Interpreting Magnus: Roman Perceptions of Alexander the Great in the Late Republic and the Principate

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Alexander the Great was for the Romans, in many respects, a model forged by necessity. There were few figures in Rome's own past who possessed the type of autocratic power that was emerging in the late Republic. Thus, Alexander served as an exemplum, both good and bad, of absolute power and as such, there was an immense spike in the interest of Alexander during the Late Republic and the Principate. Therefore, Roman conceptions of Alexander must be understood in the political and cultural context of this most volatile period in Roman history. Furthermore, it is necessary to examine the way in which these interests in Alexander manifest themselves at Rome and the Empire at large. Here, three sources of study provide the most apt material: the rulers, the commentators, and the historians of the period. The rulers, through their imitation of Alexander, reflect the ways in which they viewed their own power. The commentators, those such as Cicero and Seneca, who provide invaluable insights into the political climate of their time, make known their feelings toward Alexander and the type of power he represents. Finally, the historians, in particular those who wrote about Alexander, were all, intentionally or not, bound to the Roman world in which they lived. Therefore, the portraits of Alexander's life that they create are shaded by Roman sentiments of power as it became recognized in the Late Republic and Early Empire.