

---

Faculty Books

---

3-2015

## Alexander the Great and Hernán Cortés: Ambiguous Legacies of Leadership

Justin D. Lyons  
Cedarville University, [justinlyons@cedarville.edu](mailto:justinlyons@cedarville.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/faculty\\_books](https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/faculty_books)



Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), and the [Political History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lyons, Justin D., "Alexander the Great and Hernán Cortés: Ambiguous Legacies of Leadership" (2015).  
*Faculty Books*. 209.

[https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/faculty\\_books/209](https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/faculty_books/209)

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Books by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@cedarville.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@cedarville.edu).

---

## Alexander the Great and Hernán Cortés: Ambiguous Legacies of Leadership

### Description

This is a biographical pairing of two of the greatest conquerors in human history, drawing its inspiration from Plutarch's Parallel Lives. Like Plutarch, the purpose of the pairing is not primarily historical. While Plutarch covers the history of each of the lives he chronicles, he also emphasizes questions of character and the larger lessons of politics to be derived from the deeds he recounts. The book provides a narrative account both of Alexander's conquest of the Persian Empire and Cortés's conquest of the Aztec Empire while reflecting on the larger questions that emerge from each. The campaign narratives are followed by essays devoted to leadership and command that seek to recover the treasures of the Plutarchian approach shaped by moral and political philosophy. Analysis of leadership style and abilities is joined with assessment of character. Special emphasis is given to the speeches provided in historical sources and meditation on rhetorical successes and failures in maintaining the morale and willing service of their men.

### Keywords

History, Alexander the Great, Hernán Cortés, legacies, leadership

### Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Military History | Political History

### Publisher

Lexington Books

### ISBN

9781498505277

# Preface

What is leadership? Many books have been written attempting to formulate a list of the qualities and characteristics indispensable to the leader with the hope of finding a blueprint or pattern that can then be applied to every field of human endeavor from business, to politics, to sport. Vain hope so conceived! Human behavior is far too complex to be thus captured or unerringly guided by a list of simple rules. But surely something can be said. We have many historical examples of successful leaders in different fields of activity on which to draw. Careful consideration of their successes must be able to offer guidelines and principles useful to our own undertakings. I seek to recall two shades from the past to make them alive once again to modern eyes for the purposes of contemplation and instruction: Alexander the Great and Hernán Cortés, who both displayed undeniable talents of leadership and made enduring marks upon history.

To be sure, we must be wary of the belief that we can simply apply what was done to what must be done. Success does not certainly follow from adhering to patterns or models. It cannot be produced as a chef follows a recipe, nor can it be conjured by the mere invocation of spirits from the past. Every new situation presents its own challenges. Models train the mind, but they cannot fully encompass the particular facts of the tasks before us; they enliven us to possibilities, but they cannot replace the sparks of intuition or the comprehensive intellectual grasp of the field of action that would seem ultimately to be the gifts of nature rather than the products of study.

Nonetheless, with these cautions in mind, the study of the leaders of history is indeed valuable. I have drawn inspiration from the comparative approach of the ancient writer, Plutarch, believing that, while such historical figures may be profitably studied individually, studying them in conjunction offers additional insight into their talents and methods of leadership. Indeed, by evoking both similarities and differences, such a study can aid the reader in escaping the error of simple and anachronistic application by demonstrating leadership principles molded by different practical circumstances; it imitates the divide of past and present that must shape present choices.

Yet the student of leadership faces another difficulty. Any search for an example wholly admirable, without stain or fault or shortcoming, within the horizon of humanity will be futile. This would be so in any

pursuit, but is perhaps particularly evident when one considers captains of war. Whatever glory cloaks their frame, however they may be washed by the tides of fame, they remain stained by the blood of the fallen. Their legacies of leadership are therefore ambiguous, for there are at least two sides to every story. This ambiguity must be magnified even further when their monuments are built upon the wreckage of wars of conquest. Greatness invites investigation and reflection, but it is with sadness that we recognize that it is so often tarnished by the lust for power or for fame. We must join speculation upon the secrets of success with meditation upon the moral price.

# Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my wife, Samantha, for her encouragement and support; Duncan Jamieson of Ashland University for his help and advice; and Seth Snow for his careful reading of the manuscript.



# Introduction

“One can point to no other man, Greek or barbarian, who performed exploits so numerous and so momentous,” Arrian writes of Alexander.<sup>1</sup> Bernal Díaz assures us that name of Cortés was as respected and honored in Spain and in the New World as Alexander’s had been in the Old.<sup>2</sup> Yet both men felt compelled to write accounts of the deeds of their heroes, seemingly fearing the deeds themselves would lack permanence in the minds of men or that the accretions of time would erode and distort their true nature.

Both Alexander and Cortés understood this erosion of time, that when they had been covered with earth the preservation of their fame would be the work of hands other than their own. This philosophic reflection lay behind Alexander’s patronage of historians and sculptors; it is to be seen in his melancholy reflections at the tombs of heroes and in his determination to preserve the mausoleum of Cyrus. It is also to be found lurking behind the letters upon which Cortés lavished such painstaking care, forming a chronicle of his campaign worthy of comparison to Caesar’s commentary on the war in Gaul and serving to transmit the memory of his deeds to posterity; and it is to be observed in the vexation he felt as he saw his achievements already fading into memory within his lifetime, suffering the ingratitude that comes with forgetfulness. Well it may be remarked that there is a kind of blessing to be found in Alexander’s death at the height of his glory and renown, in the escape from the passage of long years and the swings of mercurial fortune.

It is a very old reflection that there is often a gap between merit and fame. Indeed, overcoming this gap is the reason Arrian gives for writing his work on Alexander. In what may be called his “second preface,” Arrian uses the occasion of Alexander’s visit to the tomb of Achilles to meditate on the relationship of word and deed. “Legend has it that Alexander accounted Achilles happy for having had Homer to preserve his fame for posterity,” he writes. “And, indeed, Alexander was right to account Achilles happy on that score especially; for though Alexander was fortunate in other respects, here there was a void, since his exploits were not published to mankind in a worthy manner either in prose or in verse.” In consequence, he laments, “Alexander’s exploits are much less well known than the paltriest of ancient deeds” — this despite the overwhelming magnitude of his achievements.<sup>3</sup> Arrian writes, then, to bridge the gap between merit and fame, deed and memory.

Another chronicler of great deeds found similar cause to worry and to write. In the dedication of his work to Don Martín Cortés, the son of the conqueror, Francisco López de Gómara meditates at length on the transitory nature of material things. Wealth and fame were the bequests of your father, he reminds his dedicatee, and honor imparts obligations of maintenance and augmentation. But estates and kingdoms are the playthings of fortune; they fail and fall. It is history that endures, he writes, preserving the names and the renown of the heroes of the past, even though their monuments should crumble, because "friends are never lacking to keep it fresh." But how firmly does he believe this? An abundance of such friends would surely diminish the value of Gómara's offering. Yet he writes, knowing his competitors are few and because "the conquest of Mexico and the conversion of the peoples of New Spain can and should be included among the histories of the world, not only because it was well done but because it was very great."<sup>4</sup> Keeping history fresh requires effort; actions do not remember themselves. Even the greatest endeavors will be forgotten if none are found who will perpetuate their memory.

But the channels in which historical memory runs quickly become twisted and their waters muddy. Even if contemporary views of a historical actor were unanimous—a phenomenon yet to be encountered in human experience—distance in time, loss and fragmentation of sources, changing perception, and hind-sighted judgment would quickly alter them. This becomes truer the more significant their actions and the more far-reaching the implications. By that standard, it is difficult to surpass these two conquerors. The conquests of Alexander and Cortés profoundly altered the world. Both men overthrew powerful empires, expanding the boundaries of the known world and, in so doing, transforming it. The increased knowledge and interaction between peoples which resulted from Alexander's conquests carried Greek culture far afield, giving birth to the Hellenistic Age and enormous implications for the flow of world history. Cortés strode upon the historical stage in the wake of the discovery of the New World. He established the Spanish Empire's presence in Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras, founding the indelible Spanish influence in Central and South America that would mold their destinies. His conquest enlarged the boundaries of both knowledge and desire for gain, intensifying the European imperial and colonial ambitions whose effects would shape the centuries to come.

It is not surprising that the historical legacies of Alexander and Cortés are disputed and ambiguous. There is much weight to be cast into both sides of the balance. The staggering scale of Alexander's achievements, the spectacle of his military genius, and the grandeur of his goals came at a tremendous price. In eight years, Alexander slew well over 200,000 men in battle alone, along with perhaps another quarter million defenders and residents of cities and strongholds taken by storm and siege. Many thou-



sands were killed as a warning against futile resistance or perished miserably at the brutal hands of his plundering soldiers. Many tens of thousands of men, women, and children were sold into slavery, and countless others displaced from their homes, their villages burned and their territory ravaged. Alexander's army rolled across Asia like a murderous avalanche, obliterating what lay in its path.<sup>5</sup> Was he a glorious conqueror or a ruthless killer?

Similarly, Cortés displayed tremendous daring, resilience, and skill in the overthrow of a powerful civilization in such a short time with but a relative handful of men. He broke the Aztecs' despotic hold over their subject peoples and cast down their gory gods. But those achievements are littered with the corpses of the slain. The struggle for the Aztec capital cost perhaps one million native lives, casting into shade but not insignificance those who died upon his road of approach in both battle and massacre. At his feet is also often laid the dreadful death toll of subsequent decades from European-introduced disease, which would strip to the bone the population of central Mexico.<sup>6</sup> Was he an admirable soldier or a grasping and bloody-handed destroyer of worlds?

\* \* \*

The present work draws its inspiration from Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, commonly known as the *Parallel Lives*. The *Lives* were written in the period of the late first-century to early second-century A.D. and placed biographies of great men, one Greek and one Roman, side by side in comparison. The ravages of time have not spared for us the entire corpus of this work of Plutarch. As it has passed down to us, it consists of twenty-three pairs of biographies, the majority of which are followed by a brief comparison to encourage readers to take the opportunity to pass judgment for themselves, as well as four unpaired, single lives.

"Parallel" does not mean "the same." No two human beings are identical in character, nor do two human lives exactly duplicate each other in circumstance. Plutarch searches not for exacting equivalence, but for similarities that can promote meaningful reflections. "It is no great wonder," he writes in his *Life of Sertorius*, "if in the long process of time, while fortune takes her course hither and thither, numerous coincidences should spontaneously occur."<sup>7</sup> Yet what degree of sameness is sufficient to justify a biographical pairing? One can envision the difficulty, when the whole of antiquity is laid before you, of choosing, even when limited to the offspring of two nations, two men to unite in such a pairing with confidence that they can bear the weight of the comparison. To be sure, some of Plutarch's pairings are stronger than others, but that is the nature of analogy, the difficulties of which are magnified by the scale and complexity of his project. Nor does Plutarch seek out only correspondence.

Knowing that differences can be at least as instructive as similarities when emerging from a common framework, his comparisons are as descriptive of the former as the latter. Indeed, the differences often hold the primary place.

Plutarch's main purpose in writing the *Lives* was to encourage the emulation of virtue in his readers. *The Life of Pericles* begins with a rebuke of the human tendency to expend energy on objects unworthy of attention while ignoring those that are excellent and beneficial, thus corrupting and degrading the faculties of the soul. At the same time, nature endowed man with the capacity to focus his mental perception on what he finds desirable, it imposed upon him the duty of pursuing the highest and best matters in contemplation in order that he might improve himself. While this duty very often goes unfulfilled, Plutarch has confidence that it will be pursued with more rigor if noble examples are brought forth and displayed to the common vision. Indeed, his confidence seems to be boundless:

But virtue, by the bare statement of its actions, can so affect men's minds as to create at once both admiration of the things done and desire to imitate the doers of them. . . . Moral good is a practical stimulus; it is no sooner seen, than it inspires an impulse to practice, and influences the mind and character not by a mere imitation which we look at, but by the statement of the fact creates a moral purpose which we form.

"And so," he continues, "we have thought fit to spend time and pains in writing of the lives of famous persons."<sup>8</sup> Yet the extent to which Plutarch fully believes in the transformative power of the bare moral example is questionable. The contenders for attention that he here discusses, such as art and music, while inferior in merit because they do not promote virtuous action, are nonetheless those that present themselves with the greatest charm and gracefulness. Therein lays their power to capture the soul. This power is of course magnified many times over because such distractions ask little or nothing from those who indulge in them. The contemplation of virtuous action does demand emulation and therefore exertion or, at the very least, creates an uncomfortable awareness of one's own lack of virtue or proof of it in achievement; thus it would seem to require its own charm and gracefulness as allies in the struggle to capture the soul. And does not Plutarch strive to provide them? The *Lives* do not in the least resemble the kind of uninspiring chronological narrative that has failed to capture the imagination or instruct the morals and prudence of numberless students in the history of educational endeavor. Instead, they are colored by vivid description; imbued with the personality and passions of the subject; and heaving with anecdote and moral reflection. They bear the mark of story. Thus does Plutarch seek to thwart the siren calls of the mediocre and unworthy, to turn the mind of his readers to the

high and the noble. Yet Plutarch knows that success is not guaranteed. He seeks to woo, yet his petition may be refused. He has presents his case with vigor, but the choices of other people's souls are not his to command: "Whether we take a right aim at our intended purpose, it is left to the reader to judge by what he shall here find."<sup>9</sup>

Readers dedicated to historical purism or insistent on exact chronology will find Plutarch frustrating if not infuriating. His inclusion of mythical elements and anachronisms for dramatic purposes defies the conventions of modern historiography. Yet, it must be noted for the sake of both understanding and enjoyment that Plutarch denies that he is writing history. His "Life of Alexander" begins with such an assertion:

It must be borne in mind that my design is not to write histories, but lives. And the most glorious exploits do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of virtue or vice in men; sometimes a matter of less moment, an expression or a jest, informs us better of their characters and their inclinations than the most famous sieges, the greatest armaments, or the bloodiest battles whatsoever.<sup>10</sup>

For Plutarch, it is not the events themselves that are most important, but what the events reveal about the historical actors involved. Thus, he shapes the life of his subject as an artist, magnifying and narrowing, emphasizing and understating, highlighting and veiling as suits his purpose. The reader must simply accept this method if he is to appreciate Plutarch's work or to glean the lessons from it that the author wishes to convey:

Therefore as portrait-painters are more exact in the lines and features of the face, in which the character is seen, than in the other parts of the body, so I must be allowed to give my more particular attention to the marks and indications of the souls of men, and while I endeavor by these to portray their lives, may be free to leave more weighty matters and great battles to be treated of by others.<sup>11</sup>

It is certainly true that Plutarch's narratives are rendered in this way. He disposes of the Battle of Issus, where Alexander defeated the Great King of Persia on the Syrian coast, in a single sentence. Indeed, one could not understand any of the technical aspects of Alexander's battles from Plutarch's narrative. Where the account is more expansive, topography and tactics play less of a role than the dramatic clash of protagonist and antagonist.<sup>12</sup>

Plutarch functions as an artistic moral philosopher rather than an historian. Yet he is not completely indifferent to the events that form the fabric of history. He cannot be, for the subjects he chooses to write about are men of action. This choice to portray the active rather than the contemplative life is made both because such men are more likely to excite admiration and therefore emulation and because he holds that character reveals itself in action. The deeds of the men whose lives he relates form

the necessary backdrop for reflection on their natures. Further, he chooses his pairings not only based on shared qualities, but also because of parallels in their careers and choices, their reactions to similar circumstances making possible the comparison of their characters.<sup>13</sup>

Yet none of Plutarch's subjects were perfectly morally virtuous, nor does Plutarch so present them. To do so would undermine his project; such caricatured presentations would be neither believable nor useful for moral instruction. Instead, one sees men of flesh and blood, men possessed of both gigantic excellence and staining flaws struggling through the vicissitudes of life. Plutarch often does what he can to present his subjects in a favorable light for the sake of beneficial example, but he does not ignore their moral failings, and the *Lives* are not lacking in criticism. Such a presentation of the human experience is essential for shaping engaging drama and for encouraging identification between subject and reader built upon shared struggles which, while they may vary greatly in scale, are nonetheless common to humanity. Character is revealed in deeds, whether those deeds are great or small.

\* \* \*

In pairing Alexander the Great with Hernán Cortés, I have sought both to emulate Plutarch's project and to extend it. Plutarch's *Alexander* is the longest of the existing *Lives*, more than twice the length of most of the others and, in a way, acts as a center point of the entire project. In the parallel presentation of Greeks and Romans, Alexander's exploits represent a historical moment when the balance of power might have tipped toward the Greeks, with all of the history-altering consequences that would entail.<sup>14</sup> Alexander is paired with Julius Caesar, which is nearly as long. Though it is without a comparison, the pairing forms another center point: a biographical rather than historical moment when the greatness of the two peoples rests in the hands and with the fate of a single man. I have written my own life of Alexander, seeking thus to build upon Plutarch's foundations. I extend his project by abstracting from the Greece-Rome element of his work to find another parallel. In seeking a similarity of circumstance, the number of persons who have toppled empires and transformed entire civilizations is relatively small. In seeking shared qualities, the energy, ambition, and skill necessary to do so is equally uncommon. Separation in time is no obstacle. Long centuries stretch between the subjects of Plutarch's comparisons. Nor do I think that Plutarch would object to choosing from among the conquistadors, who admired the heroes of antiquity, their greatest captain, who for a time bore the weight of an empire upon his shoulders.

The careers of these two conquerors display a broad similarity in that both launched themselves upon their intended prey despite the marked numerical inferiority of their forces relative to the quarry, and both were

successful. Resemblances of particular actions may also be noted, such as the destruction of Thebes and the massacre at Cholula for the sake of memorable example of the penalties of resistance, as well as different choices made in similar circumstances, such as Alexander's refusal of a night attack at Gaugamela and Cortés's successful use of that stratagem against Narváez. One may even note a parallel in possibilities. With the arrest of Montezuma, Cortés found himself in the very situation Alexander would have been in had he found Darius alive—tasked with the troublesome management of a living king who remained a potential flashpoint for resurgent resistance. But beyond these parallels of action and circumstance, there are reflections to be gleaned from considerations of the elements of character, such as the determination that held them both to their tasks, revealed in their refusal to settle for less than complete success, as when Alexander scorned the offer of half of the Persian Empire and Cortés dismissed the capitulation of Montezuma if only he would cease his forward march. These examples remind us that character is revealed through action and, in anything more than a completely abstract treatise, the two cannot be separated: the inner man drives the outer man.

When the achievements of Alexander and Cortés are placed side by side, audacity is the character trait that springs into the forefront for any eye surveying their lives in a comparative mood. The conquests of both bore the stamp of great temerity and boldness; indeed, when viewed by those of more cautious nature, of recklessness and imprudence. "What men have there been in the world who have shown such daring?" Bernal Díaz wrote of the massively-outnumbered conquistadors as they marched into the heart of a hostile empire.<sup>15</sup> The parallels are indeed few. Yet audacity must be joined with skill (and luck) if it is to achieve success. The extent to which these conquerors exhibited either can best be considered through an examination of their actions that also includes reflection on their motivations, intentions, and methods. Because the framework is that of conquest, themes of combat and command will necessarily have prominence. Yet every human act may be colored by mercy or cruelty, by virtue or by vice, as well as being crowned with success or tarnished with failure—the relations between them not always clear in the realm of action.

Much ambiguity is to be found in the legacies of Alexander and Cortés in terms of moral character. Alexander displayed great personal courage and perseverance. He showed himself capable at times of self-control, generosity, mercy, and wisdom. He was beloved of his men and hailed by many as a far-sighted champion of cross-cultural civilization. But these qualities must be balanced against darker reports of his moral descent into egomania, excessive drink, uncontrollable rage, insatiable ambition, paranoia, tyranny, and the murder of friends. The personal courage and determination of Cortés are also beyond dispute. He, too,

could exhibit forbearance and generosity as well as piety and steadiness of purpose; yet his legacy contends with a durable historical impression of disloyalty, deceit, greed, and wanton cruelty. In what follows, these considerations of character will be treated within the framework of leadership. Even in the context of military conquest, leadership incorporates more than strategic and tactical ability. Weapons are borne by soldiers, men who are far from home, sometimes fearful and uncertain, sometimes brash and short-sighted. They must be treated as men, wisely encouraged or castigated as the occasion demands. But it is not by words only that the authority of a leader is conveyed. His character is shown in the way he conducts himself in all things, and his men will hear his words in light of what they have seen in his actions.

In order to provide context for examining these ambiguities of action and character, chapters providing the background of each conflict are followed by brief histories of their conquests. These histories are followed by considerations of the different facets of leadership illumined thereby, including reflections on motivations, delegation and control, practical and rhetorical strategies for maintaining morale and discipline, command abilities and methods, as well as assessments of success and failure. It deserves special mention that, intertwined among all of these, and central to the parallels between the two men, is the role of religion in their conquests. Their religious beliefs influenced their actions in innumerable ways, from their strategic approach to the treatment of the conquered. But the parallel reaches its apex in that both men were identified with the divine themselves, their acceptance or rejection of deification not only shaping the nature of their conquests, but also revealing much about their self-understanding.

Plutarch's purpose was to present his readers with material for reflection on human nature and achievement, illustrating probable connections between, character, deed, and consequence. That purpose is best fulfilled by examining lives whose scale of action is large enough that the landmarks of the human experience may be more easily discerned. But this project presupposes a belief that there is a fundamental consistency in human existence, a fundamental stability in the course of human things. This belief must lie behind any conception of history or biography as providing guidance. If this presupposition is correct, then the project of parallelism may be fruitfully extended. Just as war remains essentially the same throughout the centuries despite changes in tactics and technology, so also do the main currents of human life continue to flow in their ancient courses despite alterations in particulars. Knowledge of the successes and failures of these two great captains may then not only teach us lessons of leadership and command, but aid us in reflecting on what makes a human life worthy or unworthy of our admiration.

## NOTES

1. James Romm, ed., *The Landmark Arrian: The Campaigns of Alexander*, series ed. Robert B. Strassler (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 24. Cited hereafter by book and paragraph, as Arrian I.12.4.
2. Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, trans with an introduction by J. M. Cohen (Penguin Classics, 1963), 46–47.
3. Arrian, I.12.1–2.
4. Francisco López de Gómara, *Cortés: The Life of the Conquistador by His Secretary*. Trans. and ed. Lesley Byrd Simpson. (Berkeley: University of California Press), 3–4.
5. Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (Doubleday, 2001), 84–87.
6. Hanson, 193.
7. “Sertorius” in *Plutarch’s Lives*, Vol. 2, The Dryden translation, edited and revised by Arthur Hugh Clough (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), 1.
8. “Pericles,” in *Plutarch’s Lives*, Vol. 1, The Dryden translation, edited and revised by Arthur Hugh Clough (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), 202.
9. Plutarch, “Pericles,” 202.
10. Plutarch, “Alexander,” 139.
11. Plutarch, “Alexander,” 139.
12. J. R. Hamilton, *Plutarch: Alexander: A Commentary* Second Edition. Foreword and bibliography by Philip A. Stadter (Bristol Classical Press, 1999), xlvi.
13. Hamilton, xxxix–xl.
14. Robert Lamberton, *Plutarch* (Yale University Press, 2001), 97.
15. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*. Trans A. P. Maudslay. Introduction by Hugh Thomas. (Da Capo Press, 2003), 192.