



2011-021

Richard A. Gabriel, *Philip II of Macedonia: Greater Than Alexander*. Washington: Potomac Books, 2010. Pp. xiv, 303. ISBN 978-1-59797-519-3.

Review by Ian Worthington, University of Missouri (worthingtoni@missouri.edu).

Philip II of Macedonia (r. 359–336 BC), the father of Alexander the Great (r. 336–323), needs to be brought out of the shadow of his more famous son and valued for his own achievements, which allowed Alexander to realize his spectacular military successes in Asia. In little more than a decade after setting foot on Asian soil in 334, Alexander created an empire from Greece in the west to India (present-day Pakistan) in the east. He defeated huge numbers of Persians and Indians in great pitched battles and sieges that showed his tactical genius and canny use of psychological warfare, but, when necessary, he also conducted intense guerrilla-style operations. Then he died young, a few weeks shy of his thirty-third birthday, on the eve of a campaign to Arabia. Who knows what else he might have achieved had he lived?

Philip, however, was no mere opening act to the main event that was Alexander. In particular, we must not overlook Philip's transformation of Macedonia before Alexander ever came to power, or what the son inherited from his father that helped make him "great." When Philip came to the throne in 359, Macedonia was a backwater, divided into two areas, Upper and Lower, which shared no commonality. Illyrian tribes in the upper cantons frequently invaded their neighbors. The king was unable to govern both areas from his capital of Pella in Lower Macedonia; there was no centralized government, no economy to speak of, and no real army. When the king needed troops, he resorted to hastily levied farmer-soldiers, who could never repel the incursions of neighboring tribes. On top of that, powerful cities like Athens and Thebes as well as neighboring Thracian kingdoms and the Chalcidean League interfered in Macedonia's domestic politics and, by supporting pretenders to the throne, contributed to its instability and overall weaknesses.

Then, in 359, Perdiccas III and four thousand soldiers were killed in battle by Illyrians; the legitimate heir to his throne was only a minor. The Illyrians and Paeonians, seizing their opportunity, massed to invade Lower Macedonia, while the Athenians and the king of eastern Thrace were supporting separate pretenders to the throne in a scenario worthy of any apocalyptic disaster story. The Macedonian assembly, however, bypassed the true but underaged heir, and elevated his paternal uncle, Philip—much the best decision that body ever made.

Philip changed Macedonia forever and made it a superpower of the ancient world. Within a year, he neutralized the four threats facing him at the time of his accession. He began a reform of the army and defeated the Illyrians and Paeonians in battle, absorbing their lands into his kingdom and forcing them to recognize his kingship. He united Upper and Lower Macedonia for the first time, with Pella as the single capital. He exploited the country's natural resources, stimulated its economy, and secured its borders against foreign invasions. His military reforms produced the most feared pre-Roman armed force in European history: a professional army with a career ladder, adequate pay, first-class training and equipment, effective new battle tactics, and better weaponry, including the deadly sarissa and the torsion catapult.

By the time Philip died at the hands of an assassin in 336, both the area and the prospering population of Macedonia had doubled and he had established its hegemony over Greece. Plans for his next great venture, an invasion of Asia, were in place. Thus, Alexander, who became king immediately on his father's death, inherited a stable, united, secure, and wealthy kingdom, a first-rate, battle-proved army, and the projected Asian campaign.

I have discussed in my own biography of Philip the importance of his brilliant legacy to Macedonian (and indeed Greek) history.¹ I argue that he deserves center stage in Greek history, that he—not Alexan-

1. *Philip II of Macedonia* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2008).

der—was Macedonia’s greatest king, and that the fourth century ought to be called “the age of Philip and Alexander.” In the present book, the prolific military historian Richard A. Gabriel (Royal Military College of Canada) equally emphasizes Philip’s critical role in his kingdom’s history and in his son’s career. He believes, as his book’s subtitle asserts, that Philip as king should be elevated over Alexander. This is not a novel view, for Alexander’s career had significant downsides. Among other things, his empire fell apart immediately after his death, as power-hungry generals carved it up during three decades of civil war. We have tended to discount this, preferring to see Alexander as “the Great” (surely a questionable title), because what he accomplished, however short-lived, was so remarkable.

Gabriel tells Philip’s story in nine briskly written chapters, stressing military analysis. The first two, largely introductory chapters provide context by sketching Philip’s background, youth, and influences, and Macedonia’s people and their customs. The third chapter is devoted to Philip’s revolutionary military reforms. The next five chapters discuss his relations with his neighbors and the various events of his reign that led to the spectacular expansion of Macedonia and his defeat of the Greeks at the Battle of Chaeronea in 338. That victory allowed him to establish in 337 a Common Peace in Greece, managed by a council that modern scholars call the League of Corinth, by which Philip maintained Macedonian hegemony over the Greeks. The ninth chapter deals with Philip’s assassination and the controversy over who was behind it—not Alexander and Olympias but the Persian King (240–42). That final chapter offers less than ten pages comparing Philip and Alexander (243–51). There are also some very good maps and battle plans showing the various troop deployments and movements, which admirably support the narrative.

The strength of Gabriel’s book is its focus on Philip as general, strategist, and tactician. The section on “Philip’s strategy” (54–59) is especially succinct and judicious. The third chapter, on Philip’s changes to the military is particularly good. The reforms did not happen overnight but continued throughout his reign. For example, he founded an engineering corps around 350, nine years after he came to power, which developed the torsion catapult, first used at the siege of Byzantium in 340. Though he treats Philip’s military reforms thematically rather than strictly chronologically, Gabriel clearly shows how very different and how much better the Macedonian military machine was after Philip’s innovations. A valuable section on the “Macedonian intelligence service” discusses how Philip got information from Greek cities by planting spies in them and paying locals to provide information and to act on his behalf (92–94). Such practices were not peculiar to Philip, however: the Greeks had engaged in them for decades.

Gabriel’s own admirable military experience lends an authenticity to his discussion of Philip that “arm-chair writers” (like myself) cannot match. This is especially evident in his excellent narration and analysis of Philip’s battles. He examines in detail the pivotal Battle of Chaeronea, which forever changed the course of Greek history (214–22). He is not afraid of advancing his own theories on battle tactics and maneuvers even when they fly in the face of received opinion. His account of Chaeronea is a case in point: rather than accepting the traditional view that Philip (on his right flank) feigned a retreat to coax the Athenians on the left flank of the allied line to follow him, thereby opening gaps in their line that he could exploit, Gabriel contends that Philip wanted to disrupt the Athenian phalanx, allowing him to attack it more successfully while the rest of his troops attacked the remaining allied Greek forces at the same time (219–20).

The single best battle discussion in the book is of Philip’s defeat at the hands of the Phocian general Onomarchus in Thessaly in 353 (127–32). In my own book, I virtually dismissed this battle as one of luck: Philomelus happened to lure Philip into a narrow valley, where he had hidden troops and positioned his catapults to wreak havoc on the Macedonians. Philip discovered the trap too late and extricated himself with difficulty, but the defeat was not a major one.² Gabriel masterfully demonstrates that this battle and especially Onomarchus’s use of terrain had nothing to do with luck; he rightly emphasizes the Phocian’s tactical brilliance in completely hoodwinking and outclassing Philip.

Since Philip’s generalship was part of his kingship (as it was of Alexander’s), any evaluation of his reign must assess his diplomatic and political skills, and Gabriel properly describes Philip’s political activities,

2. *Ibid.*, 58–59.

underscoring his successes in the diplomatic sphere. This is in keeping with our ancient sources, who say that Philip attached more importance to diplomacy than military action.

I make no excuse for applauding a book that praises Philip, for I believe he was a better ruler for his kingdom than Alexander. However, Gabriel's book has many weaknesses. These include factual and chronological inaccuracies, the too simplistic presentation of controversial matters, and even its subtitle. In what follows, I will point out only some of the errors I noted as I read the book.

As to mistakes of fact, Gabriel writes that Philip was married eight times (4, 15), but our sources show only seven wives; who was number eight and what is the evidence for this marriage? On page 7, Philip's wives Nicesipolis and Olympias "turned out to be lifelong friends," but Nicesipolis died twenty days after giving birth to a daughter, probably only a year after she married Philip. On page 8, Philip's education "was probably not much different from that of his son, Alexander," but it must have been very different, for Philip was a hostage in Thebes at an age (mid-teens) when Alexander was being tutored by Aristotle! On page 10, Philip appears "[not] to be the alcoholic that Alexander became." But Alexander was not an alcoholic: he drank at parties and the like, but only on specific occasions; Gabriel portrays him as drinking from the moment he woke up. On pages 15–16, the chronology of Philip's marriages is suspect. To say Philip "occasionally had homosexual relationships with boys" (18) is a gross exaggeration: only one writer (Theopompus) hostile to Philip says he had a homosexual liaison (with only one boy), but the reader is made none the wiser about the suspect veracity of the source. Gabriel writes that during his time as a hostage, "the Thebans likely regarded Philip as little more than a country bumpkin" (24). How do we know this? Moreover, the class of men that (as Gabriel goes on to say) Philip lived and associated with strongly suggests a contrary conclusion.

The notes also have their problems. One in particular (156, n. 73) stands out: to call Aeschines and Ctesiphon "pro-Macedonian, oligarchically-minded politicians" betrays an ignorance of their politics and policies toward Macedonia. Though their attitude to Philip and the Peace of Philocrates differed greatly from that of Demosthenes, for example, they were nevertheless trying to act in Athens' best interests and were not "pro-Macedonian." Also anyone who has read Aeschines's speeches *On the False Embassy* and *Against Ctesiphon* knows that oligarchy was the last thing he had on his mind.

To correct some other errors in the book: Phocis was punished at the end of the Third (not Fourth) Sacred War (58). Arrian, though a Roman citizen, was a Greek, not a Roman, historian (69)—an ethnic Greek writing in Greek on Greek subjects. In 355, not everyone in Thessaly "loved Philip," as the Pheraeans' subsequent actions showed. The chronology of Philip in Thrace (145–46) is confused and unclearly presented. Philip did not agree to release Athenian prisoners "immediately" to Athenian ambassadors in 346 (169). To say that, after 346, "no state or combination of states was left that could stop [Philip]" (167) is untrue, for Philip in the later 340s tried to prevent the (for him) worrying union of Athens and Thebes (their alliance in 339 was his greatest diplomatic failure). To speak of an "anti-Macedonian faction led by Demosthenes" (175; cf. 181, 188) misrepresents politics at Athens, where there were no "factions." To claim "Persia had not intervened in Europe since Xerxes' invasion" (193) ignores the King's Peace of 386. To say that Philip was "amazed" when he saw the Sacred Band dead on the battlefield of Chaeronea (221), does not do justice to his reaction, for he burst into tears. The discussion of the settlements Philip made with the states that opposed him at Chaeronea or did not answer his call to arms is confused with the Common Peace binding on all the Greeks that followed the earlier individual settlements (225–31).

Equally problematic is the too simplistic presentation of controversial matters. For example, Gabriel states that Philip was regent to his young nephew Amyntas for two years because of external threats facing Macedonia and that, when Philip dealt with them successfully, the people insisted he become king (5, and timeline on xi). Gabriel here prefers Justin over Diodorus, who says the Assembly elected Philip king in 359 because of the threats. A lot of scholarly ink has been splashed on the matter of Philip's accession; most of it discredits Justin's version, which says that Perdiccas was assassinated and not killed in battle!

On page 112, the alleged "secret pact" between the Athenians and Philip whereby they would give him their ally Pydna in exchange for Amphipolis is presented as fact. But such an agreement could not have ex-

isted. The ancient sources Gabriel cites are suspect and he seems unaware of G.E.M. de Ste. Croix's article³ exploding the myth of this secret pact.

Finally, the book's subtitle leads the reader to expect substantial discussion of Alexander's accomplishments and, especially, his failings as a man and as a king by comparison with Philip. Instead, Gabriel devotes only a few pages to arguing that Philip was a better general than Alexander, who would have got nowhere but for his father's achievements (243–51). We are left to make the relevant connections and draw the right conclusions while reading almost exclusively about Philip. The comparative pages should have appeared at the beginning of the book to keep Gabriel's thesis in readers' minds as they read on. As it is, apart from the discussion of Alexander in the third chapter (on the Macedonian military machine), he appears merely en passant—for example: "Philip's use of specialty military units drawn from the various tribes and peoples of the empire created the multiethnic army that ... Alexander later took with him to Asia" (187). Just where were "Alexander's far flung campaigns" (247) and what they did involve? The paragraph telling us that "Alexander [was] a brilliant tactician in his own right" (247–48) cries out for corroborative detail: exactly what did he do, and just how, why, when, and where did he do it? Should we rate Philip the better general, in light of Alexander's strategic and tactical genius, his use of psychological warfare, and his battlefield victories over numerically superior opponents?⁴

The point that Philip's career was indispensable to Alexander's is obvious, but Gabriel overdoes the military side of the comparison. In deciding whether Philip was "greater than Alexander," we must also evaluate their legacies and how each benefitted his kingdom. In this respect, Philip was greater—as our ancient writers also recognized.

Readers must decide for themselves whether these weaknesses fatally detract from the value of this readable but flawed book about a major figure in Greek history.

3. "The Alleged Secret Pact between Athens and Philip II Concerning Amphipolis and Pydna," *Classical Quarterly* 13 (1963) 110–19.

4. Another irksome aspect of the book is the inconsistency in spelling. Gabriel often mismatches direct transliterations with anglicized forms of Greek names. To cite a few (of many) examples: in the timeline on page xii, we find "Phokians" (not "Phocians") and "Olynthos" (not "Olynthus") but "Nicesipolis" (not "Nikesipolis") and "Halus" (not "Halos"). In one paragraph (124), we have both "Cersobleptes" (not "Kersobleptes") and "Ketriporis" (not "Cetripolis"). While it is nearly impossible to be consistent when transliterating Greek ("Korinth" and "Makedonia," for example, look odd), and anglicizing is much safer, there is no excuse for the myriad spelling inconsistencies in this book.