Imitating Alexander

Alexander is a product of later ages. The surviving literary sources—Diodorus Siculus, Quintus Curtius Rufus, Plutarch, Arrian, Justin—all wrote under the Roman Empire, from around the mid-first century BC to the start of the third century AD; almost all contemporary and Hellenistic historiography pertaining to Alexander is lost. Alexander, as we have him, is mostly a construct of the Roman world and is, therefore, open to continuous reinterpretation. By the late first century BC an alternate history had developed hypothesizing what would have happened had Alexander survived to invade Italy. Livy’s unsurprising conclusion was that like Pyrrhus and Hannibal he would have failed to conquer the Romans.¹

Although his relevance in the Roman world has been doubted by some, Alexander exerted a strong influence on his Hellenistic and Roman successors. His afterlife in the Greek and Roman worlds has been much studied, but scholarship has generally focused on the importance of Alexander’s image for individual rulers or during specific historical periods and has invariably focused on imperial image making.² In this chapter I challenge both these

---


² The bibliography is voluminous but see, in addition to the many relevant books and articles cited throughout this chapter, Dorothea Michel, Alexander als Vorbild für Pompeius, Caesar und Marcus Antonius. Archäologische Untersuchungen (Brussels: Latomus, 1967); Otto
trends by examining Alexander’s reception thematically and by exploring the use of his name and image by subjects in their negotiations with ruling powers. By approaching the evidence from a different direction, this paper reveals new connections within the sources and new perspectives on Alexander’s ancient reception. My focus is on the role that receptions of the Great played in the interaction between rulers and subjects, kings and cities. I explore three aspects of Alexander’s reception. The first section, ‘Inventing Alexander’, examines invented or false claims to contact with Alexander. The second, ‘Localizing Alexander’, looks at Alexander’s local reception in three cities: Ephesus, Ilium, and Rome. The third, ‘Worshipping Alexander’, explores the afterlife of Alexander cults from the third century BC to the third century AD. Throughout each of these sections I examine the dynamics of Alexander’s reception in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds, how it was local and adaptive, yet culturally and geographically diverse. My primary focus, however, is on its role in relations between ruler and subject.

There are some methodological principles that need to be followed. In general terms we can distinguish between historic and historiographic imitation of Alexander, that is when an individual imitates or emulates Alexander and when an author makes a comparison between Alexander and an individual. Peter Green has expanded this picture somewhat by dividing engagement with Alexander into three types: *imitatio*, which is an imitation of a specific action, *aemulatio*, which is a general desire to rival or surpass, and *comparatio*, which is comparison between two individuals by an author. The suitability of such Latin terms, each with an English counterpart with its own specific meaning, to