

United in Grief: Achilles, Alexander and Hadrian

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“...a Prince should read histories, and in these should note the actions of great men, observe how they conducted themselves in their wars, and examine the causes of their victories and defeats, so as to avoid the latter and imitate them in the former. And above all, he should, as many great men of past ages have done, assume for his models those persons who before his time have been renowned and celebrated, whose deeds and achievements he should constantly keep in mind, as it is related that Alexander the Great sought to resemble Achilles, Caesar Alexander, and Scipio Cyrus.”¹

Since the publication of Andrew Stewart’s 1993 book *Faces of Power*, the existing historical tradition that Alexander the Great intentionally emulated the Homeric hero, Achilles, has become further entrenched. Stewart’s suggestion that Alexander believed that he was a reincarnation of the protagonist of the *Iliad* has similarly gained acceptance (Stewart 1993, p. 80). The literary evidence for a deliberately fostered link between the two figures is tantalising and this theory has gained a lot of traction with the idea that “Alexander is... trying to become one with Achilles” now ingrained among scholars (Carney 2000, pp. 275-277; Scheer 2007, p. 218; Minchin 2012, pp. 83-84; Zeitlin 2012; Gabriel 2015, p. 76). As an alternative to this established perspective, I suggest that Arrian deliberately reinforced the connection between Alexander and Achilles when describing the death of Hephaestion in the *Anabasis* so that a third ruler, the Roman Emperor Hadrian, could benefit from this association.

There is some difficulty with approaching historical sources relating to this topic as there is an absence of coins and other visual evidence that depicts Alexander styled as the

¹ Machiavelli, *The Prince* XIV.

embodiment of Achilles. In contrast to this, there are numerous artefacts that show Alexander appearing with the attributes of Herakles or Ammon (Stewart 1993, p. 79). As well as this problem with visual sources, all the extant literary sources for the life of Alexander the Great are dated hundreds of years after Alexander's death and based on the work of earlier writers. This means that the information we have about Alexander the Great encompasses a broad spectrum from the seemingly reliable and plausible, to the outlandishly ahistorical. Despite much of the vulgate tradition being factually similar to the 'good' tradition, this corpus, which includes Diodorus Siculus, Quintus Curtius Rufus and Justin, also includes tales with no historical basis, such as a sexual liaison between Alexander and the Queen of the Amazons (Stoneman 1997, p.4). It is likely that these sources have been omitted from serious scrutiny because they do not provide significant useful evidence for Alexander imitating Achilles, and not due to perceptions of their accuracy or inaccuracy. In contrast to this, Arrian used the accounts of two of Alexander's generals, Ptolemy and Aristobulus, to form the basis of his history, and is "universally regarded as the most authoritative historian of Alexander" (Arr. *Anab.* 1.1.2; Bosworth 1980, p. v). Despite the esteem granted to the *Anabasis*, Ronald Syme has suggested that studies of Arrian as a historian have suffered during the modern preoccupation with the career of Alexander, with the writer considered the "raw material for the industry or ending as a by-product" (1982, p. 182). The role of Arrian as author, as well as the historical context that he was writing in, are important factors in any evaluation of this work.

The first occasion in the *Anabasis* where Arrian directly compares Alexander to Achilles occurs with Alexander's visit to Troy, and to the tombs of Achilles and Patroclus (1.12). Stewart harnesses the anecdote as evidence that Alexander was emulating Achilles, despite revealing his reservations that the incident is not genuinely historical (1993, p. 83). Arrian's account of this incident has become the accepted version of events, even among other ancient historians. This can be seen by a quote that "Alexander Crowned the Tomb of Achilles, and Hephaestion that of Patroclus; signifying that he was as dear to Alexander as Patroclus to Achilles" appearing in the work of Aelian approximately one hundred years later, and without question or doubt to its veracity (Ael. *VH* 12.7). Similarly, modern books about Alexander recount that "he stripped himself and his dear friend, Hephaestion, naked and, smeared with oil, they raced to the tombs of Achilles and Patroclus, which they crowned with ceremonial wreaths" (Doleac 2014, p. 53). It is unfortunate that there is no detailed record of Hadrian's visit to Ilium in the spring of 124, as it may have revealed whether he performed similar acts of commemoration (Birley 2000, p. 140). The act of visiting the place described in the *Iliad* seems significant, however, so-called pilgrimages to Troy were made by other leaders including Xerxes, Julius Caesar, and Tiberius (Hdt. 7.43; Luc. 9.964-1002; Tac. *Ann.* 2.54.5; Minchin 2012, p. 76). A visit to Troy, commonplace in antiquity, seems to be a fairly trivial factor in determining whether Alexander, or Hadrian, were attempting to associate themselves with Achilles.

There is a clearer association between Hadrian and Alexander in Arrian's *Periplus*, which is dated around 130-131 and takes the form of a literary letter to Hadrian (Bosworth 1980, p. 2-3). This work is written in the same style as the *Anabasis* and explicitly states that Arrian felt obligations of gratitude towards Hadrian, (Bosworth 1993, p. 244; Arr. *Peripl.* 2). More revealing is the section where Arrian details a temple dedicated to Achilles, and how the worshippers also praise Patroclus, "whom those, who are disposed to honour Achilles, treat with equal respect" (Arr. *Peripl.* 21.3). Arrian also praises the great qualities of Achilles, including 'the force of his love, and constancy of his friendship' (Arr. *Peripl.* 23.2). This is an interesting perspective on Achilles as most histories highlight his military prowess rather than his capacity for great love. This passage can therefore be interpreted as a "hint at the recent death of Hadrian's beloved Antinous, gently evoked via Achilles' love for Patroclus" (Rood 2011, p. 150). Bosworth makes a similar connection between the two figures and concludes that "Arrian more than hints that the Emperor deserves the same posthumous honours as his mythical model" (Bosworth 1993, p. 249).

The dating of Arrian's *Anabasis* remains unresolved, with different historians offering convincing arguments for an early or later date. Bosworth suggests that the text was completed before Arrian became a senator, whereas other scholars elect a later date, usually after Arrian's time as consul (Bosworth 1972, pp. 172-178; Carlsen 2014, pp. 211-212). Arrian's history of Alexander may have been completed after his retirement, which followed the death of his friend, Emperor Hadrian (Thomas 2007, p. 11). It is generally accepted that the idealised portrait that Arrian paints of Alexander in the *Anabasis* 'does not come from the past but is a response to Roman *imatio Alexandri*' (Asirvatham 2017, p. 487). Hadrian was a Hellenophile, and his visit to Alexandria allowed him to associate himself with Alexander through the minting of coins that depicted him being greeted by the conqueror (Saunders 2006, p. 84). It is this connection between Hadrian and Alexander that adds another layer of meaning to the *Anabasis* and suggests that the text may have been composed later in Arrian's career.

In common with Alexander, Hadrian had a friend and younger lover, a youth named Antinous from Bithynia, which is the same place of origin as Arrian. In a later Christian text by Athanasius, he is referred to as being the "favourite of Hadrian" and the 'minister of his pleasure' (Athanasius, *Against the Heathens* 9.4). Antinous died in 130 and the cause of his death remains uncertain due to conflicting accounts in the sources. Dio Cassius says that Hadrian's writing states that he fell into the Nile and drowned, but that the real cause of his death occurred "by being offered in sacrifice" (Dio Cass. 69.11.2). This is a different predicament to the deaths of both Patroclus and Hephaestion, who were both soldiers who died young, leaving their counterparts to grieve for them. Subsequently, Alexander sought the deification of Hephaestion, and Hadrian sought, and was granted, the deification of Antinous, and subsequently encouraged his

reverence throughout the empire by setting up sacred monuments (Arr. *Anab.* 7.14.7; Dio Cass. 69.11.3-4).

The earliest surviving source that recounts the mourning of Alexander for his companion, Hephaestion, occurs in Diodorus Siculus' *Library of History*, where "the king was intensely grieved at this and entrusted his body to Perdikkas to conduct to Babylon" (Diod. Sic. XVII.110.8). The funeral is then described in detail with very little commentary about any displays of grief shown by Alexander. Quintus Curtius does not mention the death of Hephaestion at all, although there are large chunks of his text missing that may have contained a reference to it. Plutarch describes the grief of Alexander as uncontrollable and that "to lighten his sorrow he waged war, as if the tracking down and hunting of men might console him" (Plut. *Alex.* 72). These descriptions do not explicitly link the death of Patroclus to the death of Hephaestion, although Plutarch's statement recalls Achilles' *aristeia* in Book 21 of the *Iliad*. Arrian also recounts that Alexander cut his hair in mourning "in light of Alexander's emulation of Achilles, who had been his role model since boyhood" (Arr. *Anab.* 7.14.4). This event is the second link between Alexander and Achilles in the *Anabasis* and highlights the similarity between the two figures. However, Alexander's mourning for Hephaestion also serves a secondary function, that is, to provide a historical precedent for the display of grief shown by Emperor Hadrian after the death of his young lover, Antinous.

The grief of Hadrian is described by Saunders as exceeding Alexander's for the singular reason that he established a city, Antinoopolis, for his dead lover (2006, p. 84). The *Historia Augusta* records the grief of Hadrian thus: 'and for this youth he wept like a woman' (SHA, *Hadr.* 14.5). Achilles is described in similar terms in the *Iliad*: "he lay there with his whole body sprawling in the dust, huge and hugely fallen, tearing at his hair and defiling it with his own hands" (Hom. *Il.* 18.22-4). Mary Beard suggests that Hadrian may have been imitating Alexander at this time (2014, pp. 52-53). Beard does go on to suggest that it is more likely that "Arrian was modelling his own picture of Alexander on the behaviour of the emperor under whom he served" (2014, p. 53). The three rulers are therefore linked by the excessiveness of their grief.

Hadrian's mourning of Antinous was not well regarded within Roman society, with Dio Cassius proclaiming "on this account, then, he became the object of some ridicule" (Dio Cass. 69.11.4). Similarly, the mourning for Hephaestion by Alexander was also considered somewhat unseemly as 'Alexander mourned for him longer than became his dignity as a king' appears in Justin's *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus* (Just. *Epit.* 12.12). Arrian says the following regarding Alexander's display of grief:

"The historians who report his excesses seem to me to fall into two camps: those who think that anything Alexander did or said in the extremity of his grief for the man who was his dearest friend can only

redound to his credit, and those who take the opposite view, that there was something shameful in behaviour below the dignity of Alexander or any other king.”²

It is the ‘any other king’ of this statement that requires attention and consideration. “Any other king’ almost certainly refers to Emperor Hadrian, and offers a redemption of his grief, in that it ‘can only redound to his credit” (Arr. *Anab.* 7.14.2-3). Arrian’s description of the mourning of Hephæstion can be viewed as an attempt to validate and rehabilitate the legacy of Hadrian. The grief exhibited by both Achilles and Alexander, emphasised by Arrian, therefore makes Hadrian their equal. If Arrian is indeed addressing Hadrian’s behaviour following the death of Antinous, then this part of the *Anabasis* offers compelling evidence for a later dating of the work to at least 130, after the death of Antinous.

Elsewhere in the *Anabasis* similarities can be drawn between Alexander and Hadrian. Arrian records the death of Bucephalus and the founding of the city of Bucephala in memory of his horse (Arr. *Anab.* 5.19.4-5). Following this anecdote, Arrian gives his own commentary; “Let this be my own tribute, for Alexander’s sake, to the horse Bucephalus” (Arr. *Anab.* 5.19.6). This interjection is a reminder that Arrian is a writer who occasionally offers and casts his own judgement on events. Others have observed that Arrian is a writer who shares his opinions and judgement, and “does not merely transpose material from his sources” (Bosworth & Baynham 2000, p. 4). Arrian’s tribute to Bucephalus is therefore evidence that he was not just a conduit for Ptolemy and Aristobulus.

Plutarch also records the death of Bucephalus and describes that ‘Alexander was plunged into grief’ (Plut. *Alex.* 61). There is a similar incident in the writing of Dio Cassius, where the grief shown by Hadrian following the death of his horse, Borysthenes, can be viewed as ‘aping’ Alexander’s grief at the death of Bucephalus (Dio Cass. 69.10.2; Morwood 2013, p. 73). While Alexander founded a city for his horse, Hadrian “prepared a tomb for him, set up a slab and placed an inscription upon it” (Dio Cass. 69.10.2). Both are great leaders with an affinity for horses such as that shown by Achilles in the *Iliad* where horses also ‘define the heroic identity of Achilles, even among a class of warriors who are themselves closely associated with horses’ (Hom. *Il.* 19.392ff; Mackie 2008, pp. 64-65). I am providing this example to show that there was a natural opportunity in the *Anabasis* for Arrian to use both Alexander and Achilles as exemplars for another king which was not utilised. The reason may be that many examples of bonds between horses and great

² Arr. *Anab.* 7.14.2-3.

leaders already existed (Fögen 2017, p. 113). Julius Caesar's horse was raised "with great care and [he] was himself the first to ride it – it would tolerate no other rider. Later on, he even dedicated a statue of it before the temple of Venus Genetrix" (Suet. *Iul.* 61). Similarly, Caligula's affection for his horse, Incitatus, exists as a model of excessive behaviour, regardless of whether he intended to appoint him as consul (Suet. *Cal.* 61). There was no need to redeem Hadrian for mourning his horse because it was not problematic in Roman society.

There are multiple levels of reference occurring in Arrian's *Anabasis* that connect the text to other writers, and to mythic, historical, and contemporary figures. There is an implicit linking of Hadrian with Achilles and Alexander, and Antinous with Patroclus and Hephaestion, which only becomes apparent when the document is viewed in light of its context. Bosworth and Baynham, when discussing the influence of literary models upon the writers, make the point that "the literary embellishment is justifiable; it enlarges on traits which were actually present" (2000, p. 21). Minchin concedes that the truth of whether Alexander was deliberately emulating Achilles is based on the Alexander tradition or "in accord with the individual motivation of each writer" (2012, p.84). Arrian's *Anabasis* and Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* are the best sources of evidence but what is there is largely circumstantial and not always confirmed in other sources. The most convincing evidence, the references to Achilles in Arrian's *Anabasis*, appear to be greatly influenced by the writer's relationship with Emperor Hadrian. Through his description of Alexander's mourning for Hephaestion he reveals a desire to reframe an aspect of Hadrian's legacy that was regarded as being shameful in Roman society. The connection between Alexander and Achilles in the *Anabasis* also serves to align Hadrian with Achilles, using Alexander as an intermediary. The impossibility of knowing the real Alexander is stated best by Claude Mossé: "Alexander the man will always remain a stranger to us, since we can see him only through the eyes of others" (2001, p. 211). Alexander is seen through Arrian's eyes as mourning Hephaestion like Hadrian mourned Antinous.

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