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## Review of *Alexander the Great & Egypt: History, Art, Tradition*

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## Book Review

***Alexander the Great and Egypt: History, Art, Tradition*** edited by Volker Grieb, Krzysztof Nawotka and Agnieszka Wojciechowska

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### Abstract

[...]there are hazards in compiling a volume with such international character; both the quality of the editing and the argumentation of each chapter are of inconsistent nature, though that is not to diminish the importance of several scholarly contributions throughout the work. [...]multiple authors address the question of chronology, Alexander's legitimation as pharaoh (with heavy focus on the oracle at Siwa), the foundation of Alexandria and other important building projects throughout Egypt, his death and burial, the behavior of the Diadochoi, and Alexander's reception/legacy.

Alexander the Great and Egypt: History, Art, Tradition. Edited by VOLKER GRIEB; KRZYSZTOF Nawotka; and Agnieszka Wojciechowska. *Philippika*, vol. 74. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014. Pp. 458, illus. euro83.

The present volume, product of a conference held in November 2011 at the University of Wrocław, in cooperation with Helmut-Schmidt University (Hamburg), is an interdisciplinary foray into Alexander's short stay in Egypt and his legacy in Egyptian culture. Consisting of twenty-two contributions (excluding the introduction), the aim of the volume, according to the editors, is "to look at the Macedonian king through the Egyptian eye," using Egyptian and other non-classical evidence as a way to "assess the depth (or shallowness) of the Greek veneer in Egypt in the age of the Argead rulers" (p. 8). Though contributions are mainly in English, German and French are also represented. Naturally, there are hazards in compiling a volume with such international character; both the quality of the editing and the argumentation of each chapter are of inconsistent nature, though that is not to diminish the importance of several scholarly contributions throughout the work.

Though the volume is organized in a roughly chronological way (beginning with Argead strategic interest in Egypt and ending with several contributions on the Medieval Alexander Romance), the editors have missed an opportunity for what could have been a more meaningful thematic approach. For instance, multiple authors address the question of chronology, Alexander's legitimation as pharaoh (with heavy focus on the oracle at Siwa), the foundation of Alexandria and other important building projects throughout Egypt, his death and burial, the behavior of the Diadochoi, and Alexander's reception/legacy. One of the most important threads throughout the volume is the almost uniform insistence on the continuity of Egyptian (especially dynastic) custom as a major element in Alexander's campaign. Due to constrictions of space, I will not focus on all of the contributions in the volume, but highlight a few outstanding or controversial pieces.

As previously mentioned, as a fascinating piece of reception literature, The Alexander Romance naturally plays a great role in several studies in this book. Wojciechowska and Nawotka ("Alexander in Egypt: Chronology") take this work (which, they argue, uniquely preserves a local tradition that does not follow the conventional line of Alexander historians) into account, in order to establish a chronology for Alexander's Egyptian campaign. They settle on a coronation date that preceded the foundation of Alexandria in spring of 331 B.C. In another contribution, "Alexander the Great kosmokrator," the same authors argue that the appellation of Alexander as kosmokrator, also evident in The Romance, originates from an Egyptian notion of "ruler of the world." Their argument is buttressed by the fact that this epithet is attested only in Egyptian contexts or sources originating in Egypt (e.g., Manetho). The transmission of the idea, the authors suggest, would have occurred in the milieu of Hellenized Egyptians in the Ptolemaic period. Aleksandra Szalc studies a visit to a Nubian queen's castle in The Romance to develop her argument for a literary conflation of Indian and African elements in its description. This, she argues, is part of a topos meant to underline the totality of Alexander's world domination (much as can also be found in Achaemenid inscriptions, most famously at Bisitun).

One of the most interesting contributions comes from Donata Schäfer ("Pharao Alexander 'der Große' in Ägypten-eine Bewertung"), who studies whether Alexander was considered "great" from an Egyptian perspective (a sort of response to the Hellenocentric arguments of I. Worthington, "How

'Great' was Alexander?" *Ancient Historical Bulletin* 13.2 [1999]: 39-55). She argues that Alexander was in fact not that "great," through an examination of the founding of Alexandria (which "nichts Besonderes dargestellt haben"), the visit to the oracle at Siwa (whose "Orakelfragen . . . waren für Ägypten ohne Bedeutung"), religion (only specific gods were worshipped to suit his needs), and building projects (mirroring those undertaken by other usurpers). Alexander, she argues, was only interesting to Egyptian elites for being the first foreign ruler for a long time to take a special interest in Egyptian matters, but he was otherwise unremarkable.

Another provocative approach is attempted by Micah Ross ("The Role of Alexander in the Transmission of the Zodiac"), who suggests that Alexander brought the zodiac paradigm to Greece from Mesopotamia, suggesting transmission through Alexander's looting of the astronomical records from Babylon (this conclusion is preserved in a spurious late commentary on Aristotle's *de Caelo* from Simplicius, who states that the latter was written before Aristotle had received Babylonian astronomical reports from Callisthenes). This also assumes a relatively contemporaneous introduction of the zodiac in Greece and Egypt (both of which were facilitated by Alexander's conquests).

Cultural transfer is also a concern for Philippe Matthey ("Alexandre et le sarcophage de Nectanebo II: Élément de propagande lagide ou mythe savant?") in his study of Alexander's tomb as remembered in medieval Muslim tradition. He argues that the tomb of Nectanebo at Alexandria (at the Attarine mosque) was attributed by eighteenth-century travelers to Alexander. He seeks to give some credence to this idea by suggesting that Nectanebo's tomb was in fact brought to Alexandria to house Alexander's body, as a sort of dynastic "recyclage" meant to maintain some kind of continuity with previous Egyptian royalty.

Among other notable pieces are that of Gunnar Dumke ("The Dead Alexander and the Egyptians: Archaeology of aVoid"), who displays acute awareness of Egyptian cultural concerns when he asserts that the dead Alexander played no role in Ptolemaic legitimation efforts in an Egyptian context. He posits two reasons for this: Alexander as a foreigner who did not properly receive Egyptian rule from his father (the impetus behind the Nectanebo legend?) and the Persianized nature of the king. The Egyptians took great pains to contrast themselves with their conqueror, and the more Persian Alexander looked, the less advantage he served for the Ptolemies, who sought to promote an "Egypt vs. Asia" antagonism for their own political purposes. The "Persian problem" threads through several other contributions as well, most notably Stefan Pfeiffer's "Alexander der Große in Ägypten," which highlights the interesting ways in which Alexander "inverted" the actions of the Persian Cambyses as a way to obtain acceptance as a good pharaoh. He also studies the oracle of Siwa in great depth, ultimately arguing for its importance in pharaonic legitimation and thereby placing Alexander's coronation after he "alle nötigen Grundanforderungen hierfür erfüllte" (p. 106).

A few articles make spurious connections to other conquerors of Egypt. For instance, Krzysztof Ulanski's "Divine Intervention during Esarhaddon and Alexander's Campaigns in Egypt" seeks to make some connection between the divinatory practices of Alexander and those of Esarhaddon with respect to their Egyptian policies, while Jan Moje ("Die privaten demotischen Quellen zur Zeit Alexanders des Großen") compares the subjugation of Egypt by Alexander and with that later by Augustus, using private Demotic documents from both periods. He finds in the latter a complete disruption of tradition and religious custom, with the former maintaining these realms and enjoying popular reception as a

"native" pharaoh. Both authors end up with unsurprising results: the kings compared had completely different agendas and backgrounds and experienced different receptions.

A final flaw throughout the volume is the rather haphazard citation of previous scholarly material. One wonders, for instance, why P. Briant's *Darius dans l'ombre d'Alexandre* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), chapters 10 and 11, are not cited, since they deal extensively with Arabo-Persian literary reception of Alexander. Several other scholarly works also failed to make the cut (e.g., S. Burstein's "Prelude to Alexander: The Reign of Khababash," *AHB* 14 [2000]: 149-54, which would have provided useful fodder for those contributions dealing with Egypto-Persian relations); most conspicuous, however, is the absence of any reference to P. Vasunia's *The Gift of the Nile* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2001), esp. chapter 7. Such as it is, the present volume presents challenges to serious academic study, but a careful selection of material therein can contribute to the growing interdisciplinary discourse focusing on studies of cultural hegemony in the ancient world.