

***Imitation of Greatness:  
Alexander of Macedon and His Influence on Leading Romans***

**Thomas W Foster II, McNair Scholar  
The Pennsylvania State University**

**Mark Munn, Ph.D  
Head, Department of Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies  
College of Liberal Arts  
The Pennsylvania State University**

**Abstract**

This paper seeks to examine the relationship between greatness and imitation in antiquity. To do so, Alexander the Great will be compared with Romans Julius Caesar and Marcus Aurelius. The question this paper tries to answer concerns leading Romans and the idea of imitating Alexander the Great and how this affected their actions. It draws upon both ancient sources and modern scholarship. It differs from both ancient and modern attempts at comparison in distinct ways, however. This paper contains elements of the following: historiography, biography, military history, political science, character study, religion and socio-cultural traditions. Special attention has been given to the socio-cultural differences of the Greco-Roman world. Comparing multiple eras allows for the establishment of credible commonalities. These commonalities can then be applied to different eras up to and including the modern. Practically, these traits allow us to link these men of antiquity, both explicitly and implicitly.

Beginning with Plutarch in the 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> century CE<sup>1</sup>, a long historical tradition of comparing great men was established. Plutarch chose to compare Alexander the Great to Julius Caesar. The reasons for such a comparison are quite obvious. Both men conquered swaths of land, changed the balance of power in the Mediterranean and caused many to either love them or plot to kill them. Scholars have assessed this comparison continuously. This paper contributes to a specific niche within that vein of scholarship by reexamining leadership styles to reveal traits, which both made Alexander great and a subject of Roman imitation.

Ancient sources and modern scholarship have discussed this comparison at length. The framework of this paper differs from previous scholarship in notable ways. The content will be framed based on the military political and personal exploits of each man. Leadership traits such as self-belief, ambition and ability to inspire subordinates will frame the discussion. For the purpose of this paper, Alexander will be compared with Julius Caesar and Marcus Aurelius. In addition, it provides new considerations about greatness. Foremost among these considerations is the idea that there is more than a single way to be a great leader in antiquity. Marcus serves as an example of a leader whose greatness did not come because of military conquest. In actuality, Marcus' avoidance of Alexander's character flaws proved crucial to his own greatness.

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<sup>1</sup> Plutarch lived from 46 CE – 120 CE.

### **Alexander the Great: Self-belief and Ambition**

Alexander the Great, or Alexander of Macedon, lived from 356-323 BCE. He was born the son of Philip II, King of Macedon, and Olympias. He enjoyed all the luxuries of the Macedonian imperial court. Aristotle personally tutored him and Alexander had a good relationship with his tutor.<sup>2</sup> Alexander later praised Aristotle for allowing him to live a “noble life”. During Alexander’s adolescent years, a number of anecdotes are handed down regarding Alexander’s sense of destiny to be greater than those before him. The most noteworthy is Alexander’s taming of the horse Bucephalus. Philoneicus the Thessalian brought the horse to the court of Philip offering to sell him. Philip and many of his subordinates tried to ride the horse but the horse refused to be ridden. Alexander declared boldly that he could do that which the others failed to do. Supremely confident that he understood the problem, Alexander offered to pay the sum for the horse if he was unsuccessful. Alexander successfully rode the horse after he turned the animal away from his shadow. Alexander’s father wept for joy and told Alexander that Macedonia was far too small for him.<sup>3</sup> This circumstance relates to Alexander’s self-belief in two ways. First, Alexander showed a great amount of confidence when he approached the situation. He was certain that he could succeed where others had previously failed. In this situation, Alexander’s audacious decisions are marked by either foolishness or hubris. Alexander risked embarrassing both his father and himself in the eyes of respected men. This provides a sense of Alexander’s level of self-confidence. Second, an overjoyed Philip stokes Alexander’s already burning ego. With his reaction and words, Philip not only approved of Alexander’s ego but also fostered it. While this anecdote likely was fabricated, it still demonstrates that in the eyes of that society Alexander was set apart to be great.

Another instance of Alexander’s self-belief concerns the story of the Gordian knot. While on campaign in Asia Minor, Alexander came to the site of the knot. According to legend, whoever loosened the knot was destined to rule the world. Alexander bent on conquest of Asia takes it upon himself to loosen the knot. After surveying the situation, Alexander determined that he could not simply untie the knot. Being Alexander and possessing a high degree of confidence, he unsheathed his sword and cut the knot. This proved that Alexander was destined for greatness in the eyes of the gods.<sup>4</sup> Alexander made a clear statement about his intentions to rule all of Asia. Spiting all of those before him, he declared himself the rightful fulfiller of the prophecy.

The siege of Tyre exemplifies the negative consequences of Alexander’s ambition. Alexander undertook a siege of a fortified island without a fleet. Persian dominance of the Mediterranean made taking the island fortress more difficult. The prolonged siege speaks to his ambition, which resulted from Alexander’s self-confidence. Alexander’s ambition got the better of him at Tyre. He spent seven months besieging the coastal city, needing ships from Phoenicians to properly attack. The Macedonians attempted to build a causeway to the island from the land. Considering all that Alexander

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<sup>2</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, VII.2-5. Plutarch contrasts the positive relationship between Aristotle and Alexander with uneven relationship he had with his father Philip.

<sup>3</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, I.6.1-8.

<sup>4</sup> Quintus Curtius, *Life of Alexander*, III.11-18.

conquered in ten years, the time spent at Tyre seems disproportionate. Multiple times Alexander took actions simply to gain the reputation for doing things, which others could not.<sup>5</sup>

Possessing all of Asia may not have even satiated the ego of Alexander. His self-belief reached divine heights. While in Egypt during February 332, Alexander sought out an oracle to Jupiter Ammon to find out if he was truly the son of a god—not Philip but Ammon (Or Zeus to the Greek or Macedonian mind). Alexander believing himself divine searched out proof. Some sources tell us that Alexander’s own men were convinced of his divinity. The priests serving at the oracle decreed that Alexander was the son of a god. Regardless of Alexander’s mental state previously, Arrian tells us that he left with the mindset that he was linked to Ammon.<sup>6</sup> Alexander’s self-belief, whether considered appropriate or megalomaniacal, set the foundation for the actions that Alexander undertook.

One of the reasons for Alexander’s military greatness was the technological advantage that he brought into battle. The Persians relied on the dated technology of Greek mercenaries<sup>7</sup> to make up their infantry. The Greek phalanx was developed centuries before Alexander. The phalanx consisted of heavily armored hoplites fighting in close quarters, hand-to-hand combat. Philip II, father of Alexander, developed the Macedonian phalanx in response. These soldiers were equipped with a spear called a sarisa, which was 13-20 feet in length. This gave the Macedonians a distinct reach advantage, if well trained. These developments mitigated the two great strengths: the armor worn by hoplites and their hand-to-hand prowess. The length of the sarisa gave great force and leverage to counteract the armor and negated the reach of the Greek phalanx. The Persians also relied on a haphazard conglomeration of multi-ethnic peoples to fill out their ranks. Alexander further expanded upon his advantage with the companion cavalry, so named for their close relations with the king. These elite units trained together for years, developed a sense of cohesiveness, and were occasionally equipped with sarisas. Their training and ability played crucial roles in the battles at Issus and Gaugamela.

### **Alexander in Battle: Granicus and Gaugamela**

Alexander the Great is most famous for being a conqueror who never lost a battle. One of the most important traits that drove Alexander’s greatness was boundless ambition. Believing he was meant for greatness, Alexander became ambitious where others were restrained. A proper example of his ambition can be seen in his insistence to fight at the Granicus River. Alexander had just crossed the Hellespont and this battle proved to be his first major conflict in the conquest of Asia.<sup>8</sup> Alexander’s army spread

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<sup>5</sup> Curtius mentions Alexander’s siege of the rock fortress at Aornos. Taking place later in Alexander’s campaign, the fortress was located in a far off reaches of Asia. Alexander showed that he believed that he could go to the ends of the earth, conquering any task set before him.

<sup>6</sup> Arrian, *The Landmark Arrian: The Campaigns of Alexander (Anabasis Alexandrou)*, III. 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> These Greek mercenaries hired themselves out on both sides of the conflict.

<sup>8</sup> Spring 334 BCE.

out on the western bank of the river, while western Persian satraps aligned their troops on the other bank. Alexander's troops were laid out with cavalry on the wings and the phalanx in the middle. Alexander commanded those on the right while his trusted general Parmenio<sup>9</sup> commanded those on the left. The Persians aligned their cavalry in front of the hired mercenaries from Greece. Alexander started the conflict by sending his cavalry from the right flank across the Granicus, forcing the Persians to engage with the Macedonians on that wing. There was a struggle to find footing and then infantry followed. Intense fighting followed in close quarters.<sup>10</sup>

Alexander's initial sortie made a wedge in the Persian cavalry lines. Alexander chose to personally exploit this hole, leading two detachments of cavalry into the fray. Alexander showed himself to be brave, as he got cut off from his troops and nearly was cut down. However, the ruse worked and the Persian cavalry fled. At the same time, Parmenio put the other wing to flight. The Macedonians were able to surround and decimate the Persian infantry.<sup>11</sup> Alexander's blend of tactics, ambition and bravery helped the Macedonians to win the day. Typical battlefield strategy would dictate that Alexander not be the one cross the river and that he fight the Persians in a more confined area where their numbers would be less advantageous. Ignoring these conventions, Alexander demonstrated his ability to achieve a victory despite the circumstances. A confluence of Alexander's leadership traits made the Macedonians successful at the Granicus.

The Battle of Gaugamela further demonstrates Alexander's ambition and its role in his greatness. Alexander had successfully defeated Darius at Issus two years previously and then subdued the rest of Phoenicia and Egypt. After that time, Alexander finally was able to get close enough to Darius to fight a decisive conflict. The site of Gaugamela is an open plain in modern day Iraq. Alexander has 47,000 troops and Arrian states that Darius had as many as 1,000,000 men.<sup>12</sup> Curtius gives us a speech that was supposed to be given by Alexander before the battle. In his speaking, he displays another important leadership trait: the ability to inspire men. He makes two very powerful appeals. Alexander claims that the battle will determine who is sovereign in Asia. Clearly, this situation carries quite a lot of gravitas. In addition, Alexander states that his men were born to fight nobly so they need not be heroes; instead, they simply need to perform their duty.<sup>13</sup> Alexander inspires his men both by stating his belief in their natural ability and by clarifying their responsibility. It remains incredible that Alexander inspired his men to victory given the numbers. Despite ancient sources often inflating numbers, Alexander was still most likely outmanned at least two-to-one. It is important to remember the psychological effect in warfare. Alexander stands before the men he addresses undefeated, having loosened the knot at Gordion, claiming divinity. Truly, Alexander's self-belief laid the foundation for him to be ambitious and inspire his men. The speeches delivered by Alexander were not remarkably different from other

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<sup>9</sup> Parmenio commanded troops under Alexander's father Philip also. He was one of Alexander's most trusted advisors.

<sup>10</sup> Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandrou*, I.12.6-17.2.

<sup>11</sup> see 11.

<sup>12</sup> Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandrou*, III.11.4-6.

<sup>13</sup> Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandrou*, III.11-12

The Persians were arrayed in the following way facing Alexander: Mazaios commanded the cavalry on the right, Darius the center including the scythe chariots meant to cut down the Macedonians. Bessos lead the cavalry opposite Alexander's right. Alexander controlled the right flank and Parmenio the left. Philotas, the son of Parmenio, commanded the companion cavalry. Alexander first moved the right wing to rougher ground, which made it more difficult for Bessos' men. Bessos attempted to take the wing from Alexander, but the Macedonians prevailed. Darius then released the scythe chariots. The effect of these chariots on Alexander's line was negligible. Mazaios launched his cavalry against Parmenio trying to outflank him. As the battle raged on the left flank, Philotas and Alexander broke through the Persian center, causing Darius to flee. Once their commander fled the center and left folded for the Persians. The Persian success against Parmenio opened a gap that the remaining Persians exploited, making for the Macedonian baggage train. They looted until the rear phalanx maneuvered to stop them. However, Parmenio was surrounded and appealed for Alexander's help. Alexander called off his pursuit of Darius and peeled back to defeat Mazaios.<sup>14</sup> The Macedonians defeated the Persians and Alexander proved his military greatness once again. He fought on a battlefield better suited to his opponent, commanded less men and dealt with the Persian push to his wagons. Gaugamela was a coming together of all the traits that made Alexander great – tactical prowess, ambition, inspiration and self-belief.

### **Alexander and Politics**

Alexander is best known as a military conqueror, but to determine what truly made him great it is important to examine his political actions as well. Alexander was born as a prince so the resulting political environment is quite different from that of either Julius Caesar or Marcus Aurelius. Macedon was ruled by hereditary monarchy, meaning that Alexander was next in line to rule after his father's death. Caesar rose to power during the late Roman Republic and M. Aurelius was adopted into the imperial family<sup>15</sup> before becoming emperor. The major difference between these systems is clear. In a monarchy, the ruler justifies rule through bloodline. For both Caesar and especially Marcus Aurelius, power came from merit.<sup>16</sup> The central problem politically for Alexander concerned leadership problems that arose during his conquest of the Persian Empire. Alexander was not only ruling over the Macedonian political situation but also dealt with presenting a positive message to the peoples he conquered. At the heart of the issue, is this one central question: to the conquered was Alexander a rightful ruler or foreign conqueror? Alexander gave himself over to Persian customs. Curtius states that Persian dress and customs were of greater grandeur. Alexander tried to compete with the opulence of Darius' court in terms of dress, luxury and obeisance. Curtius states that the man who conquered Persian now conducted himself as a satrap of Darius.<sup>17</sup> Alexander's wearing of Persian dress contains strong symbolism about the nature of his rule. Alexander presented his wearing Persian dress as a display of unity but Alexander

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<sup>14</sup> Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandrou*, III, 13-17.

Curtius, *Life of Alexander*, IV. 14.1-7.

<sup>15</sup> None of the so-called Five Good Emperors was the son of the previous emperor.

<sup>16</sup> Caesar rose to power on merit but usurped power of his own accord.

<sup>17</sup> Curtius, *Life of Alexander*, VI.1-9.

preferred the grandeur of that garb. In view of all the things that Alexander did, the forced obeisance made subordinates, both Macedonians and Persians,<sup>18</sup> the most furious. Alexander made all people in his presence submit in this manner. Persians who declared their loyalty to Alexander had functioned under this type of court but those native to Macedonia and Greece had not experienced this type of adoration for a ruler. Even worse, they viewed this act as an affront to Greek and Macedonian customs. The Persians laid prostrate before their native kings and Alexander commanded that this honor be given to him because he believed in his own divinity.

### **Alexander's Flaws: Loyalty and Drunkenness**

As tensions continued to increase so did the attempts to assassinate Alexander. The crescendo of these attempts involved Parmenio and Philotas. Philotas commanded the companion cavalry and was well respected by Alexander. Philotas was given a proper trial before his countrymen and evidence was brought forth showing his involvement or at least his knowledge of a plot against Alexander. Philotas was executed and another respected general Amyntas was implicated and executed at the same time. Lastly, Parmenio, the most trusted among Alexander's advisors and most capable subordinate, was killed.<sup>19</sup> Alexander believed that he had to be killed. Not only was his son Philotas executed, but also he was respected among all the troops and would be capable of causing division and rebellion among the ranks. Alexander's greatness militaristically was due in large part to these men, all of whom commanded troops at the Granicus and had been with him since. Alexander's great conquest made his political situation increasingly difficult. Alexander dealt with revolts from Greece under Lacedaemonian King Agis and frequent revolts from Persian satraps.<sup>20</sup> Because of the stresses of placating both Macedonians and conquered foes, Alexander's camp became rife with factions and made his campaigns more difficult.

These divisions spilled over into Alexander's personal life when he made decisions about who commanded troops and advised him. Consider Hephaestion. A friend of Alexander's from youth, he gained more responsibilities because Alexander knew that he could trust him. Alexander could be confident of this because Hephaestion owed his status entirely to Alexander. Hephaestion led troops in India because of Alexander's trust in him. This speaks to the importance of loyalty for Alexander during a time of greater personal peril. Hephaestion certainly was not as capable a commander as Philotas but he provided trustworthiness, which Alexander desperately needed. Alexander was willing to allow Persians the same roles that they enjoyed under Darius, if they had proved loyal.<sup>21</sup> Great men understand the importance of surrounding themselves with those who are loyal over those who show more ability.

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<sup>18</sup> Persians did not detest this practice since Persian imperial court customs called for this type of sacrosanct treatment.

<sup>19</sup> Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandrou*, III.1-4

Curtius, *Life of Alexander*, VI.9.7; VI.11.10-23.

<sup>20</sup> Agis and the Spartans rebelled in 330 BCE. The satrap Satibarzanes rebelled against Alexander twice.

<sup>21</sup> Nabarzanes is a notable example.

Alexander's largest character flaw was his love of drink. This led Alexander to often act foolishly. He once was nearly killed because of comments made to his father at dinner. Two examples from his campaigns stand out. At Persepolis, he commanded the Persian palace complex be burned. Primary sources confirm this act was one of the most regrettable for Alexander. In addition, he killed Kleitos with a spear while drunk. Alexander and Kleitos had been arguing over whether Alexander or Philip's leadership was greater.<sup>22</sup> Alexander later regretted burning the palace. Kleitos was a man who had become annoyed by Alexander but did not deserve to die. Alexander's excessive of drinking left destruction in his wake.

In Alexander, one sees many of the traits needed for greatness – self-belief, ambition, and inspiration of men. How did Romans try to imitate greatness and avoid the flaws of Alexander?

### **Julius Caesar: Influenced by Alexander from Adolescence**

The name Julius Caesar conjures up many images. Caesar<sup>23</sup> can be seen as the conquering general, dictator given to debauchery, or as an arbiter of political power. Regardless of how he is viewed, Caesar is respected for his greatness. Similar to Alexander, Caesar exuded self-belief from a young age. As a young man, pirates kidnapped him. Caesar spent forty days with the pirates. When they told him of their intentions to sell him, Caesar told them that they should ask for more. Caesar then also told his captors that he would capture and crucify each one of them, which he did.<sup>24</sup> It takes a large amount of confidence to threaten the men who are in charge of your life – especially when your captors are pirates whose only interest is making money. Self-belief was required for Caesar to have the military and political career for which he became famous.

### **Caesar's Campaigns – Alesia & Pharsalus Examined**

Caesar's first major successes on the battlefield took place in the Gallic frontier. Caesar reached the height of Roman political office in 59 BC when he was elected consul. After his term ended, he received the provinces of Cisalpine Gaul, Transalpine Gaul and Illyricum. These provinces supplied Caesar with the two things that he needed the most: the ability to prove himself militarily and gain a sufficient amount of wealth to pay off his creditors.<sup>25</sup> During his time in Gaul<sup>26</sup>, Caesar showed that he was adept at leading an army and incorporated the rest of Gaul into the Roman state.

No conflict demonstrates Caesar's veritable military skill better than the Battle of Alesia, which proved to be decisive in Caesar's conquest of Gaul. Fought in September of 52 BC, the engagement effectively brought Gaul under Roman control. After a bloody battle fought days before, Caesar followed the Gallic army to the stronghold at Alesia. While in pursuit, the Romans cut down many of the enemies' rear guard. The Romans set up for a siege of the city, realizing that the people of the city as well as the army had

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<sup>22</sup> Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandrou*, III.18.11-12; IV.8-9.

<sup>23</sup> 100 -44 BCE.

<sup>24</sup> Suetonius, *divus Julius*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Gaius Suetonius Tranquillius. *The Twelve Caesars*, *divus Julius*, 23.

<sup>26</sup> 58-51 BC.

enough provisions for only one month. With his opponent Vercingetorix inside the city, Caesar ordered the Romans to build a wall around the city. This entrenchment effectively would blockade the city. The German and Gallic combined forces held a distinct advantage in the number of cavalry among their ranks. As the Romans built the wall, the barbarians decided to send out horsemen under the cover of night to muster more troops. They asked for a certain quota from each of the peoples opposing Rome. Caesar ordered a second wall built to protect the Romans from the forces that would place Caesar between the city and the newly mustered troops. The number of mustered troops came to 250,000 infantry and 80,000 horsemen. In addition, the Romans built several obstacles besides the wall. The Romans constructed palisades five rows deep out of trees nearby, diverted one of the two rivers to fill a trench and placed spurred logs. These logs were placed at an angle, meant to tear up flesh and mangle armor. They dug pits, some filled with spikes and others eight feet deep. Twenty-three forts dotted the wall along with high earthen walls and siege towers. These fortifications stretched for a perimeter of 11 miles. Germans and Gauls attacked from within and without for three successive days, and more fiercely each day. After the engagement ended, as many as 90,000 Gallic soldiers laid dead. The Gauls did break through the walls at certain points, forcing the thin line of Romans to grow thinner still. Caesar himself (not unlike Alexander the Great) personally commanded troops against Gauls at specifically weak points when his subordinates failed.<sup>27</sup> Caesar displayed traits that indicate that he was an excellent tactician. Caesar followed up his previous victory with pressing the enemy harder. Using the entrenchments, Caesar denied the advantage of numbers to the Gauls. Caesar faced frequent revolts and rebellions by the Gauls during each campaign season. Not only did Caesar repulse these attempts but incorporated a new Roman province. This is a key difference between Alexander and Caesar. Alexander was battling a well-established civilization. Caesar was bringing Roman rule to a loose confederation of people in Gaul.

Caesar also outmaneuvered Pompey at the Battle of Pharsalus during the Civil Wars. Despite having a distinct disadvantage in numbers of horsemen, Caesar chose to fight this battle inland, where Pompey's naval ability to supply his army would be diminished. Acting on this perceived advantage, Pompey dispatched forces to exploit this advantage, but before the battle started, Caesar sent six cohorts to the weak flank covertly. As a result, Caesar was able to outflank Pompey and defeated him. Caesar made use of his calm demeanor during the din of battle. He was able to see the field of battle with clarity and make the best decisions. Moreover, he showed that he was able to learn from his loss at Dyrrhachium and adjust. Caesar displayed greatness in his ability to inspire men as well. After Dyrrhachium<sup>28</sup>, Caesar undertook his own personal mission to recover supplies. The troops were so distraught that he would do so without them. Caesar thus inspired men who had been soundly beaten to beg for another chance to show them victorious. This also shows that Caesar was able to win against an enemy equipped with the same technology as himself. Alexander did not face that problem during his conquest, although Caesar's technological advantage in Gaul was similar to the Alexander's advantage against the Persians.

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<sup>27</sup> Gaius Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*. VII. 63-90.

<sup>28</sup> Julius Caesar (trans. Cynthia Damon), *Civil War*. Loeb Classical Library, 2016. III.88-99.



### **Caesar: Politics of Dictatorship**

Caesar's political career took place against the background of the Late Roman Republic. Rome suffered from the Social War of Marius and Sulla.<sup>29</sup> There was a political schism between the Optimates and Populares. The Optimates served the interest of the political elite, while the Populares advanced the interests of the common people, or plebeians. Caesar, a member of the Populares, won his first election in 76 CE as tribune.<sup>30</sup> Caesar fought on behalf of the people and garnered a reputation as a defender of the Plebeians. As Caesar climbed the *cursus honorum*, he gained a popular backing. This popularity gave birth to his ambition. In 60 CE, Caesar wished to run for the consulship in the upcoming year. He sought out allies who could help him win the election. He made a three-way pact that has come to be called the first Triumvirate. He did so with two illustrious Romans, Pompey the Great and Marcus Crassus. Pompey won fame for his generalship in the east. Crassus was the richest man in Rome, capable of fielding his own personal army. Caesar won the consulship in 59 BCE and all of the men agreed to rule jointly, despite the other consul being Marcus Bibulus.<sup>31</sup> Caesar ruthlessly fought Bibulus at every opportunity. Bibulus became so disgusted that he did not bother to show up publicly after the first few months. Caesar turned his consulship into a military command in Gaul. Afterwards, Caesar's ambition reached its zenith. In 49 BCE Caesar crossed the Rubicon, declaring civil war after the Senate refused to give into Caesar's demands,<sup>32</sup> won the conflict and was declared dictator, first for ten years and then life. In fact, Caesar turned down very few honors.<sup>33</sup> Caesar's ambition knew no bounds. The only thing that stopped Caesar's ambition was death. Caesar made clear that he planned to undertake great tasks as dictator such as an urban building program and a campaign against the Parthians to the East. Ambition is the trait that most marks Caesar's political career.

### **Caesar: Personal Life and Link to Alexander**

Caesar's personal life contains both positives and negatives. Caesar is noted by both friends and sources as refraining from drinking. Caesar did so to keep a sound mind. Caesar was plagued by rumors about his sexuality from his youth. He received a reputation for homosexuality while at the court of an eastern client king. He also was known to frequent brothels whilst on campaign. Caesar did however put his morality on display during one particular instance. Publius Clodius attempted to seduce his wife, Pompeia, at a festival for women only. He did so by dressing as a woman. Despite proof that nothing of a sexual nature happened Caesar decided to divorce Pompeia, stating, "The wife of Caesar must be above suspicion".<sup>34</sup> Both political enemies and his own

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<sup>29</sup> 91-88 BCE.

<sup>30</sup> Tribunes of the plebs were given veto power over legislation and expected to protect the common people. This was the first step in the Roman *cursus honorum*. Romans climb through offices culminating with the consulship and entrance into the Senate for those not of Senatorial stock.

<sup>31</sup> Suetonius, *divus Julius*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, XXVIII,

<sup>33</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, LVII.

<sup>34</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, X.

legions note Caesar's sexuality. Alexander is known for his sexual abstinence. Caesar and Alexander clearly have different personal vices. Caesar takes great care to avoid excessive drink, Alexander's greatest flaw. In some ways, Caesar learned from the negative aspects of Alexander's character despite flaws in his own.

Caesar has undeniably been linked with Alexander. The strongest case for Caesar himself making a comparison with Alexander comes from his time spent as a quaestor in Spain. He found himself in a temple to Hercules in modern-day Cadiz. He was heard sighing audibly and talking about how Alexander conquered the world at his age and Caesar felt he had done nothing in comparison.<sup>35</sup> This shows that Alexander's accomplishments were in the mind of Caesar. In addition, he was known to have been reading the history of Alexander around the same time. Furthermore, he became involved in multiple plots to overthrow the state after his quaestorship ended. The timing of such actions show that Alexander Both Caesar's words and actions confirm his looking back to Alexander.

### **Marcus Aurelius & Different Type of Greatness**

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus lived from 121 – 180 CE and reigned as the last of the so-called Five Good Emperors. He grew up under Emperor Hadrian (r. 117-138). Emperor Antoninus Pius (r. 138-161) adopted a young Marcus into the imperial family.<sup>36</sup> The Roman imperial environment forced Marcus to adapt to a certain way of dressing and acting. As for Alexander of Macedon, all the resources necessary were brought to bear to groom him for leadership. Alexander became vainglorious and overly ambitious as a result. Alexander had to deal with a legacy of military success. Philip incorporated all Greek lands excluding that of the Lacedaemonians. Life in the imperial court seemed to have the opposite effect on Marcus. After conquering the Persian Empire, Alexander gave himself over to debauched living. He drank excessively and dressed in Persian royal garb.<sup>37</sup> Marcus paid attention to his studies, often until it was unhealthy.<sup>38</sup> Marcus was ambitious, indeed. His ambition was not self-glory but wisdom. In fact, Stoic philosophy, which he studied intently, formed the foundation of how he thought and governed. This basic difference between these two rulers underscores a deeper point regarding Marcus Aurelius. Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar fit into the same mold of leadership. Both were conquering generals, which society tends to view as the most common form of masculine heroism. Marcus garnered an equivalent amount of respect but does not fit the same mold as Alexander or Caesar.

Marcus Aurelius' legacy does not evoke thoughts of supreme military generalship. This does not mean that the Roman military did not operate effectively during his reign. Marcus' legates acted swiftly to put down revolts in Spain and Egypt. Avidius Cassius, who received the power of *imperium* in the eastern Roman provinces,

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<sup>35</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, XI.

<sup>36</sup> Translated by David Magie. *Historia Augusta Vol I: Life of Marcus Aurelius*, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press (Cambridge, Mass), 1921. 4.1.

<sup>37</sup> Arrian (Ed. James Romm). *The Landmark Arrian: Campaigns of Alexander*, bk. VII. 6-8.

<sup>38</sup> *Historia Augusta: Life of Marcus Aurelius*, 3.6

put down the rebellion in Egypt.<sup>39</sup> In 175, Cassius led a rebellion himself, thinking that Marcus had died and not wanting the young Commodus to rise to power.<sup>40</sup> This once again calls to mind the question of loyalty. Marcus' trust of Cassius is one of the few, clear political stains on his reign. Marcus waged war successfully in Parthia and Armenia until Cassius' rebellion. Caesar never was able to undertake a campaign against in the east. For these exploits, Marcus received honorary titles from the Senate. Marcus also led a successful war against the Marcomanni and other German tribes. This campaign stopped raids across the Danube into Roman territory. The campaign started in 166 CE and continued through Marcus' death in 180. Ancient sources posit that one more year may have been enough to incorporate Marcomannia and Sarmatia as provinces.<sup>41</sup> Despite not being a conqueror, Marcus did many positive things. Marcus was noted as a man who "made bad men good and good men great."<sup>42</sup> The author of the *Historia Augusta* Indeed, his ability to deal with multiple conflicts properly must be praised.

### **Marcus Aurelius – Shaped by Stoicism**

Marcus Aurelius' political actions find their roots in Stoic philosophy. In his *Meditations* Marcus mentions the paternal affection that he was shown. By all accounts, Romans viewed him as a fatherly<sup>43</sup> figure in his administration of the state.<sup>44</sup> Most importantly, he raised his brother Lucius Verus to co-emperor. This shows that Marcus understood the political situation at Rome. The Roman Empire needed to have leaders who could deal with issues on multiple fronts.<sup>45</sup> Marcus became the first emperor to appoint a co-ruler and rule the state as two. Marcus showed loyalty when he chose to support his brother despite Verus' lifestyle of excess. In this way, Aurelius demonstrates loyalty like Caesar or Alexander. Caesar demonstrated loyalty to his legions by giving them both land and wealth that he promised in return for their faithful service. The Roman state came to be ruled by a tetrarchy one century after Marcus' death. Much of the intervening time came to be known as the Crisis of the Third Century. One of the reasons for the ensuing chaos was the inability of the central government to deal with problems over such vast swath of land. Subsequent emperors struggled to realize what Marcus understood, that the Roman Empire was far too big and complex to be ruled by a single emperor. Multiple rulers were needed to govern properly.

Marcus Aurelius' personal life also was shaped by his belief in Stoic philosophy. The difference between the life of Marcus and those of Alexander and Caesar is plain to see. Marcus' way of life is simply condensed in a quote of his from his *Meditations*. He

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<sup>39</sup> Cassius put down the revolt in 172 CE. Imperium gives a Roman commander the power to choose life and death over those under him. Both Julius Caesar and Augustus were voted this power honorifically, which was held by every emperor thereafter.

<sup>40</sup> *Historia Augusta: Life of Marcus Aurelius*, 24.6-12.

<sup>41</sup> *Historia Augusta: Life of Marcus Aurelius*, 17.1-3

<sup>42</sup> *Historia Augusta: Life of Marcus Aurelius*, XII.2

<sup>43</sup> *Historia Augusta: Life of Marcus Aurelius*, I.1-3

<sup>44</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (trans. by C.R. Haines), *Loeb Classical Library*

<sup>45</sup> *Historia Augusta: Life of Marcus Aurelius*, VII.4-5

states “There is nothing better than for a man to confine himself to necessary actions.”<sup>46</sup> Marcus Aurelius did not take in excessive pleasures or act rashly, much like Caesar. He administered justice with sobriety and did not adhere to rumors. Of the three leaders, Marcus’ personal life was the most restrained, meaning that he did not suffer the same type of consequences that Caesar and Alexander did.

Marcus clearly is linked to Alexander as a giant of antiquity. As Marcus was dying, he echoed the lament of Philip II of Macedon, Alexander’s father, stating that he was grieved to have left behind a son. While the fate of these sons is completely different, the linkage is clear. Marcus’ son Commodus’ reign swiftly ended the so-called Five Good Emperors. Philip’s son Alexander did precisely the opposite through his conquest of Asia. Explicit references show that Marcus also thought about comparison with Alexander. Aurelius mentions that both Alexander and the man who packed his mules face the same bodily decomposition in death.<sup>47</sup> This fact demonstrates that Marcus recognized his greatness but also thought of greatness as a fleeting concept, which is reasonable due to the influence of Stoicism on his life.

### **Conclusion**

Alexander, Caesar and Marcus Aurelius demonstrated greatness in their lifetimes. This study has determined some of the traits necessary for being a good leader and established a linkage between Alexander the Great and two leading Romans. Both Julius Caesar and Marcus Aurelius made efforts to follow the positives of Alexander’s character while attempting to avoid negative aspects. In the end, Caesar took clear actions in imitation of Alexander. Marcus Aurelius seemed to avoid comparison when possible but certainly shows that Alexander was thought about by Roman emperors of the time. In fact, Marcus’ son Commodus often pretended to be like Hercules and Alexander, wearing <sup>48</sup> lion skin. Alexander traced his lineage through Hercules and portrayed himself as his equal. Finally, whether leading Romans imitated the greatness of Alexander or not, his mere presence centuries later speaks volumes. It is reasonable to state that Caesar and Marcus Aurelius were both tangibly influenced by Alexander, even though that influence manifested itself in very different ways.

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<sup>46</sup> *Meditations*, bk. IV.20.

<sup>47</sup> *Meditations*, bk. VI. 22.

<sup>48</sup> The lion skin refers to one of Hercules’ labors in which he defeated the Nemean Lion, an impossible task.

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