

## Battlefield Omens in the Historiography of Alexander the Great

This paper will argue that the dreams, visions, and omens which prevail in the historiography of Alexander the Great's campaigns (334-323 B.C.E.) represent a conscious attempt by Alexander and his literary agents to naturalize Alexander's absolute rule for his Greek subjects by superseding the traditional influence of the Delphic Oracle in Greek religion. Previous works which specifically treat the reports of such such phenomena in the biographies of Alexander have been few and of disparate foci. E. Fredricksmeyer discusses the portents in detail, but does not go far enough in analyzing their political dimensions (Fredricksmeyer 1958). D. Hughes takes the accounts of Alexander's dreams at face value as actual mental images experienced by the king while asleep and psychoanalyzes them as such, before proceeding into unverifiable speculation about Alexander's various Oedipal and inferiority complexes (Hughes 1984: 189). C. J. King has more recently attempted to locate Alexander's dreams and divinatory practices within the nexus of Greek religion, yet King did not give enough consideration to the political ramifications of Alexander's dreams and fixated instead on the question of Alexander's piety (King 2004: 221-2; 230).

M. Munn has shown that the earlier tyrants in Greece and Asia Minor cultivated a religious justification for their power (Munn 2006). Yet, according to Herodotus, even Anatolian tyrants such as Midas, Gyges, and Croesus consulted the Delphic oracle. In the fifth century, the Delphic Oracle had exercised a special authority in the decision making of Greek *poleis*, and its primacy is reflected in Herodotus and Thucydides. In the fourth century, the struggle for the leadership of the Amphicyonic league dominated Greek inter-state politics and led to the intervention of Philip II of Macedon in the Third Sacred War, who portrayed himself as champion of Pythian Apollo (Just. *Epit.* 8.2.3; Diod. Sic. 16.35.5; cf. Worthington 2008: 52-61). Philip is said to have later considered an invasion of Asia because of an oracle he received from Delphi (Diod. Sic. 16.91.2; Paus. 8.7.6).

Alexander visited Delphi once prior to his invasion of Asia and did not act as a reverent suppliant. Instead, dragging the Pythia to the sanctuary, he received a declaration of his invincibility (Plut. *Vit. Alex.* 14.6-7) and never again consulted the Oracle. This paper will argue that Alexander's literary agents such as Callisthenes redacted and disseminated accounts of battlefield dreams and omens as part of a conscious policy to further supersede the political and spiritual authority of Delphi. Episodes such as Alexander's dream of Heracles at Tyre (Ar. *Anab.* 2.18.1; Plut. *Vit. Alex.* 24.5; Curt. 4.2.17) or the collective vision of the eagle at Gaugamela (Plut. *Vit. Alex.* 33.2; Curt. 4.15.26-28) indicate that the king's presence, rather than a cultic site, had become the locus for supernatural phenomena and divine revelation. These episodes, moreover, as they are preserved today are Homeric in their character and regularity and are, in turn, linked to Alexander's self-presentation as a Homeric hero. This theme was well-recognized in antiquity and is much discussed today (Edmunds 1971; Ameling 1988; Cohen 1995).

Alexander, in Homeric fashion, employed his seer Aristander to interpret battlefield portents just as Calchas had in the *Iliad*. This paper will argue that this self-presentation is an appeal to an alternative form of sovereignty, one which predated the *polis* and in which Delphi played no special role yet was still intrinsically Greek. This line of argument will build on the thesis of C. Habicht 1970, followed by S. R. F. Price 1989, who demonstrated that Hellenistic ruler-cults functioned as a means for Greek polities to incorporate the foreign power of the Macedonian king within a political and religious framework.

Ameling, W. (1988) "Alexander und Achilleus. Eine Bestandsaufnahme." In W. Will and J. Heinrichs (Eds.) *Zu Alexander d. Gr. : Festschrift G. Wirth*, vol. II (pp. 657-92). Amsterdam: A.M. Hakkert.

Cohen, A. (1995) "Alexander and Achilles – Macedonians and Myceneans." In J. B. Carter and S. P. Morris (Eds.), *The Ages of Homer, A Tribute to Emily Townsend Vermeule* (pp. 483-505). Austin: University of Texas.

Edmunds, L. (1971) "The Religiosity of Alexander the Great." *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 12(3), 363-391.

Fredricksmeier, E. (1958) *The Religion of Alexander the Great* (Unpublished Ph. D. Diss.: University of Wisconsin).

Habicht, C. (1956) *Gottmenschentum und griechische Städte*. München: Beck.

Hughes, J. D. (1984) "The Dreams of Alexander the Great." *The Journal of Psychohistory*, 12(2), 168-192.

King, C. J. (2004) *Alexander and Divination: Dreams, Omens, and Aristander of Telmessus in the Alexander Historians* (Unpublished PhD Diss.: Brown University).

Munn, M. (2006) *The Mother of the Gods, Athens, and the Tyranny of Asia*. Berkeley: University of California.

Price, S. R. F. (1984) *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.

Worthington, I. (2008) *Philip II of Macedonia*. New Haven: Yale University.