

Alexander was great, but Rome is greater: Considering Livy's depiction of Alexander

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ABSTRACT

The Romans were conquerors, and it is unsurprising that they looked favorably upon the greatest conqueror of antiquity, Alexander the Great. In Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*, there are several passages in which he uses the image of Alexander to help craft his own concept of Rome's place within the wider Hellenistic world, especially within the eastern Mediterranean. Livy, despite his generally positive opinion of Alexander, ultimately created scenarios where he portrayed the Romans as superior to the Macedonian king, first, because of the primary focus of Livy's history, namely the rise of Rome to Mediterranean dominance, and second, because of the political atmosphere in which Livy was writing, namely the complete submission of the Mediterranean basin under Augustus' empire. Although scattered throughout Livy's extensive writing, when analyzed together these passages illustrate a persistent and connected motif that influences Livy's larger narrative: Alexander was great, but Rome is greater.

KEYWORDS

Alexander, Macedonia, Antigonids, Seleucids, Rome, Romans, Livy

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INTRODUCTION

In 323 BCE, Alexander the Great left behind an unrivaled reputation of conquest that he had earned by forging the largest empire in the world.¹ During the Hellenistic period (323–30) and beyond, numerous Macedonian and Roman warriors emulated his martial skill and bravery, desiring to be viewed as the next Alexander and the legitimate successor of his legacy.² Although generations of Macedonian kings attempted to match Alexander's military accomplishments, it was the Romans who conquered much of the Graeco-Macedonian world, raising the question: were the Romans the true successors of the legacy of Alexander the Great?³

The important Roman historian Livy, writing during the reign of Emperor Augustus, takes this question one step further. Although Alexander certainly is not at the center of Livy's work, when he considers the great conqueror a theme emerges. Livy respected Alexander as a warrior, but he contested the greatness of Alexander in favor of Rome. This article investigates Livy's depiction of Alexander, considering several passages that illustrate how Livy used the image of the great Macedonian to help mold his own concept of Rome's place in the world. It concludes that Rome's association with and comparison to Alexander and his accomplishments helped Livy further define the Romans' growing identity within the Graeco-Macedonian east during Rome's rise to prominence. Ultimately, Livy claims Rome as the new world hegemon, superior to even the legacy of Alexander.

The conflicts between Rome and the Hellenistic states created after Alexander's death are at the center of Livy's work, and he discusses Alexander sparingly and varyingly, balancing flattery with insults.⁴ The subject of Livy's history, namely Rome's rise to Mediterranean dominance, makes his portrayal of Alexander inconsistent. His respect for Alexander is palpable. Livy even states, "the mention of so great a prince and captain evokes certain thoughts which I have often silently pondered in my mind" (9. 17. 2). Yet his criticisms are vicious. Livy viewed the success of Rome as unrivaled, and therefore, his praise of Alexander had limits. His history offers a unique perspective on the relationship created by the Romans between Rome and Alexander.

To legitimize Roman achievements on the grandest of stages, Livy needed to use Alexander's accomplishments as a backdrop and as a point of comparison. Because the focus of Livy's history is Rome's rise to Mediterranean dominance and because of the political atmosphere in which Livy was writing, namely the complete submission of the Mediterranean under Augustan Rome, Livy, despite his generally positive opinion of Alexander, ultimately created scenarios where he portrayed the Romans as superior to the Macedonian king. Rome's military success by the reign of Augustus created opportunities for Livy to challenge Alexander's position as the greatest conqueror of all time. Livy uses the image of Alexander to reinforce the legacy of

¹ All dates are BCE unless otherwise specified.

² BOSWORTH-BAYNHAM (2000); SPENCER (2003); OVERTOOM (2011); OVERTOOM (2012); OVERTOOM (2013); BARNETT (2017).

³ The only rival to this legacy at the end of the Hellenistic period was the Parthians. OVERTOOM (2016a); OVERTOOM (2016b); OVERTOOM (2017); OVERTOOM (2019); OVERTOOM (2020); SCHLUDE (2020); OVERTOOM (2021); ELLERBROCK (2021).

⁴ MILES (1995); FELDHER (1998); FORSYTH (1999); CHAPLIN (2000); ECKSTEIN (2006); PITTINGER (2008); CHAPLIN-KRAUS (2009); LEVENE (2010); ECKSTEIN (2012); VASALY (2018).



the Romans as warriors and conquerors, and in this, Livy's Alexander is an exemplar of what to do and what not to do as a world leader.⁵ For Livy, Alexander's military vigor and vast accomplishments were things to emulate and respect. This is evident in several passages where Livy directly praises or uses sources that praise Alexander (8. 3. 7; 9. 16. 12–19; 9. 17. 2; 35. 14. 5–12; 45. 7. 3; 45. 9. 5–7). Yet, for Livy, the overall theme of his treatment of Alexander is that even though Alexander was great, the Romans proved greater.⁶

Although the “Alexander Digression” (9. 17–19), which is a counterfactual analysis of an invasion of Italy by Alexander, is the most well-known of Livy's passages on Alexander, a full analysis of the rhetorical themes of this digression is not the focus of this article.⁷ Rather, this article considers the digression briefly as it pertains to the greater theme of Livy respecting Alexander's greatness but using Alexander as a model to champion the superiority of Roman virtues and accomplishments.⁸ The remainder of the article examines the other passages on Alexander found outside of the digression throughout Livy's history. Although scattered, these passages illustrate a persistent and connected motif that influences Livy's larger narrative.

WHAT IF ALEXANDER THE GREAT INVADED ITALY?

In his digression on Alexander found in Book IX, Livy most clearly depicts his theme of representing the Romans as superior to Alexander.⁹ The digression is a near continual attack on the shortcomings of the Macedonians and their king, and it champions Roman virtues and military vigor. No section in Livy's entire history advances the motif of Roman superiority, even over Alexander the Great, more clearly than this digression. In fact, the digression is so completely pro-Roman in the face of Alexander that it has the tendency to skew our understanding and interpretation of Livy's overall opinion of him. One must remember that the digression is only a piece of broader picture. Yet the digression does warrant brief consideration.

Livy begins by justifying his digression to the reader, stating that the greatness of Alexander and his many thoughts concerning the Macedonian king led him “to enquire how the Roman State would have fared in a war with Alexander” (9. 17. 1–2). For Livy, the chief factors of war are numbers of soldiers, the valor of soldiers, the abilities of commanders, and Fortune (9. 17. 3). He then argues that the Romans would have “proved invincible” against Alexander because his fame was enhanced by not having to share it with others and because his early death saved him from the inevitable fickleness of Fortune (9. 17. 4–6). He next favorably compares numerous

⁵OAKLEY (2005) 188.

⁶Similarly, Cato the Elder championed Rome's superiority within the Hellenistic world. Although Cato did not view Hellenism negatively and recognized its qualities, he saw it as inferior. For Cato, Rome was not only politically and militarily superior, but also culturally superior. GRUEN (1992) 66–83.

⁷See instead, MORELLO (2002); OVERTOOM (2012).

⁸Polybius followed a similar theme. OVERTOOM (2013).

⁹Apart from Curtius Rufus, Livy's digression is the longest extant discussion of Alexander in the Latin literature of the Roman Republic and early Principate. Additionally, Livy's digression likely influenced Curtius' portrayal of Alexander. OAKLEY (2005) 205, 661–663.



Roman generals to Alexander in bravery, ability, and leadership, emphasizing the combined strength of the Roman state against an “old” Alexander (9. 17. 7–15). Livy also disparages the military ability of Alexander’s historical enemies, the Persians and Indians, stressing the military prowess of the Romans in Italy who defeated and killed his uncle, Alexander of Epirus (9. 17. 16–17). He claims that Alexander would have invaded Italy not as the young Macedonian conquer of history, but as a degenerate, Persianized despot consumed by many vices (9. 18. 1–5). He then defends Rome against those who challenge its supremacy, arguing that Alexander’s short career cannot outweigh the legacy of Rome’s many successes over multiple centuries (9. 18. 6–11). He also defends Rome’s many republican generals who, despite facing many obstacles within Roman society and government, excelled in war, underscoring the comparative ease of the sole command of kings (9. 18. 12–16). He next emphasizes the isolation of Alexander as a leader and the danger of death that he faced in war compared to the multitude of capable Romans who, willingly and without risk to the state, would lay down their lives for Rome (9. 18. 17–19). Livy continues by stressing the great size of the Roman army and the unity of Italy under Roman control (9. 19. 1–4). He argues that Alexander’s army was limited in size unless he recruited inferior Persians and Indians to fight and that, isolated in Italy like Hannibal, Alexander’s army would have fallen victim to the attrition of war (9. 19. 5–7). He then describes the arms and armor, tactics, and discipline of the Romans as superior to those of Macedonia (9. 19. 8–9). He argues that Alexander could not have endured one defeat but that Rome can endure any defeat, before again emphasizing the “unwarlike Asiatics” that Alexander conquered and the failed invasion of Italy by his uncle (9. 19. 10–12). He criticizes Alexander for fighting short wars and posits that Carthage would have been a willing ally of Rome against him (9. 19. 13). Livy then finishes the digression by highlighting later Roman victories over the Macedonians and stressing the invincibility of Rome in war (9. 19. 14–17).

Livy’s digression is in the rhetorical tradition of a *comparatio*, where someone compares two things and presents one as superior.¹⁰ Thus, we must keep in mind that the digression, by its very nature, promotes a patriotic stance on the part of Livy.¹¹ It is this vibrant eagerness to promote the greatness of Rome over that of Alexander that causes numerous rhetorical oversights and exaggerations in the text. This of course makes the digression highly problematic even as counterfactual history; however, for Livy, who believed Rome was Alexander’s true successor and a rival to his greatness, the digression was a necessary addition to his history.¹² It stands as the primary example of Livy’s belief in Roman supremacy over all others, even Alexander. However, one must also keep in mind that this section alone does not form Livy’s overall opinion of Alexander. In fact, in most of the Alexander passages found outside the digression, Livy expresses respect for Alexander and his achievements. Thus, one must consider these other passages to get a complete view of Livy’s assessment of the Macedonian king.

¹⁰OAKLEY (2005) 188.

¹¹OAKLEY (2005) 190.

¹²OAKLEY (2005) 209; OVERTOOM (2012).



ANOTHER ALEXANDER ACTUALLY FAILS IN ITALY

Alexander the Great first appears in Livy's extant history in Book VIII after a short introduction to Alexander of Epirus' ill-fated invasion of Italy in 334 (8. 3. 6).¹³ Livy judges that, had this invasion been successful, Alexander of Epirus would have made war against the Romans, and he immediately associates the invader with "the era of the exploits of Alexander the Great" (8. 3. 7). He then laments Alexander the Great's fate, stating, "[He] who fortune snuffed out as a young man due to disease (*iuvenem fortuna morbo exstinxit*), in another quarter of the world, after proving himself to be invincible in war (*invictum bellis*)" (8. 3. 7). Livy's acknowledgement of Alexander's negative fortune here is striking, since later in the digression he makes a contrary statement, recording, "I do not dispute that Alexander was an exceptional general, but his reputation is enhanced by the fact that he died while still young and before he had time to experience any change of fortune (*nondum alteram fortunam expertus*)" (9. 17. 5). This is but one of several Livian statements that offers an opinion of Alexander that contrasts with Livy's hyperbolic tone in the digression. Livy here recognizes that Alexander in fact did suffer at the hands of fortune by dying of an illness unexpectedly at the height of his power. Further, Livy demonstrates the highest respect for Alexander's military accomplishments by calling him "invincible in war". By directly connecting Alexander of Epirus to Alexander the Great in this passage, he contrasts the invincibility of Alexander the Great in war with the military failure of his uncle. Thus, this passage generally is favorable to Alexander the Great.

Livy again associates Alexander the Great with Alexander of Epirus after discussing the latter's defeat and death in Italy (8. 24. 1–16). Livy emphasizes Alexander the Great's relationship to Alexander of Epirus through his mother Olympias, who was a recipient of her brother's bones (8. 24. 17–18). To be sure, there is nothing in this passage overtly negative toward Alexander the Great. Livy even describes Alexander of Epirus more as a victim of ill fortune than as a wicked or foolish character. Yet Livy again claims that, even though Alexander of Epirus' invasion did not directly affect Rome, an account of this event was necessary for his history because it involved a foreign force invading Italy and because he believed that, had it been successful, this Alexander would have made war on Rome (8. 3. 6; 8. 24. 18). For Livy, it was Fortune that prevented this outcome (8. 24. 18), and since he also emphasizes the importance of Fortune in war in the digression (9. 17. 3), Livy clearly believes the Romans had Fortune's blessing.

It is possible that Livy associates Alexander the Great with his uncle's failure in Italy in Book VIII to allude to the failure of Alexander's hypothetical invasion of Italy in the digression since that association also is made explicitly later in the digression (9. 17. 17).¹⁴ Additionally, it was not lost on Livy's Roman audience that the Lucanians, who defeated and killed Alexander of Epirus, ultimately were conquered by Rome. In this sense, Livy further alludes that the Romans proved successful where Alexander of Epirus had failed (and by extension where Alexander the Great would have failed). This passage, although not a direct criticism of Alexander the Great, does not reflect well on him. Although Livy earlier laments Alexander the Great's youthful death and asserts his military invincibility (8. 3. 7), by associating him with his uncle's failure in Italy three times (8. 3. 6; 8. 24. 18; 9. 17. 17), Livy maintains his overall theme of Alexander as great but the Romans as greater.

¹³Livy incorrectly places this invasion in 340 BCE. BOSWORTH (1996) 60.

¹⁴MORELLO (2002) 71–72.



THE ASSOCIATION OF PAPIRIUS CURSOR WITH ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Livy next mentions Alexander immediately prior to the digression, where he describes Lucius Papirius Cursor, a Roman hero, as a possible equal to the Macedonian king. This discussion of Papirius introduces themes also emphasized in the digression, like Roman military discipline and the perpetuity of Rome's authority.¹⁵ Livy, speaking of Papirius' abilities, states,

There can be no doubt that in his generation, in which no other was ever more productive in great qualities, there was no single man who did more to uphold the Roman state. Indeed, people regard him as one who might have been a match in spirit for Alexander the Great (*quin eum parem destinant animis magno Alexandro ducem*), if the latter, after subjugating Asia, had turned his arms against Europe (9. 16. 19).

Here Livy establishes Papirius as the greatest Roman of the greatest Roman generation, which would have made him a possible match for Alexander. Clearly, Livy used this passage to position himself well to launch into his digression. Yet Livy's discussion of the great Papirius not only establishes his high opinion of the Roman hero, but it also associates him with Alexander-like qualities.

Earlier in the passage, Livy records that Papirius celebrated a triumph at Rome for his defeat of the Samnites in 309 (9. 16. 11). What follows is a list of personal qualities, all of which are traits commonly attributed to Alexander.¹⁶ Livy describes Papirius as a great soldier who was high-spirited, strong, and fast of foot; he had a great capacity for food and wine; and he was tough on his soldiers but shared in their toil, making him popular (9. 16. 12–15). In addition, he possessed fairness, clemency, a sense of humor, and a great power of command (9. 16. 16–18).

According to Livy, it was because of these qualities that Roman writers often compared Papirius to Alexander, and by accepting the comparison, Livy understood that these were the qualities of Alexander. Moreover, Livy positively describes these characteristics, and in fact, he acknowledges the unrivaled spirit of Alexander by not automatically championing Papirius over him.¹⁷ In depicting a Roman counterpart to Alexander, Livy in fact expressed his own opinion of what it meant to be worthy of that comparison. Thus, this passage is flattering to Alexander and a rare example of where the Romans, who remain in competition with Alexander throughout Livy's work, do not automatically take precedence over him in Livy's mind.

THE PIETY OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT AND THE PIETY OF SCIPIO AFRICANUS

Alexander again emerges in Book XXVI when Livy associates him with Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus, another hero of Rome. Scipio's successful military career as a young man made this association appropriate, and Livy connects the legend of Scipio with the legend of Alexander.¹⁸

¹⁵MORELLO (n. 2002) 71.

¹⁶OVERTOOM (2011).

¹⁷SPENCER (2003) 53.

¹⁸JACZYŃSKA (1985).



Livy relates that, from a young age, Scipio claimed a connection with the gods through dreams and visions that carried messages and commands (26. 19. 3–4). As a young man, he established a connection with Jupiter by spending time in the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus every day before commencing any business (26. 19. 5). Livy states,

This practice, which was adhered to through the whole of his life, occasioned in some persons a belief in a notion which generally prevailed, whether deliberately propagated or not, that he [Scipio] was a man of divine extraction; and revived a report as equally absurd and fabulous as that formerly spread regarding Alexander the Great, that he [Scipio] was begotten by a huge serpent, whose monstrous form was frequently observed in the bedchamber of his mother, but which, on anyone's coming in, suddenly unfolding his coils, glided out of sight (26. 19. 6–7).

Here Livy illustrates that some Romans thus perceived Scipio in the likeness of Alexander because of his piety and possible divine origin.¹⁹ Livy continues that, although Scipio never openly embraced these rumors, he did not deny them and that the people of Rome greatly admired him (26. 19. 7–9). Livy's passage largely parallels that of Polybius (10. 2, 5); however, it is notable that Polybius makes no mention of Scipio resembling Alexander. Thus, it is not trivial that Livy offers the Alexander comparison, and it is a subtle compliment to both Scipio and Alexander.

To be fair, Livy did not believe these stories of Alexander and Scipio's divine origins, but he found the connection intriguing and makes the association where Polybius is silent. Livy also associates Scipio, albeit indirectly, with Alexander, owing to their perceived piety, and he attributes superhuman qualities to Scipio. Interestingly, Polybius associates Alexander with these qualities elsewhere in his work (5. 10. 6–8; 12. 23). As seen in passage 9.16 on Papirius, Livy's association of Scipio with Alexander passes positive judgment on both men. For Livy, the initial fears of the Roman citizenry about giving such immense military responsibility to Scipio at a young age disappeared as they perceived that, like Alexander, Scipio was a great man and a favorite of the gods (26. 19. 9). Although this passage is favorable and does not position Alexander as a competitor to Rome, Scipio became a favorite of Livy's to associate with Alexander.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT COMPARED TO PYRRHUS, HANNIBAL, AND SCIPIO

Alexander next appears in Book XXXV. Livy here relates a story about a meeting between Scipio Africanus and Hannibal. Prior to the war against Antiochus III in 193, Roman delegates in Asia Minor met several times with Hannibal, who had left Carthage for the east and was offering his skills as an advisor to Antiochus (35. 14. 1–3). Although nothing of great importance came of these meetings, Livy states that some historians report that Scipio was present and asked Hannibal's opinion of the greatest generals in history (35. 14. 4–6).²⁰ The encounter further emphasizes both Livy's respect for Alexander and his prevailing motif of Roman superiority over him.

¹⁹NAIDEN (2019).

²⁰Compare Appian *Syr.* 2. 10.



Although many scholars question the validity of this conversation, Livy himself does not question the authenticity of the account.²¹ Therefore, it is a telling example of how Livy viewed Scipio, Hannibal, and Pyrrhus in relation to Alexander. In the conversation Hannibal responds to Scipio's question about who is the greatest general in history, stating, "Alexander, the king of the Macedonians, because with a small force he had routed armies innumerable and because he had traversed the most distant regions, which even to see transcended human hopes" (35. 14. 6–7). Scipio then asks about the second and third man, and Hannibal responds with Pyrrhus of Epirus and himself (35. 14. 8–9). Scipio finds this answer amusing and asks, "What would you say if you had defeated me?" "Then, beyond doubt," he [Hannibal] replied, "I should place myself both before Alexander and before Pyrrhus and before all other generals" (35. 14. 10–11). Livy then finishes the passage, recording, "Both this response, with the unexpected turn given it by Punic cleverness, and this unexpected kind of flattery, he says, stirred Scipio deeply, because Hannibal had segregated him from all other commanders as one beyond estimation" (35. 14. 12). Thus, Livy offers a comparison of the generalship of Alexander, Pyrrhus, Hannibal, and Scipio that flatters each figure. To be fair, Livy does not offer direct praise of Alexander here, but by including this story without criticism, Livy implies that he approved of the message.²² The passage generally is flattering to Alexander with some important caveats.

Both Hannibal and Scipio accept without hesitation that Alexander was the greatest general in history, and Livy here indicates that, for the leading statesmen of the ancient world, Alexander was present in thought, aspired to in accomplishment, and the measuring stick for all who followed. The passage also awards high praise to Pyrrhus, the cousin of Alexander, and unlike the two earlier passages that discuss the failure of Alexander of Epirus, Livy does not here link Alexander to Pyrrhus' failure in Italy. For Hannibal and Scipio, Pyrrhus' accomplishments far outweighed his shortcomings, and perhaps Livy agreed. Yet in this dialogue, Hannibal's defeat at the hands of the Romans would have reminded Livy's audience of Pyrrhus' failure against Rome, and since Pyrrhus represented himself in the image of Alexander and brought an experienced army in the style of Alexander's to Italy, Livy had an ideal opportunity to make comparisons between Alexander and Pyrrhus in his history.²³

Unfortunately, Livy's account of the Pyrrhic War in Books XIII–XIV is not extant, and it is unknown whether he associated Alexander with Pyrrhus explicitly in those passages. All that remains of those books are the excerpts of the epitome of Livy's extensive history, the *Periochae*. Yet there are similar themes emphasized in the *Periochae* that are found in Livy's larger preserved work, and these similarities can help decipher some of what Livy's opinions and goals would have been in the original text.²⁴ Ultimately, the summaries of Books XIII and XIV represent the mighty Pyrrhus as no match for the resilience of Rome, and they emphasize Rome's ultimate victory (*Per.* 13. 1–3, 5–9, 11; 14. 3–5). Thematically, this overlaps with Livy's explicit conclusions in his Alexander Digression and his general motif of Roman superiority over even Alexander found throughout his work. For Livy, Pyrrhus' invasion of Italy, like that of

²¹BRISCOE (1981) 165–166.

²²Although the Romans respected Pyrrhus' generalship, generally placing him second behind Alexander, they understood that there was a considerable gap in reputation between the two leaders. MOSSMAN (1992) 90–108.

²³CHAMPION (2009) 109, 132. Note Polyb. 18. 3. 3–8.

²⁴REEVE (1988); REEVE (1991) 453–483.



Alexander of Epirus, failed, further reinforcing his arguments that Alexander too would have failed. Thus, in passage 35. 14. 6–11, Livy not only indirectly links the praiseworthy generalship of Pyrrhus to Alexander, but he also associates Alexander subtly with another relative who failed to conquer Italy. In fact, Livy may well have been thinking partially of Pyrrhus when he came to his judgments in the digression about Alexander's inability to succeed in Italy.

The end of the dialogue between Hannibal and Scipio further reinforces Livy's depiction of Alexander as great but Rome as greater. Since Scipio defeated Hannibal in the Second Punic War, he is surprised and scoffs when Hannibal awards himself the third position. Hannibal then responds that, had he defeated Scipio, he would indeed be the greatest general, eclipsing even Alexander. In this, Hannibal flatters Scipio and gives a nod to the supremacy of Rome, and Livy concludes that "Hannibal had segregated him from all other commanders as one beyond estimation" (35. 14. 12).²⁵ Thus, for Livy, Rome was the ultimate victor in all scenarios, and therefore, if we combine the digression with this passage, Rome has the honor of defeating all three of the greatest generals.²⁶

A DUBIOUS FAMILY CONNECTION

Later in Book XXXV, Livy briefly mentions another familial connection to Alexander the Great, albeit a dubious one. Livy explains that Alexander of Megalopolis had claimed descent from Alexander the Great and, to this point, even had named his two sons Philip and Alexander (35. 47. 5). Although the claim was a fabrication, Philip, due to his gullible and vain nature, aspired to the Macedonian throne with the encouragement of Antiochus III and the Aetolians during the Roman-Syrian War (192–188) (35. 47. 6–8). Antiochus and the Aetolians were searching for allies in Greece against the Romans, and they manipulated Philip to secure them. Thus, Livy here illustrates the continued power and authority of Alexander the Great's name, while highlighting the divisiveness, pettiness, and selfishness of the ambitions and diplomacy of the Greeks and Macedonians in the post-Alexander world. Although an illegitimate fool in Livy's estimation, Philip used this alleged familial connection to Alexander the Great to gain supporters in Greece in an attempt to seize power in Macedonia. Here Livy clearly does not accept the validity of the family connection, but the passage juxtaposes the great legacy of Alexander with the incompetence of later Greek and Macedonian leaders.

PARALLELS BETWEEN THE ROMANS' VICTORY AT MAGNESIA AND ALEXANDER'S VICTORY AT GAUGAMELA

In Book XXXVII, Livy describes Rome's victory over Antiochus III at Magnesia in 189, and although Livy does not mention Alexander explicitly, his description of the battle, which he

²⁵ Appian makes this explicit, stating, "Thus Hannibal continued his self-laudation, but flattered Scipio in a delicate manner by suggesting that he had conquered one who was the superior of Alexander." *Syr.* 2. 10.

²⁶ MORELLO (2002) 70 n. 40.



likely based on a Polybian account no longer extant, parallels several aspects of Alexander's victory over the Persian King Darius III at Gaugamela in 331.²⁷ These similarities are worth considering in detail to further appreciate Livy's use of the legacy of Alexander in his depictions of Roman supremacy. Also, since Livy likely draws heavily upon Polybius' account of the Battle of Magnesia, much of what we discuss about Livy in this section we can associate with Polybius as well.²⁸

To begin, there are many similarities in the composition of the armies in these battles. Livy presents the Romans as greatly outnumbered at Magnesia, like Alexander was at Gaugamela.²⁹ Livy records Antiochus' strength at 60,000 infantry and more than 12,000 cavalry (37. 37. 9), and he records the Roman army, with its Greek allies, at 26,600 infantry and less than 3,000 cavalry (37. 39. 12 – 37. 40. 4).³⁰ Although both sides deployed war elephants, the Romans only had sixteen to Antiochus' fifty-four, and the Roman elephants were inferior North African elephants while Antiochus commanded powerful Indian elephants (37. 40. 5). Moreover, Livy describes Antiochus' army, like that of Darius, as a force of many different races, naming over twenty different ethnic groups, with a wide variety of equipment (37. 40. 6–14).³¹ Further, Antiochus, again like Darius, used his great advantage in infantry and cavalry to extend his line well past the extent of his enemy's front (37. 41. 1, 4).³² Also, included in both eastern armies were scythe chariots, which in both battles were meant to be difference makers but proved wildly ineffective (37. 41. 5–11).³³

Meanwhile, there are many similarities in the accounts of the battles. In both engagements, a gap opens in the left center of the battle line due to miscalculations (on the part of the kings) involving the scythe chariots (37. 41. 8–11).³⁴ Then the Romans, like Alexander, exploit the gap with a cavalry charge, creating mass confusion and the general rout of the enemy left (37. 42. 1–3).³⁵ That panic then spreads quickly to the center of the enemy army (37. 42. 4–6).³⁶ Although Antiochus' cavalry on the right wing, like that of Darius, achieves some success

²⁷ Appian does explicitly mention Alexander. *Syr.* 7. 32. Although Livy clearly utilized Polybius' history extensively for the various peace negotiations before and after the battle, Polybius' full account of the battle does not survive. What we have of Polybius in this section is from the Constantinian excerpts of the *de legat. gent.* WALBANK (1979) 3, 4, 5, 105–111, BRISCOE (1981) 2, 338–343, 358–362. Polybius' sources are more difficult to establish since he used many and wove them together. WALBANK (1957) 26–35, WALBANK (1990); ECKSTEIN (1995); WALBANK (2002b); CHAMPION (2004); MCGING (2010); MOORE (2020).

²⁸ OVERTOOM (2011); OVERTOOM (2013).

²⁹ Note Arr. *Anab.* 3. 8. BRISCOE (1981) 147–148, 344–345.

³⁰ Appian similarly places the figures at 70,000 versus 30,000. *Syr.* 7. 31.

³¹ Note Arr. *Anab.* 3. 8. BRISCOE (1981) 348–351.

³² Note Arr. *Anab.* 3. 13.

³³ Note App. *Syr.* 7. 33; Arr. *Anab.* 3. 11, 13. BRISCOE (1981) 349, 352–355.

³⁴ Note Arr. *Anab.* 3. 13.

³⁵ Note Arr. *Anab.* 3. 14.

³⁶ Note Arr. *Anab.* 3. 14.



and threatens the enemy camp, the Romans' stiff left flank, like that of Alexander, holds long enough to allow reinforcements and cavalry from the successful right wing to arrive in relief (37. 42. 6 – 37. 43. 5).³⁷ Further, Antiochus, like Darius, flees the battlefield and his army is slaughtered (37. 43. 6 – 37. 44. 1).³⁸ Finally, the Romans, like Alexander (we are told) suffered few casualties (37. 44. 2).³⁹

Gaugamela and Magnesia were significant war-deciding battles. Alexander used his victory to complete his conquest of the Persian Empire, and the Romans used their victory to force Antiochus to abandon all his lands west of the Taurus Mountains, cementing Rome as the new hegemon of the Mediterranean.⁴⁰ Livy's description of the Romans' victory at Magnesia along similar terms to that of Alexander's victory at Gaugamela was intentional. In it, one can see Livy's vision of Rome in its role as Alexander's true successor. The resemblance of the battles and the actions and experiences of Alexander and Rome say much about Livy's respect for the accomplishments of Alexander, but also his belief in Rome's ultimate superiority and destiny. Moreover, although the Romans did not have the opportunity to match force of arms with the Persians, like Alexander at Gaugamela, in Livy's mind Alexander, through his subsequent conquest of Persia, became the new master of the east and the representation of the Persian legacy. In the digression, he states, "he would evidently have come to Italy more like Darius than like Alexander, at the head of an army that had forgotten Macedonia and was already adopting the degenerate customs of the Persians" (9. 18. 3). For Livy, the Seleucids carried on that legacy in the east in the wake of Alexander's death, and the multi-ethnic, diverse army that Livy argues that Alexander would have brought to Italy in fact reflects the army of Antiochus at Magnesia (9. 19. 5). As Livy argues in the digression, this force would have been a great burden to its commander and unsuccessful against the Romans, and in Livy's mind, so too was Antiochus outclassed and overwhelmed by the Romans at Magnesia.

MACEDONIA AND THE LINGERING REPUTATION OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Livy next refers to Alexander the Great in Book XLII.⁴¹ Although his name explicitly appears in passage 42. 51. 11, there is an earlier passage also worth considering briefly. In 171, another military clash between Rome and Macedonia was imminent as King Perseus, the son of Philip V, began to challenge Roman hegemony.⁴² Livy records that the Romans had mobilized for war,

³⁷Note Arr. *Anab.* 3. 14–15. Appian's account of the battle is slightly different and has Antiochus defeating the Roman reinforcements sent to aid the camp. This makes the parallels in Livy's account even more interesting. App. *Syr.* 8. 36. BRISCOE (1981) 355–356.

³⁸Note Arr. *Anab.* 3. 14–15.

³⁹Livy records less than 300 infantry and only forty-nine cavalry killed, twenty-five of which were Eumenes' men. Arrian records only 100 deaths and the loss of 1,000 horses. *Anab.* 3. 15. 6. These casualty figures, or the lack thereof, are likely extreme exaggerations; however, for our purposes, the figures display another parallel between the battles. BRISCOE (1981) 356–357.

⁴⁰ECKSTEIN (2012) Ch. 8.

⁴¹BRISCOE (2012).

⁴²ECKSTEIN (2012) Ch. 9.



and Perseus had to decide whether to sue for peace ingloriously or risk everything gloriously in battle (42. 48. 1; 42. 50. 8–11). Livy stresses that Macedonia was in the best position to challenge Roman supremacy, stating, “The kingdom of Macedonia alone remained, a near neighbor and ready, whenever Rome lost the good fortune she once enjoyed, to animate the kings of Macedonia with their ancient spirit (*antiquos animos*)” (42. 50. 7). In this, Livy makes a nod to the great legacy of Alexander and links the fortunes of Macedonia and Rome.⁴³ Thus, Livy accomplishes two things. First, he presents the Macedonians as a threat if Perseus can channel the greatness of their past, which inarguably includes the example of Alexander, and second, he sets the situation up so that if the Romans triumph over Macedonia, they not only defeat Perseus, but also, they defeat the entire legacy of the Macedonians, which again unquestionably includes the accomplishments of Alexander.

Livy then directly associates Alexander with Perseus and his army. He reports that, after Perseus decided to pursue war, he gathered a large and diverse force of 39,000 infantry and 4,000 cavalry (42. 51). Livy states, “It was generally admitted that, next to the army which Alexander the Great had led into Asia, no Macedonian king had ever possessed so large a force” (42. 51. 11).⁴⁴ In fact, despite the fact that Alexander commanded larger armies than this in Asia, Livy curiously argues in the digression that Alexander would have invaded Italy with no more than 30,000 Macedonian infantry and 4,000 cavalry (9. 19. 5).⁴⁵ In any case, although an army of 43,000 soldiers was substantial, Livy here exaggerates Perseus’ power and associates him with Alexander to make him appear more formidable than he actually was. Again, Livy presents the Macedonians as a major threat (this time directly connected to Alexander’s legacy), but he sets up the Romans to triumph over more than just Perseus through the association with Alexander.

This motif continues in the next passage indirectly when Perseus musters his army. After the soldiers complete their drills, he addresses his troops about the coming war with Rome (42. 52. 1–4). Livy relates that Perseus called upon his soldiers to be courageous and stressed the many indignities and injuries the Macedonians had suffered at Roman hands (42. 52. 5–6). He also blames his father’s previous defeat on ill fortune (42. 52. 6). After negotiations between Rome and Macedonia during the winter went nowhere and a small Roman army arrived in Greece, Livy relates that Perseus again addressed his soldiers, telling his men that they not only surpassed the Romans in skill and training, but also had better auxiliaries, better equipment, and were better supplied (42. 52. 7–12). Livy then records that Perseus called upon his soldiers to muster the spirit of their forefathers, stating,

You must have the courage which your ancestors had, who, having subdued all Europe (*qui Europa omni domita*), crossed over to Asia and opened up by their arms an unknown world, and never ceased to conquer until, hemmed in by the Red Sea [that is, the Indian Ocean], there was nothing

⁴³Here again Livy perhaps follows the thoughts of Polybius. WALBANK (1979) 23; OVERTOOM (2011); OVERTOOM (2013).

⁴⁴Polybius (and Livy, who used Polybius extensively as a source) did not here consider the large armies of the Seleucids or Ptolemies since their connections to Macedonia were limited compared to that of the Antigonids. WALBANK (2002a) 127–136.

⁴⁵Arrian records that Alexander crossed into Asia with 30,000 infantry and more than 5,000 cavalry. *Anab.* 1. 11. At Gaugamela he commanded 40,000 infantry and 7,000 cavalry. *Anab.* 3. 12.



more to conquer (*quod vincerent defuerit*). Yet, by Hercules, now it is not for the remotest shores of India but for the possession of Macedonia that Fortune has called us to this contest (42. 52. 13–14).⁴⁶

Here Perseus alludes to Alexander, emphasizing the vastness of his conquests and the glory of Macedonia's past. Livy again connects Perseus and his army to Alexander's legacy and stresses the role of Fortune in war. For Livy, Perseus and his soldiers bear the legacy of Alexander as his direct descendants.⁴⁷

In these three passages in Book XLII, Livy intentionally connects the greatness of Alexander to Perseus on the eve of war with Rome. He portrays Alexander as the architect of Macedonia's rise to world empire and captures in Perseus a desire to reassert the pride and power of the Macedonians. Yet, although Livy's portrayal of Alexander is flattering, he also connects the vast accomplishments of the Macedonians to the utter failure of Alexander's last successor in Macedonia. Thus, Livy can portray Rome's subsequent victory over Perseus at the Battle of Pydna in 168 ultimately as a victory over Alexander's house, reputation, and legend.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT AND THE CONQUEST OF MACEDONIA

Livy once more associates Alexander the Great with Perseus in Book XLV.⁴⁸ With the Romans' decisive victory at Pydna, Macedonia surrendered, and Perseus became a prisoner (44. 45. 5, 14; 45. 6. 10). Livy portrays the fallen king as the greatest prisoner of war ever held by the Romans (45. 7. 2). He states, "Whereas Perseus was the head and supreme director of the war; and not only were all eyes drawn to him through his own reputation and that of his father and grandfather and others to whom he was allied by blood relationship, but he was heir to the glory of Philip and Alexander the Great, who raised the Macedonian Empire to a supreme position in the world" (45. 7. 3). Again, Livy stresses the glory and accomplishments of Alexander, connecting them to Perseus; however, the ultimate glory is that of Rome in overcoming the entirety of the Macedonian legacy.

Livy returns to this motif as he concludes his discussion of the Third Macedonian War, stating, "Such was the end of the war which had for four successive years been waged between the Romans and Perseus, and the end, too, of a kingdom long renowned through the whole of Asia and most of Europe" (45. 9. 2). He again here emphasizes the tradition, reputation, and former greatness of Macedonia, as well as the magnitude and finality of its end. He highlights Alexander's conquests and the forging of his massive empire to champion Rome not only in defeating Perseus, but also in inheriting the legacy of Alexander as world conquerors. Livy concludes,

The nation of the Macedonians was almost unknown to fame down to the time of Philip [II], the son of Amyntas. From that time, it began to extend under his rule, but it still confined itself within the limits of Europe, embracing the whole of Greece and portions of Thrace and Illyria. Then it

⁴⁶If this passage was indeed based on an original Polybian account, then the statement "having subdued all Europe" has interesting implications on Polybius' passage 1.2, where he criticizes the limits of Macedonia's territory in Europe as "no more than a small fraction of the continent." OVERTOOM (2013).

⁴⁷WALBANK (2002a) 130–136.

⁴⁸BRISCOE (2012).



overflowed into Asia, and during the thirteen years of Alexander's reign, he first brought under his power the whole of the Persian dominions, the extent of which was nearly boundless, and then he traversed Arabia and India up to where the Red Sea [that is, the Indian Ocean] washes the remotest frontiers of the world. In those days the Macedonians' empire and name were the greatest in the world (*tum maximum in terris Macedonum regnum nomenque*), but after Alexander's death it was broken up into numerous kingdoms, each man grasping at power for himself until its strength was exhausted by internal conflicts, and it sank from the highest pinnacle of prosperity to its final disappearance. It stood for about 150 years (45. 9. 4–7).

Livy makes several important points in this final passage. He binds the success of Macedonia to the leadership of Philip and Alexander, praising them for raising Macedonia out of obscurity. He also marvels at Alexander's boundless conquests and stresses that Alexander made the Macedonians unrivaled. Yet he couples the meteoric rise of Macedonia with its swift dismemberment after Alexander's death. In this, Livy criticizes the supposed successors of Alexander who fractured his empire and squabbled for generations over power. He blames these petty dynasts for soiling Alexander's legacy and, ultimately, for bringing Macedonia low. For Livy, in conquering Macedonia and ending its monarchy, the Romans finally emerged as Alexander's true successors. Thus, the Romans could share in the greatness of Alexander; however, this summation of Macedonia's rise and fall also speaks directly to Livy's larger thematic emphasis, where Alexander was great, but Rome is greater.

Livy's extensive history emphasizes Rome's steady rise from obscurity to world dominance. For Livy, the Romans accomplished this, despite numerous challenges and, at times, drastic reverses, through the steady, capable, and determined leadership of generations of citizen leaders (arguments he makes specifically in the digression).⁴⁹ Although Livy underscores the colossal exploits of Alexander in forging the unrivaled power and authority of Macedonia above, by noting the speed of his conquests and the equally quick destruction of his empire following his death, Livy also signals the inferiority of Alexander's accomplishments as compared to those of Rome.⁵⁰ Thus, for Livy, this passage illustrates the past grandeur of Macedonia to emphasize the true greatness of Rome's accomplishment.

ALEXANDER MARCHES THROUGH THE STREETS OF ROME AS A CAPTIVE

Livy mentions Alexander the Great a final time later in Book XLV, further attaching his name to Perseus' failure and hence underscoring the unrivaled greatness of Rome. Livy relates that the soldiers of Aemilius Paulus, upon returning home after their decisive victory in the Third Macedonian War, expressed anger over his old-fashioned discipline and his perceived stinginess toward his troops (45. 35. 4–6). In response, they threatened to vote against Paulus' right to hold a triumph for his victory over Macedonia (45. 35. 7 – 45. 36. 10). Livy then records that the statesman Marcus Servilius made a lengthy speech against this notion (45. 37. 1 – 45. 39. 19). Servilius stresses that the Romans held triumphs over Philip V and Antiochus III, arguing that a further triumph over the captured Perseus and his family is necessary to emphasize the utter defeat of the Macedonians (45. 39. 1–6). He then makes another strong argument in favor of

⁴⁹MORELLO (2002) 78.

⁵⁰SPENCER (2003) 49.



parading Perseus, who he calls “most famous and most wealthy”, and his family in the procession as captives to glorify Rome (45. 39. 6). He exclaims, “Shall the captured king, Perseus, with his sons, Philip and Alexander, bearers of such mighty names, be kept out of the sight of the citizens?” (45. 39. 7). Servilius, through Livy, here directly addresses the legacy of Alexander the Great via the boys’ “mighty names”. Thus, Livy yet again reinforces his theme, found throughout his larger work, of representing the Romans as superior even to the greatness of Alexander. Through this association, Perseus’ sons become personified symbols of Roman domination over all of Macedonia, from its rise to greatness under Philip and Alexander to its total defeat under Perseus at the hands of Rome. The young sons of the king carry a profound figurative and psychological message to the people of Rome in the moment of Paulus’ triumph and to Livy’s wider audience in perpetuity. Rome’s triumph over Alexander’s legacy was complete.

CONCLUSION

In examining the depiction of Alexander the Great in Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita* holistically and thematically, one establishes a careful and nuanced consideration of Livy’s attitude toward him. Although Livy could be critical of Alexander, this criticism does not determine his larger opinion of the Macedonian king. In fact, once one considers all the relevant passages, it becomes clear that Livy possessed a generally positive opinion of Alexander. Livy consistently is respectful of Alexander’s military vigor and skill, as well as his vast accomplishments. Ultimately, his comparisons of Rome to Alexander exist because of this respect. Yet Livy also believed that the Romans were the greatest power of all, and he uses Alexander and his legacy to portray this stance thematically.

Livy wrestled with his complex feelings for Alexander, the mighty conqueror, and Alexander, the potential rival of Rome. A primary reason for this is the confines of the subject matter within which Livy was writing, namely Rome’s domination of a large section of the Hellenistic world created in the wake of Alexander’s expansive conquests. Livy thus used Alexander and his legacy as a model, warning, and rival to Rome interchangeably, and Livy altered the image of Alexander to suit whatever context and whatever theme he wished to portray. In the end, Livy’s effort to challenge the greatness of Alexander in favor of Roman superiority reinforces his opinion that Rome, which had come to dominate the world left behind by this mighty warrior, had emerged as Alexander’s true successor, outlasting and overtaking his legacy. Yet it also further represents the great king’s immense and unrivaled impact on a Roman world that ultimately lived in the shadow of Alexander the Great.

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