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Book chapter :

Pretzler, M. (2017). *Philip, Alexander and Macedonia: Between Greek Virtue and Barbarian Pleasure*. E. Almagor & L. Maurice (Ed.), *Of Ancient Virtues and Vices in Modern Popular Culture: Beauty, Bravery, Blood and Glory*, (pp. 257-280). Leiden: Brill.

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Philip, Alexander and Macedonia: Between Greek Virtue and Barbarian Pleasure

Maria Pretzler

This paper deals with the depiction of Alexander the Great and the complex problem of where exactly this important historical figure should be situated in terms of culture and ethnicity so that a modern audience can understand them. Anybody telling the story of the great conqueror has to deal with a Macedonian by birth who is widely known as bringing Greek culture to the East; a further integral part of the story is concerned with Alexander's increasing adoption of eastern, or more specifically Persian, customs which leads to friction with his Macedonian and Greek companions. These categories and their exact definition are already problematic in the ancient sources, and Alexander's cultural context and identity is so integral to the story that anybody attempting to take the story and its main character seriously would find it difficult to ignore it altogether. Large-scale movie treatments of Alexander's life, therefore, have to find a way of dealing with these issues. In analysing Alexander on screen it is very important to remember that visuals, especially costumes and sets, are at least as important as dialogue and plot when it comes to defining a character's cultural identity. After all, a lot of thought and research usually goes into these details, and it tends to be harder to fudge matters with respect to these designs: somebody has to make a decision about the look of characters and backdrop and what they are meant to convey to the viewer. Historical accuracy is a lot less important in this respect than visual tropes which will suggest to a general audience how to interpret the cultural setting of a scene.¹

Film makers' interpretation of Macedonia causes particular dilemmas: while audiences can be expected to be able to draw on visual conventions and clichés by which to recognise an imaginary Greece or Persia, Macedonia is rather an unknown entity. Film

¹ Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, "'Help me, Aphrodite!' Depicting the Royal Women of Persia in *Alexander*," in Paul Cartledge and Fiona Rose Greenland, eds., *Responses to Oliver Stone's Alexander: Film, History and Cultural Studies* (Madison, Wisconsin, 2010) 247-251.

makers therefore have to find their own way of describing Alexander's background while also allowing viewers to make sense of his later character development when he encounters Persia and other cultures of the 'East'. As king of Macedonia, Philip II, Alexander's father, plays a crucial role in defining the region and its identity, while his mother's role as a foreigner at the Macedonian court presents yet another challenge.

For this paper, I am focusing on the two large Hollywood productions focusing on Alexander the Great, namely Robert Rossen's *Alexander the Great* (1956) with Richard Burton in the title role, and Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004) with Colin Farrell.² I shall also discuss the 1981 TV miniseries of four one-hour episodes directed by Peter Sykes, *The Search for Alexander the Great*, which combines documentary-style commentary with fictional scenes of historical characters discussing Alexander's life and some dramatized scenes featuring Nicholas Clay as Alexander. It is, in fact, striking how rarely this grand subject has been attempted for the cinema or for TV, and a number of planned projects have failed.³ The earliest big-screen treatment is, rather remarkably, an Indian production, *Sikandar* (1941), directed by Sohrab Modi with Prithviraj Kapoor in the main role; but since it focuses exclusively on Alexander's campaigns in India, it is not relevant to this particular discussion. David Rattigan's play, *An Adventure Story*, was broadcast by the BBC in 1959, with Sean Connery in the lead.⁴ A pilot for a TV series, directed in 1964 by Phil Karlson with William Shatner as Alexander, but broadcast only in 1968, is set after the battle of Issos; further episodes were never made. Since Oliver Stone's film, there have been three more productions: *Alexander, Hero of Heroes* (2006) looks like a low-tech video of a theatrical

² Oliver Stone produced three different cuts of his film, namely the theatrical cut (2004), on which the argument in this chapter is based, the Director's Cut (2005) with slight changes, and *Alexander Revisited. The Final Cut* (2007) which presents the story in a different order.

³ Kim Shahabudin, "The Appearance of History: Robert Rossen's *Alexander the Great*," in *Responses to Oliver Stone's Alexander: Film, History and Cultural Studies*, eds. Paul Cartledge and Fiona Rose Greenland (Madison, WI, 2010), p. 92.

⁴ Jeffrey Richards, *Hollywood's Ancient Worlds* (London and New York, 2008), pp. 133-4; Robin Lane Fox, "Alexander on Stage: A Critical Appraisal of Rattigan's *Adventure Story*" in *Responses to Oliver Stone's Alexander: Film, History and Cultural Studies*, eds. Paul Cartledge and Fiona Rose Greenland (Madison, Wisconsin, 2010), pp. 55-91.

production; *Alexander the Great* (2006) is a 3D-animation aimed at children; and *Young Alexander* (2010) combines a multi-ethnic cast with fantasy elements and a teen adventure story. These films have little to contribute to the question of Macedonia on screen.

Filmmakers inherit problems with defining Macedonia from the ancient sources, which do not add up to a clear cultural definition. Reports of Alexander's life first show us Macedonians in opposition to Greece, while later on, Alexander claims to be a champion of the Greek cause against the Persians, and finally adopts Persian customs, to the consternation of his Macedonian companions. A film maker has to grapple with the question of how to depict Macedonians: are they Greeks or not, and how should they be distinguished first from their Greek enemies, and then from various 'eastern' peoples Alexander encounters? And, if the term is to be used, who, in different parts of the story, gets to call whom a 'barbarian'?

There are no ancient Macedonian sources who tell us how they would have defined their own culture. All available contemporary comments on Philip come from Athenians, while most of the extant information about Alexander was written much later, between the first century BCE and the second century CE. Macedonia remained a known entity, but cultural differences between Macedonia and Greece had become blurred by changes throughout the Hellenistic period and the Roman conquest. How Greek were the Macedonians? As far as we can tell, they spoke a dialect of Greek different enough to make writers comment when Alexander switches from (probably Attic) Greek to Macedonian.⁵ Macedonian names and inscriptions are Greek, with some influence from their Illyrian and Thracian neighbours.⁶ As far as we can see, they worshipped Greek gods combined with local

⁵ E.g. Plutarch, *Alexander* 51.4; Curtius Rufus 6.9.35.

⁶ N.G.L. Hammond and G.T. Griffith, *A History of Macedonia*, volume II (Oxford, 1979), pp. 47-49; R. Malcolm Errington, *A History of Macedonia* (New York, 1990), p. 3; for a more sceptical view see E. Badian, "Greeks and Macedonians," in *Macedonia and Greece in late Classical and Early Hellenistic Times*, eds. Beryl Barr-Sharrar and Eugene N. Borza (Washington DC, 1982), pp. 33-51 and Eugene N. Borza, *In the Shadow of Olympus: the Emergence of Macedon* (Princeton NJ, 1990), pp. 90-94.

heroes according to local traditions,⁷ and wealthy Macedonians' tombs suggest distinct local burial practices. In a Greek world where each city state found its own unique cultural expression, especially through customs and religion, and where there were significant differences between dialects, the Macedonians were one of many groups with their own variation on a Greek cultural theme. Where Macedonians differed from a 'Greek norm' was that their identity, culture and civic lives were not focused on cities and, most significantly, that they were ruled by kings.

'Objective' criteria such as language or customs are, however, not enough to settle the question of ethnic identity: self-definition and definition by others also matters. In this respect, the picture is ambiguous. It seems clear that in the Classical period Macedonians were not always recognised as Greeks, and that individual Macedonians were, at times, happy to define themselves as other than Greek; however, on occasion, the kings at least were eager to stake a claim to Greekness.⁸ Around the time of the Persian Wars Alexander I was eager to establish that the royal house of Macedonia, the Argeadae, were descended from Argive ancestors and ultimately from Heracles; Herodotus believed that this needed to be established before the king could be accepted as Greek enough to compete at the Olympic Games.⁹

The debate finally came to a head when, in the 350s and 340s BCE, Macedonians under Philip II began to represent a real threat to the independence of the Greek city states in the southern mainland of Greece. Philip II became involved in traditional Greek interstate institutions, particularly the Delphic Amphictyony, which presumably required him to represent himself as Greek; he also championed Panhellenic policies and rhetoric.¹⁰ By this

⁷ M. Mari. (2011), "Traditional Cults and Beliefs," in *Brill's Companion to Ancient Macedon. Studies in the Archaeology and History of Macedon, 650 BC-300 AD*, ed. Robin J. Lane Fox (Leiden, 2011), pp. 453-465.

⁸ Badian, "Greeks and Macedonians," esp. 34-41; see also Borza, *Shadow of Olympus*, pp. 90-97.

⁹ Herodotus 5.22; for other Macedonian kings at the Olympic Games: see list in Nicolaos K. Martis, *The Falsification of Macedonian History* (Athens, 1984), pp. 29-30, which includes one (probably) non-royal Macedonian contestant in 384 BCE, based on Pausanias 5.8.11.

¹⁰ M.B. Sakellariou, "Panhellenism: From Concept to Policy," in *Philip of Macedon*, eds. Miltiades B. Hatzopoulos and Louisa D. Loukopoulos (Athens, 1980), pp. 135-145.

stage, cities had developed in Macedonia;¹¹ earlier Argead kings had invested significantly in Greek culture and arts,¹² and Philip II did so, as well.¹³ Nevertheless, it was long the image created by a hostile Athenian politician which dominated later ideas about Macedonia under Philip. For Demosthenes, Philip was a barbarian, who, as a king, needed to be resisted by Greeks just as they had resisted the kings of Persia. In his *Third Philippic* he goes so far as to say that Philip was not only no Greek, he was not even related to Greeks, and in fact was a barbarian from Macedonia, a region which did not even produce decent slaves.¹⁴ Philip's approach to warfare and diplomacy is also singled out as so fierce and effective that a Greek city state, let alone a democracy, could never have matched his outlandish autocratic efficiency.¹⁵ Add to this stories about lavish feasts at Philip's court which spoke of barbarian drunken excess and debauchery,¹⁶ and you have an image that became very difficult to shake off for centuries to come. But Demosthenes represents only one extreme viewpoint: another Athenian, Isocrates, understood the rise of Macedonia as an opportunity. In his *Panegyricus*, Isocrates gives us some of the most aggressive rhetoric about the inferiority of barbarian Persians, not least because they are ruled by a king,¹⁷ but in later works, he expresses great admiration for Philip II, and recognises him as the best potential leader for a Greek attack on Persia.¹⁸ This image, too, had some staying power, not least because both Philip and Alexander presented their campaigns into Asia as an enterprise of all Greeks to take revenge

¹¹ M.B. Hatzopoulos, "Macedonians and Greeks," in *Brill's Companion to Ancient Macedon. Studies in the Archaeology and History of Macedon, 650 BC-300 AD*, ed. Robin J. Lane Fox (Leiden, 2011), pp. 66-7.

¹² This includes patronage for a number of poets, including Pindar and Euripides, the painter Zeuxis, the architect Callimachus, and many more. See Hatzopoulos, "Macedonians and Greeks," pp. 58-9.

¹³ J.R. Ellis, "Macedonia under Philip," in *Philip of Macedon*, eds. Miltiades B. Hatzopoulos and Louisa D. Loukopoulos (Athens, 1980), pp. 146-165.

¹⁴ Demosthenes 9.31; cf. 3.17, 3.24, 19.305, 19.308.

¹⁵ Demosthenes 18. 235-6.

¹⁶ E.g. Demosthenes 2.18-19; Pierre Lévêque, "Philip's Personality," in *Philip of Macedon*, eds. Miltiades B. Hatzopoulos and Louisa D. Loukopoulos (Athens, 1980), pp. 176-177.

¹⁷ Isocrates 4.133-66, esp. 150-52.

¹⁸ Isocrates 5, esp. 5.154; Sakellariou, "Panhellenism," pp.129-134; Hatzopoulos, "Macedonians and Greeks," pp. 67-9.

for the Persian Wars.¹⁹ Later on, the difference between Macedonians and Greeks became ever more blurred in the minds of ancient writers, as the differences between Greek-speaking neighbours shrunk into insignificance compared with the contrast with various Asian cultures. This means that very different aspects of Macedonian culture mattered to ancient reports on different moments in Alexander's life; and Philip and Alexander end up as literary characters with very different cultural identities. Even in antiquity, Philip II never quite shook off Demosthenes' barbarian label, while Alexander became *the* Greek hero par excellence. His Macedonian background was less ignored than eclipsed by his association with Greek culture once he has reached the East. Alexander's final years are characterised by his increased adoption of Persian customs in the face of criticism which mainly comes from his Macedonian companions, but is often measured against Greek ideas about freedom and political power. In reality, both Alexander and Philip probably negotiated their identities depending on their audience and aims at any given point. Arrian has Alexander himself paint a picture of Macedonians as primitive herdsmen, civilised only by Philip, who found them as shepherds, dressed in sheepskins scraping a living off the mountain sides and brought them down into the plains to a more civilised life.²⁰ By the Roman period, when all these reports were written, the difference between Greeks and Macedonians may have been quite difficult to fathom, certainly compared with the clear contrast between Greeks and Persians which remained relevant due to continued conflicts with the Parthians.

How did the ambiguity of Macedonia's cultural identity affect the depiction of Alexander's background in films? Robert Rossen stated that he did three years' worth of research before writing his script for *Alexander the Great*. This research featured in the film's publicity and critics also praised the historical accuracy of the film. Rossen's research is evident on screen, with dialogue and narrative details which are clearly based on

¹⁹ Sakellariou, "Panhellenism," pp. 144-145.

²⁰ Arrian *Anabasis* 7.9.2.

Demosthenes, Plutarch and other ancient sources, and also with nods to material evidence, such as coin images and the Alexander mosaic.²¹ Oliver Stone relied on leading academics as historical advisers, particularly Robin Lane Fox, but several other scholars were consulted on various details.²² Nevertheless, the two films' interpretations of Macedonia, and of Philip's and Alexander's identity as Macedonians, differ considerably. We shall first take a look at the details in both films, and then consider the background behind this change in Macedonia's image.

Alexander the Great (1956)

Robert Rossen's *Alexander the Great* opens with a crowd listening to a debate. A caption tells us '356 BC. Divided Greece', and the visuals establish a 'Greek standard' for the viewer. The backdrop features a double row of Doric columns with a Doric frieze; two main characters are engaged in debate: they are Aeschines and Demosthenes, and we are in Athens. The speakers and the crowd are draped in garments with patterns reminiscent of Greek vases along the edges; the colour palette includes whites, yellows, greys and earthy browns. A few men wear armour and helmets with the stereotypical horsehair crest. Demosthenes warns of barbarian attacks, and we see scenes of a marching army and a burning city.

Our first close-up of Philip follows, as he receives a messenger who tells him that he has a new-born son. We see a bearded man on his bed, his shoulders are bare, but otherwise he is wrapped in furs; the backdrop behind him is lined with fur, too. The contrast is striking: if the audience missed the barbarian references in the earlier scene, just the visual cues given here would indicate a stereotypical 'northern' barbarian, who would seem more at home in a Dark Age Northern Europe than in Greece.

²¹ Shahabudin, "The Appearance of History," pp. 108-9; Jon Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, revised edition (New Haven and London, 2001), p. 42.

²² Alastair J.L. Blanshard and Kim Shahabudin, eds., *Classics on Screen: Ancient Greece and Rome on Film* (London, 2013), pp. 104-105; Lane Fox, *Making of Alexander*, pp. 87-88, 94-97, 124.

In the next scene, we return to Macedonia, as Philip visits his wife to see his son. Here we see Philip's image adjusted to an extent: his palace in Pella suggests considerable aspiration to Greek culture. The exterior features very large columns – but these columns are made of grey stone and are not fluted: they look archaic and unsophisticated compared to the image of Athens we have already seen. The replica of the late seventh-century Naxian lion-terrace at Delos which has been incorporated in the palace exterior suggests that this archaic look is deliberate. In the background we see the roofs of a Mediterranean village; stone houses with tiled roofs and small irregular streets.²³ The crowd here is mixed – there are soldiers in fur-lined armour, but we also see Greek-style himatia and tunics. After we were introduced to Philip the barbarian, our first glimpse of Macedonia proper suggests some affinity with Greek culture, albeit in a rough, rather archaic mode. Following the two initial scenes in Athens and Philip's camp, the audience needs no expertise to interpret these differences.

Our impression changes again when Philip enters the palace: the interior reverts to 'Greek mode', with fluted columns and statues. Later on we also see Etruscan wall paintings: this was before the discovery of the painted decoration of the Vergina tombs, and at the time, Etruscan tomb paintings provided the best guess for Greek wall decoration. Olympias appears dressed in a saffron-coloured chiton, a colour-co-ordinated shawl draped over her left shoulder, and gold jewellery which suggest a Greek sophistication; Philip enters, his armed, armoured and fur-clad companions in tow, without even taking off his helmet. This scene conveys effectively that in this relationship, Olympias has Greek culture, while Philip is the barbarian who merely affects the trappings of civilisation and looks out of place in his own palace. Statues in the background emphasise the contrast further. Nevertheless, Philip

²³ The exterior of the set was built on a hill above El Molar, close to Madrid, and the village, with minor modifications, was used for shots of Macedonians riding through the city of Pella; <http://www.western-locations-spain.com/hollywood/alexander/index.htm>, last accessed 16/02/16.

complains about Olympias's 'strange gods' whilst ramming his knife into a table, thereby confirming that not just his dress-sense is out of place, his manners are, too.

The next scene brings us back to a very Greek-looking setting: this is Mieza, as it turns out after a while. Young men wrestle surrounded by fluted marble columns and statues, although this vision of Greece carefully excludes nudity, with athletes in shorts and statues either dressed or carefully turned away from the viewer. Alexander enters, leading his horse and carrying a dead lion over his shoulder. With his golden locks and (very) short tunic which leaves one shoulder free he could not look more different from his father. As he approaches Aristotle, his first close-up features him in front of marble columns and the three-quarter back view of an (almost) nude athlete statue. Aristotle lectures him on the 'Greek dream' of conquering Persia, and on the danger of Philip's barbarian image, which will prevent Greeks from following him. The whole speech culminates in this astonishing statement: "we Greeks are the best... our culture is the best... our civilization the best, our men the best – all others are barbarians, and it is our moral duty to conquer them and to enslave them, and if necessary, destroy them." He gets rapturous attention from Alexander and his companions, and we see no sign that these Macedonians feel excluded from this idea of Greek superiority. A training montage showing the young men in athletic pursuits and a short scene with Alexander reading from the *Iliad* further help to establish Alexander's Greek credentials and the importance of the Greek/barbarian divide in the audience's mind.

When Philip visits Mieza, we first see the Macedonian king and his son together, and the contrast between Alexander in his Greek tunic and Philip in his fur-lined armour could not be more striking. The difference between father and son is emphasised, although at this point, they agree that Alexander is ready to rule in Pella while Philip is on campaign, both opposing Aristotle together. As Alexander rides through the narrow streets of Pella (El Molar, Spain), yet again, the audience can appreciate the contrast between sophisticated,

colonnaded Mieza and his actual home in Macedonia. What follows are various scenes which show Alexander interacting with his parents; and the cultural differences continue to be emphasised, even if we get to see that Philip's civilian clothes are rather more Greek in style than his warrior gear. When Alexander rides to war with Macedonian troops, all wear tunics with their armour rather than fur, and later, after the battle of Chaeronea and during his last wedding feast, even Philip will be seen in clothes that look more Greek than northern barbarian: Alexander's mere presence Hellenises his Macedonian surroundings, at least as far as the design of the props and costumes goes.

Alexander's return to Pella brings a number of disagreements with his parents. He sends away Olympias's friends in a scene which is quite ambiguous: we cannot be sure whether he disapproves of all those men around her, or whether he is suspicious of her plotting against Philip. Most of the disagreements are, however, with his father, who comes across as a ruthless pragmatist ready to use torture to get confessions or to kill relatives to secure his position. Alexander argues against both, and after the battle of Chaeronea he makes it clear that he disapproves both of his father's drinking and his plan to marry a much younger woman. The barbarian theme is yet again made explicit during the celebrations after the victory over the Greeks at Chaeronea. Philip first invites the Athenians to attend, suggesting that this is the behaviour of a proper gentleman; then he states that he would not destroy Athens, 'because that would be the act of a barbarian – and that Philip is not!', followed by a sip from a wine skin, while Alexander looks on disapprovingly. Once Philip is drunk, he leaves the tent and daunts an (imaginary) Demosthenes, repeatedly singing 'Philip the Barbarian'; we are again reminded of the image that has been imposed on him by his Athenian contemporaries and modern film makers. At Philip's wedding feast, Alexander refuses a drink offered by his father. Dressed in a Greek himation, Attalus, Philip's new father-in-law, boasts that the king's new wife is a proper Macedonian, not an Athenian or

Epirote, and he challenges Alexander's legitimacy, too, which leads Alexander to attack him: in this case, pure Macedonian identity actually becomes a threat to Alexander.²⁴

After Philip's assassination, about halfway through the film, Alexander's campaign against Persia starts, and we are shown the Persian reaction. The Persian king discusses the situation, seemingly in a very elaborate tent. Later on we see Darius in his palace, too, but the full extent of the building only becomes clear when we see wide-angle shots after Alexander has conquered it and it is in flames: Persian wealth and civilisation becomes more monumental as we go on. Persian costumes and sets are clearly influenced by ancient Persian art, and are also distinguished by a vivid colour scheme. The main Persian characters are played by British theatre actors, especially Harry Andrews as Darius, just like all the important Macedonians, with the exception of Frederic March as Philip, who was American.²⁵ Accents or language play no role at all in distinguishing different ethnicities: the viewer is allowed to listen to conversations in any language or dialect 'translated' into standard English without being asked to consider those differences, although this device was certainly used in Hollywood at the time, often with Americans playing the heroes and British actors as their antagonists.²⁶ The Persians also have a map with English captions which is used to inform the viewer about the route of Alexander's campaign. Persian strangeness is therefore on display, but emphasised rather less than would have been possible; and the first we see of Persians is a rational discussion of what they should do against Alexander focusing on suggestions of their Greek collaborator, Memnon.

As Alexander moves towards the East, his Greekness is first further emphasised, for example after the battle at the Granicus, when he accuses Memnon of treason because he, as a Greek, chose to fight against Alexander as commander of all Greeks. Barsine says to Alexander "Greece is where you are... where you walk, where you talk, breathe, live", just as

²⁴ Closely based on Plutarch, *Alexander* 9.4-5 (the same scene also appears in Stone's *Alexander*).

²⁵ Richards, *Hollywood's Ancient Worlds*, p. 135.

²⁶ Shahabudin, "The Appearance of History," p. 104.

he has declared that his mission now includes many peoples, as long as they are willing to follow. But soon Alexander is seduced by Persian ways, while his companions now represent a Greek – rather than Macedonian – resistance against his attempts to unite Asia and Europe, as, (remarkably!) recommended to him in a letter by the dying Darius. Now it is the Macedonians who sport himatia with vase patterns as we first saw in Athens, while Alexander dresses like a (barbarian) Persian. We see Alexander torturing Philotas to force a confession – following his father’s (barbarian?) example which he criticised earlier, and Kleitos challenges him for being drunk and for claiming to be a son of a god. At the same time, the Persians are still surprised that Alexander is unable to kill a man who contradicted him without regrets and doubt his suitability for Persian kingship. In the end, Alexander discovers that he must conquer the hearts of all his peoples (or so Ptolemy tells us in a voice-over) and organises the wedding of Susa to unite all his peoples. In a final prayer, he talks about all peoples in his empire in peace and harmony, under one quasi-Christian god who is ‘the father of all’.

Rossen’s Macedonians undergo a striking transformation during the film – from barbarians in clear conflict with Greek culture to defenders of Greek values against Persian barbarians. However, Macedonian barbarity is emphasised much more explicitly, both in the dialogue and through visual cues which point to barbarians of a north-west European kind. Persians clearly have different customs, but also an elaborate culture represented by large buildings with columns and lavish interiors. They are shown to have their own discourse about cultural differences, and in the end, Alexander follows the advice of the Persian king to strive for unity between all his peoples, and Darius becomes a kind of substitute father/rival figure for Alexander.²⁷ Alexander remains a cultural outsider: in the first half of the film, he represents a Greek, civilised outlook in contrast with his barbarian father; towards the end, he

²⁷ Shahabudin, “The Appearance of History,” pp. 99-100.

is increasingly in opposition to his now Hellenised companions because he himself is becoming increasingly foreign. Rossen's interpretation illustrates the dilemma posed by the ambiguity of ancient Macedonian identity, from Demosthenes' barbarians to champions of Greek culture in Asia: seeing this shift depicted in a two-hour film emphasises the contradiction in the ancient tradition, particularly when we watch barbarian Philip and his Greek son who is so utterly different, or when we see Macedonians becoming representatives of Hellenism.

*Alexander (2004)*²⁸

Oliver Stone decided to draw the line between barbarian vices and Greek virtues rather differently. Right at the beginning, Ptolemy's voiceover, channelling Arrian's Alexander,²⁹ tells us that Philip turned the Macedonians from shepherds in the mountains into an organised, militarily successful kingdom which was able to 'bring the devious Greeks to their knees'. The first we see of Macedonia is Olympias with her son, as Philip bursts into the room and rapes her. Nevertheless, Olympias does not only sound foreign, with her ill-defined 'Eastern European' accent,³⁰ she also complains that Philip calls *her* a barbarian. The snakes in Olympias's bedroom also emphasise her foreign ways, but nevertheless, she claims descent from Achilles, while Philip reminds us that his ancestor is Heracles.

The next scene is yet again set in a wrestling ground surrounded by Greek columns, and the trainer talks about fighting northern barbarians. A mere twelve minutes in, and we have already heard of two places Macedonians call barbarian. Next we visit Aristotle at

²⁸ My discussion focuses on the theatrical cut of the film. The Director's cut (2005) has a very similar timeline, although some of the flashbacks have been inserted in different places. There were two more versions: *Alexander Revisited: the Final Unrated Cut* (2007) and *Alexander the Ultimate Cut* (2014), which are structured differently. These different versions were not included in this discussion.

²⁹ Arrian, *Anabasis* 7.9.2.

³⁰ Elizabeth D. Carney, "Olympias and Oliver: Sex, Sexual Stereotyping, and Women in Oliver Stone's *Alexander*," in *Responses to Oliver Stone's Alexander: Film, History and Cultural Studies*, eds. Paul Cartledge and Fiona Rose Greenland (Madison, Wisconsin, 2010), p.154; Robin Lane Fox, *The Making of Alexander* (Oxford and London, 2004), p. 70 reports that the accent is based on 'school children learning English in north-western Greece'.

Mieza, where he teaches a young Alexander and his companions surrounded by broken columns: in the modern imagination, nothing looks more Greek than a ruined Greek temple. It is here where the ‘Celtic fringe’ accents of Stone’s Macedonians first become obvious, particularly in contrast to Aristotle’s (Christopher Plummer) British English ‘standard Greek’. This decision to let Alexander and his compatriots use Irish, Welsh and Scottish accents was rather controversial, but it does give us a clear idea how Stone wanted to define Alexander’s cultural background.³¹ By using English regional accents, and by contrasting this with the foreign, non-native speaker accents of Epirote Olympias and later Persians or Bactrians, Macedonians are located within the Greek-speaking world. The fact that the people of Epirus also spoke a Greek dialect was deliberately ignored, emphasising the decision to characterise Olympias as barbarian. Aristotle discusses the superiority of Greeks over Persians, suggesting that ‘we Greeks’ are superior. Is he including the Macedonian boys around him? When Alexander asks about the Persians “Why do we not rule them? It has always been our Greek dream to go east,” Stone’s intention becomes clear: these Macedonians define themselves as Greek, too.

Back in Pella, Macedonians watch Alexander tame Bucephalus. The crowd is predominantly dressed in white, conforming to established ‘Grecian’ expectations. Philip wears a tunic pinned at the shoulders, a style which fits the Greek stereotype, while the colour, black, does not; throughout the film, black fabrics are used to underline a specifically Macedonian identity, as well as helping us to recall Philip specifically. Philip is also wearing the diadem which was found in tomb II at Vergina and Val Kilmer was made up to resemble, at least superficially, the face reconstructed on the basis of the male skull which was also found there. The city in the background no longer looks like Rossen’s Mediterranean village, but we see white columns and the low pitched roofs associated with Greek temples. The

³¹ Lane Fox, *Making of Alexander*, pp. 70-1.

palace interiors were also designed to look Greek, featuring more white marble colonnades and pebble mosaics we know from major Macedonian archaeological sites.³²

The next scene shows us Philip and Alexander in the caves beneath the palace at Pella, looking at paintings which the audience is expected to interpret as very ancient. The Macedonian king, now sporting the cuirass found in his tomb, and occasionally sipping from a wine skin, gives Alexander a lesson in the risks and sacrifices of kingship as he discusses the myths of Achilles, Prometheus, Oedipus, Medea and Heracles. This scene was widely criticised, yet it adds to our picture of how we should see Macedonians.³³ Despite Ptolemy's initial story about Philip's efforts to civilise the Macedonians, the Greek roots of the royal palace go deep into a very early period, signalled to the viewer both by the idea of cave paintings and the archaic design of the images. If myths, such a quintessential aspect of what we generally remember about the ancient Greeks, were painted on the walls of caves in Macedonia, we surely have to assume that these Macedonians have shared Greek culture for a long time.

Another few years are passed over, and we arrive at Philip's wedding to Eurydice. Again, most of the Macedonians are draped in white, just like the Greek guests. The room with its marble columns and the whole scene recall nineteenth-century history paintings; Macedonian excavations contribute silver vessels and gold wreaths. Although the film is less explicit about Greek homosexuality than ancient sources about Alexander would allow, this scene also shows us (albeit in the background) Philip raping Pausanias, the man who will later assassinate him.

At this point the film cuts straight to the eve of the battle of Gaugamela. Parmenion mentions Darius' offer of his daughter in marriage, asking "when has a Greek ever been

³² Lane Fox, *Making of Alexander*, pp. 82.

³³ Verity Platt, "Viewing the Past: Cinematic Exegesis in the Caverns of Macedon," in *Responses to Oliver Stone's Alexander: Film, History and Cultural Studies*, eds. Paul Cartledge and Fiona Rose Greenland (Madison, Wisconsin, 2010), pp. 285-304, esp. pp. 289-293.

given such honours?”), but while Alexander fantasises about Darius coming to him and bowing down to Greece, he also proclaims that Babylon will be his new home. In his speech to the troops the next morning, he contrasts his army, who are Macedonian free men and fight for the freedom and glory of Greece, with Persians who are enslaved by their king and who fight only because their king tells them that they must. Coming from a Macedonian king, who has ordered his troops to follow him so far, this sounds rather odd,³⁴ and yet again this whole sequence emphasises that the difference between Macedonians and Greeks is rather blurred in this film.

After victory in battle, Alexander enters Babylon and soon ends up in the orientalisising fantasy that is the palace of Darius, with a harem depicted along the lines of nineteenth-century visions of the Orient.³⁵ This also marks the beginning of the transformation of Alexander and his companions towards more eastern cultural expression. Costumes become more colourful, fabrics more structured, patterned and extravagant, and some of the men begin to wear jewellery and make-up, all features which a modern western audience would tend to read as increasing effeminacy. Dialogue between Alexander and his companions alerts us to the danger that the immense wealth of the East will corrupt noble Macedonians. Alexander clearly admires the grandeur of Babylon, contrasting it with what Aristotle said about the inferiority of eastern barbarians. But then, still in Babylon, Alexander describes those he conquered as people who “leave their dead unburied, (...) smash their enemies’ skulls and drink them as dust, they mate in public”, and asks: “what can they think, or sing or write, when none can read?” Alexander’s city foundations and conquests are presented as civilising mission. Freeing all these people, Alexander states, would be beyond the glory of Achilles.

³⁴ The idea may be based on Isocrates 5.154.

³⁵ Llewellyn-Jones, “Help me, Aphrodite!,” esp. pp.251-258.

As Alexander moves further east, his hair grows longer, his jewellery becomes bigger and the eye makeup darker.³⁶ We see orientalisation to different degrees among his companions, from Hephaestion whose style becomes more pronouncedly ‘eastern’ than Alexander’s to Parmenion who retains his Greek armour and white tunic. In a scene where they discuss Alexander’s plan to marry Rhoxane, styling seems to map onto opinions. Parmenion asks Alexander to produce a fully Macedonian heir, while Alexander angrily criticises their “contempt for a world much older than ours”. Later, the conflict fully escalates when Cleitus, now dressed in simple Macedonian black, challenges Alexander, contrasting his own “Macedonian rags” with “Eastern pomp”, and criticising the king for demanding Persian bowing and for accepting offerings as a son of Zeus. He complains about Alexander’s barbarian friends and barbarian wife, he calls him a despot (implying Persian excess) and finally also refers to Alexander’s barbarian mother, which prompts Alexander to run him through with a spear. Even here, so far from home, the Macedonian (Greek?) concept of what is barbarian lets emotion boil over into murder. Two minutes later, the film cuts from Alexander racked with guilt and unwell back to Macedonia eight years earlier.

This flashback is a particularly striking moment. Revisiting the younger, Greek selves of Alexander and his companions emphasises the change they have gone through. We find ourselves in the theatre of Pella, where an audience predominantly dressed in Grecian white looks on as statues of Greek gods are paraded in front of them. Alexander and Philip ride along, both dressed in white and gold, Philip wearing another artefact from ‘his’ tomb, a golden oak wreath. As they ride along, Philip expresses his pride that Greeks finally respect Macedonia. What follows is Philip’s assassination and Alexander’s accession to the kingship.

As we arrive back in Asia, Alexander argues with disillusioned Macedonians at the river Hyphasis, and is forced to turn back. The campaign descends into massacres in

³⁶ Lane Fox, *Making of Alexander*, pp. 121-2.

unfamiliar tropical terrain which almost cost Alexander his life. The final retreat through the desert brings more disasters, and Alexander's return to Babylon is not triumphant as his first arrival. As Hephaistion lies dying, Alexander gives a last great speech about uniting East and West, but then he descends into rage and paranoia, and dies soon after. Ptolemy's epilogue suggests that Alexander's dream of uniting East and West was too big for his men; in fact, Ptolemy says, he never believed in the idea in the first place.³⁷

Oliver Stone found a rather different way of depicting cultural contrast in the story of the Macedonian conqueror. Here Macedonians call others barbarians and are essentially a subset of Greeks, people who identify as both Greek and Macedonian, even if there are some political tensions, too. The tension between Greeks/Macedonians on one hand and barbarians on the other is emphasised, be they Epirotes, northern tribes, Persians, Bactrians or Indians; and the 'orientalisation' of Alexander has consequently also become much more striking. In fact, Oliver Stone's East seems to have taken a step backwards into the nineteenth century – a mix between beguiling orientalism, corrupting influences and sometimes incomprehensible otherness, where in 1956, boundaries between East and West seem a lot less clearly defined.

The Search for Alexander the Great (1981)

Filmmakers might have many reasons to come to different interpretations of ambiguous source material, especially when it comes to ethnic stereotyping, but in the case of ancient Macedonia, we can look at a specific turning point. Excavations in the two royal cities of Pella and Aigai (modern Vergina) made all the difference. At both sites, modern excavation

³⁷ In his introduction to Lane Fox, *Making of Alexander*, Oliver Stone emphasises the idea that Alexander's 'vision of reconciling barbarian and Greek races was too much for many Greeks'. The idea of Alexander as a unifier of East and West was particularly promoted by W.W. Tarn, *Alexander the Great*, (Cambridge, 1948) but is now widely dismissed by scholars, starting with Ernst Badian "Alexander the Great and the Unity of Mankind", *Historia* 7 (1958), pp. 425-444. See Thomas Harrison, "Oliver Stone, *Alexander*, and the Unity of Mankind," in *Responses to Oliver Stone's Alexander: Film, History and Cultural Studies*, eds. Paul Cartledge and Fiona Rose Greenland (Madison, Wisconsin, 2010), pp. 224-232. (Lane Fox himself dismisses Tarn, too: Lane Fox, *Making of Alexander*, pp. 26).

work started in earnest in the 1950s, and no high-profile finds had been made yet as Robert Rossen's *Alexander the Great* went into production. A large royal place was uncovered in Pella and, more significantly for the public image of Macedonia, some of the most luxurious ancient private houses known anywhere in Greece, with distinctive pebble mosaics and elaborate wall paintings. But this alone would probably not have shifted the old ideas of barbarian Macedonia. At Vergina, too, royal palaces were uncovered first, starting in the 1950s. In 1977, Manolis Andronikos uncovered four royal tombs under a large tumulus; two had not been looted. He identified the most elaborate of these tombs (II) as that of Philip II. This identification of Philip's grave is widely accepted, while attempts to link members of the Argead family with other tombs, as even more were still found, proved more difficult. It was Philip's tomb which really caught the international imagination. By 1980, a group of leading scholars had produced chapters for a lavishly illustrated book on Philip II. In the introduction, the editors state: 'The purpose of the present volume is to make a contribution to the reappraisal of the personality and achievement of Philip that has become a matter of urgency in the light of the discovery of the royal tombs at Vergina.'³⁸ These discoveries also gave new energy to a dispute which had long been latent, namely whether a group of Slavonic-speakers in the south of what was then Yugoslavia had the 'right' to call themselves Macedonian. During the 1980s, a number of publications came out to 'prove' the exclusive Greekness of ancient Macedonians.³⁹ Nicolaos' Martis' 1984 monograph *The Falsification of Macedonian History* is a particularly striking example. It is not a particularly scholarly volume by 'a Macedonian and former Minister for Northern Greece', with an introduction which speaks of a 'duty to inform both Greek and international public opinion of the groundlessness of such

³⁸ Miltiades B. Hatzopoulos and Louisa D. Loukopoulos, "Preface," in *Philip of Macedon*, eds. Miltiades B. Hatzopoulos and Louisa D. Loukopoulos (Athens, 1980), p. 8.

³⁹ E.g. M. Sakellariou, ed., *Macedonia: 4000 Years of Greek History and Civilization* (Athens, 1983); cf. Loring M. Danforth, "Ancient Macedonia, Alexander the Great and the Star or Sun of Vergina: National Symbols and the Conflict between Greece and the Republic of Macedonia," in *A Companion to Ancient Macedonia*, eds. Joseph Roisman and Ian Worthington, eds. (Chichester, 2011), pp. 579-580; Loring M. Danforth, *The Macedonian Conflict. Ethnic Nationalism in a Transnational World* (Princeton, 1995), pp. 167-172.

counterfeit contentions’, namely ‘the falsification of Macedonian history by the Socialist Republic of Macedonia (Skopje)’.⁴⁰ That this book-length political pamphlet was awarded a prize by the Academy of Athens, with a commendation stating that the work ‘with reliable proofs clearly demonstrates the Hellenic origin and national feeling of the Macedonians’, shows how much the Greek government and public had riding on this question even by 1985.⁴¹

Peter Sykes’s 1981 TV docu-drama miniseries, *The Search for Alexander the Great* provides a fascinating insight into the impact merely four years after the discoveries in Vergina. James Mason’s commentary and the scenes with characters discussing the story are shot in the archaeological site of Aegira in the northern Peloponnese, and some scenes were filmed in Delphi, including inside the temple of Apollo and the Athenian Treasury. This suggests a large degree of Greek government support, which would almost certainly mean influence on the script.⁴² Macedonian archaeology clearly had an impact: while the documentary does not feature replicas of specific artefacts from the royal tombs of Vergina, we see pebble mosaics, silver drinking vessels and gold jewellery reminiscent of finds from Macedonian tombs.

These details provide some background to the interpretation of Macedonia we see in Sykes’ version. This Philip is dressed like the Greeks, and while he is a pragmatic military man who says that he prefers war to music and poetry, there is no suggestion that he is a barbarian. Demosthenes is among the characters who comment on the story; he is used as a critical voice, but the barbarian theme does not come up even once: the conflict between Greeks and Macedonians is purely a political matter. While Olympias is not represented as a

⁴⁰ Martis, *Falsification of Macedonian History*, p. 11.

⁴¹ Martis, *Falsification of Macedonian History*, page inserted before the title page.

⁴² Lane Fox, *Making of Alexander*, pp. 19-20 describes a project titled *The Search for Alexander the Great* with Greek government support and influence on the script, which was derailed by the Vergina finds in 1977. He does not make clear whether the 1981 production was what became of that project after the whole production team was sacked.

barbarian, as in Oliver Stone's *Alexander*, there is still a conflict between her and Philip over Alexander's education, and Philip here states that he wants a civilised son. This 'civilised' education, we soon find out, consists of a distinctly Spartan regime of sport, physical discomfort, little food and just one tunic, as opposed to Olympias' interest in music, poetry and religion.

While the cultural divide between Greeks and Macedonians has been played down significantly, the contrast between Greeks and Persians is strongly emphasised. In the second episode, we first meet Darius, played by Robert Stephens in a pantomime wig, beard and dark brown make-up, with exaggerated mannerisms and a stereotypical 'eastern foreigner' accent. Accents are used to illustrate ethnic differences – but only in so far as the Persians have foreign accents, while Greeks and Macedonians all use British English. The introduction to the Persians features medieval Persian paintings of turbaned figures, and music reminiscent of Muslim religious chanting. The dispute over Alexander's adoption of eastern culture is defined as pitching Greeks against Persian Barbarians: even Cleitus calls himself Greek and complains about barbarian customs, rather than, as we see in the sources, presenting a Macedonian nobleman's complaint about his king's inappropriate behaviour. Some of the Greeks (Macedonians?) at Alexander's court are heard to complain about Alexander's barbarian ways, using Modern Greek. Thus, the continuity between ancient Macedonians and modern Greeks is made completely explicit.

The political historical debate which informed Sykes's interpretation of Macedonia only intensified in the 1990s, when Greece entered into a lengthy dispute (still not resolved) with the now independent 'Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia'. By this point, the archaeological finds from Vergina, particularly the golden urn with the 'star of Vergina' on its lid, had become central to defining Macedonian identity; crucially, there was a dispute over who was allowed to use these symbols. Oliver Stone's 2004 film is clearly also

influenced by this debate. As Nisbet has shown,⁴³ elaborate lobbying behind the scenes is likely to have had an impact on the line the film took. Views on the cultural divide between East and West have also changed significantly since 1956. It is well known that Oliver Stone's outlook has been significantly influenced by his experiences in the Vietnam War,⁴⁴ which had only just started when Robert Rossen's *Alexander the Great* was released. Stone's downbeat eastern campaign in the Indian Jungle as an end to the dream of uniting East and West shows such influences; but by 2004, new western intervention in the Middle East and Afghanistan had started to colour the public's outlook, too. In this context it is striking that in Stone's version, we hardly get to see Persia proper: Alexander's campaign focuses on Babylon (with Darius' main palace) in modern Iraq and later Bactria and the Indian campaign, which map, roughly, on modern Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Conclusion

Alexander's story, with its clash between different identities and ambiguous ancient categories, is an excellent good example of ancient material which might be shaped according to our own ideas about 'civilised virtues' and 'barbarian vices'. The impact of the archaeological finds at Vergina on the public image of Macedonia can hardly be overstated: film, is after all, a visual medium. Actual Macedonian material, and specifically very striking, sophisticated artefacts which may have been owned and selected by the king himself, fired up the imagination, while the political discourse around these finds clearly steered filmmakers towards a particular interpretation. After the Vergina excavation of 1977, Philip's image could hardly return to the barbarian furs considered appropriate in 1956. In fact, Stone's

⁴³ Gideon Nisbet, *Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture* (Bristol, 2006), pp. 117-119; cf. Joanna Paul, "Oliver Stone's *Alexander* and the Cinematic Epic Tradition," in *Responses to Oliver Stone's Alexander: Film, History and Cultural Studies*, eds. Paul Cartledge and Fiona Rose Greenland (Madison, Wisconsin, 2010), pp. 18-19.

⁴⁴ Carol Cadwalladr, "Oliver Stone and the Politics of Filmmaking," *The Observer* 18/07/2010. <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/jul/18/oliver-stone-chavez-wall-street>. (accessed?)

Alexander puts almost the whole inventory of ‘Philip’s grave’ on display, not least as part of Val Kilmer’s props and costumes. Looking at Alexander in 1956, 1981 and 2004, it is clear that the relevant ethnic categories, Greek, Macedonian and Persian/Eastern/Asian have become more problematic, and filmmakers probably have less leeway now than Robert Rossen had in 1956. In the context of politics in the southern Balkans and in the Middle East, ancient Macedonia’s place in the ancient world and the identities of Philip and Alexander still need to shift and adapt as deftly as they ever did back in the fourth century BCE.