

Classic India

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The British colonisers who travelled to India from the 18th century onwards were steeped in the Classics; they knew their Greek and Latin (if not the languages of India) and quoted liberally from Horace and Virgil. Not all Britons, of course – but it wasn't just a small contingent who took ancient Greece and Rome with them to the subcontinent. In part, Classics was affectation; speaking Latin was a sign that you were polished, well-read and sophisticated. Showing off was part of the point, and acting like a gentleman was important to English self-regard in the days of the Raj. But connections with Greece and Rome went deeper: the British saw their actions in India through the lens of their classical educations and understood their decisions in the light of Graeco-Roman antiquity. Some imagined themselves as marching in the footsteps of Alexander the Great, while others preferred Julius Caesar or Augustus as their model. For some, the epic poems of Homer bore startling similarities with Sanskrit epic and were a basis for cultural comparison, and for others, Virgil's *Aeneid* offered guidance on how to be imperial and civilised at the same time. When Indians and Britons encountered each other from the middle of the 18th century to the middle of the 20th, the ancient Greeks and Romans were also present.

For the early administrators of the East India Company, as for other European adventurers and travellers in India, Alexander the Great and his journey through the region was a source of fascination. Alexander provided a point of contact between Graeco-Roman antiquity and Indian civilisation. Sir William Jones, the Welsh philologist and orientalist, is famous for having devised the theory of Indo-European languages while he was a judge in Calcutta in the late 18th century. In 1793, he also identified the figure of 'Sandrocottus', a ruler mentioned in ancient Greek texts, as Chandragupta, the founder of the Maurya Empire and a slightly younger contemporary of Alexander. This offered historians a means for synchronising 'European' and 'Indian' chronologies. The synchronisation was an exciting moment in the development of European understandings of Indian history as it enabled European intellectuals to find an acceptable (to them) point of reference in Indian narratives of the past and to give Gregorian dates to events in Indian history. Chandragupta, henceforth, could be said by European historians to have begun his reign in 320 BC.

But Alexander's appeal was not only historiographical. He was a world-historical figure, the greatest conqueror of antiquity, and his movements in the Indus Valley were interesting for that reason alone. As Iskandar, he was the subject of Arabic and Persian tales that had made their way to India long before the arrival of Europeans; as Sikandar, he was the subject of Indian romance and poetic traditions that went back centuries. British operatives embraced these traditions, but also spent a whopping amount of time and energy thinking about his route and trying to make sense of the surviving accounts of his travels. These ancient accounts, written by figures such as Arrian and Plutarch, are hard to interpret and sometimes contradict each other – the challenge of deciphering them generated a vast number of responses. Every modern traveller and agent of the East India Company in northwest India seemed to have – or develop – his own theory about Alexander's route and motives. What was the precise route that he took through the mountains of Afghanistan? Did he come across a cult of Dionysus on his march toward India, and if so, where was that cult? Where was the camp on the Hydaspes (the Jhelum river), and where precisely did he cross the river? The soldier and archaeologist Charles Masson, who in the 1830s collected thousands of Indo-Greek coins that he discovered in the North West Frontier. Masson said that Mittun, or

Mithankot, was the site of an Alexandria established by the conqueror in antiquity and was therefore a suitable trading post for the Company; he also thought that the ancient site of Harappa was the Sangala mentioned by the ancient historian Arrian. Alexander Burnes, or 'Bukhara Burnes' as he was known, wrote *Travels into Bokhara*, which was prefaced with an epigram from Horace and sold 900 copies on the first day of publication in 1834. He claimed to be the first modern European to navigate the Indus. In his coin-collecting, Masson was accompanied by Mohan Lal, a Kashmiri Brahmin, who wrote his own accounts of his travels in the northwest and retained an interest in Alexander and the Greeks.

Fascination with Alexander also had a strategic and military dimension; the British were concerned that Napoleon or the Russian tsar might be tempted to follow in Alexander's footsteps and invade India. If you were a land-based invader, the reasoning went, would you not be tempted to follow the very route into India that had been taken by the most successful conqueror in the ancient world? The title of David Hopkins' book, published in 1808, sums up the author's concerns at length: *The dangers of British India, from French invasion and missionary establishments: to which are added some account of the countries between the Caspian Sea and the Ganges; a narrative of the revolutions which they have experienced, subsequent to the expedition of Alexander the Great; and a few hints respecting the defence of the British frontiers in Hindostan*. General Sir Charles Napier, who captured Sindh with brutal force in 1843, knew Alexander's history all too well. His dispatch to Lord Ellenborough makes for a good story, but he probably never sent the message that simply read *peccavi* ('I have sinned', implying 'I have Sind', or 'I have conquered Sind'). If a good story is what you're after, however, look no further than Kipling's 'Man Who Would Be King' (1888), a masterpiece which draws much of its emotional force and colour from Alexander's regional fame. The inhabitants of Kafiristan in that tale believe the rascally Dravot to be a descendant of Alexander and worship him accordingly—until things go awry, of course.

Earlier, in 1808, Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779-1859) had been sent to Kabul precisely on account of anxieties over Napoleon's intentions, which seemed real enough. His *Account of the kingdom of Caubul*, which appeared in 1815, was in turn weighed and analysed by scholars of Alexander and by Company officials and administrators [can you say what Elphinstone reported, and add something about who the scholar and officials were and, importantly, their conclusions?]. Elphinstone was a voracious reader, in many literary traditions including Indian and Persian, and was also widely read in the Greek and Roman authors. The diaries and journals he composed in India and Afghanistan include references that range from Homer, Sophocles and Euripides to prose authors such as Thucydides and Xenophon and the orator Demosthenes. His observations and casual asides show how far things have changed in the last 200 years. It is difficult, despite the various wars in the Middle East, to imagine any officer from the past 50 years writing in their diary such a sentence as: 'I breakfasted with Kennedy, and talked about Hafiz, Saadi, Horace, and Anacreon. At nine I left him, and went to the trenches.'

British officials in India weren't shy about telling their correspondents how industrious and diligent they were right from the crack of dawn, but the frontrunner in this field was surely Thomas Macaulay, the historian and colonial administrator, who on some mornings in India read Greek and Latin for three or four hours before breakfast. Reading his diaries and letters can be an intimidating experience. The latter, especially, also reveal a pompous person, a man who took himself and his influence very seriously. His influence *was* immense and long-lasting. The so-called 'Minute' of 1835 helped put English at the centre of

educational policy in India; it championed the use of English over Indian languages in schools and colleges. This document refers to the Greek and Latin classics but does so to underline the importance of teaching of English: 'What the Greek and Latin were to the contemporaries of More and Ascham, our tongue is to the people of India.' It's not too farfetched to say that the 'Minute' bears some responsibility for the widespread use of English in South Asia today. Interestingly, Macaulay's letters indicate that the idea for his most famous literary work, the *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1842) came to him when he was in the Nilgiris, a mountainous region in the south of the subcontinent, and that he composed most of the *Lays* while in 'exile' in India. Ostensibly about Rome and national character, the poems are really a British man's reflection on service, valour and devotion to the country; an expression of English identity by a colonial administrator in India.

It stands in the Comitium
 Plain for all folk to see;
 Horatius in his harness,
 Halting upon one knee:
 And underneath is written,
 In letters all of gold,
 How valiantly he kept the bridge
 In the brave days of old.

And still his name sounds stirring
 Unto the men of Rome,
 As the trumpet-blast that cries to them
 To charge the Volscian home;
 And wives still pray to Juno
 For boys with hearts as bold
 As his who kept the bridge so well
 In the brave days of old.

The *Lays* are the creation of a man who is marking time while serving in India, dreaming of his native land by writing about ancient Rome.

While Alexander loomed large in British accounts of Indian history, there was a problem: his empire was short-lived. It splintered into several parts on his early death in 323 BC, and his generals more or less divided up the conquered lands among themselves. He did not provide a model for a long-lasting empire; for that, one needed to turn to Rome. Athens and Sparta were frequently eulogised and studied by the Victorians, but their empires were small. The Assyrian, Egyptian and Persian empires offered a kind of precedent, but they were not regarded as European or ancestral in the way that the Greeks and Romans were: their legacies to modern Europe were harder to grasp and define than the Greek and Roman. Julius Caesar thus achieved a kind of heroic status in 19th-century Britain, and in the eyes of writers such as J.A. Froude was comparable to that other JC, Jesus Christ. 'Strange and startling resemblance between the fate of the founder of the kingdom of this world and of the Founder of the kingdom not of this world, for which the first was a preparation,' wrote Froude, in his book on Caesar. 'Each was denounced for making himself a king. Each was maligned as the friend of publicans and sinners; each was betrayed by those whom he had loved and cared for; each was put to death; and Caesar also was believed to have risen again and ascended into heaven and become a divine being.' Even more relevant to the Victorians than Julius Caesar was Augustus, the first emperor of Rome and the founder of an imperial

dynasty. It was he who laid the foundations for a long-lasting, multiethnic, multiracial empire – and he who faced the challenge of maintaining and consolidating the imperial expansion won by armies before him. Perhaps the late Victorians identified with Augustus because they felt that the problems he faced were similar: developing an imperial bureaucracy, maintaining peace on the borders, and keeping colonial subjects happy. In the magisterial 11th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, H.F. Pelham described Augustus as ‘one of the world’s great men, a statesman who conceived and carried through a scheme of political reconstruction which kept the empire together, and secured peace and tranquillity and preserved civilization for more than two centuries.’

Along with Augustus another classical star shines ever brighter in the last decades of the 19th century: Virgil, poet of the *Aeneid*. Virgil’s reputation ebbed and flowed over the centuries, but his place as a ‘classic’ was never really in doubt. Readers such as William Gladstone had championed Homer’s epic and dismissed Virgil as a court poet or a minstrel for hire: ‘this crying vice of the Aeneid’, wrote Gladstone, in his *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age* of 1858, ‘the feebleness and untruth of the character of Aeneas, was due to the false position of Virgil, who was obliged to discharge his functions as a poet in subjection to his dominant obligations and liabilities as a courtly parasite of Augustus’. But Gladstone was unable to drown out admirers of the Latin poet. The cult of Virgil and Rome (Christian and non-Christian Rome alike) reached new heights by the end of the 19th century in Britain. In an essay that the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* described as ‘the most famous English essay on Virgil’, Frederic Myers said that Virgil was ‘the earliest and the official exponent of the world-wide Empire of Rome, the last and the closest precursor of the world-wide commonwealth of Christ’. Aeneas was compared by the Victorians to Abraham and Christ, however overblown those comparisons seem now. Virgil’s hero made his own painful sacrifices for the gods above: he gave up his love of Dido, the queen of Carthage, in order to press on with his mission and found a settlement in Italy. Nation over self: the British Empire was built on such stories of personal sacrifice – think, for example, of General Gordon’s ‘last stand’ – and the story of Aeneas’ valour was an exemplary demonstration of duty, piety, and heroism.

The appreciation of Virgil’s sweeping tale was accompanied by a renewed appreciation of his language and versatility as an epic poet. His genius for the right turn of phrase meant that he was a reliable source of quotations, not least on matters of state. (Horace was the other Latin poet who was regularly ransacked by the mid-Victorians for memorable phrases. Verses from a single poem of Horace—poem 12 from Book 1 of his *Odes*—were recited by Burke in 1775, then by Fox some 23 years later, then by Marryatt in 1822, Grey in 1829, and by Gladstone, Lyndhurst, Huskisson, and so on.) Jupiter’s words to Venus, recounted in Book 1 of the *Aeneid*, were a staple in Victorian classrooms: ‘For them I set no limits in space and time: I give them empire without end.’ No less resonant for the English reader were Anchises’ revelations to Aeneas in Book 6, here in Dryden’s magnificent translation:

Rome, ’tis thine alone, with awful sway,
To rule Mankind, and make the World obey;
Disposing Peace, and War, thy own Majestick Way.
To tame the Proud, the fetter’d Slave to free;
These are Imperial Arts, and worthy thee.

These prophetic words reverberated throughout the British Empire. Robert N. Cust, who was a member of the Indian Civil Service, tells us in his *Memoirs of past years of a septuagenarian* that he recalled those very lines when he found himself ruling over millions in India before he had turned 30. Cust was far from alone in his recall of the poet, and numerous memoirs and journals of imperial service quote from Virgil or allude to his poetry. Field-Marshal Earl Wavell followed his tenure as Viceroy of India by becoming president of the recently-founded Virgil Society upon his retirement in 1947 (the society's first president was T.S. Eliot).

The passages in Virgil that prophesied Rome's greatness acted as a balm to British readers and assuaged their fears of decline and fall. In describing the long decline of the Roman Empire, Edward Gibbon had evoked the prospect of imperial decline for modern readers in a style that was riveting, exquisite and grandiose, all at once. His grasp of detail was breathtaking, as was the lesson that he delivered to his many attentive readers. If even the Roman Empire came to an end, how could the British Empire hope to escape the same gloomy fate? Macaulay turned the problem on its head and said in Parliament, in July 1833, that the day when the British handed back sovereignty to Indians would be Britain's finest time. The task of imperial rule would be over, and Britons would return their nation to a grateful people whom they had themselves trained in the arts of government. 'It may be that the public mind of India may expand under our system till it has outgrown that system; that by good government we may educate our subjects into a capacity for better government, that, having become instructed in European knowledge, they may, in some future age, demand European institutions. Whether such a day will ever come I know not. But never will I attempt to avert or to retard it. Whenever it comes, it will be the proudest day in English history.' It wasn't only Indians who found that sentiment disingenuous and condescending; and at any rate, the fear of decline haunted British writers throughout the second half of the 19th century. By the 20th century, commentators in Britain and India came to see the fall of the Empire as inevitable.

Macaulay was implicated in another imperial innovation, the Indian Civil Service, the 'steel frame' which was effectively responsible for the day-to-day administration of the Raj. Entrance to the ICS, which was founded in 1858, was based on competitive examinations, and the examinations were designed from the outset to appeal to – or favour – Oxford and Cambridge graduates. Greek and Roman subjects were given a significant weighting in the mark scheme. Benjamin Jowett, the scholar of Greek and Oxford luminary, joined Macaulay in 1854 on the committee that advocated reform of the previous style of examinations—they called for a wholesale revision of the old system of choosing civil servants. They were evidently successful in achieving their goals, as in the first year of the exam, 70 per cent of the successful candidates were from Oxbridge. Jowett was in thrall to the idea that his students would run the empire in the mould of Plato's guardians, and he encouraged his students to join the ICS. Between 1888 and 1905, three successive viceroys of India (Lansdowne, Elgin, Curzon) came from Balliol College alone and all were students of Jowett.

Classics was for generations the subject of choice for the British élite, and to an extent the story of Classics and British India is also the story of how the British upper classes raised their young. Eton and Oxford play important roles in this account, as we would expect. Eton can count 20 odd Prime Ministers among its old boys, while Oxford can claim to have educated about 30 holders of the high office (some of whom went to Eton) and Classics occupied a dominant place in these institutions from the 19th century into the 1960s. This conjunction of prestigious schools and Oxford Classics was responsible for shaping the

British Empire, and especially the empire in India, in profound ways. The historian Richard Symonds pointed out in his *Oxford And Empire: The Last Lost Cause?* (1986) that in 1938, six of the eight provincial Governors in India had read Greats in Oxford and the other two had also been students at Oxford. And this was just before the Second World War, by which time British political elites were turning away from Classics to other subjects. Of the men and women who have been prime minister since the Second World War, only two read Classics at university, Harold Macmillan and Boris Johnson, both of whom went to Eton and Balliol. Perhaps that explains the traces of imperial fantasy and nostalgia one discerns in the words and actions of those two politicians. Macmillan, it should be said, volunteered for the war effort in 1914 and did not graduate.

An anecdote involving Macmillan shows how classical antiquity continued to cast a shadow over the Raj well after Indian independence. In 1958, prime minister Macmillan attended a banquet in his honour in New Delhi. He and his wife, Lady Macmillan, were being entertained at Rashtrapati Bhavan, the official residence of the President of India and formerly the Viceroy's palace. Dorothy Macmillan found herself sitting opposite a portrait of her grandfather, Lord Lansdowne, who was a student of Jowett and himself the Viceroy of India for almost six years in the 19th century. Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India's first prime minister, turned to Macmillan and says: 'I wonder if the Romans ever went back to visit Britain?'

And the shadow extended further than that. In 1908, Mahatma Gandhi was in a prison cell in South Africa, translating Plato's *Apology* into Gujarati, probably from an English translation rather than the original Greek. Gandhi's version appeared in *Indian Opinion*, the newspaper that he edited for the Indian diaspora community in South Africa. His translation was then circulated in India and, in 1910, banned for sedition by the British authorities along with *Hind Swaraj* ('Indian Home Rule'), which resembled a Platonic dialogue, and some of his other writings. By 1915, Gandhi was back in India and, by 1919, the Indian National Congress was encouraging its members to read and circulate the outlawed material, with the effect that these texts, so obviously inspired by Plato, became part of the anti-colonial movement. It wasn't Plato whom the colonial administrators feared: many of them had read the *Apology* and the *Republic* in their student days and would have known the Greek. What troubled the regime was that these texts were written and presented by an Indian and that he was writing in opposition to colonial laws and attitudes. Gandhi saw the revolutionary power in Plato's texts – and turned them against the British Empire.