Lucian and Alexander

Debunking in Classical Style

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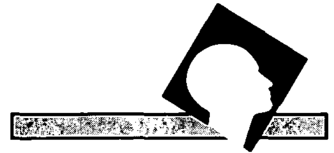
In the year A.D. 164 a middle-aged gentleman paid a visit to the town of Abonuteichos on the southern coast of the Black Sea. That he was an important personage was shown by his escort of two Roman soldiers. He had come to meet the most prominent citizen of Abonuteichos: the prophet Alexander, founder and leader of the cult of Glykon, the human-headed snake god. He found Alexander surrounded by a mob of worshipful locals. As Alexander extended his hand in greeting, the visitor bowed as if to kiss the proffered hand and then sank his teeth into it in a savage bite.

Thus did Alexander the quack prophet meet his future biographer, Lucian of Samosata. Like the cynic philosopher Diogenes (who used a lantern in daylight to search for an honest man), Lucian continued to clamp his teeth into rogues, albeit in a figurative rather than a literal sense. Lucian's satire on the life of Alexander of Abonuteichos, *Alexander; or The False Prophet*, immortalized Alexander as the archetype of the cosmic scoundrel and charlatan. It proved to be the beginning of a long line of writings exposing fraudulent religious cults and assailing rogues and charlatans generally. James Randi's exposures of tricksters and swindlers in *Flim-Flam!* and *The Faith-Healers* are just the most recent skirmishes in a battle whose first shots were fired by Lucian.



Lucian's exposure of Alexander the quack prophet began a long line of writings exposing fraudulent cults, tricksters, and charlatans that continues to this day.

As Lucian tells the story, Alexander was born in Abonuteichos of undistinguished parents. One of his lovers, a disciple of Apollonius of Tyana (founder of another well-known cult) became his mentor and taught him all the tricks

of the strolling mountebank. Eventually, Alexander took up with a partner, an astrologer nicknamed "Nutsy." Together, they traveled about swindling the local "fatheads." Their biggest score was a wealthy woman who had come to Bithynia from Macedon many years before. When she decided to return to Macedon they tagged along. In Macedon, Alexander and his colleague first encountered the local breed of snakes. These were quite enormous; at the same time they were also docile and harmless. Alexander and Nutsy cooked up a scheme for using one of these snakes to establish an oracle to rival Delphi. After some debate, the would-be prophets decided on Abonuteichos as the site of their oracle: the town and surrounding province of Pontus would provide an ample supply of superstitious rubes, better provided with money than brains.

To launch their enterprise, they planted bronze tablets in the sanctuary of Apollo at Chalcedon. The inscriptions on the tablets stated that Asclepius and his father Apollo were moving forthwith to Abonuteichos. When the citizens of Abonuteichos heard of this miraculous event, they immediately voted to erect a temple and started to dig the foundations. Alexander was by now back in Abonuteichos, sporting the appropriate ensemble of a high-class prophet: flowing hair, purple shirt, and scimitar, in the style of Perseus. Alexander had manufactured a Sibylline oracle identifying Abonuteichos as the birthplace of a prophet. The oracle included a cryptogram identifying Alexander as the prophesied one.

> One who will show, first, the primary unit, then a decade thrice over,
> Followed by five other units, then twenty plus twenty plus twenty;
> Numerals four which add up to the name of a man to defend us!

(Primary unit = 1; decade thrice over = 30; 5 other units = 5; and 20 plus 20 plus 20 = 60. In the Greek way of using letters of the alphabet to represent numbers, 1 + 30 + 5 + 60 would be written A, L, E, X. "A man" is *andr-* and "to defend" is *alex.*)

The final step was the epiphany of Alexander's god. One night he buried a blown-out goose egg in the excavation for the new temple's foundations. He had placed a baby snake in the eggshell and carefully sealed it up with white wax and white lead. The next day Alexander, clad only in a gold brocade G-string, appeared in the main square of town. Babbling ecstatically and incoherently (except for the frequent words *Apollo* and *Asclepius*), he drew an awed crowd. He led his audience to the site of the temple, where after singing some hymns he scooped up the previously buried egg and cracked it open to reveal the baby snake, which he claimed to be Asclepius. Alexander hurried home, where he lay low for several days to let the suspense build and allow the word of the miraculous birth to spread throughout

the surrounding province.

Finally, Alexander let the frenzied mob in to view a further miracle: the baby snake had grown to enormous size virtually overnight and now had the head of a man! The snake was of course one of the tame Macedonian variety; Alexander had wrapped it around his body so that the head was tucked under his arm, out of sight. A linen mask provided the god's human face. Eventually the human-headed snake (now named Glykon) would grace pictures, models, and statuettes—even the coinage of Abonuteichos.

An early Roman coin bearing an image of Glykon. (from Harold Mattingly's *Roman Coins from the Earliest Times to the Fall of the Western Empire*, Methuen, London, 1967).

Having equipped himself with a god, Alexander went into the oracle business in a big way. He directed those seeking predictions to write their queries on scrolls, which they were to seal with wax or clay. He would then take the scrolls to the god; they would later be returned to the clients, seals intact, but with the answers to their questions miraculously written underneath. Alexander had mastered several tricks of the trade: with a hot needle, he would cut through the wax underneath the impressed seal, read the contents of the scroll, add an appropriate pronouncement below the question, and then restore the seal by a second passage of the hot needle; alternatively, he would make a cast of the impression on the seal, using a quick-setting plaster, break the seal, carry out the necessary hocus-pocus, and then make a new wax or clay seal with the cast of the original. Later, for an appropriately enhanced fee, Alexander had Glykon deliver prophecies in person: the windpipes of some birds were fitted together and inserted into the back of the linen mask; a confederate outside the room provided the voice of the god.

As his oracle grew in fame and stature, Alexander created a three-day mystery ceremony (like that conducted at Eleusis). After an expulsion ritual in which Epicureans and Christians were enjoined to be gone, the ceremony presented in turn the births of Apollo, his son Asclepius, and the new god Glykon. It ended with the love affair of Alexander and the goddess Selene. Throughout, Alexander made sure his flowing robes frequently parted to show his golden thigh (a piece of gilded leather tied over his upper leg). This golden thigh led to learned speculation by some university professors about whether Alexander had the soul of Pythagoras or merely one similar to it. (One cannot but be forcefully reminded here of the disgraceful role played by various "professors" in validating the spurious claims of certain psychics.)

Needless to say, occasionally the oracle's predictions did not work out. On one occasion, the governor of Cappadocia, Marcus Sedatius Severianus, sought a prophecy before he marched his forces into Armenia to battle the Parthians. Upon receipt of a favorable prediction, Severianus set out to do battle with the Parthians. When Severianus and his forces were unfortunately (and unexpectedly) annihilated by the Parthian king, Alexander quickly substituted an

unfavorable prediction for the previous favorable one. (Many modern psychics, such as Jeane Dixon, have developed the manufacture of the "retrodiction" to a high art.)

Even when Alexander could not fudge the record in this way, the true believers who sought auguries from Glykon found it easy to explain away misfired predictions. When Publius Mummius Sisenna Rutilianus, a prominent Roman official, sought Glykon's advice about an appropriate teacher for his son, the oracle directed: "Choose thou Pythagoras. Choose the great poet and teacher of battle." Within days of this pronouncement the boy died. Rutilianus immediately saw the true import of the god's advice: his son was to be taught by Pythagoras and Homer, both of whom were dead!

From Abonuteichos the influence of Alexander's cult spread into the surrounding provinces. Eventually it spread to Italy and Rome (partly through the sponsorship of Rutilianus, whom Alexander dominated to such an extent that in response to an oracle he married Alexander's daughter). Members of the imperial court sought advice from Glykon, their questions providing Alexander with much information about political undercurrents at Rome as well as unsurpassed opportunities for blackmail. Even the emperor Marcus Aurelius was not immune to Alexander's blandishments. During the Marcomannic War, Alexander sent the emperor an oracle directing him to throw two live lions into the Danube.

> Whereupon there shall come in an instant
> Victory, glory bounding, and with it the peace we so cherish.

The sacrifice was duly performed and the Roman forces immediately suffered a catastrophic defeat. In the face of this apparently failed prediction, Alexander blandly pointed out that the god had prophesied victory without specifying whether it was to be Rome's or the enemy's. Alexander also tried to get the emperor to change the name of Abonuteichos to Ionopolis and permit the city to issue a coin with Glykon's image on it. (This campaign was ultimately successful. Abonuteichos became Ionopolis, a vestige of this name being preserved down to the present by the Turkish village of Ineboli that occupies its site. Examples of the coinage showing Glykon may be seen in many museums.)

Lucian had tried to influence Rutilianus against his marriage to Alexander's daughter. This was in vain, because Rutilianus, although otherwise a reasonable man and a responsible public official, was virtually insane on the subject of religion. To expose the bogus oracle, Lucian sent hoax inquiries to the shrine:

> Query: Is Alexander bald? (Apparently he wore a wig to disguise the fact.)
> Answer: Sabardalchu malach Attis was different.

He submitted under different names two hoax scrolls bearing the question: "Where was Homer born?" (This was a trick question in that one possible answer was the town of Amastris, a political and commercial rival of Abonuteichos with whose Epicureans Alexander had a longstanding feud.) The first scroll was submitted by one of Lucian's servants, who responded to Alexander's probing questions that his master wanted a treatment for a pain in the side.

> Answer: Rub it, I bid, with a "cytmis" plus foam from the mouth of a race horse.

When the second scroll was presented, Lucian let Alexander overhear that the questioner wanted to know whether to go to Italy by ship or by land.

> Answer: Ships I forbid thee—the way across land with thy feet shalt thou follow.

Lucian also submitted a scroll on the outside of which he had written that it was a request for eight oracles. In fact the scroll contained the single question: "When will Alexander the quack magician be caught?" Needless to say the eight oracles supplied were, as lawyers like to say, nonresponsive.

Not content to wage his war against shams at long range, Lucian took the war into the enemy's country. With an escort supplied by the governor of Cappadocia, Lucian journeyed to Abonuteichos, where he greeted Alexander as described at the beginning of this article. The enraged believers were about to mob him when Alexander intervened, telling the crowd that Glykon could turn even bitter enemies into friends. After a brief colloquy, in which Alexander reproached Lucian for his advice to Rutilianus against the marriage, Lucian found it discrete to pretend a new-found friendship for Alexander. Alexander for his part arranged for a boat to carry Lucian on the next stage of his journey and deliver him to Amastris.

On the journey to Amastris Lucian discovered that the crew had been ordered by Alexander to throw him over the side. The captain prevailed on the men not to harm their passenger and he was set safely ashore. In revenge, Lucian tried to get up a lawsuit against Alexander, but Avitus, the governor of Bithynia and Pontus, got him to drop the case on the grounds that Rutilianus's influence would prevent him from punishing Alexander even if he were caught *in flagrante delicto.*

Alexander's life ended with another failed prophecy: he had predicted that he would live to be 150 and die by being struck by lightning. He did not live half so long, dying before the age of 70 of a gangrenous leg.

As good skeptics we should be willing to ask how much, if any, of Lucian's tale of Alexander of Abonuteichos is true. For a long time, classical scholars regarded Lucian's *Alexander* as an example of the insignificance of the targets of Lucian's personal satires. The most recent scholarship has confirmed Lucian, at least as far as the broad outlines of his story are concerned. The cult of Glykon was in fact widespread and influential. The name of Abonuteichos was indeed changed to Ionopolis. The city did in fact issue coinage bearing the likeness of Glykon. On the other hand, Lucian may have copied descriptions of the mechanics of Alexander's oracular frauds from books attacking other oracles. These circumstantial details may come from Celsus's *Against the Magicians* (no longer extant) and Hippolytus's *Refutation of All Heresies.* Lucian's personal tests of Alexander's oracular powers may derive from Oenomaus's *Detection of Impostors.* It is, however, fair to point out that many fraudulent oracles may have used the same tricks, and Lucian may have adopted the tactic of exposing the fraudulent nature of Alexander's oracle through submission of bogus questions because it was likely to be effective.

Lucian carried on his war against sham and imposture in many of his other writings. All told, his surviving writings comprise nearly 1,300 pages of Greek text. In addition to his *Alexander*, Lucian wrote *The Death of*

Peregrinus, a satire that targeted the Cynic philosopher Peregrinus, who committed suicide in a spectacular act of self-immolation at the Olympic games.

The influence of Lucian on later writers was profound. His works were imitated, plagiarized, extended, updated, and otherwise mined for usable ideas by noted writers, including Erasmus, Thomas More (*Utopia* owes much to Lucian's *True History*), Jonathan Swift (*Gulliver's Travels* is another spinoff of *True History*), Ben Jonson (the title character of Jonson's *The Alchemist* strongly resembles Alexander), Christopher Marlowe, and Goethe.

Desiderius Erasmus was the most influential later writer to draw inspiration from Lucian's *Alexander*. He prepared one of the first translations of *Alexander*. The *Colloquies* of Erasmus (a collection of readings intended for beginning students of Latin) contains a Lucian-inspired dialogue entitled "Exorcism or The Spectator," in which a group of hoaxers expose the superstition and credulity of a foolish priest. Ironically, the character of one of the hoaxers was probably based on Erasmus's friend Thomas More.

Lucian has also been mined by writers of a less skeptical bent. Immanuel Velikovsky, in *Worlds in Collision*, quotes from Lucian's *Astrology* to support his interpretation of Homer's *Iliad* as a coded recounting of the natural disasters caused by Venus's encounters with other planets after its ejection as a comet from Jupiter.

> All that he [Homer] hath said of Venus and of Mars his passion is also manifestly composed from no other sources than this science [astrology]. Indeed, it is the conjunction of Venus and Mars that create the poetry of Homer.

Because Lucian insists on identifying Aphrodite with the planet Venus (as did everyone else in antiquity), Velikovsky has to add the following idiotic gloss on the text:

> Lucian is unaware that Athene is the goddess of the planet Venus and yet he knows the real meaning of the cosmic plot of the Homeric epic, which shows that the sources of his instruction in astrology were cognizant of the facts of the celestial drama. (*Worlds in Collision*, p. 251f)

Leaving aside the arrogance that leads Velikovsky to "correct" the classical scholarship of a classical author, Velikovsky ignores the possibility suggested by some classical scholars that Lucian's *Astrology* was written to satirize exactly the kind of farfetched exegesis that is Velikovsky's *metier*. Even today, over the distance of nearly two millennia, Lucian and his skeptical descendants are still sinking their teeth into humorless cranks.

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