

Alexander's Letters as a Mirror of the "Great King" Alexander

This paper will examine some letters, considered genuine by almost all the scholarly tradition, written by Alexander to his friends. Although the letters consist of only a few words, from them, despite their brevity, an idea fundamental to the study of the history of Alexander's self-fashioning comes to light: the concept of Iranian kingship, which Alexander begins to employ after assuming the title of "Great King." This emerges not only in the system of public ideologies, but also in the whole figure of the king even in his private life. Moreover, I will try to shed new light on the idea and perception of the Iranian kingship as seen through Alexander's letters.

The traditional study of epistolography as a literary genre should include historical approaches, but it has largely restricted itself to the study of false letters (Rosenmeyer 2001). In addition to this, fragmentary historians generally play a marginal role in ancient historiography and, consequently, in understanding the histories of Greece and Near East. With Alexander's history, these two fields need to be strictly connected, since the letters were, in all probability, quoted and handed down by those (fragmentary) historians contemporary with Alexander, who were close to the young king and often held very important roles at the court.

Whether or not the skepticism of modern scholars towards letters derives from ancient authors, it is well known that, in the Greeks' mind at least, writing was considered distinctly and typically Persian. The Greeks in general used to write only for political and military reasons, and their messages were most of the time oral and secret. Stirewalt 1993, Steiner 1994 and Rosenmeyer 2001 underline that the Greeks in the classical period looked askance at the act of writing letters, because of the association of writing with tyranny or an individual's personal power, while democracy was characterized by freedom *of speech*.

Thus, it is not likely to be by chance that Alexander begins to write letters as soon as he arrives in Asia. Moreover, these letters are not of a diplomatic nature, but rather of the most disparate types, ranging from those to Antipater to those to his mother and his friends, and that fact suggests that this was a typical Persian/Oriental habit, drawn from Persia at the same time that Alexander (famously) adopted some other customs.

In addition, this is not the only interesting fact about Alexander's Orientalization. After the conquest of the Persian Empire, namely after the 331 B.C.E., the young king changed his Oriental policy. The year 330 represents a sort of demarcation line between the 'first' Alexander, who took revenge in the name of the "Greeks" for Persian offenses, and the 'second' Alexander, who began more and more to resemble the heir of the Great King. At that time, Alexander began to use two different seals on his letters: with his old ring he sealed the letters he sent to Greece, and with Darius' ring the letters he sent to Asia (Curt. 6.6.6); he introduced at his court figures typical of the Persian court (Plut. *Alex* 45.1-4; Justin 12.4.1; Curt. 6.2.1-11), such as the chamberlain, *ei0saggeleu/j* (Chares 125 T2 and F12= Plut. *Alex.* 46.1-2), the taster, *e0de/atroj* (Chares 125 F1=Athen. 4.171 b-c), the bodyguard, *swmatofu/lac* (Arr. *Anab.* 3.27.5); he began dressing himself in Persian dresses (Ephippus 126 F 5= Athen. 12.537e-538b); and, perhaps most famously, he imposed the practice of the *prosku/nhsij* (Plut. *Alex.* 54; Justin 12.7.1; Curt. 8.5.21).

Moreover, an important fragment from Chares of Mytilene (125 F 10 = Plut. *Phoc.* 17) provides the only information contemporary with Alexander about the letters. From this fragment we learn that the king eliminated the *xai/rein*, the typical Greek greeting, from the salutation of his letters. Since Chares was also Alexander's chamberlain, the person closest to the king, he consequently would have known which form of greeting Alexander used in his letters.

In addition, this change appears to result from Alexander's taking the new title of "Great King". Although this might seem a minor point, it is not: this new form of greeting must have come from the Persian world. Alexander, having become the Great King, thus also employed the *modus scribendi* of the Persian kings.

This shift, which is midway between style and ideology, gives us a hint of Alexander's later policy, and his letters, when properly appreciated, demonstrate that Alexander's change was not only external, but also internal, ideological and cultural, and that he transformed his mental attitude once he acquired the model of Persian kingship in its entirety.

Bibliography

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