



The First European Alexander the Great in the Age of Empire Pierre Briant

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The exploits of Alexander the Great were so remarkable that for centuries after his death the Macedonian ruler seemed a figure more of legend than of history. Thinkers of the European Enlightenment, searching for ancient models to understand contemporary affairs, were the first to critically interpret Alexander's achievements. As Pierre Briant shows, in the minds of eighteenth-century intellectuals and philosophes, Alexander was the first European: a successful creator of empire who opened the door to new sources of trade and scientific knowledge, and an enlightened leader who brought the fruits of Western civilization to an oppressed and backward "Orient." In France, Scotland, England, and Germany, Alexander the Great became an important point of reference in discourses from philosophy and history to political economy and geography. Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Robertson asked what lessons Alexander's empire-building had to teach modern Europeans. They saw the ancient Macedonian as the embodiment of the rational and benevolent Western ruler, a historical model to be emulated as Western powers accelerated their colonial expansion into Asia, India, and the Middle East. For a Europe that had to contend with the formidable Ottoman Empire, Alexander provided an important precedent as the conqueror who had brought great tyrants of the "Orient" to heel. As *The First European* makes clear, in the minds of Europe's leading thinkers, Alexander was not an aggressive militarist but a civilizing force whose conquests revitalized Asian lands that had lain stagnant for centuries under the lash of despotic rulers.

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In this important work, a great historian of classical antiquity returns to the European "long eighteenth century" and its reconsideration of the crucial figure of Alexander as a forerunner of its own imperial ambitions and projects. With its vast erudition, and careful attention to minor as well as major figures from Montesquieu to Droysen and beyond, Pierre Briant's book is nothing less than a tour de force, both as a contribution to the intellectual history of the Enlightenment in its global dimensions, as well as to the complex dialogue between "Moderns" and "Ancients". It confirms once more that the life-trajectory of the Macedonian conqueror remains an inexhaustible cultural resource, whether in the Christian or indeed the Islamic world, from the Atlantic and Mediterranean to Bengal and the Malay Peninsula. This is a significant and weighty contribution to a real global intellectual history.

(Sanjay Subrahmanyam, University of California, Los Angeles).