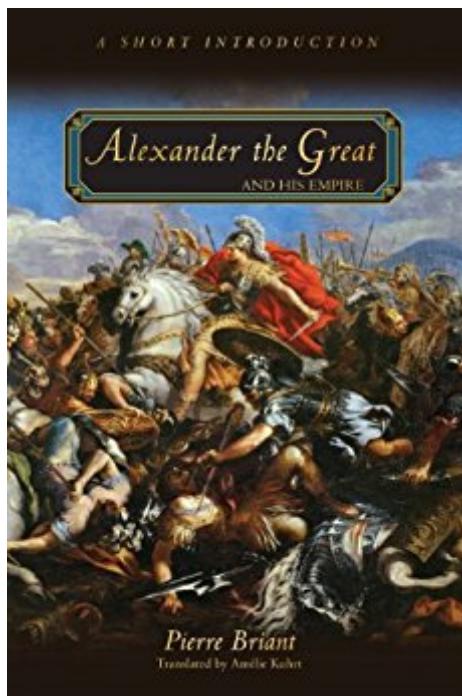


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# Alexander The Great And His Empire: A Short Introduction



## **Synopsis**

This is the first publication in English of Pierre Briant's classic short history of Alexander the Great's conquest of the Persian empire, from the Mediterranean to Central Asia. Eschewing a conventional biographical focus, this is the only book in any language that sets the rise of Alexander's short-lived empire within the broad context of ancient Near Eastern history under Achaemenid Persian rule, as well as against Alexander's Macedonian background. As a renowned historian of both the Macedonians and the Persians, Briant is uniquely able to assess Alexander's significance from the viewpoint of both the conquerors and the conquered, and to trace what changed and what stayed the same as Alexander and the Hellenistic world gained ascendancy over Darius's Persia. After a short account of Alexander's life before his landing in Asia Minor, the book gives a brief overview of the major stages of his conquest. This background sets the stage for a series of concise thematic chapters that explore the origins and objectives of the conquest; the nature and significance of the resistance it met; the administration, defense, and exploitation of the conquered lands; the varying nature of Alexander's relations with the Macedonians, Greeks, and Persians; and the problems of succession following Alexander's death. For this translation, Briant has written a new foreword and conclusion, updated the main text and the thematic annotated bibliography, and added a substantial appendix in which he assesses the current state of scholarship on Alexander and suggests some directions for future research. More than ever, this masterful work provides an original and important perspective on Alexander and his empire. Some images inside the book are unavailable due to digital copyright restrictions.

## **Book Information**

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## Customer Reviews

Delivered as expected

Here's my book review I wrote for my seminar: Given the title, one would expect Briant's work to be a survey of the topics, problems, and historical interpretations of Alexander's empire. This is not the case. At least, not quite. Subjects range from monetary policy to the disciplining of satraps to Alexander's relationship with Iranian nobility. However, this book is more so a platform for Briant to disseminate his positions on these matters than an introduction to them. While the title may be somewhat misleading, perhaps an exposition of his views is not a bad thing. A well-published French Achaemenid scholar, Briant brings an underrepresented and welcome perspective. This is not to say that he adopts a strictly Persian view, but brings knowledge of a more comprehensive corpus of evidence and scholarship and does not limit his view to the side of the conquerors. Generally stated, *Alexander and His Empire* concerns itself with the political and organizational aspects of Alexander's short-lived empire and it does so in a topical manner. Briant's explicit purpose is to introduce these topics to students who might otherwise miss them in reading the ancient texts. The initial two sections of the book regard Alexander himself and his spectacular campaign. While Briant says that it is not his intention to rehearse facts, this is unequivocally what he does throughout these chapters which consist of a minimalistic, 18-page sprint from cradle-to-the-grave (or sarcophagus). Briant hopes that these sections might "familiarize the reader with [the campaign's] chronology" (xi). But, given Briant's expressed goals and the subjects he discusses, it is unclear why familiarity with the chronology of Alexander's campaigns is necessary. Furthermore, a student who is largely unfamiliar with the history of Alexander's campaigns will find these sections a confusing jumble of characters and toponyms, while those acquainted with Alexander's era will find such a scanty summary valueless. The topical focus which pervades the remainder of the book begins in chapter two. Chapter two introduces the topical focus which pervades the remainder of the text. It starts with a dismissal of irrational personality traits (e.g. pothos) as legitimate explanations for military and

policy decisions. Next the age-old questions of the origins, pretexts and ends of the war are considered; Tarn's evaluation that the war was an inheritance of Philip is accepted and the expressed motivations are described as a *faÃfÂşade*. Both Philip's territorial aims and Alexander's 'final plans' are deemed irrecoverable. Surprisingly, he suggests that many Greeks in Asia Minor may have become accustomed to Persian overlords. Furthermore, Briant asserts that Alexander was not simply a 'liberator' of the Greeks in Asia Minor, but their treatment varied based on their degree of cooperation (e.g. Aspendos). In a kind of statement any historian should be wary of, Briant states that the motivation for the Indian campaign must "certainly have been" (37) to conquer Darius I's empire. Briant's work begins in earnest in chapter three. Outlining Alexander's early vulnerabilities, unrest in Greece, Persian counterattacks, the guerrilla war in Bactria and the unrest of his army, Briant soundly establishes that Alexander's campaigns were far from a smooth march through the Orient. Finally Briant's Achaemenid expertise and unique perspective begin to be seen. One of the best discussions of the book concerns Persian resistance in Asia Minor, revealing Memnon as less important than oft considered and convincingly showing a failed resistance not to be a tactical blunder by the satraps, but resulting from following orders. Darius is defended from the biased ancient authors who portray him as a feeble ruler and incapable general; the tradition which holds that Darius made overtures to Alexander, offering to concede evermore territory, is rejected. Resistance in the east is rightly characterized as fundamentally different from in the west, with fierce uprisings continuing long after the capture of the regional capital. Many of Briant's theses are present in his accounting for the 'slaughter' in India - he objects to the moralizing of Bosworth and Badian, and casts Alexander not as irrational or ruthless, but pragmatic. Chapter four focuses on the administration of the empire. Generally Alexander co-opted preexisting Achaemenid political structures, but the manifestation of rule varied widely. Whether concerning Asian Greeks or Indian tribes, Briant argues that a locale's status was determined by their relationship with Alexander. Alexander is seen as adaptable and flexible, being as generous or ruthless as the situation demanded. Briant also highlights the great structural weakness of Alexander's empire: unity and order depended solely on him. When Alexander was gone - whether in India or permanently - the structure began to break down. In the context of this point, Badian's 'reign of terror' is evaluated and dismissed. Again, Alexander is painted as a pragmatist. Execution was the rational response to such unacceptable injustice and disobedience. Rounding out the chapter is an examination of Alexander's commercial aims and monetary policy. Discussion of the *katarrktes* of the Tigris - among the few narrow, extended arguments in the book - demonstrates his occasional use of commonly ignored evidence. The final chapter examines the relationship between ruler and ruled.

Alexander, says Briant, had a consistent policy towards eastern nobles. If they submitted, they were allowed to retain their position, which ensured administrative continuity. Briant argues that the Persepolis affair should be seen as a manifestation of this policy - the message being that if the resistant Persians did not become compliant, they would lose their imperial status. The focus of discussion is on eastern nobles, but Briant notes the balance of interests Alexander had to strike between Hellenic and Oriental peoples, as demonstrated by the proskynesis affair and his adoption of Persian dress. Briant also weighs in on Alexander's divinity, finding it "not at all improbable" (137) that he requested divine honors from Greek cities. Though his empire was no 'brotherhood of man,' Alexander gradually fostered greater assimilation through marriage and military integration. Ultimately, though, Alexander remained first and foremost Macedonian according to Briant, sacrificing to the Olympians until the day he died. The conclusion asks whether Alexander is to blame for the collapse which followed his demise. In responding to the primary criticism that he did not provide an heir, Briant answers no. The bibliography gathers ancient evidence from Arrian commentaries to numismatics to relevant Aramaic and cuneiform documents. A useful reference on atypical sources for academics, non-academics will find little help here, especially considering the variety of languages. In general, Briant's judgment might be questioned, seeing as five of the fifteen "landmark" works on Alexander he cites are his own. In addition to the formal bibliography, in-text footnotes also may serve as a thematic bibliography. Of the eleven figures and three maps in the book, the overview of the campaigns and sketch of Alexander are obligatory inclusions for an introductory text on Alexander. Figures two and five, though, are scarcely related to the material they are presented with, and the maps of Bactria and Sogdiana are sure to perplex. The appendix is more technical than the rest of the work; in it, Briant bemoans a "new orthodoxy" (140) forming behind Badian and Bosworth. Briant concludes his work by suggesting how the field might benefit from adopting a wider perspective - especially in examining overlooked topics, evidence, and the Achaemenid context. At first, Briant seems to hold a healthy skepticism for the sources, declaring that each proposition should be qualified by 'if my source is right'. He takes this further than is warranted, though, claiming that the ancient sources are more so examples of "story-telling" (xvii) than history. Given this assessment, it is curious that he unhesitatingly uses the most dubious sources - Plutarch and Curtius Rufus - multiple times in chapter three. Aside from classical sources, he regularly cites ancient Middle Eastern documents (e.g. p.12) and even past intellectuals such as Droysen and Montesquieu. That they weighed in on the considered affairs reminds the reader that these issues will likely never be conclusively settled, but also functions to exhibit demonstrable progress. A few specific logical or editorial mistakes are worthy of note. Two quotations are provided

without references (80; 136). Likely the fault of Kuhrt, a number of sentences are awkward (e.g. "The European situation continued very worrying" (13)). The text erroneously mentions the destruction of the "city" of Persepolis (14). Furthermore, in asserting that the Indus was, in all likelihood, Alexander's goal all along (38), Briant seems to forget that Alexander crossed the Indus and several other rivers before turning around at the Hyphasis. He even seems to contradict himself when he later suggests that Alexander meant to go farther (129). In addition, Briant suggests the cause for the mutiny at Opis was that Alexander seemingly planned to keep the soldiery fighting indefinitely (66), while the reason expressed in the sources is quite the opposite: they were upset because they were being sent home and replaced. Another issue is that Briant makes countless claims which are either contested, contestable or demand evidence without adequate in-text support. He does, however, usually cite some source, much of the time himself. The result is a drastic abridgment of arguments, constantly referring the reader elsewhere if they wish to evaluate the arguments in their full-force. Indeed, most discussions are overly brief. This condensation may frustrate the critical scholar, but might be welcomed by amateurs given the added accessibility and lack of technical detail. Briant is at his best when he strays from the beaten path and engages less discussed issues. Surprisingly though, he spends at least as much time addressing the hyper-debated topics, yet he provides far too little evidence to make any of these arguments convincing. In addition, Briant seems confused as to who his audience is. At once Briant's book contains sections which could only reasonably be seen as meant for students new to the genre (though largely unhelpful; see introduction and chapter one) and parts which are completely inappropriate for undergraduates new to Alexander or ancient history (see bibliography, appendix). The body of the book lies somewhere in between - one need not be an expert in the field, but a background is necessary to comprehend the points being made and their significance. In the end, though not a bad book, I cannot say that Briant does a satisfactory job of accomplishing his purpose. Even for an introduction, most specific discussions are too abbreviated, lacking sufficient evidence and argument. While some good points are made, the heavy self-citation leaves the reader remembering one recurring message: if you want the arguments, read my other books.

In awarding Briant an honorary doctorate in 1999, the University of Chicago called him "the foremost living historian of the Achaemenid Persian empire," founded by Cyrus "the Great" and conquered by Macedonia's King Alexander III, also called "the Great." The Achaemenid empire was one of the world's most impressive political and cultural entities prior to the Roman Empire, and many scholars now argue it had a major impact on the formation of Greek identity and the Western tradition.

Recent movies about Alexander and other Greeks have portrayed the Achaemenid dynasts as decadent and exotic - alien in the extreme to the more familiar Hellenic world. Hollywood's artistic exaggeration does not help us to understand an Eastern culture that substantially influenced the West. Briant has seriously dedicated his work to promoting such understanding. This particular work on Alexander was published in French in 1974 and is only now available to wider audiences in English. Briant has updated his work in the light of new scholarship and added an appendix showing new developments in the field. He also includes an introductory bibliography, which is very helpful to those who wish to explore an area already flooded with scholarship. In the main text, the author focuses on how Alexander himself endeavored to become an Achaemenid ruler. The Macedonian king maintained the political and economic structures of the Achaemenid Persians, offered favors to local Iranian political figures (much to the dismay of the Macedonians) and encouraged his Eastern subjects to view him as the successor to the fugitive King Darius. When Darius was slain by a local ruler seeking Alexander's approval, Alexander professed that he was shocked and saddened by the death. Alexander's success in building his empire was due largely to the fact that he changed little in the lands he conquered. Local administration, trade networks, economy and even religious systems remained essentially intact. When possible, Alexander preferred having indigenous leaders govern as satraps and implement his policies. "All politics is local" was a useful mantra for the times.(A version of this review appeared in the Sep/Oct 2013 issue of Saudi Aramco World.)

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