CHAPTER 9

Greek History in a Roman Context: Arrian’s
Anabasis of Alexander

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Alexander the Great was one of the most popular historical and iconic figures in the Second Sophistic. Two surviving works, Plutarch’s biography and Arrian’s Anabasis of Alexander in seven books, are among the most important literary sources for the life of the Macedonian king,1 but the subject of this chapter is not the myth or reality of Alexander the Great. The focus of this chapter is a contextual reading of Arrian’s work on Alexander, in order to discuss if or how it reflects a literary response to Roman power and institutions in the first half of second century CE. It explores the position of the Greek historian by looking not only at the four passages where he explicitly mentions Rome and the Romans in the Anabasis of Alexander, but it will also analyze two other episodes in the work that might be interpreted as implicit commentaries on the Roman Empire of Arrian’s own time.

The dating of Arrian’s Anabasis of Alexander is of course an essential issue, when the purpose is an analysis of the text in the light of contemporary history, and the political career of Lucius Flavius Arrianus is, in broad outline, clear from his own literary works and epigraphical evidence.2 He was probably born about 84 CE and originated from Nicomedia. His cultural background and education was entirely Greek. In his youth Arrian attended the lectures of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus at Nicopolis in Epirus before entering Roman public service. It is uncertain when Arrian became a senator, but he presumably held the proconsulship of Baetica before being appointed consul suffectus about 129 CE. He was governor in the important frontier-province Cappadocia for at least six years but retired shortly before the death of Hadrian in 138 CE. Apparently Arrian left the imperial administration after his retirement, but he


did not settle in his hometown or in Rome. Instead he established himself at Athens where he held the eponymous archonship of 145/6 CE, which is the last information we have about his life.³

The reputation of Arrian is not due to this impressive political and administrative career, although he was the first Greek Bithynian who entered the senate. It was his literary production, including the publications of Epictetus’ lectures and a brief handbook on these that made Arrian a famous philosopher already in Antiquity. The younger contemporary Lucian describes Arrian as ‘the pupil of Epictetus, a man among the first of the Romans, who consorted with culture (paideia) all his life’.⁴ Lucian’s remark is from the introduction of his work on Alexander the False Prophet, where he makes a brief comparison of the Alexander of Abonoteichos and the Macedonian king. As a justification of his own work Lucian adds that even Arrian wrote a biography of a brigand, so the context indicates that Lucian is playing with a double vision of Greek and Roman cultures in his characterization of Arrian.⁵

Unfortunately only eight of Arrian’s seventeen known works have survived. The most important of them, the Anabasis of Alexander, is our most completely preserved account of the Macedonian king. The inspiration from Xenophon’s Anabasis is obvious, and in the first paragraph of his later work on hunting, Cynegeticus, Arrian himself stresses the affinity with Xenophon ‘having the same name as he, and being of the same city, and having shared the same interests from youth—hunting, generalship and philosophy.’⁶ The epigraphical evidence does not confirm that Arrian actually possessed the surname Xenophon, but he was celebrated by others as the ‘new Xenophon.’⁷

There is no exact reference in the seven books of the Anabasis of Alexander indicating when or where they were written. What Bosworth wrote more than fifteen years ago remains true: ‘The absolute date of the Alexander history remains a stumbling block. Certainty is hardly attainable.’⁸ Three views dominate the debate. Bosworth himself holds the view that Arrian’s history of Alexander is a relatively early work, written in the period of Hadrian’s

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³ Some of the controversial details of Arrian’s life and work include the time of his promotion to the senate and his early military activities. They are, however, not crucial for the arguments in this chapter that concentrates on his literary career.