

The Apocryphal Alexander: Alexander the Great in Ptolemy the Quail

Ptolemaeus Chennus's *Καινὴ Ἱστορία* has perplexed scholars for centuries, as far back as the ninth-century patriarch Photius to whom we are primarily indebted for what writings of Ptolemaeus Chennus, or Ptolemy "the Quail," survive today. Ptolemy was an Alexandrian grammarian working in Rome in the first or second century CE and the author of a work entitled *Ἀνθόμηρος* ("Anti-Homer") in addition to his *Καινὴ Ἱστορία* ("New History"), also attested as the *Παράδοξος Ἱστορία* ("Paradoxical History"). The *Καινὴ Ἱστορία* is, according to Photius, a serious attempt by an altogether unqualified individual to compile a smattering of anecdotes about topics ranging from Homer to Heracles and Herodotus to Alexander the Great. The paucity of the actual text of Ptolemy and the irreverent, almost cheeky, nature of his writings have resulted in considerable scholarly disagreement over both the tone and the contents of the *Καινὴ Ἱστορία*, with scholars debating the veracity of the work as a whole (e.g. Tomberg 1967, Bowersock 1994, Cameron 2004, Horsfall 2008-9, Mheallaigh 2014). Instead of joining this debate over whether Ptolemy records his own fabrications versus passing on the fabrications of others, I propose to analyze the contents of the *Καινὴ Ἱστορία* as we have them, assessing and the nature of the tales he tells in regard to the figure of Alexander the Great of Macedon. Given the predominantly mythological focus of Ptolemy's writings, it is curious that he includes a handful of references to Alexander the Great, who is the only historical figure to receive such treatment in the *Καινὴ Ἱστορία*. In this paper, I will explore Ptolemy's references to Alexander, assessing how Alexander is discussed and the nature of the claims involved. Furthermore, I will argue that in his references to Alexander Ptolemy engages directly in the ongoing debate in his day among historians and philosophers alike on different aspects of Alexander-reception,

including his tutelage under Aristotle, his relationship to Homer, and claims of his divine parentage.

Alexander was, even during his lifetime, a magnet for fantastical tales and contradictory facts: he was the son of Philip, and yet the son of a god; he was the student of Aristotle, yet was infamous for living a life of excess and failing to control himself, at least as far as his ambition and drinking were concerned; he was the leader of a pack of companions, and yet notoriously began to distrust and alienate them as his campaigns wore on and his empire grew. Ptolemy provides solutions to these apparent contradictions in Alexander's character with a wink and a smile. A close reading of Ptolemy the Quail reveals that Ptolemy demanded from his readers a considerable amount of knowledge about his subject matter, but if they could catch his allusions, the end result was invariably humorous.

Bibliography

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