

Matthew Vivonia

Alexander the Great's "Pirate" Army: Terminology, Context, and Legacy

ABSTRACT: *In addition to his Macedonians, Alexander the Great relied heavily on mercenaries for his conquests in Asia. After his death, while his "successors" (the Diadochi) were fighting over his inheritance, the eastern Mediterranean experienced a prolonged surge in piracy. Based on a study of ancient Greek terminology, the historical context of Alexander's mercenary army, and the latter's legacy in the late fourth and third century BCE near the geographical centers of sea raiding, this article argues that it was Alexander's own men who turned to piracy after his death, making them the bane of the Diadochi.*

KEYWORDS: *antiquity; Macedon; Greece; Middle East; Mediterranean; Alexander the Great; Diadochi; piracy; Arrian; terminology*

Introduction

According to an old legend, Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE) once captured a pirate and decided to investigate him for his crimes. Alexander asked him, "What is your idea, in infesting the sea?" The pirate responded, "The same as yours, in infesting the earth! But because I do it with a tiny craft, I'm called a pirate: because you have a mighty navy, you're called an emperor."¹ In certain versions of the legend, Alexander frees the pirate for his profound response. It is impossible to know whether this interaction really happened, but if Alexander did let the pirate go, his motivation would have been entirely understandable. After all, their behaviors were not so different. While traditional Alexander scholars might contest this claim and find the comparison between Alexander and a minor thief an insult to the great Macedonian's legacy, much of Alexander's military was comprised of men just like this pirate. In actuality, the lines between piracy, theft, and military conquest were not so clear in ancient Greece. The likelihood of Alexander's men having contributed to the Hellenistic epidemic of piracy is exceptionally high. Alexander hired and commanded vast numbers of mercenaries during his conquests in the East, but his successors struggled with controlling the Mediterranean against piratical raiding. Piracy became an issue after Alexander's death because the mercenaries he employed were no longer given proper incentives to raid for Macedon rather than against it.

The amount of scholarship on Alexander is enormous to say the least. In 2008, Waldemar Heckel remarked that writing Alexander's biography "has been done

¹ This story can be found in Saint Augustine [of Hippo], *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson, with a new introduction by Gillian R. Evans (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 139 (book IV, chapter 4). See also Noam Chomsky, *Pirates and Emperors, Old and New: International Terrorism in the Real World* (1986; Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2015), xiii. Ancient sources in this article are usually cited in traditional format (book, chapter, line number).

so many times that it seems pointless to repeat the exercise."² Alexander died in 323 BCE. Surviving historical writing about him goes back to the first century BCE. Arrian (85/90-after 145/146 CE) is regarded as the chief source, although Diodorus Siculus (first century BCE), Plutarch (46-after 119 CE), Quintus Curtius Rufus (first century CE), and Justin (second/third century CE) have also supplied plenty of information.³ All these authors worked at least two or more centuries after Alexander's death. Callisthenes (ca. 370-327 BCE) was one of the few historical writers to have known Alexander personally, but none of his works have survived into the modern era. These texts, however, open the door for medieval writers known jointly as Pseudo-Callisthenes who, since the fourth century CE, ghostwrote a collection of myths regarding the young Macedonian king: *The Romance of Alexander*.⁴ Over time, these tales became sensationalized renditions of the original stories, similar to the Arthurian legends. Though widely recognized as fictional, the *Romance* remained hugely popular for centuries, romanticizing the public opinion of Alexander along with it. It took until the twentieth century for Alexander's biography to come closer to scholarship than entertainment.

One issue over which modern scholars differ with regard to Alexander is simply how much they like him. In 1948, William Woodethorpe Tarn (1869-1957) published a two-volume study on *Alexander the Great*. Since then, Tarn has come to be regarded as the chief force behind Alexander's modern romanticization.⁵ Tarn would have lent no credence to any purported similarity between Alexander and a common pirate. Since publication, Tarn's works have inspired many others, including historical fiction novelist Mary Renault. With lines like "There goes my lord, whom I was born to follow. I have found a King," Renault takes after Tarn,

² Waldemar Heckel, *The Conquests of Alexander the Great* (2007; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), xi.

³ Arrian, *The Anabasis of Alexander, or, The History of the Wars and Conquests of Alexander the Great*, trans. Edward James Chinnock (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1884); Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (1919; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923); Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, trans. Charles H. Oldfather (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933); Quintus Curtius, *History of Alexander*, trans. John C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1946); Justin, *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus: Volume 1*, trans. John C. Yardley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). For Arrian as the chief source for the life of Alexander, see, for example, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World*, ed. John Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), s.v. "Arrian."

⁴ Pseudo-Callisthenes, *The Romance of Alexander by Pseudo Callisthenes*, trans. Albert Murgdich Wolohojian (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

⁵ William W. Tarn, *Alexander the Great: Volume 1, Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1948); William W. Tarn, *Alexander the Great: Volume 2, Sources and Studies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1948). These volumes are considered Tarn's most famous and romanticizing works; see [Jeanne Reames, "Fire Bringer: Oliver Stone's Alexander," *Hephaestion Philalexandros*](#), accessed April 2, 2020; and David Constantine, *The Pillars of Hercules* (San Francisco: Nightshade Books, 2012), 393, for references to Tarn's romanticism.

upholding a still popular portrayal of Alexander as a pristine humanitarian.⁶ This positive approach to the Macedonian conqueror may have worked for some, but certainly not all. George L. Cawkwell (1919-2019) has argued that historians “who tend to think that Alexander could make no mistakes [...] should be left to their hero-worship.”⁷ Tarn has been scrutinized for his bias by a number of scholars: he was criticized by Jeanne Reames for his homophobic comments on Hephaestion’s relationship with Alexander,⁸ and historian Ernst Badian opened an article about Parmenion, one of Alexander’s generals, by calling Tarn’s work “romantic idealization” and an “acceptance of the favorable and rejection of the unfavorable,”⁹ and then proceeded to shred Tarn’s arguments regarding Parmenion and referring to Alexander’s conquests as massacre, thus taking a much more grisly approach to the young Macedonian.

Thus, there are considerable divisions between historians who adore Alexander and those who do not. This article focuses on Alexander’s relationship to mercenary work and piracy. To have an honest conversation about whether Macedonians were in fact employing pirates, biographers like Tarn will be set aside, and instead the floor will be given to those who have studied piracy during the Hellenistic age extensively, such as Herbert William Parke (1903-1986) and Matthew Trundle (1965-2019), and their works *Greek Mercenary Soldiers* (1933) and *Greek Mercenaries* (2004) respectively.¹⁰ As for pirates, Philip de Souza, a Classicist at University College Dublin, has contributed significantly to the field with his monograph on *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World* (1999), as has Janice J. Gabbert, professor emerita at Wright State University, with her article “Piracy in the Early Hellenistic Period” (1986).¹¹ This discussion of Hellenistic piracy will then take us back to the ancient sources, particularly the Greek orator Demosthenes (384-322 BCE) and his habit of calling the Macedonians “pirate lords.”¹²

⁶ Mary Renault, *Fire from Heaven* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969); Mary Renault, *The Persian Boy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 130. See Reames, “Fire Bringer,” and Constantine, *Pillars of Hercules*, 393, for references to Renault’s work in the shadow of William W. Tarn.

⁷ George L. Cawkwell, *The Greek Wars: The Failure of Persia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 199.

⁸ Jeanne Reames-Zimmerman, “Hephaestion Amyntoros: Éminence Grise at the Court of Alexander the Great” (PhD diss. Pennsylvania State University, 1998), 240. She refers here to comments made in Tarn, *Alexander the Great: Volume 2*, 57.

⁹ Ernst Badian, “The Death of Parmenio,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 91 (1960): 324-338, here 324.

¹⁰ Herbert W. Parke, *Greek Mercenary Soldiers: From the Earliest Times to the Battle of Ipsus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933); Matthew Trundle, *Greek Mercenaries: From the Late Archaic Period to Alexander* (New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2004).

¹¹ Philip de Souza, *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Janice J. Gabbert, “Piracy in the Early Hellenistic Period: A Career Open to Talents,” *Greece & Rome* 33, no. 2 (October 1986): 156-163.

¹² Demosthenes, *Orations: Volume 1*, trans. James H. Vince (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), Fourth Philippic, 10.34.

Historians, both ancient and modern, have made it sound as though Alexander hired mercenaries to fight against pirates.¹³ However, the evidence suggests that, in ancient Greece, "mercenaries" and "pirates" were interchangeable terms. Therefore, differentiating between Alexander's men and the raiders with whom they collided is not as straightforward as it may seem. This article seeks to address this very ambiguity and analyze Alexander's ability to rein in vast numbers of mercenaries and use them to his advantage.

I. Terminology

In the ancient Greek language, the terms for "pirate," "bandit," "mercenary," and "soldier" were fairly interchangeable: there was no objective definition for any of these terms, and there was no equivalent for the English word "pirate." One of the most commonly used words for "pirate" was *ληστής* (*leistes*) whose root *ληίς* (*leis*) meant "plunder" or "spoils." Homer regularly used the term *leistes* to describe raiders. Another commonly used term was *πειρατής* (*peirates*) which is more recognizable for its similarity to the English word "pirate;" however, in its actual meaning, *peirates* was even further from "pirate" than *leistes*, as it derived from the word for "trial," *πείρα* (*peira*), and its root verb *πειράω* (*peirao*), meaning "to try" or "to attempt," thus making *peirates* literally "the one who attempts something" (presumably robbery). Polybius (ca. 200-ca. 120 BCE), Diodorus Siculus, and inscriptions throughout the Mediterranean used *peirates*.¹⁴ Some authors even used *leistes* and *peirates* interchangeably. Strabo (ca. 63 BCE-after 23 CE) used both terms in his criticism of the Pamphylians and Cilicians.¹⁵ Achilles Tatius (second century CE) even used forms of them both in the same sentence: in his romance *Leucippe and Clitophon*, he says *ἦν γὰρ καὶ ἄλλως εὐρωστος τὸ σῶμα καὶ φύσει πειρατικός*, which means "he was both exceptionally strong of body and by nature piratical," employing the term *πειρατικός* (*peiratikos*), and then goes on to say *ταχὺ μὲν ἐξεῦρε ληστὰς ἀλιεῖς ἀπὸ τῆς κώμης ἐκείνης*, which means "he quickly sought out some pirate sailors from that village," this time using *ληστὰς* (*leistas*).¹⁶ Achilles Tatius specified that they were raiding on sea rather than land, but in many other cases it seemed irrelevant to the ancient historians where the robbery was committed.

The linguistic exception to the widespread use of *peirates* and *leistes* to describe pirates was *καταποντισται* (*katapontistai*), meaning "the ones who throw into the

¹³ The following studies are among those that refer to pirates as antagonists of the state and separate from the group of mercenaries hired by Alexander: Gabbert, "Piracy in the Early Hellenistic Period;" and Elpida Hadjidaki, "The Classical and Hellenistic Harbor at Phalasarna: A Pirate's Port?" (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1988).

¹⁴ De Souza, *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World*, 2-6. Some of the following translations are taken directly from de Souza, others are my own.

¹⁵ Strabo, *Geography*, trans. Horace L. Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917), 14.3.2.

¹⁶ Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon*, trans. Stephen Gaselee (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 2.17.3 (the translation in the text above is de Souza's).

sea."¹⁷ Its root verb, *καταποντίζω* (*katapontizo*) meant "to plunge" or "sink into the sea," as if to drown. *Katapontistai* was the only term for pirates that exclusively meant "sea bandits," yet it was scarcely used, and Dio Cassius (ca. 163-after 229 CE) was one of the few ancient writers who employed this term for banditry.¹⁸ This does not contribute much to the study of Alexander, though, since at the time when the most reliable work on Alexander (i.e., Arrian) was written, Dio Cassius was still a century away from being born. Further down the line, in the tenth century CE, the Byzantine lexicon *Suda* included definitions for each of these three terms that made them sound distinct from each other.¹⁹ However, Arrian, Plutarch, Diodorus Siculus, and others who wrote about Alexander did not use them systematically or as distinct from each other.

Similar to the linguistic ambiguities when denoting pirates, there was also a lack of distinction when it came to describing mercenaries. No ancient Greek term is the equivalent of the English word "mercenary." In ancient Greek, armies of men were considered *στρατιώται* (*stratiotai*) which translates to "soldiers." For centuries, this term described the working men of ancient Greece who would farm in the off-seasons and fight in the on-seasons. They were juxtaposed against the *ἐπικούροι* (*epikouroi*), meaning "helpers;" the *ξένοι* (*xenoi*), meaning "foreigners;" and the *μισθοφόροι* (*misthophoroi*), meaning "wage-earners." All three of these were used to describe mercenaries. *Epikouros* means "ally" or more literally "fighter alongside."²⁰ Homer's *Iliad* almost exclusively uses the term *epikouros* for "mercenary," but it also uses *epikouros* to refer to Aphrodite when she assists other gods, showing that it was not used exclusively to denote a mercenary. The term *xenos*, the root of our English word *xenophobia*, means "foreigner" or "stranger."²¹ In earlier parts of his work, Arrian uses *stratiotai* and *xenoi* to differentiate Macedonians from mercenaries. This becomes indistinguishable later in his work, though, when Alexander's men become ingredients in a Mediterranean human melting pot. The word *misthophoros* eventually prevailed as the dominant label for "mercenary." Stemming from the term *μισθός* (*misthos*), which means "payment," *misthophoros* described a soldier "persuaded by wage payment."²² This word may seem the closest to a literal translation for "mercenary," but also becomes confusing in Alexander's historiography. While useful for Philip II's era to mark the difference between Macedonians and paid foreigners, *misthophoroi* phase in and out of Arrian's work once he starts discussing Philip's son Alexander.

¹⁷ De Souza, *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World*, 9.

¹⁸ See De Souza, *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World*, 10.

¹⁹ *Suidae Lexicon*, ed. Ada Adler (1928-1938; Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1989-1994).

²⁰ Brian M. Lavelle, "Epikouros and Epikouroi in Early Greek Literature and History," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 38 (1997): 229-262, here 229.

²¹ Trundle, *Greek Mercenaries*, 10.

²² Trundle, *Greek Mercenaries*, 10.

All members of Alexander's army were paid. Thus, the *stratiotai* could no longer be distinguished from the *misthophoroi* once all men were receiving wages. To make matters worse, a number of titles were assigned to ship captains and seamen all around the Greek world. The seamen could accept wages from anyone, even enemy "nations," and continue to be referred to by their naval titles. It would seem, given the definitions, that they would be considered *misthophoroi* or *katapontistai*, but the ancient writers do not always describe them as such.²³

This ancient Greek linguistic mess illustrates the level of ambiguity associated with pirates, bandits, mercenaries, seamen, and soldiers in Alexander's world. All these "positions" could be held by the same men at different times. None of them had a definition or translation that was written in stone; instead, ancient authors considered it a matter of context. Janice Gabbert has argued that there was, in fact, no real distinction between pirate and mercenary in ancient Greece.²⁴ Thus, it is easy to see how Alexander's use of "mercenaries" could really mean a use of pirates. Greek authors typically used *leistēs* and *peirates* to describe a criminal or an enemy. This is why Demosthenes used these terms to attack Philip II. *Misthophoroi* were free from this connotation. Historians old and new have recognized that Alexander commanded an army of mercenaries. Some authors have chosen to call them hired professionals, but the message behind it is the same: Alexander was recruiting men from all over the Greek world to conquer the East, and he was paying them to do it.

II. Context

Alexander's father, Philip II of Macedon, made the hiring of men a trend throughout ancient Greece. Parke states that, in Philip's time, "the mercenary had become a typical feature of Greek warfare" because "the mercenary was a professional; and ultimately the professional ousted the amateur from all important warfare."²⁵ While this may be applauding the mercenary a bit too much, the point Parke is trying to make is that Macedonian armies were no longer comprised just of able-bodied Macedonian working men who only took part in warfare during late spring and summer when they could afford to do so. A social and cultural shift had taken place. As Philip II looked outward to hire fighting men, he was inspired by rulers from Persia and all over the Near East. To them, large numbers of freemen without "national" loyalties were just floating all over the Mediterranean, available for hire. By the time Alexander led his forces against Darius III of Persia (ca. 380-330 BCE), Darius had thousands of Greek mercenaries in his employ. Philip's widespread employment of mercenaries even earned him the title "pirate of the Greeks" from Demosthenes.²⁶ Philip was famous for the

²³ Demosthenes, *Orations*, 50.12, refers to such men as seamen.

²⁴ Gabbert, "Piracy in the Early Hellenistic Period," 156.

²⁵ Parke, *Greek Mercenary Soldiers*, 113 and 1, respectively.

²⁶ Also called "plunderer of the Greeks;" see Demosthenes, *Orations*, 10.34.

level of discipline he practiced in his army, hence the prevailing notion of Macedonian forces that consisted of "hired professionals." The idea of employing mercenaries alongside Macedonians was passed down to Alexander by Philip II, but the new king ended up using far more of these mercenaries than his father could have ever imagined.

The military numbers recorded by ancient writers are not particularly trustworthy. Polybius claims that Darius had 30,000 Greek mercenaries with him at the Battle of Issus in Cilicia/southern Turkey (333 BCE).²⁷ Parke insists that 30,000 men would have been utterly impossible, given the geographical circumstances.²⁸ Early on in Alexander's campaign, so Diodorus Siculus asserts, only 5,000 of his 32,000 men were mercenaries.²⁹ Parke's estimate of mercenaries hired by Alexander throughout his campaign is of 42,700 foot-soldiers and 5,180 cavalrymen.³⁰ These numbers are debatable. They were also in flux. It is clear, though, that Alexander was lacking hired men at the beginning of his campaign because of his father's vast military spending. Military matters had been incredibly important to the strictly disciplined Philip II, and mercenaries were expensive. Thus, Philip had not left Alexander a large sum of spending money. In fact, Alexander struggled with funds up until one of his greatest victories, the Battle of Issus. Before Issus, Alexander had to disband troops since he lacked the ability to pay them.³¹ After Issus, he started to pick up additional fighters wherever he went. Arrian indicates that Alexander's mercenary count kept growing, especially after the Battle of Gaugamela near Erbil/Iraq (331 BCE).³²

As Alexander's force of mercenaries grew, so did the number of cities he had conquered that were now in need of protection. Alexander dropped off men almost as quickly as he picked them up. Historians hypothesize that he did not trust hired foreigners as much as he trusted his Macedonians. This makes sense, and it serves as an explanation for why he kept hired foreigners farther away. According to Arrian, Alexander surrounded himself with the "finest and best armed of the shield-bearing troops [...] as a body-guard."³³ Meanwhile, the number of mercenaries in the king's army consistently decreased, according to Arrian, until Gaugamela. They were ordered to secure gates outside the main force, sent on separate expeditions, or even left to garrison cities he had

²⁷ Polybius, *The Histories*, trans. William R. Paton, revised by Frank W. Walbank (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 12.18.

²⁸ Parke, *Greek Mercenary Soldiers*, 190.

²⁹ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 17.7.3.

³⁰ Parke, *Greek Mercenary Soldiers*, 198.

³¹ Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander*, 1.20.1.

³² Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander*, 3.19.6, discusses Alexander's funds and soldier counts. Parke, *Greek Mercenary Soldiers*, 197, references these numbers, as does Trundle, *Greek Mercenaries*, 64.

³³ Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander*, 2.5.1.

conquered.³⁴ De Souza has theorized that Alexander consistently took the Macedonians in his phalanx, while leaving *xenoi* to the less trustworthy jobs. This practice left Egypt, Halicarnassus (today's Bodrum/Turkey), Celaenae (in Phrygia/west central Turkey), Susa (today's Shush/Iran), and Arachosia (in today's Afghanistan) with large numbers of foreigners who had previously served under Alexander's command.³⁵

III. Legacy

Alexander never named a formal successor before he died, which caused a series of wars for power that lasted nearly forty years. After his death, the Diadochi struggled to keep his empire stable and safe from piracy. Diadochi, which translates to "successors," has become the collective name for Alexander's generals, family members, and companions who laid claim to his empire. While they fought amongst themselves for succession, the outskirts of Alexander's vast empire fell prey to a multitude of pirate groups. De Souza suggests that the internal conflict "provided many opportunities" for the pirates of the age.³⁶ Such a scenario is not at all uncommon, and parallels can be found in plenty of other global conflicts. Writing about seafarers from Late Imperial South China, Robert J. Antony has called it "symptomatic" of political instability to provide opportunity for theft and manipulation.³⁷ In order to showcase what the Diadochi were ultimately dealing with, we now turn to a few examples of piracy recorded in the fourth and third centuries BCE. In 304 BCE, one of these Diadochi, Demetrios I Poliorketes, the son of the king of Macedon (Antigonos I Monophthalmos), tried to lay siege to Rhodes³⁸ which was regularly attacked by Tyrrhenian pirates from the Italian Peninsula.³⁹ Another unsuccessful siege attempt was made in 287 BCE against Ephesos, this time by Lysimachos, another one of the Diadochi.⁴⁰ Aetolian pirates took the Delphic Amphiktyony and other central Greek cities in 277 BCE.⁴¹ Also in 277 BCE, Kassandreia (in Macedonia) was put under siege by Antigonos Gonatas, the son of Demetrios I Poliorketes, and this time it fell to his power.⁴²

Even kings in the third century BCE were recorded as hiring pirates. Ptolemy II used pirates to fight the Seleucid Antiochos I.⁴³ Aratos of Sikyon hired

³⁴ Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander*, 2.23.6.

³⁵ De Souza, *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World*, 197-198.

³⁶ De Souza, *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World*, 43.

³⁷ Robert J. Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2003), 28.

³⁸ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 20.82.

³⁹ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 16.5.3.

⁴⁰ Polyaeus, *Stratagems of War*, trans. Richard Shepherd (London: George Nicol, 1793), 8.57.

⁴¹ De Souza, *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World*, 70.

⁴² Polyaeus, *Stratagems*, 4.6.18.

⁴³ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, trans. William H. S. Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918), 1.7.3.

Xenophilos, whom Plutarch recorded as a "robber captain," to capture a city.⁴⁴ Evidence of less notable piracy is also abundant in inscriptions from this time. One example of this includes an Attic inscription from 250 BCE which states, *καὶ πολέμου γενομένου τοῦ περὶ Ἀλεξάνδρον καὶ πειρατικῶν ἐκπλεόντων ἐκ τοῦ Ἐπιλιμνίου*, which translates to "and when the war with Alexandros [of Corinth] broke out and pirates were sailing out from Epilimnion."⁴⁵ Historians today are not even sure where Epilimnion was. Such a vast number of cities were affected by pirate invasions that it may have seemed to civilians along the Mediterranean coast that nowhere was safe. Also apparent from the listed piratical acts is how long they continued after Alexander's death: he had died in 323 BCE, yet piracy was still endemic in 250 BCE. The authority of the Diadochi was almost certainly lacking. Evidence for rampant piracy abounds in all types of period sources.

Crete, Rhodes, and Delos were among the most pirate-infested islands in the Hellenistic era. They were also famous for their role in the highly lucrative Mediterranean slave trade. Strabo sums up the relationship between piracy and slavery quite well in his hostile description of the Pamphylian and Cilician pirates:

the Pamphyliaus and the Tracheian Cilicians [...] used their places as bases of operation for the business of piracy, when they engaged in piracy themselves or offered them to pirates as markets for the sale of booty and as naval stations. In Side, at any rate, a city in Pamphylia, the dockyards stood open to the Cilicians, who would sell their captives at auction there, though admitting that these were freemen.⁴⁶

The activity Strabo describes here may be viewed as conventional. Side was joined by plenty of other cities in this business. Crete was responsible for nearly half a dozen cities that were well known as hubs for the slave trade, and compared to Rhodes, Delos, and a few Aegean islands linked with piracy, Crete was much more expansive. Phalasarna was a large port town on the west end of Crete, highly developed, and infamous for piracy. Archaeological evidence seems to suggest that it was one the largest pirate hubs on the island. Historians theorize that it was later closed down by Pompey the Great.⁴⁷ The diverse coinage found at Hierapytna (Crete) shows evidence of wealth based on piracy.⁴⁸ Knossos and Miletos (also on Crete) yield similar corroborating material: a source from Miletos, dated from around 260-230 BCE, shows that the two cities made an agreement not to sell their respective people to each other.⁴⁹ Only a few miles off the coast of

⁴⁴ Plutarch, *Life of Aratus*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 6.

⁴⁵ Inscription SIG [*Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum*] no. 454 = IG [*Inscriptiones Graecae*] II.1225, line 13, quoted in De Souza, *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World*, 5.

⁴⁶ Strabo, *Geography*, 14.3.2.

⁴⁷ Hadjidaki, "Classical and Hellenistic Harbor at Phalasarna."

⁴⁸ E. J. P. Raven, "The Hierapytna Hoard of Greek and Roman Coins," *The Numismatic Chronicle and Journal of the Royal Numismatic Society*, 5th series, 18 (1938): 133-158.

⁴⁹ De Souza, *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World*, 62. De Souza references *Sda* [*Studi di diritto attico*] iii.482.

Crete, archaeological findings on the island of Antikythera likely also support wealth from piracy.⁵⁰ Delos and Rhodes feature inscriptions discussing their wealth and "theft." From Rhodes, we know the stories of pirates who were active there, and Delos's customs reveal that their vast wealth can be considered evidence for piracy. The town of Epidauros Limera in Laconia was a base used by pirates, and Gabbert has called it "a favorite recruiting center for mercenaries."⁵¹ Ephesos, too, was a large hub for the slave trade in the Near East.⁵² If Illyrians, Cilicians, Pamphylans, Tyrrhenians, and Aetolians can be found in all these places all over the Aegean Sea, it is likely that their profits derived from piracy.

The men contributing to the rampant piracy of the fourth and third centuries BCE were most likely the very same types of men who had once stood under Alexander's command. However, the aforementioned pirate bases and groups did not yield historical records that are comparable to those of the Macedonian conqueror in either quantity or quality. Apart from the archaeological evidence used to determine the level of traffic at these sites, we have no way of knowing how many men took part in piratical acts. It is clear, however, that "theft" increased after Alexander's death. Yet, similarly to what Robert Antony has concluded with regard to the shift from the Ming to the Qing dynasties, "given the economic and political anarchy of this period, a clear distinction between piracy, rebellion, and trade was impossible."⁵³ This type of disorder was not unique to modern China, just as it had not been unique to the ancient Mediterranean. The shortage of reliable ancient sources and the ambiguities of the ancient Greek language make it impossible for any modern historian to truly know who comprised these tribes of pirates. In the case of the so-called Illyrian pirates, De Souza claims that ancient writers like Polybius quickly called their attackers Illyrians without really knowing where their enemies came from.⁵⁴ When taking into consideration that Alexander had left mercenaries in the cities he had conquered as he was traveling east, it is entirely plausible that these men stopped serving him after hearing of his death. Ancient writers did not record what these mercenaries were up to after they had been left in Egypt or Halicarnassus. They are merely mentioned as having left Alexander's traveling armies.

To further emphasize the likelihood that Alexander's men embraced piracy after his death, we turn to Halicarnassus. Alexander had taken Halicarnassus by siege (334 BCE) during his pursuit of Darius III, but it was here that his funds

⁵⁰ Alan Johnston, Alessandro Quercia, Aris Tsaravopoulos, Andrew Bevan and James Conolly, "Pots, Piracy and Aegila: Hellenistic Ceramics from an Intensive Survey of Antikythera, Greece," *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 107 (2012): 247-272.

⁵¹ Gabbert, "Piracy in the Early Hellenistic Period," 162, references Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 3.23.6; Strabo, *Geography*, 3.368; and IG [*Inscriptiones Graecae*] V.1.931.

⁵² David Lewis, "Near Eastern Slaves in Classical Attica and the Slave Trade with Persian Territories," *The Classical Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2011): 91-113.

⁵³ Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea*, 28.

⁵⁴ De Souza, *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World*, 80.

would not allow him to keep marching since he had too many, presumably unpaid, mercenaries. According to Parke, Alexander left 3,000 hired men in the city before moving further east. We hear nothing of these men in later years, as they were probably deemed insignificant by ancient historians. Alexander died eleven years later. As piracy increased, Halicarnassus was conveniently located between some of the most vibrant pirate bases in the eastern Mediterranean: Rhodes less than 150 miles south by sea; Ephesos just a couple hundred miles to the north; the wide expanse of the Aegean, including Delos, to the west; and Knossos and Hierapytna on the eastern side of Crete just a day away by sea. Alexander had left a force of 3,000 hired men surrounded by the biggest pirate towns of the age. What motivation did they have to continue to work for their king after his death? The political instability due to the Diadochi's infighting most likely cost them their "paycheck." Joining any of the numerous bandit groups that were just a day's distance away would have been a logical choice. Macedonian control was waning, and the Diadochi were not doing much to stop banditry either. In Gabbert's words: "no power was strong enough - or cared enough - to attempt to suppress piracy."⁵⁵ This is why Alexander's men were likely the ones later responsible for the piracy that would plague the Diadochi. The conqueror had been able to keep them in line, but his successors were not.

Alexander gave his hired men a reason to fight for him. According to Parke, "it was a combined army of Macedonians and mercenaries that conquered the world for Alexander."⁵⁶ The Macedonians had obvious reasons for supporting him, but on closer inspection, so did the mercenaries. Alexander famously never lost a battle. Men fighting for pay rather than "national" loyalties are liable to choose the (presumably) winning side. Alexander successfully proved to them that he was that winning side. His success at the Battle of Issus, where his men had found themselves largely outnumbered, marked him as a star strategist. When he seized Tyre after fierce rebellion from its people, he reached new heights. With every victory, he became the more trustworthy choice. His power eventually became so intimidating that cities started surrendering upon his arrival. Egypt and Babylon, both wealthy kingdoms and thousands of years old, handed themselves into his dominion.⁵⁷ The Diadochi simply could not offer Alexander's standard of guarantee when it came to positive results. Not even the sophisticated Athenians or the battle-driven Spartans were a match for Alexander's abilities. For this reason, it is clear why pirates, mercenaries, and thugs would choose to unify under Alexander and nobody else.

⁵⁵ Gabbert, "Piracy in the Early Hellenistic Period," 156.

⁵⁶ Parke, *Greek Mercenary Soldiers*, 2.

⁵⁷ Heckel, *Conquests of Alexander the Great*, 71.

Conclusion

Traditional Alexander scholars may have attempted to sever the connection between Alexander and Hellenistic piracy through careful choice of words. The geography and linguistics of the time would instead suggest a close relationship. Creating a clean distinction between the terms "mercenary" and "pirate" is a modern construct. Regardless of what one calls Alexander's men, he was an excellent commander. Whether he led a group of thieves or a group of honest men does not take away from his accomplishments. Armies of all sizes and inclinations have plundered when necessary. It is unlikely that, if these archpirates of the Hellenistic era could indeed be proven to have followed Alexander into battle, public opinion regarding him would change.

Historians and non-historians alike remember Alexander as a man with stunning determination and a professional army. Philip II had begun the practice of hiring men from outside Macedonia, and although these were expensive, they helped turn the Macedonian military into a disciplined force. These paid men assisted Alexander in taking the largest territory any ancient Greek (or Macedonian) would ever conquer. He picked up large numbers of soldiers as he moved east, leaving them in various cities as he continued his conquests. After his death, his successors struggled to wrestle the eastern Mediterranean from the clutches of theft and slaving. The various cities in which Alexander had left his paid men became subject to the powerful pirates of the day. The profits that were to be gained from joining with other pirate bases were higher and more enticing than serving as guards for a dead man. Thus, these military men likely deserted the cities they were assigned to and joined the ranks of pirates.

Using this logic, it is inaccurate to say that Alexander used mercenaries to fight off pirates. Whether or not his army was comprised of hired professionals, mercenaries, bandits, pirates, or delinquent thugs is simply a matter of vocabulary. Modern historians have realized that there was no clear distinction between mercenaries and pirates in the ancient world, and the ambiguity in the usage of the terms *leistes*, *peirates*, *katapontistes*, *stratiotes*, *epikouros*, *xenos*, and *misthophoros* underscores that point. Alexander convinced these men, whoever they were, to conquer the known world for him and with him. His discipline, conviction, ambition, invincible military success, and consequent wealth made it so. These were traits the Diadochi clearly did not have. So, what is the big difference between Alexander's conquest and the humble raiding of a pirate with one little ship? There is none. Alexander was just better at it, and he had better "press."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Matthew Vivonia of Mission Viejo, California, earned his B.A. in History (2018) and his Single Subject Teaching Credential in Social Science (2019) at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), where he is a member of the Theta-Pi chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honors Society). He is working in the Saddleback Valley Unified School District. His article printed above originated in a senior research seminar offered by CSUF's History Department.