



Review

Reviewed Work(s): Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian Army by Donald W. Engels

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Nonetheless, it would be remarkable if any user of the book failed to benefit from the breadth of interest and knowledge Fraser shows here, and every discipline would do well to emulate his concern for the broader context of specialized studies. If the bibliography is not all we could hope, it is at least a lot more than we had or are likely to get elsewhere. Students of late antiquity owe a debt of gratitude to Fraser and the Oxford University Press for this new edition of Butler.

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Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian Army. By DONALD W. ENGELS. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978. Pp. xiv + 194.

The study of Alexander the Great has undergone a revolution in the last quarter-century; scholarly attention has moved from subjective interpretation of personality to progress principally in two directions. First, the longstanding prejudice in favor of Arrian and against the writers of the Alexander vulgate (i.e. Diodorus, Curtius and Justin) has been strongly challenged. In particular, Ptolemy son of Lagos, Arrian's principal source, has been shown to be by no means as objective and comprehensive as was once thought (see e.g. the pioneering article of C.B. Welles, "The Reliability of Ptolemy as an Historian," *Miscellanea di Studi Alessandrini in memoria di A. Rostagni* (Turin 1963) 101-116 and the good discussion of A.B. Bosworth, "Arrian and the Alexander Vulgate," *Alexandre le Grand: Entretiens Hardt* 22 [Geneva 1975] 1-33). Secondly, a concerted attempt to understand Alexander's context, especially the Macedonian background, has made many of Alexander's actions seem more rationally explicable and less dependent purely on his personality than they often appear in the sources and in modern works; here the brilliant studies of Alexander's relations to the Macedonian nobility by E. Badian may be cited as exemplary of an entire school of thought.

Donald Engels owes a considerable amount to both of these currents in his attempt to assess the effect on Alexander's strategy of terrain, transport and supply. Engels has repeated occasion to assess favorably (e.g. pp. 7, 84, 87, 101) the geographical information provided by Curtius; and if Diodorus is not so helpful, that is the fault of his brevity. By contrast, Arrian reflects Ptolemy's desire to give the impression that logistical considerations played little part in the expedition. Engels thus treats the sources much on a par, with all information subject to critical scrutiny.

It is the other direction, however, which provides the main theme of this book: Alexander's actions can be properly understood only when they are viewed in the context of the physical realities of his situation. Engels seeks to answer two questions: how did Alexander's army get its provisions, and what effects did the necessity of finding them have on the strategy and tactics of the Macedonian army? The ancient sources are sometimes informative about the geographical context, but almost never about supplies. The method followed, therefore, begins from the terrain and looks to the sources for confirmation of the conclusions reached.

Engels begins with a general assessment of the army's capabilities, the result of which is the view that any unmechanized army could draw provisions by land only within a four-day radius because transport animals or personnel would consume in a longer round trip as much as they could carry. On the other hand, a land army could itself carry no more than 7-10 days' provisions (less in the desert where water must be carried), no matter how numerous the pack animals. For each movement of the Macedonian army, these general principles are applied to the terrain over which the army was to travel and the resources of the area.

The results are a practical view of what the army must have done and why. In some cases the conclusions arrived at are very different from accepted views (in Asia Minor and the Gedrosian Desert, for example). In discussing the Siwah journey, Engels strongly (conclusively, in my view) supports Welles's view that a return journey across the desert directly to Memphis is simply impossible and that Alexander must have returned via Paraetionium and Alexandria. Engels also (63 n.54) accepts the consequence that Welles was right to place the founding of Alexandria after the visit to the oracle (against Ptolemy but with Aristoboulos and all the other sources; there seems no avoiding this view once the foundation date of Alexandria around 7 April is accepted as I believe it must be).

Engels' method depends heavily on inference from historical geography, climate and palaeoecology, precisely because of the lack of interest of ancient writers in the problems he treats. The book is a fine example of progress achieved by asking questions the ancients did not ask and testing the answers against the sources. One's admiration for Alexander's achievement is in no way lessened by seeing how it was brought about. Engels makes it clear that Alexander's logistics were consistently much superior to those of other armies ancient and modern (before mechanization); much of the credit is properly assigned to Philip, and due recognition is given to Philip's officers (above all Parmenion) who served Alexander. All the same, it becomes clear in the end that the genius behind the successful management of logistics is Alexander himself.

This sort of treatment runs several risks: (1) the author may take the modern situation in an area to be the same as the ancient in cases where it is not. Engels seems to avoid this pitfall scrupulously (although the Egyptian coast from Alexandria to Paraetionium may be an exception; compare p. 62 to A.J. Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt*² [Oxford 1978] 9 ff.); he has generally taken pains to find out what can be known about the ancient conditions.

(2) If some of the manpower figures used should be wrong, certain conclusions lose some of their cogency. Engels insists repeatedly (pp. 14, 22 *et passim*) that his principles of logistical analysis are true for larger or smaller armies alike, and this is essentially correct. But there are numerous cases where numbers *do* make a difference in the argument (e.g. pp. 72, 95-96, 154-55), and in general I think Engels overestimates the size of Alexander's army (pp. 145-52) by making no allowance for losses where casualty figures are not given by the sources and by taking at face value figures given by Arrian for e.g. the siege of Tyre, where Macedonian losses were surely many more than the 400 claimed.

(3) Any approach to Alexander—or any other subject—seeking to explain it by reference to background conditions runs the risk of a mechanistic approach. Engels is aware of the problem (p. 10), and by concentrating on those parts of the expedition where the role of logistical considerations was most important he avoids the temptation to rewrite the history of the entire period in terms of logistics.

What has been said above is at most sufficient to give a glimpse of the interest of this book. The reader will find his understanding of Alexander and his campaigns deepened by the intelligent analysis devoted to them here. It is a pity that maps are so poor: a book on logistics should above all have first-rate topographical maps, and the sketch maps here (on which the spelling of toponyms often does not agree with that used in the text even though the maps were custom-made) are wholly inadequate. But the book as a whole is stimulating and original, the product of wide reading in historical geography and military history and above all of realistic thinking. Every student of Alexander, and of ancient military history generally, should profit from this fine work.

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