

The modern mythology of the left-handedness of Alexander the Great

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The prevalent modern suggestion that Alexander the Great was left-handed probably derives from Michael Barsley's (1966) book, *Left-handed man in a right-handed world*, perhaps by mutation from an earlier story cited by Wile in 1934 from a 17th century Rabbinical exegesis, which said that Alexander discovered a country where all the inhabitants were left-handed. That itself may derive in part from the medieval Hebrew *Book of Josippon*, which mentions Alexander talking of the superiority of the left hand and of how "kings stemming from the tribe of kings are left-handed".

Despite the absence of any classical evidence that Alexander the Great was left-handed (Small, 2006), the idea that he was left-handed is a recurrent feature of recent popular accounts of left-handedness, and can be found in a host of newspaper articles, as well as in popular books. The internet also has many lists of famous left-handers, the vast majority of which—17 out of 20 that I have looked at—cite Alexander as left-handed (see Table 1). Many of these are probably copied from one another (Elias, 1998). The earliest unambiguous statement I can find for Alexander's left-handedness is by Fincher (1977), who on p. 26 of his book *Sinister People*,¹ at the end of the

¹ This book seems to have had a complicated publishing history. My own hardback copy, published by G. P. Putnam's Sons in New York in 1977, has the full title on the cover of *Sinister People: The looking glass world of the left-hander. An in-depth study of the origins and consequences of being left-handed*. However, there would seem to be a second version of the book, also published in 1977 but by Barnes and Noble, entitled *Lefties: The origins and consequences of being left-handed*. Interestingly, Rutledge and Donley (1992) cite the two versions, without dates, as separate books.

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TABLE 1
Internet sites of famous left-handers

(a) Sites featuring Alexander the Great (search strategy in Google: famous left handers list "Alexander the Great". All sites accessed 17 July 2005)

<http://www.indiana.edu/~primate/left.html>
http://home.planet.nl/~mvdubois/lefthanders_en.html
<http://www.sinistershop.com/Famous.htm>
http://www.seanweems.com/index.php?page_id=18
<http://www.indianexpress.com/ie/daily/19991108/isp08080.html>
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0857/is_n2_v10/ai_12206761
<http://www.brainydays.co.uk/left-handed/famous-left-handed.htm>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_famous_left-handed_people
<http://homepage1.nifty.com/hidex/left/left2e.html>
<http://www.trendlines.com/lefties.asp>
<http://www.coolquiz.com/trivia/didyouknow/lefthand.asp>
<http://www.answers.com/topic/list-of-famous-left-handed-people>
<http://lefthanded.cdf-design.com/celebrities/>
http://www.baylorhealth.edu/proceedings/12_4/12_4_flatt.html
http://web.linux.ca/pedia/index.php/List_of_famous_left-handed_people
<http://www.planetary.brown.edu/~noble/leftyfactoids.html>
http://www.tutorgig.com/ed/List_of_famous_left-handed_people

(b) Sites not featuring Alexander the Great (search strategy in Google: famous left handers list "Alexander the Great". All sites accessed 17 July 2005)

<http://www.anythingleft-handed.co.uk/famous.html>
<http://www.drspock.com/article/0,1510,5818,00.html>
<http://www.johnhritter.com/lefties.sht>

These lists are not inclusive but do suggest that the majority of websites with lists of famous left-handers do include Alexander the Great.

first chapter, heads the rather miscellaneous list of left-handers with Alexander the Great. A few years later, Lindsay (1980, pp. 5–6), says that “some of the greatest leaders in history have been lefties, going back as far as the fourth century BC, when Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) conquered the Persian Empire”, and in 1996 Lindsay again (p. 9) cites Alexander as left-handed. De Kay cited Alexander as left-handed in *The World's Greatest Left-handers* (1985), which was included in a 1994 anthology of several books on left-handedness (de Kay, 1994, p. 200). Rutledge and Donley (1992) also list Alexander the Great as left-handed (p. 12). Coren (1992) not only cites Alexander as left-handed, but also uses the fact that he was short-lived, dying “at 33” (p. 52)—although actually he was 32 when he died; see Bury, 1951—as evidence for his theory that left-handers die younger. Finally, I have to confess to giving further credence to the idea of Alexander’s sinistrality in my own popular book (McManus, 2002), the only slight mitigation being that on both occasions I did at least add the

word “reputedly” (pp. 303 and 315), although it will be seen from what follows that I should have been far more sceptical, particularly given the dubious nature of the evidence I had found for the likes of Picasso and Bob Dylan being left-handed.

An important and interesting variant of the theme on Alexander is the story, retold by Fincher (1977, pp. 59–60), that “legend has it that Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) conquered a country whose inhabitants were left-handed and who accorded that hand the greater honor because it was anatomically nearer the heart”. Here the words “Alexander” and “left-handed” are in close proximity, but without any explicit suggestion that Alexander was himself left-handed. Langford (1984, p. 61) modifies the story slightly: “Alexander the Great . . ., who in his wanderings around the Middle East and Central Asia, apparently came across an entirely left-handed tribe who regarded shaking hands with the left hand as a supreme distinction since the left hand was the one nearer the heart.” The source for Langford is likely to be the second of two books by Michael Barsley (1966, 1970),² who published a range of light and humorous books on popular topics from 1939 onwards, until his death in 1993. In particular, Langford links the story of the left-handed tribe to one also told by Barsley about Lord Baden-Powell and the Ashanti wars. Significantly, Michael Barsley’s first book, *The left-handed book* (1966), which is generally well researched, seems to have no mention at all of Alexander—although from the Acknowledgements section of Barsley (1966) it is clear that Barsley was aware of Wile (1934; see later). However, the second book, *Left-handed man in a right-handed world* (1970), is rather more of a pot-boiler, and contains a greater proportion of speculation and more popular material. The sixth (unnumbered) chapter is entitled “Left-handed people”, and at its beginning it has a brief synopsis, which says, “A survey of famous Sinistrals and their champions through the centuries to the present day – Alexander the Great – . . .” (p. 77). The chapter then begins:

² The publishing history of Barsley’s books is equally as complicated as that of Fincher’s. In the UK there are two books: *The left-handed book: An investigation into the sinister history of left-handedness*, published in 1966, and *Left-handed man in a right-handed world* published in 1970. The 1966 book was published in the US in 1967 by Wilshire (Hollywood, CA) as *Some of my best friends are left-handed people: An investigation into the history of left-handedness*, although the typography makes it appear that the title is really *Left-handed People*, and it is often cited as such. A variant of *Left-handed people*, also published by Wilshire, and without any proper dating, declares that it was “originally published as *The other hand*”. There is also a book published in the US entitled *Left-handed people*, which according to www.alibris.com is dated 1976 or 1977—whether or not this is the same as the 1967 book is not clear, but becomes important because both Fincher and Lindsay refer to a 1976 edition of *Left-handed people*, which might perhaps contain material from the 1970 book.

The young King Alexander the Great – it is remarkable to realize that he died in his thirty-second year – owed part of his education to Aristotle. His military exploits, particularly his conquest of Persia and the defeat of King Darius, are the main landmarks of his spectacular career. There is, however, the story recounted by several authorities, that at one stage of his campaign towards the east, he discovered a tribe which was completely left-handed (it could possibly have been the Dervishes, whose dances go widdershins) and which gave greater honour to the left hand as a form of greeting, because the left hand was considered to be nearer the heart.

The chapter then goes off somewhat at a tangent, and talks about Lord Baden-Powell, the founder of the Boy Scout movement, who said that scouts should shake hands with the left hand. Over the next 13 pages the chapter visits many individuals who may have been left-handed. On page 90 the chapter describes the left-handedness of General Hideki Tojo (1884–1948), who was executed for war crimes after an unsuccessful suicide attempt, perhaps being unsuccessful because of his left-handedness. Barsley then continues, “So Tojo lived long enough to be tried and executed, the first left-handed dictator since, perhaps, Alexander” (p. 91). The word “perhaps” is highly ambiguous here, it not being clear whether there may have been other left-handed dictators, or whether Alexander’s left-handedness is itself in question.

Barsley makes no other comment about Alexander, although intriguingly he does include two drawings of him, both by Barsley himself, one based on a coin from Lysimachus, and the other of Alexander on horseback “from a fresco in Pompeii” (p. 78). The latter is based on the famous portrayal of Alexander on horseback at the House of the Faun in Pompeii, but makes the tiny, yet significant, modification of omitting the clearly visible right hand which holds a spear—strongly suggesting, as Small (2006, p. 563) points out, that in antiquity Alexander was thought to be right-handed. Taking together the prominence of Alexander at the beginning of the chapter, the use of two drawings, the description of the chapter as about left-handed people, and the later comment about Tojo, like Alexander, being a “left-handed dictator”, it seems probable that Barsley is the source of the modern mythology that Alexander was left-handed. Although a difficult hypothesis to prove in the absence of direct evidence, it would, of course, be readily disproved by finding an earlier citation of Alexander as left-handed.³

³ Since writing the first draft of this manuscript, I have discovered that the original 1966 edition of de Kay’s *The left-handed book* includes Alexander the Great at the beginning of the list of dedicatees who it later states “are all left-handed” (no page numbers). This therefore seems to be an earlier and separate citation from those that can be tracked back to Barsley, and perhaps indicates a second source for the modern belief. Unfortunately De Kay provides no references or citations of any sort and, as with Barsley, the reference may be erroneously derived from Wile (1934).

Barsley's comments about Alexander are driven by the story of the left-handed tribes supposedly discovered by Alexander, which Barsley (1970, p. 77) says, was "recounted by several authorities". This story is readily traced back to the scholarly and compendious book by Wile (1934), which on p. 24 refers to "the legend that Alexander the Great found a country where all the inhabitants were left-handed, and that they tried to convince him that greater honor is due the left hand because it is nearer the heart; hence they shook hands in a left-handed greeting". Wile is generally scrupulous in his citations, and he refers at this point to an entry entitled "Right and Left" in the *Jewish Encyclopaedia* (Anonymous, 1916), which says:

It is said that Alexander the Great found a country where all the inhabitants were left-handed, and that they endeavored to convince him that greater honor is due to the left hand because it is nearer the heart; hence in greeting they shook hands with the left hand ("Erke ha-Kinnuyim," *s.v.*).

Erke ha-Kinnuyim is a series of exegetic commentaries, written by Jehiel ben Solomon Heilprin (1660–1746), a rabbinical leader and talmudic scholar who lived in Minsk. The commentaries were eventually published at the Hebrew printing press in Dyhernfurth in Germany, in 1806. At that point the trail, for me at least, almost runs cold. However, of some likely interest and relevance is that there is in medieval Hebrew literature a lengthy and complex interest in Alexander the Great (van Bekkum, 1986), sometimes based in history and sometimes taking more the form of a romance, derived mainly from the text now known as *The Book of Josippon* [Yosippon]. It was originally but erroneously attributed to Josephus, and hence is also known as the pseudo-Josephus, and was probably compiled in tenth-century Italy (Reiner, 1969; Wallach, 1947). The modern edition by Flusser (1980) contains a mention of Alexander, which says: "And he asked another one: 'Which one is better, the right or the left side?' And he answered: 'The left, because the woman nurses her son on the left side first. And kings stemming from the tribe of kings are left handed.'" (p. 474; translation by Wout van Bekkum). Once again, there is no explicit mention of the handedness of Alexander himself, but there is an implication that as a king of the tribe of kings he would be left-handed.

To summarise: there is no contemporary evidence that Alexander the Great was left-handed, and there is every reason to believe otherwise. Nevertheless, modern websites and articles on left-handedness do make the assertion that Alexander was left-handed, and in so doing they are copying other sources which claim that individuals such as Picasso or Bob Dylan are left-handed, despite voluminous evidence to the contrary. One can only

assume that there is an element of “reflected glory” for some left-handers in reading assertions that great individuals from history are also left-handed. The earliest definite version of the modern Alexander myth is contained in the second book on left-handedness written by Michael Barsley, which provides a modern retelling of the story that Alexander discovered a country consisting entirely of left-handers who shook hands with the left hand. By implication, and by the use of illustrations that are less than accurate, that story then slides across into an implication, without evidence, that Alexander himself was left-handed. Because the majority of materials on left-handedness do not consult original sources, but merely repeat claims made in other such sources, the suggestion of Alexander’s sinistrality then becomes a modern “factoid”, a meme spread by repetition, being replicated many times without critical assessment in books, newspapers, and websites, and appearing true merely because of the very fact of repetition. The story of Alexander’s discovery of a tribe of left-handers is a separate but related thread, which can be dated back at least to 1916, and perhaps before that to the comments of a seventeenth-century talmudic scholar, itself perhaps based on the tenth-century *Book of Josippon*.

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Was Alexander the Great left-handed?

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No evidence, literary or pictorial, exists from antiquity to indicate that Alexander the Great was left-handed. Instead classical representations of Alexander show him as right-handed.

I first came across the idea that Alexander the Great was left-handed in Chris McManus's *Right Hand, Left Hand* (2002), but then I'm a classical archaeologist familiar with classical depictions of Alexander the Great, which always show him right-handed.¹ Moreover, none of the classical textual sources refer to Alexander as left-handed. They do describe him as short with a crooked neck and fair skin.² Because of the quirks of survival of information it is impossible to prove absolutely that there were no ancient references to Alexander the Left-handed. Nonetheless, it is possible to demonstrate that the likelihood of such a tidbit being preserved is extremely high and hence, in its absence, that Alexander the Great must have been right-handed.

¹ McManus, 2002, pp. 303 and 315. In both cases McManus is careful to add "reputedly" before left-handed. I also have not come across any "classical" land comprising only the left-handed, which Alexander was supposed to have visited. I suspect that this story also belongs to the post-Antique tradition. Compare *Search*, 1980, pp. 14–20. There are two decent web sites devoted to Alexander, the second of which has a section on false legends about Alexander, including his fictitious left-handedness: <http://www.isidore-of-seville.com/Alexanderama.html> and <http://pothos.org/alexander.asp> (select "Art and Legends", then "Internet Myths & Trivia"). Please note that all URLs in this article were accessed in May 2006.

² For short: Quintus Curtius Rufus 3.12.16 and 5.2.13–15 (Stewart, 1993, p. 342 T4 and T5). For his crooked neck: Plutarch, *Quomodo adulator ab amico internoscatur* 9 (*Moralia* 53 D) (Stewart, 1993, p. 343 T8). For fair: Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 4.107 (Stewart, 1993, p. 344 T10). Stewart has collected all extant references to the appearance and portraits of Alexander the Great. In addition in conversation (March 2005) Stewart confirmed that he knew of no references to a left-handed Alexander.

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Left-handedness was sufficiently rare that classical historians noted the fact about famous and infamous left-handers. Suetonius (68.1) records that “[Tiberius’s] left hand was the more nimble and stronger, and its joints were so powerful that he could bore through a fresh, sound apple with his finger, and break the head of a body, or even a young man, with a fillip”.³ Similarly we know that Commodus, the mad son of Marcus Aurelius, “held the shield in his right hand and the wooden sword in his left, and indeed took great pride in the fact that he was left-handed”.⁴ Even the not-so-well-known who were left-handed were recorded. Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 35.20) mentions that “Turpilius painted with his left hand, a thing recorded of no preceding artist”.

Although Pliny the Elder cares about handedness and refers to Alexander nearly 60 times, he never once calls Alexander left-handed.⁵ Pliny (*Natural History* 35.98–99) does cite a painting with “a Battle with the Persians, a panel that contains a hundred human figures” which has been identified with the Alexander Mosaic from the House of the Faun in Pompeii, made ca. 100 BC.⁶ Here Alexander, on the left, is about to hurl his spear, significantly held in his raised right hand, at Darius fleeing in a chariot on the right. Pliny (*Natural History* 35.92) describes another painting of “Alexander the Great holding a Thunderbolt, in the temple of Artemis at Ephesus . . . The fingers have the appearance of projecting from the surface and the thunderbolt seems to stand out from the picture.” Again, without any mention to the contrary, the thunderbolt would be in Alexander’s right hand, as it is in surviving depictions

³ Translation from the *LCL*. Please note that all translations are from the *LCL* editions.

⁴ Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 73.19.2. Commodus in a well-known portrait of him as Hercules holds the club in his right hand and the apples of the Hesperides in his left hand. It is not possible to tell whether the artist has conventionally made Commodus right-handed; assumed that if Commodus were Hercules, he would like Hercules be right-handed; or has not thought about the matter at all. The statue is in the Museo del Palazzo dei Conservatori, Rome, and dates to ca. 191–192. For a photograph see Kleiner, 1992, p. 276 fig. 243.

⁵ A search of the *Packard Humanities Institute* CD-ROM of Latin literature yielded 58 hits for Alexander the Great (“Alexand” AND “magn”). Similarly a search for “left hand” (“sinistr” AND “man”) in Pliny the Elder yielded 17 references, most of which referred to picking and administering herbs with the left hand (for example: *NH* 20.126, 21.146, and 22.135). In other words, superstitions about the left hand were common and noted by Pliny.

⁶ The Alexander Mosaic is considered to be a copy of a lost Greek original painting, for which scholars have suggested seven different artists (Cohen, 1997, pp. 138–140). Since the attributions are to painters contemporary with Alexander the Great, the question of who painted it does not matter for this study. The Alexander Mosaic is now in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale (Inv. 10020) in Naples. See Stewart (1993, p. 431) for select bibliography. It is widely reproduced. Good colour photographs of the whole and especially of the details may be found in Moreno (2001). Pictures are also available on the Web at: <http://www.isidore-of-seville.com/ImagesofAlexander/5.html>

of Alexander with the thunderbolt.⁷ Another possibility is that Alexander was one of those who did not use his right hand for all “handed” activities.⁸ That is, he may have used his right hand for activities requiring strength, such as wielding a sword or spear, but his left hand for actions requiring fine motor skills like writing. I doubt that this is the case because, again, the literary sources probably would have mentioned it as something unusual.

While I could go through all of the extant representations and all of the descriptions of lost portraits of Alexander the Great, these few examples should suffice to demonstrate that Alexander was never portrayed in either literature or art as left-handed in antiquity because, quite simply, he was right-handed. I suspect that he “became” left-handed only in recent times, when being left-handed became a matter of pride.⁹ Particularly apt for those who continue to maintain that Alexander is left-handed, and a suitable note on which to end, are Plutarch’s words from his essay “*On the Tranquillity of the Mind*” (467 C1): “Theodorus, called the Atheist, used to say that he offered his discourses with his right hand, but his audience received them with their left.”

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⁷ Silver dekadrachms, minted in Babylonia or Susiana ca. 326–323 BC, are the only extant portraits of Alexander made during his lifetime. On the reverse they show him standing in armour, leaning on a spear held upright in his left hand, and holding the thunderbolt of Zeus in his right hand. A Nike flies in from the left to crown him. While the date, the subject of the reverse, and the general location of the mint are secure, there is a question as to whether the coins are “fully” Greek. Some scholars now consider the coins to be five-shekel pieces. Because of the scene on the obverse, these coins are sometimes known as the “Porus” dekadrachms. For a picture of an example in the British Museum (London) go to: <http://www.isidore-of-seville.com/ImagesofAlexander/8.html> Also see Stewart, 2003, p. 39; and Stewart, 1993, pp. 201–209, 433 No. 1 (with bibliography) and figs. 68–69.

⁸ I thank Michael Peters, one of the editors of *Laterality*, for raising this point. He cites the more recent example of Leonardo da Vinci who switched hands for certain kinds of activities according to Vasari.

⁹ Compare McManus, 2002, pp. 312–335.

- McManus, C. (2002). *Right hand, Left hand. The origins of asymmetry in brains, bodies, atoms and cultures*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
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