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Pierre Briant, Alexandre des Lumières. Fragments d'histoire européenne

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Pierre Briant,
ALEXANDRE DES LUMIÈRES.
FRAGMENTS D'HISTOIRE EUROPÉENNE
Paris: Gallimard (NRF Essais), 2012, 739 pages.

A prominent Achaemenid scholar and professor of history and culture of the Achaemenid world and Alexander's empire at the prestigious Collège de France, Pierre Briant has been facing Alexander and his legend for a long time. Since 1979 he has published extensively on the historical perceptions and ideological uses of Alexander's conquests, their implication on ancient historiography and the shaping of modern worldviews.[1] These stimulating studies were followed by a number of authoritative historical treatises on Alexander and the hermeneutic issues that have arisen from his conquests.[2]

Alexandre des Lumières. Fragments d'histoire européenne is the accomplished outcome of the author's long and extensive investigations of Alexander's conquests, their reception and their impact on modern thought. Briant's new book does not aim at yet another fierce broadside against Eurocentric approaches to the "East", nor does it attempt to deconstruct modern Western views on conquest and empire. His methodology evolves closer to the lines set by Momigliano's subtle enquiries into humanism's learned practices as a recurrent interaction amongst ideology, politics and erudition, rather than to the bold deconstructions of modern colonial discourses. A conscientious and scrupulous scholar, he seeks the workings of historical perception and explores the origins and the development of Alexander's images, their successive transformations, diffusion and acclimatization in various environments. His aim is to trace and contextualize Alexander's images, positive or negative, during the "long Enlightenment" (*c.* 1650 – *c.* 1830), to "rediscover Alexander through the Enlightenment and, in this way, to discover the Enlightenment through Alexander" (p. 12).

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This venture had to overcome a primary paradox: the absence of substantial works focusing expressly on Alexander during the time period examined. The slight number of editions and translations of the antique historians of Alexander's

[1] Pierre Briant, "Impérialismes antiques et idéologie coloniale dans la France contemporaine. Alexandre 'modèle colonial'", *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne* 5 (1979), pp. 283-292; *id.*, *Darius dans l'ombre d'Alexandre*, Paris: Fayard, 2003. Mention should also be made of Briant's stimulating and provocative open letter to Alexander (*Lettre ouverte à Alexandre le Grand*, Paris: Actes Sud, 2008), in which he exposes the incongruities of traditional scholarship on the issue.

[2] Among others, Pierre Briant, *Alexander the Great and his Empire*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010; *id.*, *Alexandre le Grand*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, [7]2011.

expeditions (Arian, Plutarch, Quintus Curtius) was followed by an even smaller production of contemporary works of historiography. Indeed, before Johann Gustav Droysen's *Geshichte Alexanders des Grossen* (Hamburg 1833), we encounter just two histories of Alexander's conquests and their aftermath, Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet's *Histoire du siècle d'Alexandre* (Amsterdam 1762) and, to a certain degree, John Gillies' *The History of the World: From the Reign of Alexander to that of Augustus* (London 1807). This meagre output can be enhanced by the critical approaches to the historical lore on Alexander, such as the *Examen critique des anciens historiens d'Alexandre le Grand* by the erudite Baron de Sainte-Croix (Paris, first edition 1775; later editions 1804 and 1810) and, in some measure, the Scottish historian William Robertson's *An Historical Disquisition Concerning the Knowledge which the Ancients had of India* (Edinburgh 1791). In contrast to this rather scanty yield, references to the ancient conqueror are rather thick and hold a key position in histories of Greece or universal histories, as well as in a wide range of theoretic discourses and specialized works on various issues that preoccupied this long time period.

In an effort to assemble a reliable body of the eighteenth-century images of Alexander, Briant marshals a wide range of fragmentary references to the conqueror. He thus gathered a vast mass of some 700 items, covering the quasi-totality of the Enlightenment's written production – articles and book reviews, encyclopaedia entries, academic reports and speeches, letters and memoirs and, of course, books: editions of ancient texts, erudite antiquarian treatises, modern historiography and biographies, essays on ethics, legislation, philosophy, politics and economy, geography treatises and travel accounts, cartography, literature, and even some items of visual art (cf. "Primary sources", pp. 571-613). This vast corpus reveals in addition the cultural areas where Briant sought images of Alexander: mainly in France, England and Scotland, but also the "Germanies". According to the author, the rest of European academia did not seem to take part in the Enlightenment debate on Alexander: although some eminent yet isolated Dutch, Scandinavian and Swiss scholars participated in the discussion, as well as some learned Greek patriots (Philippides, Korais and Rhigas), Italian, Spanish and Portuguese scholars are merely absent, while the promising Russian positions on the issue remain to be explored (cf. pp. 20-26).[3]

Briant's major challenge was to tame this genuine pandemonium of scattered images, and hence one of the major assets of his endeavour lies in the adopted methodology, the means to insert the contradictory and even conflicting fragments into a coherent hermeneutic scheme. The author did not embark on a linear chronological account and opted for a stratigraphic approach, arranging his narrative in four parts, each one serving

[3] This exclusion seems too severe, especially for the Italian stances. Aside from Pope Alexander VII (1655-1667), who identified himself with Alexander the builder in replanning the city of Rome, one should recall Giambattista Vico: in his influential *Scienza nuova* (1725), he made ample references to Alexander and proceeded to insightful thoughts on the effects of his politics of conquest on the Christian universal design.

as the footing of the next. His analysis goes deeper and deeper, revealing the successive and overlapping layers of meaning concealed in all that was written on Alexander the Great during two crucial centuries for Western thought. His first concern is to explore the Enlightenment's fabric of Alexander's history, to elucidate the rise of a critical stance, one that goes beyond the moralized political exemplar imposed by Plutarch. In part one (pp. 33-200) the pieces are set in place and the main actors of the narrative are introduced. By presenting the fundamental texts and exploring their sources, objectives and adopted methodologies, Briant brings to light two parallel lines of attack on Alexander in Enlightenment thought. The first is the one of the erudite scholars, philologists, historians, geographers and antiquarians, partisans and practitioners of a meticulous critical confrontation of all the available sources, what was then called *la saine critique*. In their quest for historical accuracy and precise factual documentation, scholars such as Charles Rollin, Pierre Bayle and the Baron de Sainte-Croix revised the heroic legend of the charismatic prince-conqueror and produced mostly negative images of Alexander. Opposed to these, Briant places the historian-philosophers, such as Linguet, Robertson or Gillies. They were adepts and followers of some central figures of the Enlightenment, such as Voltaire or Montesquieu. The historian-philosophers recalled Alexander's conquests in order to illustrate ideas on historical change, global communication and world history and they adopted a fairly positive stance towards Alexander.

Antiquarian scholars had to strive thus not only against ancient and deep-rooted prejudices but also against modern assumptions. Historical insight is contaminated by the Enlightenment's vision of government, colonialism and conquest, and, as the eighteenth century progressed, the flow of Alexander's images in the public sphere increased. References to the Macedonian conqueror became more and more frequent in a wide range of modern debates: on despotism and tolerance, on the "Great Men" and the "Enlightened Prince", on administration and strategy, international trade and colonial expansion, the devastating or the civilizing effects of conquest. Alexander's images shift between the hero and the adventurer, the destructor and the regenerator, the plague and the blessing and all that lies in between, depending on each authors' broader views and agenda. The contrast between approvals or rejections of the historical model proposed by Alexander's conquests by Enlightenment scholars, theorists and men of action forms one of the axes of Briant's narrative. However, his investigation proceeds much deeper than an account of the positive or negative stances towards Alexander. Although such simplistic readings of the book can be clearly foreseen, the author proceeds to a thorough assessment of the expressed views and explores, almost case by case, the bearings of a central issue: whether Alexander's enterprise and politics can or cannot serve as the historical paradigm of the successful conquest, in other words, the rise of Alexander to a modern imperial model (parts two and three, pp. 203-481).

The idea has old roots. Nourished by the medieval heroic tale, Alexander's legend was destined to a notable career during the era of European expansion.[4] The growth of Western trade, the commercial infiltration of the East, the creation of the Levant and the East India companies and the rapid colonial expansion that ensued aroused new interest in Alexander. According to Briant, the notion that Alexander's expedition was a key stage in the development of Greek commercial and colonization networks was initiated in France in the context of Colbert's mercantilism and his design to support French overseas commercial expansion. The thesis, originally formulated by Pierre-Daniel Huet (*Histoire du commerce et de la navigation des anciens*, written in 1667, first published in 1717), was further elaborated and imposed by Montesquieu. In his influential *De l'esprit des lois* (1748), Alexander's expedition was represented as a genius and radical political project: to supplant the despotic and somnolent Persian Empire and their Phoenician allies by an entrepreneurial Hellenized commonwealth, forged by dense communication networks. By conceiving and performing the deed, Alexander transformed the image of the world and the course of its history.

The statement is central. It reflects the rise of a novel understanding of spatial functions and historical stages: a timid awareness of mobility and connectivity as forms of territorial power and agents of historical change. Rightfully enough, Briant recognizes in this a major conceptual innovation (p. 344) and follows carefully the transfer of Alexander's novel lesson of empire to diverse cultural and national contexts. Partly promoted in France by Voltaire and applied by Linguet, the idea was rejected by moralists and antiquarian scholars as unhistorical and immoral. It was also discarded by Diderot and the radical thinkers, opponents to any form of imperialism. Alexander's imperial lesson met with a rather cool reception on the east bank of the Rhine, where the intelligentsia was absorbed by vital state organization and national unification concerns. The notions of Montesquieu and his followers were rejected by Heyne as undocumented modern constructions and, later on, by the German national historians: they saw in the ancient conqueror an antecedent of Napoleon and considered him responsible for the destruction of Greece, its orientalization and its ensuing decadence (Niebuhr, W. von Humboldt). This ideological rejection did not prevent a range of constructive reflections on the positive bearings of Alexander's conquests on global history (Herder, Fichte) or on the history of commerce and colonization (Ar. Heeren, F. Chr. Schlosser).

It was in England and Scotland where Montesquieu's notions were to gain a more effective and powerful audience. With their important foothold in India and weaving dense communication and trading networks over a scattered maritime empire,

[4] Cf. the recently published titles of the series "Alexander redivivus" (Brepols 2011-), dedicated to the reception of Alexander's legend in late Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the early modern period.

the British were keen to adopt both the idea of a civilizing colonial paradigm and its open trading horizons. Montesquieu's view of Alexander formed the methodological base for many important works with explicit political agenda: the atlas of India by the British geographer and historian James Rennell (1781-1788); the essay on the ancient lore on India, supplemented by a history of trade and information on local manners by Robertson; the edition of the voyage of Nearchus extracted from Arian by the classical scholar and geographer William Vincent, the "first navigation attempted by Europeans in the Indian Ocean" (1797); and, finally, Gillies' world history from Alexander to Augustus. This rich production reverberated everywhere in Europe through subsequent reissues and many translations into German and French, exacerbating the antiquarians' irritation: with his usual conceit, Sainte-Croix condemned all these unhistorical acts "to make an armed merchant out of the vanquisher of Darius and Porus" (p. 426).

Montesquieu and, to a certain degree, Voltaire saw in Alexander's conquests an admirable reconciliation of empire and universalism, one that could heal the wounds of conquest by means of tolerance and peaceful assimilation, exchange networks and shared prosperity; whilst the British historians and geographers of the late Enlightenment promoted Alexander's imperial paradigm in order to direct their nation's colonial and mercantile expansion. Completing his stratigraphic approach, Briant investigates in the last part of the book the bearing of Enlightenment insight of Alexander's conquests on contemporary thought and action (part four, pp. 485-556). The investigation focuses on the grounds of historiography, while the input of geography is here considered under the specific geopolitical viewpoint of the Eastern Question.[5] By assessing Alexander's position in Greek and world histories, Briant sheds light on the gradual shaping of a double historical understanding: an awareness of historicity mainly developed in antiquarian endeavours; and the parallel rise of an evolutionary historical scheme by means of notions of change and historical periods, worked out by historians.[6] The final chapter of the book is dedicated to the implication of Alexander's exemplar on the Eastern Question. In this context, the Macedonian conqueror's quest was considered as the first European attempt to regenerate an immobile, despotic and treasure-hoarding East, Ancient Persia and India being by this time assimilated to the Ottoman Empire. The Modern

[5] It would be tempting to explore the impact of Montesquieu's notions on mobility and connectivity as active spatial agents on Enlightenment geographical thought. The elements collected by Briant allude to an early phase of human geography, probing the possibilities of transformation of natural environments and seeking to define alternative and powerful spatial realities. Mention should be made here of D. Robert de Vaugondy's *Essai sur l'histoire de la geographie* (1755), which opens with a chapter on ancient and modern navigations and explorations.

[6] Being based on traditional political history, the survey overlooks the relevance of art history and archaeology, especially Winckelmann's contribution in defining the successive stages in Greek art and history.

Greek stances on the issue are not ignored: Briant includes texts and images that served the self-defining needs of a less powerful public, at the moment of its national awakening at the margins of Enlightened Europe.

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Although the subject has quite often to do with rigid and ascetic scholars, editors, translators and commentators, Briant succeeds in recovering their world from the dust, introducing the reader to the ambience of fierce academic rivalry and quarrel, the vivid shock of methodologies ("Ancients" and "Moderns") and the arcane lineages of knowledge concealed in practices of referencing and footnoting. A treasure trove of information on hitherto neglected themes, the book offers in addition some fascinating excursuses, all revealing where the author's true allegiance lies: the encomium of erudition (pp. 135-150), thoughts on 18th-century reading practices (pp. 283-288) or on the jurists' imaginative debates over *mare liberum* and *mare clausum* (pp. 332-344); and as the collected testimonies are thoroughly revisited again and again, constantly re-examined against new backgrounds, the narrative emanates a thrill of suspense.

There is no doubt: *Alexandre des Lumières* is an outstanding piece of historiography. It is not only a basic reference tool for the history of perceptions and of classical traditions, but a penetrating insight into some key transformations of modern historical and spatial awareness and the workings of global reflection. In these sad days of scholarship, where eclectic interpretative constructions are coming thick and fast, unconcerned about factual documentation and reduced for the most to today's value judgements, Briant's ingenious and solid hermeneutic achievement is more than eagerly welcomed.

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