

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.

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