In recent years, there has been a proliferation of popular and scholarly histories exploring the career and contributions of the great conqueror, Alexander the Great of Macedon. In this new book, the prolific Alexandrian scholar, Ian Worthington presents for non-specialists an analysis of the careers of both Philip II and Alexander through a detailed account of the rise and fall of the Macedonian empire in the fourth century BC. He aims to compare and contrast these two rulers in order, ‘to decide if one of them ultimately better served his kingdom’ (p. 5). He also addresses how that empire impacted Macedonia, Greece, and Asia in both cultural and sociological terms. Worthington sees Alexander as ‘the empire’s master builder’ and Philip as ‘its architect’, and uses this as the framework for exploring the development of the Macedonian empire (p. 6). Secondary, Worthington aims to give greater credit than previous scholars have to the strengths and successes of the Persian empire and its ruler, Darius III, and to explore the ways in which the constant fighting taxed the spirits and the manpower of the Macedonian troops.

This book is a thorough introduction to the events and accomplishments of Philip and Alexander, and is unique in its examination of both men in a single volume. It also gives a cursory introduction to some of the inconsistencies and problems in Alexandrian history and scholarship. The author provides a detailed narrative of Philip’s and Alexander’s kingships, which surpasses many other accounts of both kings in focusing not only on the major events of their campaigns, but also on some of the less frequently discussed episodes, such as Alexander’s siege of Miletus and Halicarnassus (pp. 152-6). In addition, the wealth of images and maps bring to life many of the cultural and artistic aspects of this period, which Worthington addresses throughout, though there are a few spots in which the image does not seem to correspond to the text addressing it – most notably the tetradrachm in Figure 6, which does not fit its description as a portrait of ‘a bearded horseman wearing the distinct Macedonian felt cap or kausia’ (pp. 25-6). Of particular note are the beautiful maps of battles (maps 6-10), which make very clear the tactics and movements of the troops in some of the key battle of Philip’s and Alexander’s reigns. At the end of the book, Worthington includes several useful addenda, including an appendix on the ancient sources, a timeline, and a list of principal characters to help guide the reader through this complex time period.
Worthington starts out the first chapter with the difficult task of quickly surveying the history of Greece and Macedonia before the rise of Philip. The author begins this cursory survey with the events of the Greco-Persian wars at the start of the fifth century, but quickly shifts to a discussion of the nature of the polis in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, focusing particularly on the power dynamic between the three most powerful city-states, Athens, Sparta, and Thebes. He also presents what we know of early Macedonian politics and expansion, the presence of Hellenization among their court, and the accession of Philip.

Chapters 2 through 6 explore the rise and career of Philip II, all the way down to his assassination in 336. In Worthington's view, history has largely overlooked the integral role that Philip's reign played in the successes of Alexander the Great, and it is his goal in these chapters to highlight Philip's contributions. Worthington emphasizes Philip's aptitude at diplomacy, and explores the king's success as a general and strategist. These chapters delve deeply into Philip's early life and career, narrating his wars with the Paeonias, Illyrians, Thracians, and Greeks in great detail. Worthington praises the king's ability to prioritize threats and deal with them accordingly. He also presents Philip as a master of 'unashamed deceit' in his wars of expansion (p. 117), which we see in his conflicts with Athens over Amphipolis, his gradual conquest of the Chalcidian cities, and his feigned alliances with Thebes.

The chapters on Philip's career give great attention to the sequence of events, the major achievements of the king, and the efforts of the Greeks to curb his growing influence. Worthington emphasizes the role of Demosthenes in Athenian hostility toward Macedon, and though he does periodically mention the alternative approaches of Athenian politicians such as Aeschines and Isocrates, he offers little direct evidence from the writings of Isocrates as a counterpoint. It is clear that Worthington's priority is the incredible tension between the Macedonian king and the great Athenian orator – understandable since Worthington has already written a major monograph on Demosthenes.

Chapters 7 through 15 detail the career of Alexander, from his accession to his death. As with the earlier chapters of the book, Worthington focuses a large part of his text on giving a detailed narrative of the events, with short sections of analysis interspersed throughout. He presents Alexander as the young and ambitious king that he was, but is not hesitant to point out the many flaws that Alexander exhibited over the course of his campaigns.

Worthington's Alexander learned a variety of key tactics and skills from his father, and the author notes the ways in which the young king was indebted to Philip's securing of the borders and creation of a highly trained military.