

Tomi Vandergriff

The Crucial Role Religion Played in the Conquests of Alexander the Great

Tomi Vandergriff graduated from UWM in May 2013 with a bachelor's degree in Religious Studies with a focus on ancient Paganism and early Christianity. She spent a month in Morocco this summer researching maternal and infant health in Islamic societies and next year she is finishing up her degree in history as well as certificates in Ancient Mediterranean Studies and Global Studies. Tomi hopes to finish a graduate degree in History and Museum Studies and to begin a career at a museum.

Religion in the ancient world was a very important factor in every aspect of people's life. It was even more pronounced in the life and campaigns of Alexander the Great. He ensured that he was not only doing enough to keep the gods appeased, but that he sacrificed above and beyond what was normally done, even by a king. His army and his people likely believed that Alexander was a demi-god, and it seemed that he was constantly in favor with the gods and that he was supported over his enemies by them. Alexander the Great as was eventually able to conquer much of the known world and create a massive empire with incredibly loyal followers, and this would not have been possible without his attitudes and actions towards the gods and religion. Unfortunately, this seems to be very much overlooked in research and readings about Alexander. If it is brought up at all, it is merely glossed over, while most scholars focus on his strategies, tactics and leadership.¹ This paper's objective is to bring to light the obvious impact that religion had on Alexander's campaigns.

A basic understanding of paganism is needed to understand why Alexander the Great could not have conquered as he did without religion. In a pagan's mind everything that happened was due to the gods. The gods controlled everything from who won battles, to who would recover from an illness, to who would suffer and fail. Paganism was all about controlling the gods and keeping them on your side so that they would cause things to work in your favor or grant you what you wanted. There are different ways to gain the god's favor including sacrificing, building monuments and holding games in their honor. It is also important to understand that pagans did not have a problem worshiping gods other than their own. They believed that gods lived in that which they represented, so if someone went somewhere else they

would have to worship the gods of whatever place they went to so that they would continue to have protection.

That being said, it seems that a major force driving Alexander the Great's conquests was that he seemed to be in a constant battle with himself in trying to decide whether or not he was a demi-god attempting to become a god. Not only that, he seemed to be trying to prove this to his followers and the people he conquered as well. In the ancient world it was believed that there were three different types of beings in the world. These were gods, humans and demi-gods. Gods were immortal beings like Zeus or Athena. Humans were mortal and eventually died, with no hope of ever becoming immortal. And finally, there were demi-gods who were half human and half god; and were also mortal. One parent was a human and one parent was a god. These demi-gods had the potential to become gods and be immortal through different difficult tasks, such as the labors of Hercules. The main way people thought they could figure out if they should pursue these tasks in the ancient world were signs from the gods. Most likely the reason behind Alexander wanting to know whether or not he could become immortal was the idea that the Greeks had about their afterlife. It was a very unappealing prospect for them. While for some people like the Egyptians, death was a beginning; for the Greeks it was an ending. They believed that after death souls just wandered aimlessly for eternity in Hades still longing to know what was going on with the people in the world that they cared about. With this in mind it is understandable why Alexander put so much emphasis on religion.

It was long thought that Alexander may not have actually been Phillip's child, as rumors circulated that he was possibly the child of the god Zeus. At his father's marriage to another woman named Cleopatra, "Attalus made the remark, 'Well, now we shall certainly see royalty born who are legitimate and not bastards,'"² indicating that people at the time did not believe he was Phillip's child. It has also been said that, "the blood of both (Perseus and Heracles) flowed in his veins, and just as legend traced their decent from Zeus, so he, too, had a feeling that in some way he was descended from Ammon [Zeus]."³ If Alexander was a demi-god his people would have been even more devoted to him than they already were and he would have been very much aware of this. This idea was clearly in people's minds, as well as the idea that he was possibly descended from other demi-gods and possibly Zeus himself. The other factor supporting the fact that he was possibly a demi-god was all of the feats that he had accomplished that his army was present for. As mentioned before, these accomplishments were the way that people relied on to determine whether or not someone was a demi-god. All these accomplishments would have led them to believe he was a demi-god and therefore caused them to have been even more loyal to him in whatever he set his mind to accomplish. One such instance is described by Arrian, when he untied the Gordian Knot that Heracles could not even untie. An oracle had said that whoever, "undid the knot which fixed its yoke was destined to be the lord of Asia."⁴ His men believed that because Alexander undid the knot that this would now be his destiny. The next day Alexander offered a sacrifice, "to the gods who had sent the sign from heaven and proclaimed the Loosing of the Knot."⁵ When this accomplishment is talked about by a modern scholar the religious aspect is completely ignored and the author just describes it as, "a personal challenge."⁶ Another very important reason that people would have thought that Alexander was a demi-god is the famous incident where he marched his army six weeks out of the way to consult a well-known oracle and received confirmation that Zeus was his father. This would have largely contributed to his men being willing to follow him as far as they did, for as long as they did. However, again, when discussed by a scholar it is clear that they do not understand that he and his followers had been thinking about this possibility before they went to the oracle.⁷

To further the idea he was a demi-god and to motivate his men in many instances he referenced how he had surpassed the accomplishments of Heracles and Dionysus. This would have kept them pushing on with him even they did not want to. When he was trying to rally his men he said, "Even Dionysus, who is a god indeed, in a sense beyond what is applicable to Heracles, faced not a few laborious tasks; yet we have done more."⁸ Alexander is said to have believed that he, "felt it would not be beyond his merits to be regarded by the Arabs as a third god, in view of the fact that his achievements surpassed those of Dionysus."⁹ His reasoning was that the Arab people here only worshiped two gods; Uranus and Dionysus. This would have been a great morale boost for his men, as well as proof to him that he was in fact a demi-god. It was almost as if he was in a personal competition with the gods even though he had a great deal of respect for them, for according to Arrian, "He longed to equal the fame of Heracles and Perseus."¹⁰ This would have been a huge driving force that pushed Alexander to go farther and farther and conquer more and more land.

Another crucial way religion played a part in Alexander's campaigns is that he thought that he was in the god's favor and that they sanctioned his campaigns. Aristotle told Alexander not to worry about the people he conquered and that he should treat them like animals but he disagreed because as Plutarch says he, "believed that he had been sent by the gods to bring the whole world together as its governor and arbiter."¹¹ He treated his conquered people very well so that they would assimilate into his empire more readily. He also treated, "the inhabitants of a conquered country as free men rather than as slaves, to deal with the problems of administration."¹² This included letting them practice their own religion. If Alexander's men were unsure whether or not the gods were on his side, there were signs that they were. One such sign occurred when Alexander was in Sardis and wanted to build a temple to Zeus but was not sure of whether or not he should build it there. While he was wondering a storm came and it was taken as a sign the gods were pleased.¹³ Another instance was when Alexander had a dream about Heracles welcoming him into Tyre, a city he and his men were unsure if the army should attempt to take. This was taken as a sign from the gods they would take Tyre and they did.¹⁴ These signs helped Alexander push his men along to expand his empire further even when they were unsure.

When Alexander was a student of Aristotle he would have studied different stories about the gods and sacrificing. He would have learned how to appease the gods and how important this was. On the other hand he also would have learned about what happens to people who angered the gods. When Xerxes was trying to cross the Hellespont between Asia and Europe, he said, "But Xerxes the King will cross you, with or without your permission. No man sacrifices to you and you deserve the neglect by your acid and muddy waters."¹⁵ And after this, Xerxes ended up retreating. Alexander would likely have known about this account and was taught that Xerxes was punished for disrespecting the gods. He took knowledge like this and made sure to always appease the gods.

It seemed as though Alexander was always on the good side of the gods when it came to his conquests. He was constantly sacrificing in different ways to ensure that he remained in a favorable position with the gods and to prove to his men, his empire and the people he was attempting to conquer that he was in the god's favor. His seers, "instructed Alexander to make sacrifices to the gods"¹⁶ and these seers would advise him when and how to make sacrifices. Alexander always made sure to make sacrifices before any campaign or military action. Arrian wrote about an instance when, "The final preparations were made, the embarkation began at dawn, and Alexander offered his customary sacrifice, not omitting a special offering to the river

Hydaspes according to the soothsayer's instructions."¹⁷ These sacrifices obviously kept him in good favor with the gods in his eyes, his men's eyes, and his enemy's eyes. One such instance of this was when after a victory, "As an offering to the goddess Athena, he sent to Athens three hundred full suits of Persian armor."¹⁸ Another way to honor the gods was to hold games for them as Alexander frequently did. For example, "he did honor to Heracles by religious celebrations and games."¹⁹ These were fun events that not only boosted the soldier's morale but, in their mind and Alexander's, boosted the god's protection of Alexander and his men, causing them to be even more loyal to him. As he went further into Asia he made sure to keep praising the gods every time he reached a new landmark. When he was, "at Elaeus he offered sacrifice upon the tomb of Protesilaus, who was supposed to be the first man of Agamemnon's army to set foot upon the soil of Asia."²⁰ Sometimes to appease cities and cause them to not resist his army he would offer to make sacrifices to certain gods that the cities were particularly fond of. For example, in Tyre, a city which had the oldest temple for Heracles he told the people, "he wished to enter the town and offer sacrifices to Heracles."²¹ Alexander also of course did not forget to honor the demi-gods that he was attempting to emulate. When his army defeated Orontobates he, "proceeded to Mallus, where he performed all proper ceremonies in honor of the demi-god Amphilochus."²²

Sometimes to appease cities and cause them to not resist his army he would offer to make sacrifices to certain gods that the cities were particularly fond of. Possibly learning from Xerxes mistake with the Hellespont, when Alexander crossed the Danube River he, "offered sacrifice on the banks of the river Danube to Zeus the Savior and Heracles, not omitting the River himself, for allowing passage."²³ He again, in honor of Athena after a defeat and massacre of a group of Indians he left an altar in the city.²⁴ Whenever Alexander would recover from an illness he made sure to make sure the gods knew he was grateful. Diodorus said, "After recovering from his wound and sacrificing to thank the gods for his return to health."²⁵ Alexander came through quite a great deal of injuries and sicknesses and most of it, due to the ideas of paganism, his men would have attributed this to his relationship with the gods. Again, to offer thanks he made sure to include games held in honor of gods who may usually have been forgotten; the Muses. "He also celebrated the Olympian game at Aegae, and, according to some accounts, held games in honor of the Muses."²⁶ Again and again Alexander continues to offer sacrifice to Heracles, his role model, after victories. One example of this is, "After the victory Alexander offered sacrifice to Heracles and held a ceremonial parade of his troops in full battle equipment."²⁷ This would have been a perfect way to honor Heracles as he was a warrior. All of these acts as well as others not mentioned helped, Alexander thought, to continue to keep him in the god's good graces and, therefore in his troop's good graces.

In conclusion, even though he was a brilliant general, religion had a very strong influence on the campaigns and conquests of Alexander the Great. His concern with proving he was truly in fact a demi-god helped lead him to his great success. Alexander's need to surpass and appease the gods and consistently prove to his men and himself that he was doing so created an incredibly loyal following which allowed him to conquer so much of the known world. None of these things would have been possible without the influence of religion.

¹ A. R. Burn, "The Generalship of Alexander," *Greece and Rome*, 12, no. 2 (1965): 140, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/642311>.

² Athenaeus, ed. Judith Beall, *Reader* (Milwaukee; 2011), 40.

³ Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, (London: Penguin Classics, 1971), 151.

4 Ibid, 105.

5 Ibid.

6 A. R. Burn, "The Generalship of Alexander," *Greece and Rome*, 12, no. 2 (1965): 140, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/642311>.

7 Ernst A. Fredricksmeier, "Alexander, Zeus Ammon, and the Conquest of Asia," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 121 (1991): 199-200, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/284452>.

8 Arrian, 294.

9 Ibid, 382.

10 Arrian, 151.

11 Plutarch, ed. Judith Beall, *Reader* (Milwaukee; 2011), 59.

12 Henry M. de Mauriac, "Alexander the Great and the Politics of "Homonoia", " *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 10, no. 1 (1949): 106, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2707202>.

13 Arrian, 77.

14 Ibid., 132.

15 Herodotus, ed. Judith Beall, *Reader* (Milwaukee; 2011), 2.

16 Diodorus, ed. Judith Beall, *Reader* (Milwaukee;2011), 153.

17 Arrian, 303.

18 Arrian, 76.

19 Ibid., 155.

20 Ibid, 65-66.

21 Ibid, 129

22 Ibid, 109.

23 Arrian, 48.

24 *In The Footsteps of Alexander the Great*, directed by David Wallace, (PBS,1998)

25 Diodorus, 52.

26 Arrian, 64.

27 Ibid., 143.