

A TURKISH ALEXANDER? MICHAEL ATTALEIATES, PORUS, AND ALEXANDER
THE GREAT*

Abstract: This short note discusses Michael Attaleiates' account of the encounter between prince Liparites and the Turk, Tughril Beg (Attal. 8.2 [Bekker p. 45 = Pérez Martín p. 34]), which contains an allusion to the famous exchange between Alexander the Great and Porus.

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After narrating the defeat of the Romano-Georgian army by the Seljuk Turks in 1048, the historian Michael Attaleiates embellished his account of the ensuing conference between the Seljuk 'ethnarch' (i.e. sultan), Tughril Beg, and the captured Roman commander, the Georgian prince Liparites, with the following exchange (Attal. 8.2 [Bekker p. 45 = Pérez Martín p. 34]):¹

ἀλλ' ὅ γε τοῦτον ἰδὼν καὶ τὸ γένος τούτου μεμαθηκώς, προκατέλαβε γὰρ αὐτὸν ἡ
φήμη τῆς τοῦ ἀνδρὸς γενναιότητος, ἥρετο τοῦτον ὅπως δὴ χρηστέον αὐτῷ ὁ δὲ
βασιλικῶς ἔφη.

But when he [sc. Tughril] saw him [sc. Liparites] and learned of his family – for the
fame of the man's bravery had preceded him – he asked him how he thought he should

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¹ References to Attaleiates' *History* follow the divisions of the new text and translation of Kaldellis and Krallis. The pagination from Bekker's 'Bonn' edition (1853) and Pérez Martín's (2002) critical edition follow in square brackets. For Zonaras, the edition of Dindorf (1868-75) has been used, and for Skylitzes that of Thurn (1973).

be treated. And he said “like a king”. (trans. Kaldellis and Krallis, slightly adapted)

The artificiality of Attaleiates’ account is obvious, and so it is strange that Attaleiates’ recent commentators have passed over this passage without comment. Skylitzes and Zonaras both narrate the story of Liparites’ capture without mentioning Liparites’ pithy response to the sultan’s interrogation.² Attaleiates has, in fact, reworked the famous exchange between Alexander the Great and the Indian king Porus.³ For the sake of comparison, take Plutarch’s description of that encounter (*Alex.* 60.14):

(14) ἐπεὶ δὲ ληφθέντα τὸν Πῶρον ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος ἠρώτα, πῶς αὐτῷ χρήσεται, “βασιλικῶς” εἶπε.

But when Porus was taken prisoner, Alexander asked him how he would be treated, and [Porus] said, “Like a king”.

The source question need not delay us; indeed, in this case such a line of enquiry may be fruitless. Attaleiates was an individual of wide reading, the evidence of which is scattered throughout the history in the many literary echoes of classical and Christian texts.⁴ Moreover, the stories of Alexander’s treatment of Porus was in wide circulation during Byzantine middle ages. The version transmitted by the Alexander historians, and adapted by Attaleiates, has

² Cf. Skylitzes *Syn. Hist.* 453-4; Zonar. 17.25 [Dindorf 4.173-4]. For discussion of the sources for this campaign, see Shepard (1975/1976) 270-283.

³ The meeting between Porus and Alexander was one of the more frequently repeated anecdotes concerning the Macedonian conqueror. E.g. Plut. *Mor.* 181E, 332E, 458B; Arrian *Anab.* 5.19.2; Metz *Epit.* 61; Themist. *Or.* 7.88D. Cf. Bosworth (1995) 309-10.

⁴ For Attaleiates’ reading and intellectual horizons, see Krallis (2012) 52-69; cf. Pérez Martín (2002) l-liii.

Alexander spare the defeated king, thus demonstrating Alexander's clemency (ἐπιείκεια); whereas that found in the popular Romance traditions has Alexander kill Porus in single combat, thus emphasising the Macedonian's martial prowess (ἀνδρεία).⁵ But it was the former which seems to have been the more favoured by men of learning in Byzantium. To cite but two examples, Arrian's version was excerpted in the tenth century by the compilers of the *Excerpta Constantiniana*,⁶ and in the early twelfth century Attaleiates' younger contemporary, John Zonaras, included the story in his *Epitome of Histories*, extracted from Plutarch.⁷

Yet the insertion of such a riff on a familiar historical anecdote should not be dismissed simply as Attaleiates' playing a sophisticated yet ultimately facile game with his educated readers. It was once assumed that this feature of Byzantine historiography was indeed such a game played between the (sophisticated) author and the (sophisticated) reader where the role of the reader was simply to identify the sources of the allusions.⁸ This view, long held as orthodox by many Byzantinists, suggested a readership somewhat disengaged from the material they were reading. There are now alternatives to this view. Certainly allusions and intertextual references added a patina of sophistication to a work of literature. But we are becoming more aware of the various nuanced ways in which such historical as well as literary allusions functioned within an historical narrative.⁹ Indeed, the new orthodoxy is to view these parallels not the end point but the point of departure from which the reader is invited to perform further acts of interpretation and comparison.

⁵ For this so-called 'Porus-Crux' in the Medieval tradition, see in brief Cary (1956) 340.

⁶ *ES* (Arrian) F 12 [Boissevain p. 62-3]. The excerpt is a near-verbatim quotation of Arrian *Anab.* 5.19.1-3.

⁷ Zonar 4.13 [= Dindorf 1 p. 298] Plutarch's *Vita Alexandri* was certainly the source behind Zonaras' account of the Alexander-Porus encounter. For Zonaras' familiarity with Plutarch in the *Epitome*, see Büttner-Wobst (1890). Note also the presence of the anecdote in the collection of Plutarchan *excerpta* preserved in *Cod. Paris. suppl. gr. 134*, for which see Manfredini (1993), 4.

⁸ Hunger (1969/70) 29-30. Cf. Mango (1975).

⁹ Among the various studies, note in particular Bosworth (2004); Damon (2010), 375-388; Pelling (2010) 105-18; Pelling (2013); Mallan (2017).

How then should we read Attaleiates' account of this encounter between the prince and the Turk? Jonathan Shepard thought that Attaleiates' version 'presents the whole episode as an illustration of the excellence of the "Iberian" allies and of Monomachus' folly in offending them by ceasing to support them off "State lands".'¹⁰ Such an explanation was, and remains perfectly valid. But it only scrapes the surface of what Attaleiates is doing in this passage. To gain a better appreciation of Attaleiates' strategy we need to think in terms of what may be termed historical parallelism.

The usefulness of the past to explore aspects of the present was an important feature of Attaleiates' programme, as it had been for his classical predecessors.¹¹ The memorable deeds and sayings of the great men of the past – the Scipiones, the Fabii, and indeed Alexander the Great – provided the measure against which Attaleiates' ethical and political judgments on his contemporaries were calibrated. Perhaps unsurprisingly, of the non-Roman historical figures in Attaleiates' work, it is Alexander who is most frequently cited with several different stories and *apophthegmata* ascribed to him.¹² Alexander, after all, had long been regarded by rhetoricians and historians as the *exemplum* of (good and bad) kingship, and Attaleiates like his contemporary, Michael Psellus, knew this well.¹³

Certainly, there is an ethical component to the anecdote: the sultan, like Alexander provides a positive *exemplum* of moderation and clemency (ἐπιείκεια/φιλανθρωπία) by his

¹⁰ Shepard (1975/6) 280 n. 30.

¹¹ Certainly the most conspicuous example of this technique in Attaleiates' history is the comparison of ancient and modern Romans (Attal. 27.8-12 [Bekker pp. 218-20 = Pérez Martín pp. 160-61], for discussion of which, see Kaldellis (2007) and Krallis (2012) 192-9.

¹² E.g. Attal. 29.3 [Bekker p. 231 = Pérez Martín p. 168]; 33.9 [Bekker p.280 = Pérez Martín p. 201]. Cf. Pérez Martín (2002) 318, 331.

¹³ Menander Rhetor (2.377.9-10; cf. 2.426.23-4), writing in the late third century, regarded Alexander the Great as the obvious figure to which any emperor might be compared in an imperial panegyric. Cf. Psellus *Chron.* 6.163-4. That Alexander could be used as a negative *exemplum* of kingship by Byzantine writers, see Neville (2012) 40-1; Stoneman (1994) xxv-xxxiii. For the ambiguities of the *imago Alexandri* in antiquity, see Ceașescu (1974); Spencer (2002); Baynham (2009) 290-1.

treatment of a conquered (noble) foe.¹⁴ In the archetype, the clemency of Alexander results in the release of Porus, just as in Attaleiates' version, that of the sultan results in the release of Liparites. What is striking here is that it is a barbarian potentate whose behaviour is exemplary. This adds to the piquancy of the anecdote: Attaleiates knew that barbarians were always 'good to think with'.¹⁵ Attaleiates thus provides a point of comparison and contrast between Tughril's conduct and the conduct of the Roman emperors of Attaleiates' day (or at any rate those before the accession of Nicephorus Botaneiates); and especially their behaviour towards their defeated imperial rivals. As was commonly held by authors of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Attaleiates believed that a king should show appropriate clemency to a defeated foe – if it were expedient to do so. But here, we cannot help but draw contrast between the Tughril's clemency and greatness of spirit, and the cruelty of the likes of Constantine IX Monomachus, who notoriously blinded his defeated enemy Leo Tornicius; an event which Attaleiates had only just described in his narrative.¹⁶ We may even see the clemency of Tughril foreshadowing that of the sultan Alp Arslan towards Romanus IV Diogenes after the defeat of the Romans at Mantzikert.¹⁷

The parallel may be taken further. When we read on, we see Attaleiates identify the encounter between Liparites and the sultan as the point at which diplomatic relations were established between the Romans and the Seljuk Turks. It was in a similar way that the stories of Alexander and Porus were interpreted, as we may infer from the inclusion of that story in the Constantinian *Excerpta de Legationibus*.¹⁸ By casting the sultan in the role of Alexander,

¹⁴ Cf. Bosworth (1995) 309. When Themistius (*Or.* 7.88D) in the fourth century reuses the story, he is exhorting the emperor Constantius to imitate the actions of Alexander in showing moderation to the defeated.

¹⁵ For Attaleiates' portrayals of barbarians in the *History*, see Krallis (2012) 157-69 especially 158 n. 150 and 151; Cf. Kaldellis (2007) 5-6, *passim*.

¹⁶ Attal. 6.12 [Bekker p. 30 = Pérez-Martín p. 23-4].

¹⁷ Attal. 20.26 [Bekker p. 164-5 = Pérez-Martín p. xx]. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing this to my attention.

¹⁸ *ELGR* (Arrian) 5 = Arr. *Anab.* 5.20.

Attaleiates effectively assimilates the (alien) Turkish leader into the (familiar) Roman worldview. Furthermore, by presenting the sultan in such a light, Attaleiates again asks his readers to reflect further on the worrying decline of Roman imperial fortunes, and the ascent of the Turks. Indeed, from his vantage-point of late 1070s the rapid and dramatic conquests of the Seljuk's must have seemed, to an historically-minded observer like Attaleiates, to have been worthy of the memory of Alexander, in the way that most of his Roman coevals were not.

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