

Hollywood has just released one of the latest of its epic blockbusters: Alexander the Great. Directed by distinguished director Oliver Stone, the movie endeavours to recreate the events of the Hellenic conquests and the downfall of the first Persian Achaemenid Empire. It is important to note however, that simply because a movie is high budget, casts high profile Hollywood actors and is directed by top ranking directors, does not make it flawless.

Beyond the entertainment value of Oliver Stone's latest project, a number of serious errors do exist in the movie, many which may appear trivial. These "trivial" errors will nevertheless be of consequence to both Iranians and Greeks.

Ironically, it has been my Greek friends and colleagues who bought the flaws of Oliver Stone's "Alexander" picture to my attention. There are a total of five overall errors that will be listed and discussed below:

(1) The Battle of Gaugamela:

Oliver Stone has relied on Professor Robin Lane Fox, one of the world's foremost experts in the area of Alexander and Hellenic Studies. His book is a standard reference text in the area of Alexandrian Studies:

R.L. Fox. Alexander the Great. London: Penguin, 1986 and 1994.
ISBN: 0140088784

Despite excellent reviews of his book by critics and scholars, Dr. Fox does not understand the military of ancient Persia. A typographical shot of the battle of Gaugamela, shows the Greeks advancing in ordered and disciplined ranks. In contrast, the armies of Darius III are shown as little better than an amorphous mob. This is a false image of the Achaemenid army. The Achaemenids used drums and musical instruments to direct the marching tactics of their troops in battle. Second, the Achaemenians used the decimal system, which was in fact, unknown to the Greeks of the period. Persian units were formed in legions of 10, 100 or 1000 or 10,000. A typical term was "Hezar-Patesh" (roughly equivalent to "leader of a thousand men").

In addition, the Persians had developed a sophisticated system of heraldry and their troops wore standard uniforms. The Greeks were certainly excellent fighters and were thoroughly organized, but this does not mean that the Persians were not. At the time, the Greeks were militarily superior with respect to armaments, tactics and military training.

This military imbalance changed with the coming of the Parthian and Sassanian cavalry. The Iranian Savaran (elite Cavalry) successfully halted and defeated many of the later Greek-Hoplite inspired Roman armies. Many Romans attempted to imitate Alexander and failed against Persia. These include Marcus Lucinius Crassus at Carrhae, Marc Antony at Tabriz (where he failed twice), Gordian III at Mesiche, Phillip the Arab near modern Syria, Valerian at Barbablissos, and Julian the Apostate in Mesopotamia. I

personally doubt that Hollywood will recreate these spectacular Roman defeats as these will challenge contemporary western notions of the Alexandrian legacy. In addition, many Iranians today are unaware of the proud legacy of the Parthian and Sassanian Savaran.

Professor Fox's elementary grasp of Iranian militaria should not inspire much confidence with respect to accurate portrayals of Iranians in general. You may wish to read the following books by Professors Sekunda and Head who are experts on the uniforms, dress and equipment of the ancient Greeks and Achaemenid Persians.

N. Sekunda. *The Persian Army: 560-330 BC*. England. Osprey Men at Arms Elite Series, 1992.

ISBN: 1855322501

http://www.ospreypublishing.com/title_detail.php/title=P2501

D. Head. *The Achaemenid Persian Army*. England: Montvert Publications, 1992.

ISBN: 1874101000

There are many errors with the uniforms portrayed as "Persian". As you will see in these books, the colors and materials of Achaemenid Persians were invariably bright with a mix of shades of purple, Saffron, red dyes, shades of blue and green, mixed with darker browns (almost Burgundy) and black. These fashions and regalia were resuscitated during the Sassanian dynasty (226-651 AD). Only the Persian archers (and a few guards) are shown with some accuracy; the same cannot be said with respect to the other "Persians" of the movie set.

More puzzling is the "Arabesque" way in which ancient Persians are portrayed in this battle. I was shocked to see Arabian camel riders used to portray one of the vanguards of Darius III's attack on Alexander at the battle scene. Arabs were simply auxiliary units in the Achaemenian army at the time, and were not a major factor. Camel troops were never a major battle order in the armies of Persia. This may be the usual Hollywood habit however of portraying Iranians as Arabs, a topic we will re-visit later in this commentary.

(2) Confusing Persia with Babylon

It is very interesting that Professor Fox does not refer to the Achaemenid capitals in Susa, Maracanda (Samarqand), Media or Persopolis. The destruction of Persopolis by Alexander is a major event – instead the movie shows Alexander entering the city of Babylon, implying that this was the administrative capital of Persia. Babylon was simply another satrapy of the empire; not its capital. Babylon had already been incorporated into the Persian Empire in 539 BC by Cyrus the Great (559-530 BC). Why is Persopolis and its destruction not mentioned? There was also the destruction of the three major Zoroastrian texts by Alexander – also not referred to in the movie.

A possible reason for this may be found in Professor Fox's interview with the distinguished journal "Archeology Today" (Riding with Alexander):

<http://www.archaeology.org/online/interviews/fox.html>

Note the statement below, and how indicative it is of Professor Fox's lack of understanding of Classical Achaemenid Persia:

“We all understood that the separate "parts" of Oliver's drama must be "color-coded" and ... which could not totally depart from audiences' expectations of Greek or Babylonian imagery”

Note the statement “Greek or Babylonian imagery”. As noted previously, Babylon was not a major power at the time of Alexander. Persian arts and architecture were an eclectic synthesis of indigenous (e.g Median, Elamite), Lydian, and Mesopotamian styles, including Babylonian. The city-palace of Persopolis is very distinct and cannot be crudely termed as Babylonian. It is, to put it mildly, shocking, that the treatment of Persian studies is addressed at such a shallow level by Professor Fox.

An important point must be made, especially with respect to the reason why Alexander was so violent in his conquest of Persia. The Greeks were simply taking revenge for the earlier invasion of their country by Darius the Great and his son Xerxes. The Greeks paid a heavy price for their battles at Marathon (490 BC), Thermopylae (17th September, 490 BC), Athens (27th September, 490 BC), Salamis (29th September, 490 BC), and Plataea (479 BC). It is significant that when Xerxes burned Athens, he ordered the sacred statues of the Greek gods to be removed and brought to Persia. The Greeks revered their gods and this Persian act was a national insult to them. Most contemporary Iranians are not aware of these facts. This certainly is not an excuse for what happened at Alexander's time, but it does help put these events in perspective.

Although many Iranians demonize Alexander, the man did come to develop a great deal of respect for Persia. The more Alexander stayed in Persia, the more “Persian” he became, in manners and in dress. Alexander paid his respects at the tomb of Cyrus the Great and indeed saw himself as the heir of Cyrus. The Greeks so admired Cyrus the Great, that they saw his manner of government as a model. You may wish to read the Greek “Cyropedia”. If Aristotle made racist statements about the Persians (and this is shown in the movie), it must also be made clear that many Greeks also praised the Persians (see Xenophon or Plutarch in his discussion of the Parthian general Surena). A very positive aspect of the Alexander movie is that Alexander praises the “east” for its architecture and civilization. It is possible that Alexander was poisoned by some of his officers for becoming too “Persian”.

(3) The Blondism of Alexander

A very serious concern of the Alexander movie is the promotion of the idea of the “Nordicism” of ancient Greece. Put simply, this is the thesis that ancient Greeks were not only predominantly blonde, but “Nordic”, in the manner of present-day Scandinavians and Northern Germans.

Nordicists have long argued, since the late 1700s, that the people of ancient and modern Greece are unrelated. Nordicism argues that the “ancient” Greeks were the “true” Greeks in contrast to the non-Nordic people of Greece today. This view is exemplified by the Austrian Hellenicist, Professor Fallmerayer, in the 1830s, who noted that “not a drop of pure Greek blood runs in the veins of modern Greeks...” To this day, Fallmerayer is recalled with bitterness and derision in Greece. It is worth noting that Fallmerayer never set foot in Greece in his entire lifetime. For further discussion on these issues you may wish to read:

Felipe Fernandez-Armesto’s “Guide to Peoples of Europe”, especially pages 207-216.
Published in London by Times Books in 1994.
ISBN: 0-7320-0624-5

Fallmerayer’s analysis of Greece is not entirely correct. While true that the Ottoman Turks ruled Greece for 400 years and that previous Byzantine rulers (e.g. Emperor Nikopherous) had to import colonists from present day south Italy to help repopulate parts of Greece ravaged by wars, many of these “Italian” colonists were themselves ancient Greek, settled in regions such as Calabria and Southern France since the times of Darius the Great and earlier. In any event, there has always been a strong and predominant Greek element in areas such as the Peloponnesos.

As for the lack of mainstream Nordicism in modern Greece, this has to do with the history of ancient Greece itself. Mainland Greece was already settled with indigenous Mediterranean peoples, such as the ancient Minoans, before the arrival of the Classical Greeks. Ancient Greece, like today, was a mixture of Mediterranean and “blonde” peoples.

This leads to a very crucial question: why have no Greek actors been selected to portray classical Greeks such as Alexander, Hephaestion, Ptolemy I, Olympias, King Phillip II, Cassander or Antigonus? For a review of the cast, click on the following links:

<http://www.alexander-the-great.co.uk/>

<http://www.lilianagimenez.com/artisti-ospiti/raz.jpg> - Israeli actor, Raz Degan who portrays Darius III.

If one were to use Classical Greek works of art (vases and statues specifically) as a standard for prototypical Greek physical appearance, one can then easily find a plethora of modern Greek actors and actresses today who can portray ancient Greeks. It is interesting as to why Oliver Stone did not select Hollywood actors of Greek descent or from mainland Greece.

Oliver Stone goes further however. Colin Farrell, a dark haired Irish actor, who plays Alexander, is portrayed literally, as a bleached blonde. The notion of Alexander being Flaxen-haired or blonde is itself a matter of considerable doubt if not strong dispute. As noted by my friend George Tsonis, a Greek-Canadian and a scholar of Greek, Roman and Persian history, the Greek word for Alexander’s complexion is “Xanthenein” (fair). This description simply marks Alexander’s complexion as being fairer than the other

Greeks of his time. Yes, he was relatively fair, but not necessarily flaxen-blond in the Nordacist sense. From the Tufts University Lexicon “Xanthenein” is roughly translated as fair or a yellowish-brown color. A related term, “Xanthizo”, can also be to “make yellow” or “brown”. No wonder there is confusion!

Plutarch, whom most western scholars rely on for their references, does not actually describe Alexander's hair color, only his complexion. This is a quote from Aelian on the hair; below is the Anglized Greek from Cyrillic and the English translation below that:

"Alexandron de ton Filippou apragmonos oraion legousi genesthai' tin men gar komin anasesyrthai afto, xanthin de einai"

"Alexander the son of Philip is reported to have possessed a natural beauty: his hair was wavy and fair"

Varia Historae, 12.14

To see the debates raging about Alexander’s true appearance see the following discussion panel:

<http://www.pothos.org/forum/showmessage.asp?messageID=16281>

A very non-Nordic portrayal of Alexander is evident in the Pompei Mosaic. It is agreed by a majority of scholars that the painting is a faithful rendition of an original Hellenistic painting of the 3rd century BC. As you will witness in the attachment below (<http://users.otenet.gr/~ncro/mosalex.gif>), this Hellenic-Roman version of Alexander is very different from the contemporary Hollywood fantasy interpretation:



As you saw with Pompei Mosaic above, this is a very different Alexander than what many western scholars and Hollywood would have us believe.

This painting appears to refute the notion of Alexander being blonde. Nevertheless, a number of western scholars remain determined to push forward an image of Alexander that may be false. There are scholars who are actually convinced that the Pompei mosaic is proof of Alexander's Nordic blondeness! Even in allowing for poor reproductions, the mosaic clearly shows a 'brown' haired person with a Mediterranean or modern Iranian profile. Many Greek and Iranian people today have auburn-brown hair, which can appear to be somewhat "blonde" in sunlight.

The point from the Greek perspective however, is not simply whether Alexander was blonde or not. After all, the Dorian Greeks were blonde as a rule, just as the original Persians and Mede settlers of ancient Iran were as well. The issue is that of using the notion of blondeness to project a specifically non-Greek Nordic west European image. Irrespective of whether Alexander was blonde or not, he represented the culture of ancient Greece, which is not necessarily the same as that of modern Western Europe.

Ancient Greece and Rome, as we will note again further below, were Mediterranean empires, very different from the inhabitants of interior and northern Europe. The peoples of western and eastern Europe were very different from the Classical Greeks in culture, language and temperament. To obtain an introduction to the history of the northern Europeans, you may wish to read:

D. Rankin. *Celts and the Classical World*. London: Routledge, 1996.
ISBN: 0-415-15090-6

A. Ferrill. *The Fall of the Roman Empire: The Military Explanation*. Thames & Hudson, 1986.
ISBN: 0500274959

The "Europeans" adopted a great deal of their civilization and identity from the Greeks and the Romans. Even the name "Europe" is derived from the ancient Greek term "Oropia". It may not be an exaggeration to state the following: with their adoption of Greco-Roman culture, west European scholars in particular, have essentially effected a "Nordic makeover" of the ancient Greeks and Romans. As Western culture has adopted the mantle of ancient Greece, it has also adopted Alexander as its own son; to the point that Alexander and ancient Greece are viewed as identical with ancient Western Europe and Scandinavia.

The Nordicising of favourite historical figures does not end with Alexander. Jesus Christ, is frequently portrayed as a slightly built, tall blonde Nordic man. Jesus or Jeshua, was a Jew from West Asia who spoke Aramaic. It is now acknowledged by a number of researchers that much of what we accept as the "appearance" of Jesus is not altogether accurate. Jesus would most likely have resembled a modern Fertile Crescent Arab or Jew from places such as Jerusalem, Amman, Hebron, Damascus or Basra. Scientists have

recently reconstructed the image of Christ (http://www.lightplanet.com/mormons/basic/christ/physical_appearance.htm) as he would have most likely appeared in his lifetime in ancient Palestine and Judea:



The reconstruction that you witnessed in the link above is very different from the icons we are used to seeing in the churches and Christian arts of Northwestern Europe. How many images have you seen in North American or Western European churches that show the Aramaic Christ? It would seem that, like Alexander, the “real image” of Jesus has shifted in accordance with politics, ideology, dogma and popular culture over the centuries. Interestingly, many cultures across the world today interpret Jesus’ physical appearance in accordance with their own anthropomorphic image:

<http://dsc.discovery.com/convergence/jesus/photo/photo.html>

It appears that Hollywood has successfully associated a certain physical appearance with modernity, progress, success and rationalism. By implication, that which is not of that “certain look” is in danger of being associated with all that is the antithesis of that. With this logic, historical reality is bent to fit a manufactured reality: a fantasy.

(4) Greek or Macedonian?

This movie contains a number of concerns to Greeks in particular, such as Macedonia being “different” from the rest of Greece, a very contested issue in the Balkans these days. Although not generally reported, the government of Greece, which had originally supported the Alexander picture, withdrew its funding and support for Oliver Stone’s project:

<http://www.hri.org/news/greek/ana/1998/98-11-17.ana.html#19>

There was to have been co-operation between Stone and the Greek government, but this was apparently changed when the details of the script became known.

To be honest, I was left confused as to whether the Macedonians were Greek or not. This may be an attempt to placate those who view Macedonia as “different” from Greece, not unlike those who try to argue that Kurds and Azerbaijanis are not Iranians. The Greeks, like the Iranians today, are now confronted with having to defend their historical heritage against those who have territorial claims against their nation. The Oliver Stone picture, in my opinion, does not clearly define Macedonians as Greeks.

In addition to these concerns, many Greeks are offended by the bisexual portrayal of Alexander. It is also rumoured that many Greek associations may have plans to sue Oliver Stone.

Again, ancient Greek terminology and its translations by western scholars may have played a role in the “bisexual” interpretation of Alexander. We have already seen how the term “Xanthenein” has been stretched to paint a “Scandinavian” Alexander.

(5) The Portrayal of Roxanna and the Perpetuation of the “Hollywood Persian”

My wife Parnian and I, as Iranians, found the portrayal of Roxanna insulting. This portrayal has been defined by the aforementioned Professor Fox, whose has already been noted for his shallow understanding of Persian arts and architecture. Professor Fox’s portrayal of Roxanna also indicates that he has very little knowledge of Iran’s anthropological history.

The portrayal of ancient Iranians is outright comical, if not insulting. The inaccurate Hollywood portrayal of Iranians is exemplified by the selection of Rosario Dawson (http://www.lostfocus.de/archives/rosario_dawson.jpg), a very talented, beautiful and intelligent black actress, to star as Roxanna, an ancient Iranian queen from Soghdia-Bactria. Roxanna was not black, anymore than Alexander was Scandinavian. Having Rosario Dawson portrayed as Roxanna makes as much sense as having Lucy Liu, an Asian-American, portraying Queen Victoria of Great Britain.

The term Roxanna is derived from Old Iranian “Rokh-shwan” or “face (Ruksh) - fair skinned-shiny (shwan)”. Roxanna was related to a North Iranian tribe known later as the Sarmatians, the remnants who survive in the Caucasus and Russia as the Ossetians (ancient Alans or Ard-Alans)

Roman sources such as Pliny repeatedly describe ancient North Iranian peoples such as the Alans and Seres as “...flaxen (blonde) haired blue eyed nomads...” (see Wilcox, p.19). Rosario Dawson does not fit the description of an ancient Iranian woman, especially from Northern Iranian stock. The Ossetians of today, descendants of ancient Northern Iranians, predominantly resemble northern Iranians and Europeans and speak an archaic Iranian language (like the Avesta of the Zoroastrians). Blondism is very common among these descendants of ancient North Iranians in cities such as Beslan and

Vladikafkaz. It can be argued that Roxanna was a brunette, however, she was of Northern Iranian stock, which would still make her very different from actress Rosario Dawson.

There are plenty of talented actresses of Iranian descent in North America alone that would well fit the historical Roxanna. Oliver Stone could have just as easily selected an Iranian actress, however he relied on the historical “expertise” of Professor Fox. The question that can be addressed to Professor Fox is this: what makes Rosario Dawson so representative of Iranian women and Roxanna in particular? Is the Professor aware of the anthropology and history of ancient Iran as it was at 333 BC?

More puzzling is the design of Roxanna’s costume in the movie. Note the photo showing the marriage of Alexander to Roxanna. Roxanna appears to wear a Burka-like veil constructed of strips of metallic mesh in which the face is partly hidden. See the photo:

http://www.alexander-the-great.co.uk/showimages.php?id=alex3_1.jpg

The headgear is partly correct if we base the costume on the Saka Paradrya Iranian speaking tribes of the present-day Ukraine (8-4th centuries BC). The decorations on the headgear are simply wrong and Iranian queens did not wear face masks of any type. For a discussion of the Saka Paradrya, known in the west as Scythians, consult:

E.V. Cernenko. The Scythians 700-300 BC. London: OspreyPublishing, 1989.

ISBN: 0850454786

See colour plate G.

Once you have consulted Professor’s Cernenko’s book, it will be evident how flawed the costume design is, not to mention the colors. None of the reconstructions by Professor Gorelik, which Cernenko has consulted, show any type of face masks for ancient Iranian women. Ancient Iranian women, who were found in military, religious and political leadership roles, simply did not wear such attire during courtship, marriage or everyday duties.

It is not clear why Professor Fox has chosen a Burka-like face mask for Roxanna at Alexander’s wedding. Variants of this face mask are present in Afghanistan today, mainly the result of former Taliban rule and very conservative Pashtoon tribal society, which very strongly identifies itself with the culture of ancient Arabia.

These errors are enough to question the historical accuracy of the Alexander picture. It seems that when it comes to Iranians and their identity, history is easily “re-written” for the benefit of popular entertainment. As Professor Fox has duly noted in an interview with Archeology Today (<http://www.archaeology.org/online/interviews/fox.html>), the movie “could not totally depart from audiences’ expectations”. The “audience” undoubtedly has “expectations” as to what Iranians “should” look like.

Given Professor Fox’s rudimentary knowledge of Persia’s anthropology, you may wish to refer to:

J.P. Mallory. In Search of the Indo-Europeans: Language, Archeology and Myth. London: Thames & Hudson, 1989.

ISBN: 0-500-27616-1

Read pages: 9-23, 48-56, 78, 266-272.

An excellent article by Dr. Oric Basirov is posted as well:

http://home.btconnect.com/CAIS/Religions/iranian/Zarathushtrian/Oric.Basirov/origin_of_the_iranians.htm

For color reconstructions of ancient Iranians see:

P. Wilcox. Rome's Enemies (3): Parthians and Sassanid Persians. London: Osprey Publishing, 1986.

ISBN: 0850456886

T. Newark. The Barbarians. London: Concord Publications Company, 1998.

ISBN: 9623616341

See Page 7 (the Saka – ancestors of today's Lurs and Seistanis) and 30 (ancestors of the Ard-Alan).

Iran today is very much a genetic tapestry that includes blondism in Northern and Western Iran (e.g. Parsabad, or Talysh), as well as among Iranian peoples such as Lurs, Azeris, Mazandarani, Kurds and Boyer-Ahmadis. Iran is also home to Arabians in Khuzistan and the Persian Gulf coast, Asiatic Turcomens in the Northeast, as well as the Baluchis near Pakistan, who have a strong Dravidian admixture. You may wish to read the very thorough and precise compendium of Iranian peoples today by Massoume Price:

F. Hole (Editor). The Archaeology of Western Iran: Settlement and Society from Prehistory to the Islamic Conquest (Smithsonian Series in Archaeological Inquiry). Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987.

ISBN: 0874745268

W. B. Fisher (Editor). The Cambridge History of Iran: Volume 1, The Land of Iran.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

ISBN: 0521069351

These books (especially the Cambridge History of Iran series) will provide a more informed and less misleading analysis of Iran's anthropological history than that offered by Professor Fox.

Hollywood portrayals of Iranians are in stark contrast to reality. Until the Arabian arrivals in the 7th century AD, the majority of Iranians would have looked no different from the Greeks or Romans. Greek and Roman references to classical Iranians do not refer to them as different in the "physical" sense; differences lay mainly in manner of government, philosophy and to a lesser extent, mythology. The Azadan nobility of the

Parthian and Sassanian Savaran (elite cavalry), more than 500 years later than Alexander, are described by Peter Wilcox as "...very similar to the Celts...strikingly similar to Northwest Europeans..." (p.6). There are still many short stories in Southern Italy today which accurately portray the temperament and appearance of the Persians as they would have appeared in antiquity.

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Despite the powerful historical revisionism of a number of mainly northwest European historians such as Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) or the aforementioned Fallmerayer, the Greco-Roman world and Persia have profoundly influenced each other in areas such as architecture, the arts and crafts, the sciences and medicine, mythology, military and engineering technologies. While true that one can find a number of anti-Persian references in Greco-Roman sources, these were in the context of wars that broke out between these powers. A perfect example of this is how the movie explicitly shows Aristotle deriding the Persians as inferior to the Greeks. Modern Greeks place this in context and see Aristotle as expressing the political climate of his day. Iranians are very well liked and respected in Greece and are seen as the heirs of a great civilization. Alexander himself came to greatly appreciate the Iranians and their culture. It is a shame that the movie did not show Alexander as paying homage to the tomb of Cyrus the Great.

As noted previously, Greco-Roman historians who were prepared to acknowledge and highly praise the Persians (e.g. Xenophon, Plutarch, etc.). Today's popular culture, education systems and movie entertainment industries in particular, seem to be providing a very selective and distorted view of Persia with respect to antiquity. Many are simply not aware (or wish not be aware) of Persia's importance and status in antiquity let alone her major contributions to world civilization.

Ancient Greeks, Romans and Persians had much more in common with each other than with the relatively unsophisticated Celtic and Germanic peoples who were roaming the Northern European forests. For an incisive discussion of these little discussed topics consult:

N. Spatari. Calabria, L'enigma Delle Arti Asittite: Nella Calabria Ultramediterranea. Italy: MUSABA, 2003.
ISBN: 8887935300

As far as I know, this book has still not be translated from Italian to English. Still an excellent read, especially with the illustrations.

P. Kriwaczek. In Search of Zarathustra: The First prophet and the Ideas that Changed the World. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002.
ISBN: 0297646222

I look forward to the day when we will see blockbuster movies of Shapur I (241-272) who defeated three Roman emperors in his lifetime and destroyed a third of Rome's armies. Even more dramatic would be to see movies made of the life and times of figures

such as Zarathustra, Aryaman, Shahrbaraz, Mani, Mazdak, Babak, Abu Ali Sina or Omar Khayyam.

Dr. Kaveh Farrokh
Manuvera@aol.com