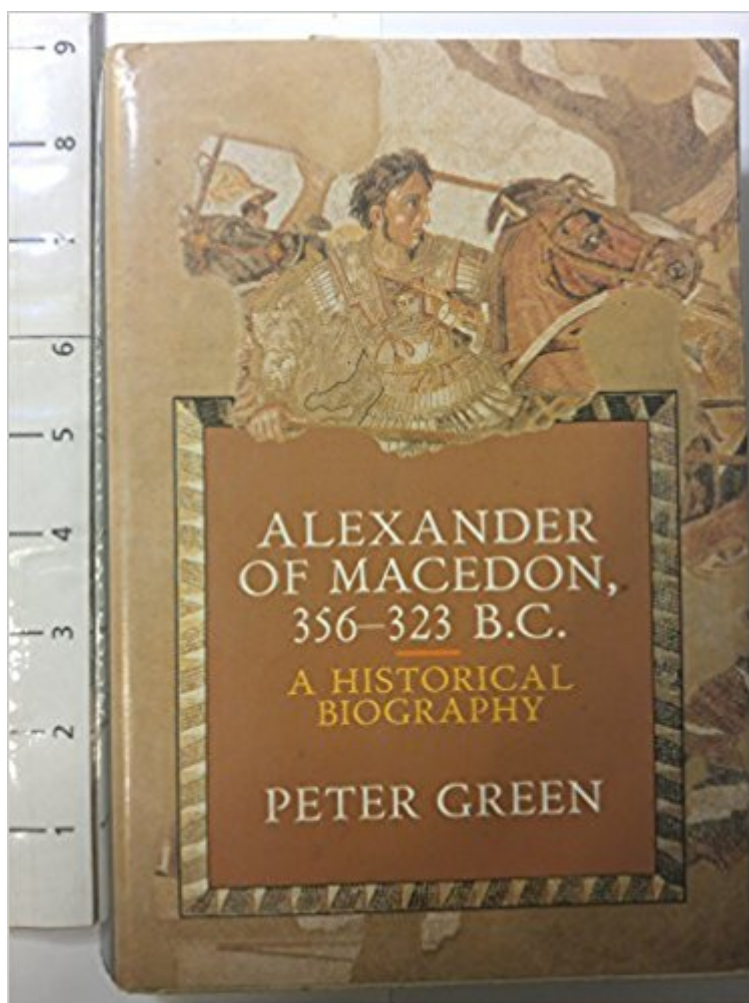


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Alexander Of Macedon, 356-323 B.C.: A Historical Biography



Synopsis

Until recently, popular biographers and most scholars viewed Alexander the Great as a genius with a plan, a romantic figure pursuing his vision of a united world. His dream was at times characterized as a benevolent interest in the brotherhood of man, sometimes as a brute interest in the exercise of power. Green, a Cambridge-trained classicist who is also a novelist, portrays Alexander as both a complex personality and a single-minded general, a man capable of such diverse expedencies as patricide or the massacre of civilians. Green describes his Alexander as "not only the most brilliant (and ambitious) field commander in history, but also supremely indifferent to all those administrative excellences and idealistic yearnings foisted upon him by later generations, especially those who found the conqueror, tout court, a little hard upon their liberal sensibilities." This biography begins not with one of the universally known incidents of Alexander's life, but with an account of his father, Philip of Macedonia, whose many-territoried empire was the first on the continent of Europe to have an effectively centralized government and military. What Philip and Macedonia had to offer, Alexander made his own, but Philip and Macedonia also made Alexander form an important context for understanding Alexander himself. Yet his origins and training do not fully explain the man. After he was named hegemon of the Hellenic League, many philosophers came to congratulate Alexander, but one was conspicuous by his absence: Diogenes the Cynic, an ascetic who lived in a clay tub. Piqued and curious, Alexander himself visited the philosopher, who, when asked if there was anything Alexander could do for him, made the famous reply, "Don't stand between me and the sun." Alexander's courtiers jeered, but Alexander silenced them: "If I were not Alexander, I would be Diogenes." This remark was as unexpected in Alexander as it would be in a modern leader. For the general reader, the book, redolent with gritty details and fully aware of Alexander's darker side, offers a gripping tale of Alexander's career. Full backnotes, fourteen maps, and chronological and genealogical tables serve readers with more specialized interests.

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Customer Reviews

There's no shortage of biographies available on Alexander the Great, but Peter Green's Alexander of Macedon is one of the finest. The prose is crisp and clear, and within a few pages readers become absorbed in the world that made Alexander, and then the story of how Alexander remade it. Green writes, "Alexander's true genius was as a field-commander: perhaps, taken all in all, the most incomparable general the world has ever seen. His gift for speed, improvisation, variety of strategy; his cool-headedness in a crisis; his ability to extract himself from the most impossible situations; his mastery of terrain; his psychological ability to penetrate the enemy's intentions--all these qualities place him at the very head of the Great Captains of history." --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Alexander the Great, as portrayed in Green's vibrant, immensely readable biography, was a megalomaniac, a ruthless murderer of civilians, a charmingly persuasive liar who bribed his own troops and a political opportunist supremely indifferent to the idealistic yearnings later ascribed to him. Pulling together circumstantial evidence, Green conjectures that Alexander conspired with his mother, Olympias, in the murder of his father, King Philip II of Macedonia, who was assassinated by a former homosexual lover. History leaps off the page in this passionate narrative. A professor of classics at the University of Texas, Green strips away romantic legends to lay bare an Orwellian tyrant whose unbroken ascent to absolute power led to his estrangement from reality. History Book Club main selection; BOMC alternate. Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I'm not a scholar, I just wanted to learn about Alexander's life and this book does a thorough job of documenting it, based on what records, reliable or not, exists. Not much is known in detail about his childhood; however, his military exploits are delineated as well as can be. The author does not make the mistake of writing in a dry style of prose which would be easy to lapse into in classical history. I find this book to be a very easy, fascinating read. The maps should have been appendicized and there should have been an overall map of the macedonian territory. The one negative note, is that the author indicated he would need to do a revision based on new research

that has occurred since the original publication; however, this new edition never came to light, leaving one thinking that maybe there's another book with more up-to-date information on Alexander.

"...a male goat was coming from the west over the surface of the whole earth without touching the ground....And I saw him come beside the ram, and he was enraged at him; and he struck the ram and shattered his two horns, and the ram had no strength to withstand him, and there was none to rescue the ram from his power."I was sold on Green's book by one of the two-star reviewers.Why does anyone study the life of Alexander the Great who died so long ago? I originally began reading about this individual because of the above quote, from Daniel 7:5, 7 (NASB) in the Bible. To understand the Bible you need to understand the times it discusses--the "ram" being the astrological sign for ancient Persia plus evidently a similar-sounding word to the nation's name in its own language.I have read Plutarch, Fox, Renault, bits of Arrian and Curtius, Bosworth and others--and alternately been intrigued by Alexander and puzzled. Renault's Alexander (in "The Persian Boy" and "The Nature of Alexander") is kind of a likeable boy-next-door type who is "lighthearted in battle" (who wouldn't be?), "sensitive to criticism," "never turns away love" from his eunuch Persian boy whom he sees only occasionally(described by most historians in unflattering terms but not by Renault)...and remorseful over the murder of Cleitus (thus we must believe he is a decent fellow after all!).The cavalier manner in which some authors treat the murders of boyhood friends by Alexander (during the last year(s) of his life), the brief references to mutinies or attempted mutinies, the fact that his empire broke apart so fast upon his death and that many of the Greeks resettled in Bactrian cities left for Greece ASAP once their commander was gone, and the break-up of all those "forced" Greco-Persian marriages....just doesn't speak well of what really was going on during Alexander's tumultuous and militarily successful reign.Bosworth's notation that the armies that Alexander utilized had never before been in such a continuous state of warfare as they were during Alex the G's reign--is another reason why I was open to a book that is more clear-eyed about Alexander the Great as an individual and as a ruler/dictator/fill-in-the-word.His successes and military genius are granted, despite some assertions (by other authors who no longer fear a death sentence from Alexander) that Philip II was the greater general. Alexander and Philip both learned from others, and Alexander built upon his father's legacy, which is not something an untalented man would have been able to do.That two-star reviewer complained that Green was judging Alexander by 21st century standards. I know that that can be controversial, but it is also necessary to see things from our perspective as well as the perspective of the times in which they happened.Green's

research seems to be thorough, with copious endnotes and references. He has a witty way with words--"charges and counter-charges of bribery were hurled to and fro like so many custard pies in a farce" (p.46 pbk)--which enlivens the text. And no, I did not mind the criticisms but welcomed and enjoyed them. Green is thorough in his coverage, starting out with a decent recounting of Macedonian history and the history of Alexander's family before and leading up to the rise of Philip II, his father. The maps of battle layouts, routes the Macedonian army took, the descriptions of terrain--all help the reader to "see" what is going on. I could get a pretty good picture of how battles were fought by reading his accounts, in most cases. He is also not so negative about Alexander as one might suppose. He simply sees the whole individual, not just the idealized version. If, in our day, a very decorated general also happened to go out and kill his childhood friend in a drunken brawl--and/or be linked to the deaths of political rivals (his own modern-day Parmenio, etc.)--what would our analysis of this individual be? Another author suggested that post-traumatic stress disorder may have accounted for much of this--since these murders/assassinations all followed some major battlefield injury received by Alexander. This is an example of someone using 21st-century standards to defend Alexander--not to send him before the "human rights tribunal." Whatever the root cause, these deaths and other behaviors would send an officer or general to the hospital "for evaluation" these days. I appreciated the book's willingness to balance out some of the rhetoric about Alexander that exists elsewhere. I will finish Arrian and Curtius, and no doubt read other accounts on Alexander. It certainly brings life to, and fleshes out, the biblical verses--which arguably were written a couple centuries before Alexander was even conceived. Green has made a great contribution to our knowledge--and to the debate over, and analysis of, this man's life.

Peter Green's *Alexander of Macedon 356-323 B.C.: A Historical Biography* is no starry-eyed account of this famous general. Indeed, Green takes a cynical attitude toward his subject - one that I think is refreshing in our current day when many ancient warlords are hailed as visionaries or enlightened despots (for example, Jack Weatherford's otherwise excellent biography of Genghis Khan *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* hails the Mongol as a harbinger of international trade). Green's *Alexander of Macedon* is somewhat older (originally printed in the early 1970s, revised in 1992), but his skepticism and lucid writing make the book worth reading for any fan of ancient history. The book is probably more appropriate to academic audiences or readers familiar with the ancient world, but I would also cautiously recommend it to newcomers. At some points, Green seems intent on employing "elite erudition" (big words), such as "tergiversation" (def:

evasive, tendency to switch sides). I'm no dummy - I have a J.D. from a top law school - but a few times I was lost. Some of his analogies aren't clear to a reader not steeped in ancient Greek history (I never did quite figure out what he meant when he said the Macedonian king's status was like that of a Mycenaean "wanax"). Nevertheless, these problems seem limited to the introduction and parts of the first chapter. As the narrative progresses, the writing becomes much smoother and accessible. By the middle of the book, you'll have trouble putting it down. The first part of the book - a good 100 pages or 1/5 the total - focuses on Macedonia and Alexander's father, Philip II. Unique among great historical leaders, Alexander's dad was an impressive ruler in his own right and exerted a powerful influence over Alexander the Great. This section also provides a very useful background to the Hellenistic world before Alexander's conquests. Green recognizes that Alexander was a brilliant strategist, but also points out his flaws. In doing so, he demystifies Alexander and humanizes him into something we would recognize - a charismatic and brilliant, but flawed leader. Militarily, Alexander had a gift for guessing his opponents' moves and employing psychologically devastating tactics (what we'd call psychological operations). However, Alexander was a poor politician and government manager. After conquering a territory, he would generally either co-opt the local leadership and move on. He seldom stopped to improve public administration or consolidate his holdings. This led to subsequent local rebellions, plentiful usurpers, and ultimately the dissolution of the empire upon his death. And, as a Macedonian, he never really did learn how to get along with the Greeks, whom Alexander often feared would form a fifth front. Green also shows a refreshing skepticism toward ancient sources, much of which he discounts as propaganda. Sometimes funny, often brash, Macedonian propaganda has helped shape much of our view of history. As such, Green's book necessarily challenges many of the ancient sources and some modern portrayals of Alexander (most notably Oliver Stone's *Alexander, Revisited - The Final Cut* [Blu-ray]). However, Green never engages in ad hominem attacks against his subject - he comes across as an eminently fair judge of history. He very helpfully proposes alternative interpretations to Macedonian propaganda and is not shy about highlighting gaps in the historical record. For example, Green cites convincing evidence that Darius' army at Issus was as small or smaller than Alexander's - not the 600,000 sometimes cited. Green even argues that Macedonian propaganda covered up Alexander's first - and only - defeat at the first battle of Granicus. The Appendix provides a particularly fascinating insight into his methodology toward ancient sources, recreating a radically different - and somewhat convincing - account of the battle. I think this ultimately provides the reader with a far more interesting and accurate biography of Alexander. Ultimately, Green claims Hubris led to Alexander's downfall. At some point, Alexander went beyond his mission of defeating

the Persian Empire and was consumed by an insatiable "pathos" or curiosity to keep conquering to the end of the world (in modern parlance, "mission creep"). But throughout his journeys, Alexander becomes even more egomaniacal to the point of claiming divine status. He engages in purges of his top officers at the slightest rumor. Perhaps the most devastating indictment is his march through the Gedrosian Desert, when Green claims Alexander took the desert route to set a new record, and as a result lost over 50,000 soldiers, women, and children (that is certainly a different type of record). In the end, power consumes itself. If you've ever been curious about history's most famous general, I definitely recommend Peter Green's *Alexander of Macedon*.

Good insight and well researched.

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