Like Gods among Men. The Use of Religion and Mythical Issues during Alexander’s Campaign*

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The religiosity of Alexander the Great has been a question that attracted many scholars and researchers. In fact, we know better Alexander’s daily religious practices that any other person in Antiquity. Likewise, Alexander’s divinization is one of the main research topics in the scholarship about him.

Our purpose in the present study is to focus on the religious aspects of Alexander’s conquest of Persia. First, we must bear in mind that Alexander was, according to the ancient sources, a very pious person, and an expert in the religious practices and various divinities; he was always concerned with religious questions and involved in daily practices of the traditions in relation to the gods. We must be conscious, in this context, that Alexander cannot act

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3 F.J. Gómez Espelosín, La leyenda de Alejandro. Mito, historiografía y propaganda (Madrid: Servicio de publicaciones de la Universidad de Alcalá de Henares, 2007) 183–4 for an optimousa good bibliographical survey of the topic.
as a private, as far as he is a Macedonian king and as such, he had a key role in management of the relationship between the Macedonian community and the gods. In fact, we must consider the Macedonian kings as mediators between the Macedonian kingdom and the divine. Therefore, Alexander, as with his predecessor Philip, was at the head of any kind of religious institutional act or activity involving the realm. We must not forget that the division between religion and state, between civil and religious matters, was much vaguer than in present times and the frontiers between the two were not always easy to trace during the ancient period. These two domains were always very closely linked in Antiquity.

The present paper focuses on the use of religion and mythical issues during Alexander’s campaign. In order to do so, we attend specifically to three main questions: the theme of revenge, the religious memories of the Persian Wars, and the use of mythical characters by Alexander as propaganda.

The Theme of Revenge

First, we must carefully consider the question of the propaganda employed by Alexander in relation to two factors: first, the tradition of the use of religious legitimation for war and the imperialism that started during Philip II’s reign; and second, the context, especially intellectual, of Alexander’s lifetime in the Greek mentality. Both factors are, actually, deeply linked.

To begin with, and starting with the propaganda of Philip, we must remember Squillace’s interesting perspectives, which we follow here, developing a deep analysis of the question. In this sense, Philip had already presented his conquests and military interferences in foreign polis-states as a result of the need to defend the gods. This was the case, for example, in the Third Sacred War, when Philip showed himself to be the protector of Delphi, and so, of Apollo, in the fight against the Phocians and Thebans. The idea of a Sacred War was, actually, very effective and a great success of Macedonian propaganda in Greece, as far as it allowed Phillip to validate his war and sanctify the
