

## Review of Oliver Stone's "Alexander" by U-M's John Cherry



"Alexander, the ill-timed?"

*By John Cherry, University of Michigan Professor of Classical Archaeology and Greek, and Curator, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology (Director, Interdepartmental Program in Classical Art and Archaeology, IPCAA)*

Thanksgiving weekend must have been painfully disappointing for movie director Oliver Stone. Having dreamed for decades of making a film based on the life of Alexander the Great, and having secured more than \$150 million in independent financing to create his lavish, three-hour epic filmed in Morocco, Thailand, and on a huge soundstage in London, must it not have been galling to see it squarely trounced in ticket sales by? a kids' cartoon, no less, *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*? Conquering the North American box office, it seems, is a task more formidable than Alexander's own destruction of the Persian Empire. What should be inferred from the fact that this movie could do no better than open at No. 6, and in just three weeks vanished altogether from most cineplex screens? Poor timing and plain bad luck in terms of the competition? That the apparent revival of enthusiasm for sword-and-sandals epics, initiated by *Gladiator*, has run its course - the recent clunker *Troy* providing the coup de grâce? That Alexander's career does not provide manageable material for a successful movie? That this particular Alexander is not very good? All of the above, perhaps?

Stone might well ruminate ruefully on the ancient Greek concept of *kairos* - the right moment, the critical time. He had, after all, made a directorial name for himself with earlier controversial, politically charged movies such as *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), *JFK* (1991), and *Nixon* (1995). Alexander, he made clear, had always attracted him as a possible subject for a movie. And if further encouragement were needed, there had previously been only a single, ghastly attempt by Hollywood to make such a film - Robert Rossen's 1956 *Alexander the Great*, starring Richard Burton, dressed in a blonde fright-wig and ultra-short tunic, learning on the job how to act. What terrible timing, then, for Stone to discover - when already committed to his own Alexander movie - that the brilliant Australian director Baz Luhrmann also has an untitled Alexander the Great project in the works, with Leonardo DiCaprio (*Alexander*) and Nicole Kidman (*Olympias*) signed on for the starring roles, David Hare and Valerio Manfredi (of Alexander-trilogy fame) as writers, and Dino De Laurentiis and Martin Scorsese as producers. Allegedly, Luhrmann's Alexander has been pushed back by more than a year (possibly even shelved entirely), to avoid a release-date too close to Stone's, whose production was accelerated for the same reason. And there is even a third "teen" Alexander project said to be in the works, the brainchild of Ilya Salkind (producer of *The Three Musketeers* and *Superman*).

Movie websites describe the plot outline of Luhrmann's projected movie as follows: "Long awaited biopic of the legendary Macedonian king delves not only into his ambitions of world domination, but also his homosexual desires." A director with his eye on the bottom-line might want to reconsider this last part, in light of reactions in some quarters to Stone's *Alexander*. For the Classical scholar, the textual and iconographic evidence that males in the ancient Greek world engaged in emotional and sexual relationships with partners of both sexes is so abundant that the notion of Alexander in bed with

Hephaestion and Bagoas, as well as Barsine, Roxane, Stateira, and various other Persian trophy-brides, will hardly raise an eyebrow. Stone pulls his punches in this respect, providing a nude sex-romp for Alexander and Roxane (Rosario Dawson), but limiting his portrayal of Alexander and his boyfriends to a few kisses, some hugging, and a lot of deep gazing into kohl-rimmed, limpid eyes. Critics have had their fun, mocking the movie as "the Queer Eye for the Macedonian Guy," and so on. Stone's movie, though, is playing to the post-9/11, conservative-trending, world of Bush 43, in which nine states have just provided overwhelming endorsement of proposals banning recognition of gay marriage and other forms of same-sex unions, and the President himself is an enthusiastic proponent of a constitutional amendment to the same effect. Bad timing, or what? In Greece, a group of Greek lawyers has even been threatening to sue over the very suggestion that Alexander the Great was bisexual; they got as far as sending an extrajudicial note to the Warner Brothers film studio and to Stone himself, demanding that "the production company should make it clear to the audience that this film is pure fiction and not a true depiction of the life of Alexander."

At the time this film was conceived, Stone in his wildest dreams could not have imagined that American and coalition forces would be engaged in ferocious warfare across the heartland of the territory that Alexander conquered, and especially in Baghdad, just up-river from very city (Babylon) in which Alexander, according to this movie (and some ancient sources), died of poisoning at the hands of his own inner circle. It is hard to view Stone's film without refracting it through current events playing out in the self-same territory. And, on the whole, the impression we receive is that Alexander brought civilization to barbarians, because it was good for 'em. Does this sound at all familiar in terms of current political rhetoric? Given that he began developing this project in 1989, Stone can hardly be held responsible for attempts to read his movie as a political allegory of contemporary conditions, let alone charges that he had President Bush in mind as a point of reference. Such questions, though, are nearly impossible to resist, and in interviews Stone has displayed an admirably long-term view in answering them: "It's ironic, and I think there is a coincidence that's far beyond my imagining, but I would certainly not limit this to the current situation. This is an older situation, East vs. West. This is pre-Muslim, and there was always a conflict between Persian and Greek."

Fair enough. But what about Greek vs. Macedonian? Talk about kairos! After years of international negotiations, George W. Bush decides - as the very first major foreign-policy decision following his re-election, and just hours before the movie opened - to recognize FYROM (the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) as [sc. the "real"] Macedonia. Stone takes a smart middle course here: Farrell & co. talk in a guttural Irish brogue (to simulate some kind of otherness), while the Greeks speak a version of BBC received English. Years from now, when the political calculus has changed utterly, I predict that this aspect of the movie will play very strangely. Nonetheless, how are we to understand the Alexander who rides into battle at Gaugamela screaming about "the freedom of the Greek people," when the previous hour has been set entirely in a place called "Macedonia," with barely a mention of Greeks, let alone whether they are fighting Macedonians, joining them in common cause against Persians, or enjoying the bonds of close kinship.

This is all so much cinematic and political baggage for a single movie to bear, and Stone's Alexander is probably incapable of sustaining the weight, especially with a cast that is only respectable, not star-studded. We have as Olympias Angelina Jolie, who in real life, let us not forget, is only one year older than her cinematic son Alexander (Colin Farrell); she doesn't speak Irish (obviously: she's from Epirus!), but some weird form of Transylvania-talk, and she has so many pet snakes that the creatures represent a positive menace underfoot, especially for the the young Alexander (Connor Paolo). The movie devotes so much set-up time to the domestic psycho-drama of Alexander, Olympias, and Philip II (played surprisingly well by Val Kilmer, one eye stitched shut) that the audience is led to believe that Alexander set out to conquer the known world in order to please his mother and to avenge/surpass his father. This only creates later confusion when it transpires that the real driving force is the wish to put to the test Aristotle's geographical theories about the ends of the earth, an idea that is itself then confounded when Alexander begins spouting the usual nonsense about the Brotherhood of Man and Unity of All Mankind. Why any of the most prominent members of the hetairoi, Alexander's Macedonian Companions - Ptolemy, Cassander, Antigonus, Craterus, Cleitus, Hephaestion, and all the rest - would buy into any of this remains

a mystery (unless one lays weight on the fact that a lot of these lads went to school together). Any treatment of Alexander in film is bound to run up against this casting problem: that there are simply too many Companions, barely distinguishable from each other, and all yes-men.

So is Alexander a successful movie at any level? And, more interestingly, by what criteria should it be judged? John Q. Public has already voted with his feet. The critics, too, have provided an overwhelming thumbs-down verdict: the website [rottentomatoes.com](http://www.rottentomatoes.com), for instance, which collates published movie reviews, has so far counted 163 of them, of which 139 fall into the "rotten tomato" category ("over-long," "turgid," "too much like a history lesson," "yawn-inducing," etc.).

Still, for those with more vested interests, either in Alexander as a Macedonian Greek hero or as the subject of scholarly study, the dangerous tendency is to focus myopically on historical veracity as the standard of excellence - the sort of approach that can lead to exam questions in classes on ancient sport such as "Identify any five historical inaccuracies in the portrayal of the chariot-race in Ben-Hur." Inevitably, there are many errors or (as I imagine Stone would prefer to think of them) compressions of historical fact. Cleitus did not save Alexander in battle at Gaugamela, but at Granicus three years earlier, nor did Alexander murder Cleitus in India, but at Maracanda two years before. Neither the Persian royal family was presented to Alexander upon his entry into Babylon (they fell into his hands after Issus), nor the eunuch Bagoas (he was a later gift). The movie's second, climactic battle scenes are intended to represent the Battle of Hydaspes, which took place on open ground, not in a dense jungle forest, and anyway it was not there, but at the siege of Malli the following year that Alexander received his gravest wound (which Stone indicates, inventively, by turning the film stock red for several minutes). The details of the Pages' Plot are thoroughly confused. And so on.

Does any of this much matter? Probably not: this is, after all, intended as cinematic entertainment, not precise historical re-enactment, let alone a history lesson. In any case, the "historical facts" about Alexander are a gray zone. None of the writings of the contemporary Alexander-historians has survived, save via subsequent quotation, epitomization, and paraphrase, and they all had different axes to grind and plenty of reasons to invent and exaggerate. Later writers, such as Arrian, were simply too far removed from the events to do anything other than cherry-pick the written sources available to them. The oft-quoted remark of Strabo, that "all who wrote about Alexander preferred the marvelous to the true," in fact could do service also as an encapsulation of Stone's liberties with history? the marvelous, in his case, being Alexander's youth, drive, ambition, and (alleged) vision, as well as the sweep and drama of the battlefield and the bewildering otherness of the peoples and lands he encountered. In this, Stone found his historical consultant only too willing to collude. As the eccentric British classicist Robin Lane Fox put it in a recent interview, "Certainly there is a gap between entertainment and scholarship. Both Oliver and I know this. They can profit when they come close together, but they are different enterprises. That's important."

In the final analysis, what sinks this movie has nothing to do with its closeness to the facts (or otherwise), but its lack of narrative drive and structure, the failure to explain Alexander as a man with a mission (or, indeed, to provide a credible account of what that mission may have been), and above all a lack of the kind of closure that any Hollywood enterprise demands. One could easily imagine this film chopped up into segments and rearranged in a very different order, without its impact being very different. Indeed, this is very nearly the way Stone himself works. He makes a segue directly from the early years in Macedonia to the battlefield of Guagamela (but why is Alexander there? who exactly is he fighting, and why? what is this army he commands?). At a late stage in the movie, the action comes to a screeching halt for a "meanwhile, 8 years earlier in Macedonia" segment, providing an account of Alexander's father's murder, as if the audience might be confused without this additional bit of historical (or, perhaps, psychological?) background.

The truth is that it is very hard to turn Alexander's career into a convincingly complete drama (Stone, in fact, has said that "the movie is a three-act condensation of a five-act life"). If the drive to bolster one's power by fighting an enemy in the Middle East has some motivational coherence (as well as powerful contemporary resonance), what happened afterwards is very hard either to explain or portray: an increasingly pointless, almost existential quest for what lies beyond the eastern horizon. After the troops'

mutiny in India, Stone (in a single line) blips over the catastrophe of the march back through the Gedrosian Desert, and wraps things up, provocatively, with a poisoning in Babylon, hushed up by those responsible. He attempts to impose narrative coherence by wrapping the action within the retrospective meta-narrative supplied by Ptolemy I (Sir Anthony Hopkins), a prosy pedant amongst his papyrus, reflecting and editorializing on the great events of yesteryear, as he gazes out from his balcony over an astonishingly amateurish digitally-created harbor of Alexandria. But the attempt is unsuccessful, and the restlessness of the audience during these episodes is palpable.

The conclusion I draw is simply that the Life of Alexander is not very suitable material for cinematic treatment. *Gladiator* succeeded as a popular movie precisely because it dealt with an entirely fictional person, but one set within a real historical context that was, for the most part, realistic and plausible. There's certainly scope for an Alexander movie cast in similar terms, focusing on an invented character, acceptable to Hollywood, one caught up in the astonishing, genuinely world-changing events of Alexander's time. Baz Luhrmann, take note.

copyright 2005 John Cherry