

Globalization under Alexander the Great

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Alexander the Great has a special place in Enlightenment thinking. Pierre Briant shows that in the 18th century, Alexander was known less as a heroic warrior than as a conqueror who, by means of his empire, was able to extend the known limits of the world, thereby spurring the development of trade and the growth of knowledge.

Reviewed: Pierre Briant, *Alexandre des Lumières: Fragments d'histoire européenne* [The Enlightenment's Alexander: Fragments of European History], Paris, Gallimard, 2012, 748 pp., 29 euros.

“By conquering the Persian Empire, he [Alexander] could be said to have changed the face of the planet, and to have effected a great revolution in commercial affairs. We have to consider this conquest ... as a new era of commerce.” (Pierre-Daniel Huet, *Histoire du commerce et de la navigation des Anciens*, Paris, 1716, XVII.1)

In his *History of Commerce*, submitted to Colbert in 1667 in the form of a handwritten report, then published in 1716, the antiquarian scholar Pierre-Daniel Huet closely connects the prosperity of kingdoms with the development of trade and navigation. In this setting, Alexander the Great takes on a central role, because he had united the seas in his empire, and he thus appears as a benefactor of all mankind. Translated into the major European languages, this book was a great success, and the epigraph above was repeated almost literally by Montesquieu and Voltaire. For these two philosophers, much better known than Huet, Alexander had accomplished “a great revolution”: he had changed “the face of commerce” across the whole world. In the 18th century, the meaning of the term “commerce” was very broad; it designated not only economic and intellectual exchange but also the (peaceful) relations among states and peoples, and between the sexes. The term was also used to characterize the most advanced state of social development. Hence the importance of the role that the Enlightenment assigned to Alexander.

In his latest work, Pierre Briant, a Professor at the Collège de France who specializes in the Alexandrian Empire, has set to work in what is for him a new field, the historiography – or rather, the historiographies – of the Enlightenment, the “long eighteenth century” extending from 1675 to 1829. In doing this, he is taking issue with traditional historiography, which sees Alexandrian historiography starting in the 19th century with Johan Gustav Droysen’s *Geschichte Alexanders des Grossen* (1833). Professor Briant not only shows that Droysen’s Alexander bears “striking resemblances” to Montesquieu’s in *l’Esprit des lois* (1748), his investigation also casts serious doubts on the idea that histories of antiquity written in 1820-1840 have a decisive role to play in understanding Enlightenment thinking. Briant resituates the origin of Alexandrian historiography, placing it in the preceding century. Here he points to Arnaldo Momigliano as the source of his

inspiration: treading in the footsteps of this author of *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (1977) and *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (1990), Briant too takes the fruitful path that connects antiquity to the 18th century.

The Enlightenment's Alexanders

This view that the history of commerce written by a scholar at the end of the 17th century demonstrated the Enlightenment's interest in Alexander is original in two ways. First, it raises questions about the sources of Enlightenment thinking. Second, it shows that Alexander was the focus of many different interests: the Enlightenment's view of Alexander was shaped by moralists and tutors looking for models of heroism, but above all by philosophers and historians interested in the formation of empires, cartographers and geographers who saw in the Alexandrian conquests a privileged moment in the development of knowledge, and economists who connected the wealth of states to the great expansion of commerce and navigation. Because of the very limited number of eighteenth-century texts entirely devoted to Alexander, Briant chooses to dig into a very broad body of works in very disparate genres, including reports and translations.

The book begins by looking at the first modern biography of Alexander, written by Samuel Clarke in England in 1665, after the Civil War and the execution of Charles I. Here, the Macedonian King appeared as an embodiment of immoderation and lust, characterized by his thirst for conquest, whereas in the previous period, when biography as a genre conformed to the ancient model of *exempla*, he had been included in the ranks of virtuous princes. Briant ends his book with a reference to the scholarly contribution of Barthold Georg Niebuhr; in a Prussia torn apart by the defeat at Jena, Niebuhr exalted the unifying actions of Greece under Philip of Macedon, and condemned the work of Philip's son, Alexander, unable to consolidate the kingdom that he had inherited, because he was caught up in the absurd conquest of Asia. Between these chronological endpoints, Briant looks at the period of historical criticism that constructed the Enlightenment's positive image of Alexander, and he re-examines the ancient sources of this history – which were all very late (Strabo, Quintus Curtius Rufus, Plutarch, Arrian). In particular, Briant shows how Quintus Curtius became the polemical target of authors as diverse as Bayle, Marmontel, Voltaire, and Guillaume de Sainte-Croix, the scholarly baron who suggested an alternative and almost opposite view to that of the *philosophes*; Briant explores this alternative view in great detail.

The arrangement of *Alexandre des Lumières* is only partly chronological. The book is organized mainly around four issues, each of which illuminates the whole study from different angles. Taken together, they explain why there was so much interest in Alexander during the Enlightenment. "The Origin and Development of a Critical History" reflects on the Enlightenment's historiographical turn and the leading role that Alexander played in it. "The Hero's Death: The Birth of a Philosopher-Conqueror" examines the evolution of the model that Alexander presented to expanding European societies. "Empires" looks at Alexander's imperialist orientation in relation to modern empires. And finally, "The Meaning of History" tackles the great debate about the philosophy of history, in which Alexander serves as a good testing ground. Briant describes a debate that has a European dimension, full of echoes and borrowings, but also has its particularities and local nuances, especially abundant in Britain, France and Germany. With the book's transnational outlook, it is – as its subtitle suggests – an exercise in European history, at the moment when Europe was accelerating an expansionist policy founded on increasing rivalries. So in the powerful and original thesis of this book, the history of Alexander was a part of colonial thinking, and his image was constructed as an embodiment of Western values, in contrast to those of the East. In other words, when discussing Alexander's expedition into Asia, Enlightenment Europe was primarily discussing its own imperial expansion.

The Political Use of Alexander: The Colonial Model

In the centre of Briant's book are "the political uses of history in the connections established or imposed by Europe with the other parts of the world transformed into lands to be conquered" (p. 14). Eighteenth-century specialists delving into this work will be struck by its author's ability both to contextualize Enlightenment debates on two analytical levels – European and national – and to clarify the political issues. By relating the past to the present, history became a major issue for the present. Therefore, appropriations of Alexander changed in line with the political and national priorities of the moment, and with the scholarly interests dictated by the dynamics of conquest.

In the 18th century, history, geography, astronomy, cartography, commerce and navigation all revolved around Europe's conquest of the world. Since Alexander had opened up Asia to Europe, he was described by the Surveyor General of Bengal, James Rennell (in his *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan*, 1783), as an explorer and geographer; Rennell saw him as the condottiere of "the first European fleet to sail in the Indian Ocean". As recent studies have shown¹, colonial geography was an essential element of imperial ideology; this explains why Alexander became "an object and a subject of the history of geography, cartography and exploration" (p. 19) – a particularly interesting point brought out in this book. Because the nature of European imperialism is at the centre of Enlightenment debates, the image that emerges here is a "colonial style" Alexander.

In Briant's view, Montesquieu was a turning point in the historiography of Alexander, and the enormous success of *l'Esprit des lois* quickly validated it. Montesquieu presented Alexander as having opened up for Europe the path to Asia, by forging trading links across the Persian Gulf, by making the Tigris and Euphrates rivers navigable, and by building Alexandria, which in his *Pensées* (243) Montesquieu called "the greatest project ever conceived". Alexander, no longer a fighting hero, had become a great strategist who tried to increase the productiveness of adjoining lands. He built an empire where harmony and prosperity reigned – a world pacified by commerce, and by what can be seen as the first globalization. Open roads of communication led to more open knowledge. People who up to then had been marginal were integrated into the human race, thanks to Alexander's civilization building. His conquest was successful.

Voltaire, often a fierce critic of Montesquieu, shared his assessment of Alexander. According to Voltaire, Alexander accomplished the mission that the Greeks had given to him: destroying the threat that Persia represented to Greek civilization. Alexander appeared to him to be a "great man" who had founded more cities than he had destroyed, and with them had built fortresses, harbours, and new colonies, thus establishing bases for long-term commerce. He could be compared to Peter the Great; they were both leaders of civilizing conquests.

Alexander also plays a large role in the historical accounts of great discoveries written by William Robertson, the Scottish Historiographer Royal and a leading figure in the Church of Scotland. Particularly in his history of ancient India – published in 1790-91, right in the middle of Britain's expansionism in India – Robertson took up an anti-imperialist position, defending ancient India, which he presented as the oldest and happiest civilization in antiquity. Robertson invites his readers to look up to Alexander, who did not destroy conquered peoples but respected their manners

¹ See inter alia Kapil Raj, "La construction de l'empire de la géographie: L'odyssée des arpenteurs de Sa Très Gracieuse Majesté, la reine Victoria, en Asie centrale", *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, a. 52, n. 5 (1997), pp. 1153-1180; David N. Livingstone and Charles W. J. Withers (eds.), *Geography and Enlightenment*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999; Miles Ogborn and Charles W.J. Withers (eds.), *Georgian Geographies: Essays on Space, Place and Landscape in the Eighteenth Century*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2004; Charles W. J. Withers, *Placing the Enlightenment: Thinking Geographically about the Age of Reason*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007; and Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2007.

and customs, thus becoming a model of tolerance. In Robertson's wake, his successor as Historiographer Royal, John Gillies, credited Alexander with inspiring the greatest commercial system that the world had ever seen.

Professor Briant shows how the Enlightenment's historiography of Alexander is closely linked with that of the Persian Empire, regarded as an empire with a "motionless" history. But he does more than that, by emphasizing the permanent two-way interchanges between the Hellenistic era and the Enlightenment. At the time when France was expanding into Egypt, Russia into Asia Minor, and Britain into India, Alexander became by mutual consent a model of the rational condottiere, combining political domination of the East with commercial expansion. In this way, he was recognized by eighteenth-century historians as the first to team up colonization and civilization, a political program in the wake of which colonial Europe meant to follow.

Revealing the devices by which the Enlightenment's European societies used their past, Professor Briant enriches historians' understanding of the Enlightenment. The recruitment of Alexander in the century of Montesquieu and Robertson opened up a way to update the Ancients – Moderns theme: thanks to the conqueror from Macedonia, ancient Greeks and modern Europeans shared the role of colonizing and civilizing the East.

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