

Landscape, religion and memory in Ancient Macedonia: Alexander the Great and the trees

This study examines the historical and historiographical context in which trees and plants are related to Alexander the Great and elucidates their political significance. Through the discussion of three case studies, it aims to offer a broader synthesis insisting on a comparative approach of different kind of evidence and tracing the evolution from the late classical to the Roman times as well.

1. Taking into consideration recent interpretations, the hunting scene of Tomb II in Vergina, set in a landscape with a special flora, could illustrate the importance of the hunt and the “sacred” trees in the making of a new heir. Thus, it could be interpreted as the rite to the transition into a new monarchy.

2. The vegetal world was part of the quest for new knowledge acquainted by the Asian and Indian expedition and it marked a significant aspect of the royal ideology of a king as “master over the nature” and master of the world (*kosmokrator*). In this way, Alexander had to follow the path opened by previous, legendary conquerors of Asia, such as Dionysos. The ivy, related to this deity, discovered in the hinterland of Asia becomes an argument for the legitimization of the conquest; this plant is presented as a *mnèma* (μνήμα) of Dionysos’ presence in Asia. This term let us consider the way Alexander historians thought of the historicity of this conquest, of the monumentalization of the past, as well as of Dionysos as a role model for Alexander and those who wanted to imitate him.

3. Oracles played an important role in Alexander’s expedition. This fact seems to be elaborated in the invented tradition on Alexander’s intercourse with oracle trees at the edges of the world, where he is informed about his death. Foretelling the king’s death was a political matter par excellence, especially for ancient non-Greek societies (e.g. Persian, Babylonian), who invented ways of such a prognosis. Here, this episode is contextualized vis-à-vis both Greek and “Oriental” traditions.

It is argued that representations of trees and plants can help us study Ancient Macedonians’ perceptions of power, space, identity and memory.

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