Alexander the Great’s and Aristotle’s Views on the Conquered Peoples

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Abstract

The relationship between Alexander the Great and Aristotle, one of the most famous teacher-student relationships of all time, was in fact not a peaceful or cordial one. Behind the Unverifiable story of Aristotle poisoning Alexander, lies some more profound differences between these two in terms of their values, perspectives, and philosophies. By analyzing ancient sources by writers such as Arrian, Plutarch and Diodorus, this essay illustrates Alexander the Great’s and Aristotle’s different opinions on the treatment of conquered peoples in an empire, and seeks to bring about a deeper understanding and appreciation of Alexander’s multiculturalism.

Keywords

Ancient Greek history; Alexander the Great; Aristotelian philosophy; Military campaign; conquest of the Persian Empire; Ancient slavery and multiculturalism.

1. Introduction

What do you think of a teacher who murdered his own student?

If the teacher, Aristotle, was the most well-known philosopher of all time, and the student, Alexander the Great, was the one who conquered the Persian Empire in less than ten years without losing a single battle, what do you think of the teacher poisoning his own student?

Alexander the Great, the King of Macedonia and the best military leader in the Ancient Greek World, died in 323 BCE after he had created a vast empire that stretched from Macedonia to Egypt and from Greece to western India. There were two different versions of what killed the Great King in ancient sources. According to two Roman-era writers, Plutarch and Arrian, Alexander’s death was attributed to a poison that had been administered by none other than Aristotle in one version of the story. The poison was provided by Aristotle, sent to Antipater, and eventually brought to Alexander by Antipater’s son Iollas at a dinner-party [1].

1.1. The Plausibility of This Version of Alexander’s Death

Due to the fact that poison at that time usually caused immediate death and Alexander died nearly a fortnight later, plus this version of story only came out publicly five years after Alexander’s death [2], it may have been fabricated and spread by Alexander’s mother Olympias in order to tarnish the reputation of Alexander’s political rivals, including Aristotle and Antipater. Either way, whether it was a true story or a political propaganda, it reflected the intense relationship between Alexander and Aristotle.

1.2. Brief Summary of Alexander the Great and Aristotle’s Relationship and Differences

Although this was one of the most famous student-teacher relationships in human history, it was certainly not a peaceful and cordial one, both personally and philosophically. They held strongly opposing opinions on ethics and politics, and had entirely different views of the world, most notably their views on the conquered peoples of an empire. While Aristotle advised Alexander to treat the conquered peoples of his empire like plants or animals [2], history has
proven that Alexander did not take his tutor’s advice. Events occurred at Opis in the summer of 324 BCE would be a great place to start if we want to discover what Alexander believed and Aristotle didn’t.

2. Overview and Analysis of the Opis Mutiny, 324BCE

After defeating Porus at the Battle of Hydaspes, the Macedonian soldiers refused to go any further into India with Alexander. A mutiny rose because of this at the Hyphasis River in the summer of 326 BCE. The soldiers had been fighting away from home ever since 334 BCE. They were exhausted, homesick, and the fact that no relief from fighting was in sight made them unwilling to go any further for Alexander. Alexander had to compromise his unsatisfied ambitions and led his army back to Persia and Mesopotamia.

Two years later, by midsummer of 324, Alexander and the army had reached the city of Opis on the Tigris River. At Opis, another mutiny occurred.

2.1. The Cause of the Opis Mutiny

Alexander called an assembly and announced the discharge of soldiers who were unfit for service through age or disablements, namely the veterans. Alexander promised to give them on departure enough to make them the envy of their friends and relatives at home, and also stir up the remaining Macedonian soldiers to a zeal for participating in perilous adventures for Alexander in the future [1]. Alexander thought this would flatter the Macedonians. However, it neither pleased the veterans who were being discharged nor those soldiers who were staying behind. There were several reasons for their discontent.

For the veterans, their interpretation of this decision was different from Alexander’s intentions. They believed Alexander deliberately humiliated them and regarded them as altogether useless for warfare, and were naturally annoyed at his remarks [1]. For the soldiers who were still "fit for service", they vehemently demanded demobilization for themselves too, and argued that it was only fair that those recruited together should be sent home together. In a nutshell, all of them complained about Alexander having no respect for his soldiers [3].

2.2. The Discontent of Macedonian Soldiers and Alexander’s Policies of Orientalization

However, it may seem like a little overreaction if the soldiers were only mad over this one decision of Alexander’s. The truth was, most of their grievances had been accumulating over the years of Alexander’s orientalizing [1]. Ever since Darius’ death and the elimination of those who posed a possible threat to Alexander’s title, The King of Asia, in 330 BCE, Alexander had been adopting Persian customs and clothing. He installed Asiatic usher in his court, added concubines to his retinue in the manner of a Persian King, dressed himself in a white robe and Persian sash, and ordered the most distinguished Persian soldiers to serve as his bodyguard [4]. Moreover, he distributed to his Macedonian Companions Persian cloaks, and to their horses Persian harnesses [5].

No matter how much the Asians feared Alexander on battlefields, he’s still a foreigner to these people by the end of the day. Acting and living in an Asian manner helped him legitimize his rule as the King of Asia. “To be the king, Alexander had to play the king” [6]. This was a wise solution to the cultural and political problems left behind by the late king Darius. However, the Macedonian veterans, who had been influenced by Greek and Macedonian culture for their entire lives, considered these Persian customs to be barbaric and effeminate [7]. After tolerating Alexander’s orientalizing for six years, the Macedonians found the opportunity to release their anger and dissatisfaction towards Alexander at Opis.

After being mocked by his own soldiers, Alexander responded ferociously, which was consistent with his infamous temper. The ringleaders of the mutineers were arrested
immediately and brought to execution without delay [1]. Alexander then made an impassioned speech to the rest of the Macedonians. In the speech, he listed all the favors he had done for the soldiers, all the pains and toils he had suffered, and explained how he had claimed the glory not for himself alone, but for the Macedonians. To conclude his speech, Alexander made a strong emotional appeal, just like what he did at the Hyphasis River, by telling them to go wherever they wanted if they insisted on deserting their king who had done everything for them. Alexander ordered the soldiers out of his sight and left for his quarters [1].

2.3. The end of the Mutiny and Alexander’s Final Stage of Orientalization

For three days, the soldiers did not budge. On the third day, to everyone’s surprise, Alexander picked men among the Persians and divided among them the highest commands in the army. The Oriental force was being drafted into Macedonian units. A Persian Corps of Guards was called by a Macedonian name. The Persian infantry was given the title of Companions. There was even a company of Persian “silver shields” and a Persian Royal Squadron [1]. Alexander brought his so-called “orientalizing” to a whole another level.

When the Macedonian ranks heard about this news, they broke. Running to Alexander, the Macedonians threw down their arms, offered to give up the leader of the mutiny, and pleaded for the king’s pity and his kiss, an honor that had been bestowed upon the Persians, who were called “Alexander’s kinsmen”, but no Macedonian. Alexander restored harmony with his fellow men, and kissed every soldier who wished so. This Persian customary kiss, something that the Macedonians had long resented, now became a prize that the soldiers would only be too happy to receive one from their king [1].

The soldiers returned shouting and singing their victory song to the camp [1], but the victory really belonged to Alexander. The reason why the soldiers made a concession should be looked at from two sides. For Alexander, unlike the situation at Hyphasis two years ago, this time he was not bluffing. The “Successors”, thirty thousand Persian youths who had been trained to fight in the Macedonian style for two years [1], were present and fully trained. Alexander probably could finish his future campaigns without most of the Macedonians. For the Macedonians’ part, they must have been convinced that Alexander was able to replace them all as long as it was necessary. Incorporating Persian units and other distinguished Asian soldiers into his army was never a joke for Alexander.

3. The Overview and Analysis of the Opis Banquet and the Aftermath of the Mutiny, 324BCE

To celebrate this reconciliation, Alexander held a feast. What’s worth noting was the seating at the banquet. Alexander himself sat in the middle, and all the Macedonians sat around him; and then next to them the Persians, and next any of the other tribes who had precedence in reputation [1]. Alexander prayed for other good things at this banquet, and especially for “harmony and fellowship in the empire between Macedonians and Persians.” [1] This was his final stage of orientalizing.

3.1. Refutation of the Argument That Considers the Opis Banquet as A Celebration of the Unity of Mankind

Some modern and ancient scholars have exaggerated this banquet into a kind of celebration of the unity and equality of mankind [8], which was not entirely accurate. Plutarch argued that it was Alexander who gave effect to Zeno’s idea of a well-ordered and philosophic commonwealth, in which all men are considered to be of one community and one polity [9]. However, if we examine the seating arrangements again, we will find no evidence of a mixing together of different ethnic groups at the banquet, thus Alexander’s empire was never designed as “a herd that feeds together and shares the pasturage of a common field”, which was Zeno’s ideal for the
unity of mankind. Furthermore, Alexander only believed that Zeus was the father of mankind, and that Zeus made the best especially his own. Like Zeus, Alexander showed his clear preference for the Persians among the rest of humanity. The kind of unity Alexander had in mind was a joint hegemony between two of the best peoples in the world, Macedonians and Persians.

3.2. Alexander's Conception of Multiculturalism Embodied in the Opis Banquet

Although Alexander was probably not the ancient version of John Locke, he was a multiculturalist. His decision of sharing the reign of his empire was astounding and unprecedented, and it suggests what he believed: the fact that the Persians were the conquered people did not make them inferior to the Macedonians at all. Some of the Persians were just as skilled in fighting and capable of ruling as the Macedonians.

As for the other Non-Greek conquered peoples, although the majority of them were not in the same ruling class with the Macedonians and Persians, they were certainly not considered or treated like plants or animals based on the simple fact that some of them were at the same banquet with Alexander himself. The example of Alexander restoring Porus the Indian King to his sovereignty and even increasing his territory right after he was defeated at the Battle of Hydaspes in 326 BCE [1] once again explains Alexander’s view of the conquered peoples: As soon as the conquering had finished, Alexander cared less about his subjects’ defeat at the battles or their ethnicity. Anyone, even besides the Macedonians and Persians, could become Alexander’s favorite as long as they were capable. The other ordinary sons of Zeus would have to live under the rule of the few, however, in an empire that accepted different peoples and cultures.

Alexander didn’t just refuse Aristotle’s advice. Everything he did, from the initial adoptions of foreign customs to the joint hegemony with Non-Greek people, was a huge challenge against Aristotle’s entire view on nature and slavery.

4. Aristotle’s View on the Conquered Peoples and Slavery

What Aristotle argued was that there were two kinds of slaves: either they had at one point been defeated in war, or else they were the children of slaves, in which case their inferiority was clear from their inferior parentage. For the former situation, Aristotle had his own reasoning and justification of why the defeated ones were slaves.

4.1. Aristotle’s Reasoning and Justification of the Former Type of Slavery

Because at the original coming into existence of the young, animals bring forth with them at birth enough sustenance to suffice until the offspring can provide for itself, such as milk for viviparous species and eggs for oviparous species, we must suppose that nature also provides for animals in a similar way when grown up. If nature makes nothing without purpose or in vain, then plants exist for the sake of animals and the other animals for the good of men when grown up. Thus warfare can be considered as a form of hunting. Just like how hunting is properly employed against wild animals, it can also be employed against such of mankind that was designed by nature for subjection. The fact that a group people has been defeated in war means that they are inferior by nature and meant to serve [10].

According to Aristotle's argument, just like the plants and animals that nature provides humans with when grown up, other humans who have been proven to be inferior are naturally in the same category with plants and animals in nature’s design. They should be hunted, and treated like plants and animals afterwards. This was the advice that Aristotle gave Alexander.
4.2. Aristotelian Empiricism in Contrast with Alexander's Multiculturalism

Despite how strikingly opposing their opinions were, the discussion of Aristotle and Alexander's views on the conquered peoples of an empire cannot be separated from the historical and geographical context in which these philosophies were produced.

In Aristotle's time, most Greeks – at least the ones who were not slaves themselves – would also have believed that this question of slavery had an obvious answer, if they had asked the question at all: of course slavery is just [11]. That's because slavery was an indispensable part of Ancient Greek city-state lives. Aristotle, who had spent his entire life in Greece, was not very interested in Non-Greeks. He was generally thought of as an empiricist, and his philosophies were based upon the data collection of real constitutions in real Greek city states, thus it was never his job to argue against slavery.

Alexander, on the other hand, kept refreshing his “database” throughout his lifetime. He conquered Non-Greeks, fought alongside Non-Greeks, married Non-Greeks, lived among Non-Greeks, and even lived like a Non-Greek. To treat the Non-Greeks he had conquered like plants or animals was among one of the things that the Great King of Macedonia couldn't possibly agree on.

5. The Difference Between Alexander’s Slavery and Aristotle’s

While some people may argue that Alexander was the one who enslaved tens of thousands of people throughout his campaign, this argument does not refute the thesis in this paper. There was no evidence showing that Alexander enslaved conquered peoples because of their ethnic or racial identities, and there were clear economic, political, and personal reasons every time he enslaved somebody.

5.1. Brief Analysis of Some Cases in Which Alexander Enslaved the Conquered Peoples

For instance, in 332 BCE, Alexander sold all the remaining Tyrians into slavery after battle because the Tyrians had cut the throats of some Macedonian soldiers at one point during the siege in full view of the Macedonian army [1]. It was for revenge purposes.

In 330 BCE, for another example, Alexander and the Macedonian army sacked Persepolis, the Persian Capital, and sold the women and children there into slavery [5]. When Alexander entered the city, he referred back to the vengeful ideology of the campaign: To punish the Persians for burning down the temples on the Athenian Acropolis 150 ago. Alexander told his generals that no city was more hateful to the Greeks than Persepolis, and handed over the fate of the city to an army that hadn't received substantial reward yet. The private homes in Persepolis were sacked, the men were slaughtered, and the women enslaved. This was a political move of Alexander’s. To punish the Persians was the ultimate justification of the whole campaign, and to enslave the people of the dynastic capital of Persia fulfills that goal. Though Alexander killed tens of thousands of people for own his name to appear in our history books, he had to make it look like he did it for Greece.

Moreover, Alexander and the Macedonians' recent encounter with hundreds of Greeks who were horribly mutilated by Persians probably inspired them not to be merciful. At least to a certain extent, this act of enslaving was a propaganda made possible by the rage of the Macedonian soldiers.

5.2. Summary of Alexander's and Aristotle's Opinions on the Conquered Peoples

Alexander, a utilitarian, used slavery as one of his necessary means to solve these issues. They had nothing to do with the peoples’ nature or ethnicity. But when no such issues exist anymore,
and the main job had become ruling and administration, Alexander was more than happy to incorporate Non-Greeks into his ruling class. Thus we can infer: Even if Alexander did enslave a lot of people, he never looked at slavery from Aristotle’s perspective. He never believed the conquered peoples were *slavish by nature*. It was precisely the good qualities and merits within these peoples that made Alexander fight with them and rule with them. Aristotle’s philosophy of enslaving conquered people is unfortunately consistent with other known Aristotelian theories, plus, he obviously never dared to imagine that this thirteen-year-old kid he taught would later reach far beyond the boundaries of the Greek World, both physically and culturally.

6. Conclusion

The image of Alexander of the Great in most people’s minds, under the influence of modern pop culture, was a man who was best at killing people. He was one of the best, if not the best, killers the world has ever witnessed. However, that image seems to have diluted people’s attention on Alexander’s other good qualities. He is not labelled as a philosopher, but the multicultural ideas that he experimented with were way ahead of his time. He was a successful innovator from numerous aspects, including the ones that were off the battlefield. This broad and somewhat modern outlook on culture, politics, and the world as whole inspired countless kings, emperors, and politicians who came after him. Alexander’s thoughts were no less penetrating than his Macedonian sword.

References