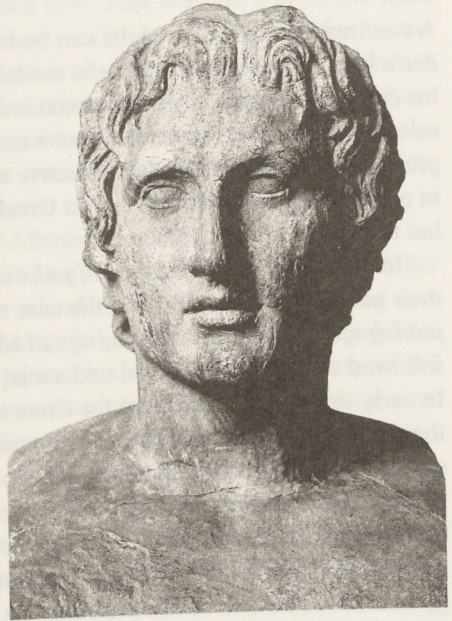


Fig. 3: Portrait of Alexander the Great. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Inv. MA 436. Roman copy after original of ca. 330 BC (Alexandria?). Photo Archive T. Hölscher.

probably, the original portrait statue of the Akropolis-Erbach type was created and erected somewhere in Greece, most likely in Athens, either after Chaironeia in 338 or at Alexander's accession to the throne in 336 BC.<sup>39</sup>

The time when Alexander, in contrast to his companions, adopted this hairstyle in his real appearance can only approximately be determined. The most likely moment is his transition into the class of ephebes which, at least in Athens but most probably also in other places, was celebrated with a sacrifice of the long children's hair and the adoption of the short athletes' haircut. At this age Alexander might have started his divergence from the normal hairstyle of young men and his adoption of a new 'heroic' image.

<sup>39</sup> This is the *communis opinio* in recent scholarship. Identification with one of the attested images, e.g. on the Athenian Agora or in the Philippeion at Olympia, is not impossible but difficult to prove.

## ALEXANDER'S HEROIC BIOGRAPHY

A confirmation of these results can be found in the conceptual structure of Alexander's biography. This structure is modelled, beyond the contingent vicissitudes of his extraordinary life, by a traditional order of age classes and their respective social roles. In this sense, Alexander was a most 'successful designer of a life lived as a project'.<sup>40</sup> As a premise, it is instructive to have a look at the concepts of age classes in early Greek communities and in Greek myth. Details varied from place to place, but there was a basic structure.<sup>41</sup>

In historical times, the sons of *polis* citizens passed their childhood, as a *pais*, in their parents' house, mostly in the care of their mother, in well-to-do families of a *paidagogos*. – Thereafter, in the age of adolescence, as *ephebos*, from 16 to 18, there followed a period of physical and social introduction into the world of adult men. In early times, as it is attested for Crete and for Sparta, the youths were sent out of the city to the far-off woods and mountains where they would develop their physical strength, by hunting animals and coping with the challenges of the wilderness. In Crete this was done in the company of an elder male companion who also had to introduce his youth into the social rules and norms of maleness. In later periods, this physical and social education was more and more transferred to the extra-urban gymnasia. At the end of this phase, at the age of 18 to 20, the young men were integrated into the community of citizens as full members.<sup>42</sup> – There followed another phase, of ca. 10 to 12 years, as a *neos*, during which the young men continued living in their parents' house, participating as junior citizens in the people's assembly, and fighting as junior warriors for the safety and glory of their city, but also making their way in their social circles, and finally looking for a wife. – Only at the age of ca. 30, as *aner*, did they enter into full manhood, implying marriage, the foundation of their own household, and the capacity of taking on responsibility and magistracies in the citizen community. – At the age of 60, as *geron*, they used to retire from the tasks of the *polis* and the family.

The same concept, just in bigger dimensions, was predominant in the life of mythical heroes. Sometimes, the course of their lives was disturbed or changed by the vicissitudes of individual destiny, but the basic pattern is always clear. It is the pattern observed in actual historical societies.

Theseus passed his childhood at Troizen with his mother Aithra. In order to prove that he had reached the age of adolescence he heaved up a huge rock under which his father had hidden a sword and a pair of sandals, the symbols of manhood.

40 For a first sketch of what follows see HÖLSCHER 2009, esp. 54–59. Quotation from A. COHEN 1995, 483.

41 See GARLAND 1990; DE COSTA LEITAO 1993; KAMEN 2007; TIMMER 2008; ÖZEN-KLEINE 2016.

42 For the phase of adolescence see JEANMAIRE 1939; VAN EFFENTERRE 1949; WILLETS 1955, 7–17; BRELICH 1958, 124–129; VIDAL-NAQUET 1981; BRELICH 1989, 196–207; SCHNAPP 1996; LUPI 2000; WALDNER 2000, 82–101.



In his phase as an *ephebos* he set out for Athens, accomplishing a series of heroic deeds against wild brigands and a monstrous sow. This was his way to the male world of his father who, at his arrival at Athens, received and recognised him as his son, heir, and future successor. Then, as an adult *neos*, Theseus committed himself to the community of Athens, liberating the territory from the devastations of the bull of Marathon, and accompanying the youths and maidens to Crete in order to overcome the Minotaur and to save Athens from the annual tribute of young life. There, he won the love of Ariadne, his potential wife – from whom, however, he is recalled, in order to assume the kingship of Athens.<sup>43</sup>

Perseus, having been exposed on the sea in a wooden chest, together with his mother Danaë, and being stranded on the island of Seriphos, was received and brought up by Diktys, a brother of the local king Polydektes. If Diktys was a fisherman, as later sources inform us, Perseus passed his childhood in the care of his mother and his phase as an *ephebos* with an educator in a liminal zone, at the sea-shore. Later, when Perseus had grown up and came with his mother to the palace, and when the king harassed the attractive woman, he courageously defended her, showing the qualities of a *neos* and a potential successor to the throne. As such he was sent out by the king in order to kill the Gorgo at the western edge of the world. At the end of this phase he freed the princess Andromeda from the terrible sea-dragon in far-off Ethiopia, took her as his wife, and after various adventures rightfully took possession of the kingship at Argos.<sup>44</sup>

Jason, as a *pais* and *ephebos*, was given by his father to the Centaur Chiron on Mount Pelion, who was the most famous educator of great heroes. At the age of 20, as a *neos*, he came back to his home city Iolkos and claimed the succession of the illegitimate king Pelias. So as to prove his valour he was sent out, together with a group of other youthful heroes, to Kolchis, at the eastern end of the world, in order to bring back the Golden Fleece. There he won the love of the king's daughter Medeia and took her as his wife. He returned to Iolkos, and finally to Korinth, where he failed to marry the king's daughter and to establish his rule.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, Achilleus. He too was given by his father Peleus to Chiron on Mount Pelion, becoming a famous mythical paradigm of ideal education, represented on a great number of archaic and early classical vases. Having grown up and reached the age of a young warrior, he participated in the war against Troy which lasted, not by chance, for ten years, corresponding to the life phase of a *neos*. At the end he comes up against Penthesilea, the queen of the Amazons, falling in love while he kills her. He dies at the threshold of full manhood, before marriage, before the final triumph over Troy, and without returning to Greece where he would have taken over the rule in his inherited land.<sup>46</sup>

43 JEANMAIRE 1939, 228–383; SOURVINOU-INWOOD 1979; NEILS 1987; CALAME 1990.

44 SCHAUENBURG 1960; TOPPER 2007.

45 CLAUSS 1993.

46 NAGY 1979; KOSSATZ-DEISSMANN 1981; HÖLSCHER 2019, 60–81.

One could continue with other heroes, such as Bellerophon, Paris, not least with Herakles, whose path of life is, however, more complex.

If we read Alexander's biography against this backdrop of heroic lives, many common traits become apparent. Many of the great mythical heroes traced their lineage back to a god or goddess: Herakles and Perseus to Zeus, Achilles to Thetis, Theseus to Poseidon, and so forth. It is well known how willingly Alexander accepted to be called, and later also himself pretended to be, the son of Zeus.<sup>47</sup>

From early on, Alexander's life was conceived and formed according to the categories of age classes.<sup>48</sup> According to Plutarch, Demosthenes called him a boy in the Illyrian War, and a youth in the Thessalian campaign, whereupon Alexander would have answered that in front of the city wall of Athens he might prove to be a man. Particularly remarkable, so Plutarch writes, was the fact that Alexander took over the Macedonian kingdom at the age of twenty, which was a traditional date of entering into the class of adult young men.<sup>49</sup>

Alexander's education by high-ranking teachers, such as Leonidas and Lysimachos, is well attested. Particularly famous was the appointment of Aristotle who is said to have read the *Iliad* with him, as a preparation for his future as a warlord, but also to have taught him the art of healing.<sup>50</sup> The place where this education was accomplished was not the royal palace at Pella but a remote sanctuary of the nymphs near Mieza, in the hilly inland of Macedonia where Pliny mentions a famous cave of stalactites.<sup>51</sup> Without doubt, this was not an intimate situation of togetherness between the philosopher and the prince: obviously, Alexander was educated there together with other sons of elite families, and certainly there were various tutors providing them with a broad physical and intellectual education. The atmosphere of this remote place may be gathered from the hunt painting of the royal tomb of Vergina, with a group of naked youths on horseback.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, the relation between Aristotle and Alexander must have been particularly important. All this is strongly reminiscent of the education of Achilles by Chiron on Mount Pelion. The wise Centaur, too, was reported to have taught his pupils not only the practice of hunting but also the art of healing and of playing the lyre.<sup>53</sup> The literary sources do not suggest an explicit reference between the historical and the mythical couple of

47 See BOSWORTH 1988a, 282–284.

48 For Macedonian age classes see HATZOPOULOS 1996a.

49 Plut. *Alex.* 11.1–6.

50 Plut. *Alex.* 7–8. TRAMPEDACH 1994, 54–55 reduces the influence of Aristotle on Alexander, without negating it totally. On the alleged portrait set up by Alexander see VOUTIRAS 1987.

51 Plin. *NH* 31.30. – For the city of Mieza and the site of the (extra-urban) sanctuary see PETSAS 1966, 5–12; PAPAZOGLU 1988, 150–152; BILLOT 1989; ERRINGTON 2000. BOSWORTH 1988a, 20 speaks of a 'miniature Academy'; yet, Plato's Academy was a periurban place while Mieza was located in the *eschatia*.

52 SAATSOGLU-PALIADELI 2004; BORZA / PALAGIA 2007; FRANKS 2012.

53 For sources and images see KOSSATZ-DEISSMANN 1981, nr.19–93, pp.40–42, 53–55. For the comparison with Alexander and Aristotle see already AMELING 1988, 667–668.



teacher and pupil, but they clearly testify that the constellation of persons surrounding the young Alexander was seen in mythical dimensions: Lysimachos was highly esteemed at the royal court 'because he referred to himself as Phoinix, to Alexander as Achilleus, and to Philipp as Peleus'.<sup>54</sup> Alexander and Aristotle at Mieza were not mirror images of Achilleus and Chiron on Mount Pelion, but they were, as a present-time constellation, commensurable to the mythical couple of teacher and disciple.

Alexander's first proof of his unique manly prowess was given by his mastering and taming the wild stallion Boukephalos.<sup>55</sup> By this deed, too, he showed himself as equal to the greatest heroes of myth. At the same age, Theseus had proved, by heaving up the mighty rock, to have reached the stage of a grown-up *ephebos*; Bellerophon had tamed, to demonstrate his forces as an adult *neos*, the winged horse Pegasus; Herakles had strangled, as his first deed, the Nemean lion; later he had overcome the furious horses of the Thracian king Diomedes. These are Alexander's mythic prototypes of heroic proofs of manhood. At the same time, however, Alexander had won a unique symbol of his social and royal rank. The Cretan ephebes received at the end of their phase of adolescence significant symbols of their new social status: a cup for the *symposion*, a rich cloth for religious festivals, and a bull for sacrificing it to the gods;<sup>56</sup> Theseus found under the rock a sword and a pair of sandals for his adventurous journey to Athens. By mastering Boukephalos, Alexander overcame a stallion of mythical wildness, and at the same time appropriated it for himself, almost as an animal double of himself. In this sense the taming of Boukephalos was not an imitation of a specific mythical model but a first mythopoietic act of autonomous heroism.

When Alexander, being twenty years old, succeeded his father on the throne of Macedonia, he was actually only at the age of the *neoi*, the junior warriors. Regarding his conceptual biography, it is most significant that he adopted precisely this role: by starting his great military campaign which eventually lasted ten years like the phase of the *neoi*, the junior warriors of Greek cities, but also like the archetypal campaign of the mythical heroes against Troy.

All in all, these ten years were a manifestation of heroism in mythical dimensions. In his great battles Alexander combatted, against every normal practice of this time, at the head of his troops, striving for a personal encounter with the enemy, especially with the Persian king.<sup>57</sup> While this might be understood as an imitation of Homeric heroes, his daring assault on the city wall of the Malloi was a manifestation of his own individual heroism.<sup>58</sup> In his royal hunts he used to expose himself to lions in a direct encounter, as Herakles had fought against beasts and monsters or Theseus

<sup>54</sup> Plut. *Alex.* 5.5.

<sup>55</sup> Plut. *Alex.* 6.

<sup>56</sup> Strab. 10.4.21.

<sup>57</sup> Arr. *Anab.* 1.14.7, 1.15.3, 1.28.6, 2.10.3, 2.11.7, 3.14.2, 4.4.5, 5.13.2, 5.16.4; Plut. *Alex.* 9.2, 16.2–5, 20.4–5, 33.3–4. HÖLSCHER 1973, 152–153; LONDON 2005, 118–119 and *passim*.

<sup>58</sup> Arr. *Anab.* 6.7.4–6; Plut. *Alex.* 63. LONDON 2005, 133–136.

against the Minotaur.<sup>59</sup> Here again, Alexander presented himself in actions that are not to be understood as imitations of specific mythical heroes but as mythopoeitic acts of his own. The most obvious act of this heroic autonomy was to cut the Gordian knot. This symbolic deed, by which he set the course of the whole future campaign, was an act of mythical dimensions for which he had no specific mythical precedent at all.<sup>60</sup>

The same is evident in Alexander's notorious emotional *habitus*: on the one hand in his excessive outbursts of violence, such as the murder of Kleitos;<sup>61</sup> on the other hand in his emphatic demonstrations of nobleness and magnanimity, especially towards the captured women of the Persian royal family;<sup>62</sup> or else in his pathetic rituals of spectacular sacrifices, not only to the traditional gods but also – at a solar eclipse before the battle of Gaugamela – to the Sun, the Moon, and the Earth; not to speak of his excessive mourning and the overwhelming funeral for Hephaestion.<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, the whole campaign was marked by continuous omens and miracles, confirming the uniqueness of Alexander's heroic power.<sup>64</sup>

When he advanced into ever more distant lands, Alexander exposed himself to immense physical effort and strain, like Herakles. When he was about to conquer Sogdiana, his seer Aristandros predicted the expected strain even by the interpretation of an omen.<sup>65</sup> Alexander had to ask for directions when going to unknown far-distant lands, through wasteland and desert, as Perseus had asked the Graiai for his path to the Gorgo and Herakles old Nereus for his way to the Hesperids. Like Herakles, he encountered peoples of frightening strangeness and got knowledge of the threatening tribes of the warlike Amazons.<sup>66</sup> Like Herakles, Iason, Perseus and Bellerophon he reached far-off liminal zones which in many aspects are described as the 'end of the world'.<sup>67</sup> There he had to fight against the gigantic elephants with their spear-throwing riders,<sup>68</sup> no less terrifying than the monstrous opponents of the heroes of myth, Geryon with his three armed bodies, Gorgo Medousa with her petrifying face, the composite beast of the Chimaira, or the dragon of Kolchis. Yet again this was not an imitation of individual mythical models but a manifestation of mythical equality.

59 Arr. *Anab.* 4.13.2; Plut. *Alex.* 2, 40.3–4. Curt. 8.1.11–19, 8.6.7. On monuments of Alexander hunting, see A. COHEN 1995; ZENZEN 2018, 158–167.

60 On the Gordian knot see below p. 42.

61 Arr. *Anab.* 4.8.1–4.9.9; Plut. *Alex.* 51–52. BOSWORTH 1988a, 114–116.

62 Arr. *Anab.* 2.12.1–8; Plut. *Alex.* 21.1–5.

63 Arr. *Anab.* 3.7.6.

64 See TRAMPEDACH, this volume.

65 Arr. *Anab.* 4.15.7–8; Plut. *Alex.* 57.4–5. TRAMPEDACH 2015, 108–109.

66 See n. 28.

67 Plut. *Alex.* 66.1; see also Arr. *Anab.* 3.20.4.

68 Arr. *Anab.* 5.10.1–2, 5.11.4, 15.6–7, 17.3–7. Poros' elephants are reported to have especially terrorised the Macedonian horses.



Towards the end of his campaign Alexander met the Sogdian princess Roxane, allegedly the most beautiful woman of Asia, with whom he celebrated a fabulous and spectacular wedding feast: a historical counterpart of such heroes' brides from distant lands as Andromeda, Medea, and Ariadne.<sup>69</sup> His most intimate friend and companion Hephæstion took on the role of the bride's male attendant, as Patroklos had promised to bring the captive Briseis to Achilles as his bride. Only later, after his return to Babylon, at the age of thirty, he took on the role of a monarch, residing in an imperial capital, receiving embassies from all parts of the world, and striving to establish stable imperial structures.<sup>70</sup> His early death, likening him further to Achilles, was of course not intended in his heroic role, but as a result was not totally surprising: in the Greek concept of human destiny even the greatest heroes were exposed to the fate of death.

Of course, all this could not have been planned from the beginning. But from early on, and in all stages of his life, Alexander conceived his role according to a conceptual pattern, which step by step resulted in an archetypal great biography.

In their basic structures of age classes the life courses of *polis* citizens and mythical heroes correspond to each other. But in their dimensions the lives of the great heroes by far exceed the normal measure of historical periods. In this regard, Alexander is on the side of myth. It is this super-human dimension that is expressed in his alleged saying when he was asked whether he was willing to contend in the foot-race at the Olympic games: yes, if I could have kings as my contenders. He belonged to the age class of swift-footed athletes, but on the level of Achilles.<sup>71</sup>

#### FROM EARLY ON?

The crucial question in this context is, how and when, under which conditions and on the basis of which experiences, Alexander conceived his claim to world dominion and his role as a universal ruler. Many scholars opt for a stepwise development, with a decisive change in 333 BC, after the battle of Issos: in this view, his first victory over Dareios III opened up the perspective of the succession to the throne of the Persian Great Kings entailing the claim to universal power. Correspondingly, from this time on Alexander would have developed forms and practices of public representation of the Persian kings and shaped his role as a ruler over the Macedonians and Greeks as well as over the peoples of the Achæmenid Empire.

The merit – and perhaps also the goal – of this interpretation is to make Alexander's radical break with his roots in the Greek world rationally understandable, as the formation of a new political role that was based on real experiences of military and political events and processes. His starting-point would be the plan of a

<sup>69</sup> Arr. *Anab.* 4.19.5–6; Plut. *Alex.* 47.4.

<sup>70</sup> Which, of course, did not prevent him from planning new wars of conquest.

<sup>71</sup> Plut. *Alex.* 4.5; see MANN, this volume.

war against Persia, inherited from Philip II, and conceived in Greek traditions of revenge for the sacrileges of the classical Persian Wars – until his victory at Issos suggested to him the idea of invincibility and world-wide rule. Such rational explanations of extraordinary facts are understandably attractive – yet one may doubt whether Alexander can really be explained in this way.

Philip's military objectives were probably rather limited: above all the liberation of the Greek cities of Asia Minor, and moreover, possibly, the creation of a zone of security against the Persian Empire. The fact that Alexander 'inherited' Philip's war plans is often interpreted in the sense that he also took over his father's limited aims. This assumption, however, requires no less justification than every other interpretation. In fact, some of the phenomena that have been dealt with above, to which other ones could be added, seem to suggest that these later 'developments' were rather implied and rooted in his unique heroism from early on, and that this was not only a matter of 'rational' motivations – whatever 'rationality' may mean in this context.

The question of the origins of Alexander's self-concept of a young hero entails the well-known problems of the reliability of the written sources and the precise chronology of the artistic testimonies. In this situation it is important not simply to resort to hypercriticism or total agnosticism but to look for plausible solutions. On the one hand, some traditions may arouse scepticism, such as Alexander's alleged youthful indignation over his father's military achievements since they would reduce his own claims to heroic glory.<sup>72</sup> But on the other hand there is a number of testimonies that cannot be dismissed.

Alexander's heroic image marked by beardlessness with *anastole* and long hair, by which he distinguished himself from the short-cut hairstyle of Macedonian youths, is attested, in his portraits with a high degree of probability before his start for the Persian campaign, either after Chaironeia in 338 or after his accession to the throne in 336 BC. As for the underlying real hairstyle, it is at least plausible that he adopted it when he entered the age of *ephebos*, around 340 BC, and was elevated to the rank of a vice-ruler, κύριος τῶν πραγμάτων, endowed with the royal seal.<sup>73</sup> At this time, at the latest, Alexander seems to have developed a sort of hero-like ambitions.

Alexander's education by Aristotle in the distant sanctuary of Mieza must have taken place ca. 343–340 BC. Although this was not an exclusive interaction between one great tutor and one privileged pupil, but rather an education within a circle of noble Macedonian youths by a group of teachers, a certain focus must have been put on the exceptional interrelation between the famous philosopher and the royal prince. It is plausible to recognise here the model of education of great mythical heroes. Aristotle, as is well-known, read Homer's *Iliad* with his pupil, making him acquainted with the heroes of the Trojan myth, and on the other hand must have introduced him to a universal perspective of the world which was not limited to the

72 Plut. *Alex.* 5.1–3.

73 Plut. *Alex.* 9.1.



space of Greek *poleis* but embraced the entire *kosmos* to the end of the world. In the young heir of the by far greatest power of the Greek world, the pathos of mythical warrior values in combination with a 'global' world view could arouse phantasies of unprecedented reach.

Shortly afterwards, Aristotle composed a hymn to Hermias, the tyrant of Atarneus, put to death by the Persian king Artaxerxes, comparing him with the great heroes Herakles and the Dioskouroi, Achilleus and Ajax: there can be no doubt that this was the tone in which the philosopher had inspired the heroic ambitions of the Macedonian prince before.<sup>74</sup>

The taming of Boukephalos, at the age of an ephebe, is rooted, like the education by Aristotle, in contemporary social practice. Other noble Macedonian youths, too, will have mastered vehement horses and proved to be brave riders. Yet Alexander stands out among them in that this accomplishment of him was recognised and exalted as a gigantic performance of unique mythical character. The origin of this exaltation, whether in Alexander's youth or at a later date, is difficult to fix, but it seems less probable that a normal social practice was later raised to a mythical level than that Alexander, when he tamed the particularly fiery stallion, with the unique name of 'bull's head', from the beginning aroused some amazement and admiration comparable to the heroes of myth.

Immediately after his father's death, in 336 BC, when Alexander ascended the throne, his ambition to equal the Homeric Achilleus was so widely known that Demosthenes could achieve some public effect by ridiculing him for this (see above).

When Alexander crossed the Hellespont to Asia he performed, as is well-known, a series of symbolic actions through which he manifested his very high and far-reaching political ambitions. By making a sacrifice to Protesilaos before crossing over and, like the Homeric hero, jumping first from the ship onto the Asian mainland, he accomplished the transition in the dimensions of a transition from Europe to Asia. By throwing his spear from the ship into the Asian soil he claimed Asia, without limits, as his spear-won, *doriktetos*, possession. By performing, from the ship, a further sacrifice to Poseidon, he responded to the sacrifice of Xerxes to Helios, one and a half centuries before, by which the Persian King had claimed the possession of the whole of Europe. When he subsequently visited Troy, making sacrifices to Achilleus and the other Achaian heroes, this implied not only the succession and imitation of the mythical Greek victors but also the destruction of an empire and the extinction of its royal family.<sup>75</sup> At the same time he made a sacrifice to Priamos, on the one hand to expiate the murder of the Trojan king by his ancestor Neoptolemos, on the other hand claiming the succession as ruler of 'Asia'. It would have been quite incommensurable with such wide-ranging perspectives if Alexander had ful-

<sup>74</sup> Diog. Laert. 5.7–8; Ath. 15.696a–e. GREEN 2003; FORD 2011. I am grateful to Hans-Joachim Gehrke for indicating this testimony to me.

<sup>75</sup> Arr. *Anab.* 1.11.5–8; Diod. 17.17.2; INSTINSKY 1949; ZAHRT 1996.

filled them only by the limited liberation of a marginal region of the Persian Empire, leaving his great adversary more or less in power.

Cutting the knot in the pole of Gordias' chariot at Gordion was a symbol of the highest and most far-reaching significance. As for the authenticity of this act, one must not necessarily believe in a previous oracle saying that whoever would untie the knot would become the ruler of Asia: Alexander can very well have put this prophecy into circulation himself. But there is no serious reason to doubt that he actually performed at Gordion an act of spectacular symbolic impact. Arrian explicitly refers to the earliest and most reliable authors, most probably eyewitnesses of the event: some authors, among whom certainly Ptolemaios, say that he cut the knot, while Aristoboulos had him pull out the peg from the pole. Whichever version we follow, and whatever later authors may have added to the tradition, the core of this unique story makes sense only in the local context of Gordion and in the presence of its protagonist. To assume that the entire story was invented later would not only be absolutely unjustified but even highly improbable.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, at Gordion Alexander made a most far-reaching symbolic claim immediately before the imminent encounter with the army of Dareios III which, moreover, stood in a most significant tradition. More than two centuries earlier, the famous oracle given to the Lydian king Kroisos had defined the encounter with the Persians as an 'either – or' of the rule over the world. Kroisos had interpreted it as a prophecy that he would destroy the Persian Empire, whereas in the end it was his own empire that was destined to be destroyed.<sup>77</sup> The old capital of the Phrygians, the predecessors of the Lydians as rulers of Western Asia Minor, was the appropriate place for Alexander's manifestation of an 'either – or' regarding the rule over Asia.

After Issos it was obvious that for Alexander the only possible future was to eliminate the rule of the Achaimenid kings and to become the successor to their throne. At this moment, however, when he had to present himself to the population of Asia, a brand-new stylisation as a genuine Greek hero, whether initiated by himself or by his followers, would not have been particularly promising. This shows again that his heroic image must have been conceived earlier.

As a result, Alexander's heroism seems to have originated in the high-spirited atmosphere of the Macedonian court around the successor prince and his noble companions, educated by inspiring teachers, inciting the responsive and impetuous prince to grand ambitions and soaring plans. In the course of time, this general heroic attitude was shaped step by step into a multifaceted character of a contemporary hero equivalent to the great heroes of myth. Then, after his victories against the Great king and his accession to their throne this concept was further widened into a god-like world rule. Yet, the foundations of all this were laid early in his life.

76 Arr. *Anab.* 2.3.1–8; Curt. 3.1.14–18; Just. *Epit.* 11.7.3–16; Plut. *Alex.* 18.1–2; Marsyas (*FGrHist* 135/136) F4. SCHMIDT 1959; FREDRICKSMEYER 1961; KRAFT 1971, 84–92; BOSWORTH 1980b, 184–188 and 1988a, 53–54.

77 Hdt. 1.53.



Who may have conceived this idea of Alexander's heroic role?<sup>78</sup> Since explicit information is lacking this is a matter of speculation on probabilities. In principle, the vision of 'great' royal heroism must have been a product of three concentric social agents. The first, fundamental factor must have been Alexander's own individual character: high-spirited, quickly inflammable, and immensely ambitious. The second factor was his immediate social environment: his teachers who inspired him for the world of Homeric heroes, and the royal court which supported such aspirations. A third precondition was the entire social and mental context of this time in which extraordinary individuals with 'super-human' qualities were widely hoped for and acknowledged, as was increasingly the case in fourth century BC Greece.

### ALEXANDER'S 'GREATNESS'

As is well-known, historical judgments on Alexander, ancient as well as modern, are particularly controversial, from admiration of his world-shaking achievements to condemnation of his destructive violence and his unrestrained furious character. Such diverging views are understandable, well-intentioned, but based on personal judgements, and therefore without any objective solution. What is more or less beyond such debates, however, is Alexander's epithet 'the Great'. Why?

The type of a hero which was pre-figured in the mythical past and reborn in Alexander had grown in a cultural space beyond ethical or moral coordinates. Greek heroes are neither 'good' nor exemplary, they are just excessively 'great'. Herakles' life oscillated between his salvation deeds against beasts and monsters on the one hand and his furious atrocities against innocent victims on the other. Achilles' bright heroism is inseparable from his dark violent *furor*. The same goes for their historical counterpart Alexander 'the Great', but also for many later powerful individuals to whom contemporaries and posterity have attested historical 'greatness'. They are measured solely by how much they have put into motion in world history: in this sense, Arrian motivates his decision to write on Alexander, without any ethical qualification, because 'no other individual man among Greeks and Barbarians had accomplished so many and such immense deeds'.<sup>79</sup> There even were voices, such as the philosopher Anaxarchos, saying that all deeds accomplished by great rulers were *eo ipso* rightful.<sup>80</sup>

The question of the judgements underlying the qualification of 'greatness' has been answered by Jacob Burckhardt without any illusions:<sup>81</sup> 'If the point at issue

<sup>78</sup> This question was insistently raised at the conference by Matthias Haake.

<sup>79</sup> Arr. *Anab.* 1.12.4. For Arrian's different personal position see *Anab.* 4.7.4–5 where he states that even the greatest heroic deeds and achievements, like those of Alexander, are no valuable contribution to human *eudaimonia* if they are not controlled by *sophrosyne*.

<sup>80</sup> Arr. *Anab.* 4.9.7–8.

<sup>81</sup> BURCKHARDT 1979, chapter 5. German original: BURCKHARDT 1978, 151–180, on 'Die historische Größe'.

here is the nature of greatness, we must, first and foremost, be on our guard against the idea that what we have to describe is a moral ideal, for in history the great individual is not set up as an example, but as an exception'. And further: 'The great man in history, however, regards it as his prime duty to stand his ground and increase his power, and power never yet improved a man'. In this sense 'we become aware of the great man's strange exemption from the ordinary moral code'. 'The crimes of the man, therefore, who bestows on a community greatness, power, and glory, are condoned.' Unique power and superiority, abnormous volition and strong impact on 'a whole nation, a whole civilisation, humanity itself', 'fulfill much that is only possible to him', whether for salvation or disaster: all this is implied and pre-figured in Achilles' 'besthood' – in Homer's phrase: in his will 'always to be the best and superior to the others'. Burckhardt still connects this character with 'greatness of soul' ('Seelengröße') and 'morality' ('Sittlichkeit') and considers it as highly desirable 'that the great man should be shown in conscious relationship to the spirit, to the culture of his time' – but there is a strong tendency in this spirit of agonistic competition towards an autonomous concept of 'greatness'. In Alexander this concept was implanted, by his own ambition as well as by projections of his environment, from his youth on.

Legitimacy? Legitimation? To the ancient Greeks heroic greatness, beyond good and bad, was a self-evident measure of glory. Herodotos had founded historiography as an exploration and commemoration of 'great and astounding deeds', ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμαστά. Alexander fulfilled this measure like no other. Many admired him, many suffered from him. But his glory was undisputed.