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THE WORLD OF ALEXANDER'S BIRTH AND HIS EDUCATION IN LITERATURE AND WARFARE (350S AND 340S BC)

§1.

Timeline of Alexander's Life

359 BC	Philip II becomes king of the Macedonians.
356 BC	Alexander is born to Olympias and Philip II.
338 BC	Philip II and Alexander defeat the Greek alliance at the battle of Chaeronea.
336 BC	Philip II is assassinated, and Alexander becomes king.
335 BC	Alexander destroys Thebes for rebelling.
334 BC	Alexander begins his expedition to conquer Asia.
333 BC	Alexander defeats the Persian king at the battle of Issus.
332 BC	Alexander captures Tyre after a long siege.
331 BC	Alexander is crowned Pharaoh in Egypt; he defeats the Persian king again at the battle of Gaugamela.
330 BC	The Persian palace at Persepolis is destroyed in a fire for which Alexander is responsible.
329 BC	Alexander reaches Bactria (present-day Afghanistan).
328 BC	Alexander kills Cleitus in a drunken argument.
327 BC	Alexander marries Roxane, daughter of a Bactrian ruler.
326 BC	Alexander's army at the Hyphasis River refuses to march any farther east into India.

324 BC Alexander returns to Persia by marching through the Gedrosian Desert; Alexander and many of his commanders marry Persian brides at Susa.
323 BC Alexander dies in Babylon.

Alexander was born in the year 356 (all dates are BC, unless otherwise indicated) in Macedonia, the region of mountains, plains, and rivers between Greece (to the south and east) and the even more mountainous Balkan regions (to the north, west, and northeast). A royal family ruled Macedonia, and Alexander's father Philip ruled as king of the Macedonians. To keep his power, a Macedonian king had to rally support continuously from the fiercely proud leaders dominating the region. These leaders believed themselves to be the social equals of the royal family, and each had many local men ready to follow him into battle. To remain successful, a king of the Macedonians had to win an ongoing competition for status among this social elite. Philip and his ancestors sought legitimacy for their royal standing through their claim that they shared the same ethnic heritage as the Greeks. Most Greeks of the time disagreed, seeing Macedonians as barbarians. For Greeks, barbarians were defined as people who did not speak Greek; barbarians could be brave or noble, but in the competition for cultural and personal status over others that defined Alexander's world, barbarians were, for Greeks, by definition less elite.

For Greeks, Alexander's mother, Olympias, was also a barbarian because she was from Epirus to the west of Macedonia. But Olympias was royal (and rich), from a family that claimed descent from Achilles, made famous by Homer's *Iliad* as the best of the Greek warriors at the time of the Trojan War. Philip's family, too, was royal and very ancient, descended from Heracles (called Hercules by the Romans). Heracles was the most famous human being in the Greek world; literature told of his struggles and victories over enemies, monsters, and gods, and of the prize he won: he became a god after his death, worshipped across the world. Both Achilles and Heracles had a divine parent; Heracles was the son of Zeus, the king of the gods. We must accept that

Alexander, like almost everyone else, believed this heritage to be literally true and monumentally significant. His family history therefore gave Alexander a social status in his world second to none, a fact that was fundamental to his understanding of his life and what he should do with it.

§ 2.

Alexander was born when Philip was away fighting a war to strengthen his kingdom by taking away from Athenian control the Greek city-state of Potidaea, east of Macedonia. Athens was still a powerful city-state famed for its architecture and literature, but Philip had built Macedonia into a power far greater. He was winning the competition with the Greek city-states for international status and power. On the day Philip's army captured Potidaea, he received news of three other victories: his general Parmenion had defeated the Illyrians, Macedonia's most dangerous northern neighbors; his racehorse had won first place at the Olympic Games, the most prominent competitive festival in ancient Greece; and one of his several wives, Olympias, had born him a son to be his heir to the throne. By taking Potidaea, Philip seized control of that region's gold and silver mines; these rich new sources of precious metals bankrolled Philip's expansion of power. The Illyrians had almost destroyed the Macedonian kingdom several years earlier; defeating them marked Philip as an unquestioned success in the competitive world of Macedonian politics. Given that only Greeks could compete in the Olympics, Philip's victory there earned him the right to boast that he belonged to the Greek elite. The birth of Alexander finally gave him a son he could hope to mold into a successor, keeping Philip's family line competitive in the violently dangerous world of Macedonian royal politics. The court prophets told Philip that his son's birth date, contemporary with his three great victories, meant that the boy would grow up to be "unbeatable, invincible" (*aniketos*).

People at the time, and for centuries after, said that the gods sent signs that Alexander's birth would change the world and

that he was no ordinary human being. Olympias had dreamed – most people at the time thought dreams were messages from the gods – that her womb was struck by a thunderbolt from Zeus. Philip dreamed his son would have the nature of a lion. He also claimed that, months before, he had glimpsed a giant snake, surely a god in disguise, sleeping with Olympias; the priest of the god Apollo publicly confirmed the interpretation. On the very day Alexander was born, Persian priests, the so-called Magi, who were visiting the Greek city Ephesus in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), suddenly panicked when the temple of the goddess Artemis burned down. They ran through the streets shouting that the kingdoms of Asia were destined to fall.

§3.

Alexander began his life in a world of women. Macedonian kings were polygamous, with each wife representing a political alliance with an important family, inside or outside the kingdom. Olympias' homeland, for example, was strategically important for Macedonian security; good relations with the Epirote royal family protected Macedonia's western flank. By the time Philip died, he had married seven women. The political necessity of these marriages did not rule out love; Philip is said to have fallen hard for Olympias when he met her at an international religious festival. Royal women were in charge of their own living space in their homes and palaces; men entered rarely and only with permission. This feminine world was just as competitive as the world of men. The king's wives competed to be the most important, and a child's rank depended on the mother's prominence as well as on the child's own ability in the father's eyes. A child's success would elevate a mother's status.

As a child, Alexander lived among female relatives, friends, and many slaves. Olympias had brought slaves with her from Epirus to Macedonia, while others – working for the royal family as cooks, cleaners, gardeners, musicians, weavers, and in nearly every other trade imaginable – were either born to slaves or were prizes of conquest. Some were northern barbarians with

no formal education; others were Greeks, some of whom could read and write and even serve as teachers for children. All of these slaves were property; they could be physically or sexually abused or even killed if their owners were cruel. One of the most important jobs of the women in any wealthy house was to train and manage the household slaves and even to nurse them back to health after sickness or injury. Despite their wide differences in status, royalty and slaves lived closely together in an intercultural and multilingual domestic community. Alexander heard many languages as a child; his mother spoke Epirote, the language of Epirus; his nurse, a free woman from an elite local family, spoke Macedonian, a language related to Greek but incomprehensible to Greeks; various slaves spoke the languages of their native lands. Greek was the common language, and Alexander grew up bilingual in Macedonian and Greek.

A mother's most important duty was to launch her child's education, especially to prepare him or her to enter society beyond the restricted circle of childhood. For Alexander, that was the society of the royal court. Like the world of women, the Macedonian court was strongly international, where Greeks and other non-Macedonians, including Persians, lived as long-term guests. For at least half a century before Philip, Macedonian kings had paid for leading Greek artists, writers, and thinkers to be part of life at court. At the end of the fifth century, the famous Athenian author of tragic dramas, Euripides, was hired to live in the capital city of Pella and write and direct plays in Greek of the kind that thrilled international audiences in Athenian drama festivals. Early in the fourth century, a Macedonian king invited a student of the famous Athenian philosopher Plato to live at court, empowering him with the sensitive job of choosing guests invited to eat at the king's dinner table based on their education in philosophy and geometry.

§4.

The ancient writers say that even before Alexander entered the world of adult men, he loved the broad range of Greek literature:

tragic and comic plays, histories of Greeks and barbarians, philosophical essays on the nature of the world and how people should live in it, and poems honoring victors in war, sports, and politics. To understand Alexander's motivations and goals, it is crucial to appreciate what Greek literature meant to him and his peers. For them, stories of heroes and gods were records of history, not fiction. "Myth" is the Greek word for story, and what we today refer to as "mythology" – a term implying made-up legends – was seen as the complex narrative of genuine interactions between gods and humans in the past. Myths were real for Alexander, and they had meaning beyond entertainment. The stories described competing, even contradictory, versions of the past because history was complicated and meaningful on multiple levels; it was the responsibility of a myth's audience to unravel the significance of this competition of meaning through hard study, deep reflection, creative imagination, and spirited discussion.

For members of the highest social elite, myths taught lessons about their ancestors, reaching back to the beginning of history and the birth of the gods. Zeus, the king of the gods, headed the lineage of Alexander's family, many generations in the past. The stories of Greek literature for Alexander therefore concerned his heritage; they described who he was and prescribed how he should live. It mattered tremendously to Alexander to know what his ancestors had done, and how he could live up to and then go beyond their glorious achievements. His inherited place in the world and his proper role in it, then, were explicable to him only through the lens of literature's stories; these stories were key to Alexander's constructing his personal identity and status. His immersion in Greek literature and passion for knowledge did not make him dreamy or bookish; they reflected his insatiable curiosity, brilliant intelligence, and rigorous education as a member of the upper class of his time and place.

For Alexander, literature revealed guiding principles of life – often harsh and violent and always competitive – that he never forgot. For example, the poems of Pindar from the city of Thebes taught Alexander that a man's greatest victories will disappear

and perish unless sung, told, or written down. Alexander learned the dramas of Euripides by heart, their rhythmic lines encapsulating for him and his peers razor-sharp insights into honor and insult that they could hurl at each other like weapons. The most important author of all for Alexander was the poet Homer. His *Iliad* focused on Alexander's ancestor Achilles, the "best of the Greeks." It showed that Achilles lived "always to go beyond others," and therefore chose a glorious death over safety and obscurity. In his quest for immortal fame, he demanded absolute loyalty from others and public recognition of his superior status.

Everything Alexander learned as he grew up described human life as ultimately dependent on the plans of the gods. In ancient polytheistic religion, there was no single set of beliefs or doctrines shared by everyone about the role of the gods and supernatural forces in the lives of people, and there was no organized religious authority to dictate beliefs. Worship at temples and rituals at festivals were important events in all communities, but people also believed that they might meet or talk to the gods at any time, anywhere – if the gods chose to send a message about what human beings should do. Understanding communications from the gods was very difficult, and the stakes could be as high as life or death. People realized that they could never hope to understand fully the nature of the gods; divine majesty was so vastly superior to the position of mere mortals that the gods' plans were by nature incomprehensible. People also knew that to misunderstand what the gods wanted from them was to risk destruction. The gods did not love human beings, nor did they automatically and always want to protect them. Communities and individuals were obliged to honor and worship the gods, with the hope (but not the guarantee) of receiving divine help in return for frequent prayers and sacrifices, especially of large and expensive animals.

The gods were frightening and dangerous, and people prayed to them, sacrificed animals to them, and gave them gifts to avoid their anger. But people also prayed, sacrificed, and gave to the gods out of gratitude. The gods could be the sources of great

blessings – children, health, victory, food, wine. Some rituals of worship promised believers a better existence after death. Olympias and Philip met at just such a religious gathering. All accounts say that Olympias was devoted to prayer, sacrifice, and other devotional rituals. She emphasized particularly the worship of Dionysus, who would be a very important god to Alexander throughout his life. Dionysus was the Greek deity who most strongly displayed complexity and ambiguity. Born on earth from a sexual encounter between a woman and the king of the gods, then either torn to pieces by monsters and resurrected or born a second time from the leg of his father, he was a god who had been human at some point in his creation but then became divine. He was the source of great pleasures (wine and sex) for human beings, but also pain and violent death for anyone who showed disloyalty to him or failed to respect his power. Olympias believed that a god had impregnated her and that Alexander was the son of a divine father; eventually, when Alexander was old enough, she told him so.

The gods spoke to people through specially designated priestesses and priests at various sacred places called oracles. Zeus spoke from an oracle at Dodona in western Greece, whereas the Egyptian god Ammon (whom the Greeks thought to be Zeus) answered suppliants' questions at Siwah in the Egyptian desert. The most famous Greek oracle was Apollo's sanctuary at Delphi in central Greece (the oracle Philip consulted after seeing the snake in his wife's bed). The messages of oracles were difficult to understand because they were usually expressed as riddles or obscure hints; other kinds of divine communication – the appearance of particular kinds of birds, dreams, or signs in the sky – were even more obscure. Interpreting all these divine messages and signs required the help of experts.

§ 5 ·

These were all things that Alexander learned in the world of women where he lived for the first years of his life and from the

Greek literature that he read and discussed at home. When he was old enough and strong enough, perhaps seven or eight years old, he took his first steps into the world of men. In the company of other boys, Alexander trained his body for strength and speed. They ran 200-yard sprints – the length Greeks called a *stadion* ("stadium") – lifted rocks and weights, and began to learn to fight. Through fighting Alexander and his classmates learned strength, speed of hand, foot, and eye, aggression, and how to take pain without panic. This early combat training resembled modern mixed martial arts: punching, grappling, kicking. The ultimate form of ancient fighting was the *pankration*, "total power fighting." The *pankration* was an opportunity to display courage and endurance while in pain. Later in his life, when Alexander sponsored athletic contests, he never encouraged his soldiers to pursue the injury-plagued *pankration*, preferring that they fight with wooden poles, because matches with these mock arms were less likely to disable his troops. Training for war was the constant, obvious goal of Alexander's daily exercises as a boy.

In the world of Alexander's time, war was normal, to defend the home and homeland and to win conquests and riches from others. The frequency of war reflected fundamental assumptions about the nature of human existence. One of those assumptions, shared by Alexander and everyone else, was that individuals and nations were not automatically entitled to an equal claim to status, power, and prosperity. Everyone had a rank, superior to, equal to, or inferior to others. People regularly disagreed about who was entitled to be superior and who had to be inferior, and one function of war was to settle such disputes, at the expense of the freedom of the losers. Those who believed themselves to be superior felt an obligation to assert their status and demand its recognition from others; those who were inferior yet resisted the power of their superiors faced terrible (and inevitable) consequences for their supposed disloyalty. These hierarchical assumptions were built into society, even into the uniquely radical democracy of Athens, where the free citizens were divided according to status into income-based classes

that determined their political opportunities. The hierarchy of strength, courage, and ability was the foundation of order and stability in this world. It dominated how Macedonians saw others, and it was the reason that Macedonians trained their sons to be warriors. They trained to fight to maintain their status and the safety of their land, with weapons and with words. All the sons of the nobility learned to fight; none learned to be deferential.

Alexander began training for war with the shorter and lighter weapons of the infantry: knives and swords. This training extended the lessons of the *pankration*, to fight with courage and cunning when the enemy was only an arm's length away, slashing or stabbing with a sharp-edged weapon. He and his friends also learned to use long-distance weapons, shooting arrows with bows and rocks with slings as light-armed infantry, and then to fight as heavy infantry wearing armor and wielding long thrusting spears. It was important for a commander and king-to-be to have experience of all kinds of infantry weapons and tactics so that he could use his troops to best effect. Above all, however, the son of the king had to be a skilled cavalryman, ready to lead charges in person against the enemy. The horse was the vehicle for a military commander in battle, providing mobility and an elevated point of view over a battlefield. As soon as he was large enough, Alexander learned to ride, practicing maneuvers on horseback at high speeds without stirrups (which would be unknown in Europe for another thousand years). He trained to use a cavalryman's thrusting spear and slashing sword, fighting in coordination with others in massed attacks. Through all this training, Alexander learned how far and how fast armed infantry could march and cavalry could ride over different kinds of terrain. He learned how much men eat and drink on the march and how long their strength can endure while fighting. In the company of his father, Alexander saw engineers developing machines of warfare – catapults, siege-towers, portable bridges – and witnessed negotiations with suppliers of weapons, food, and the other things necessary to keep an army fit to fight. Many of these engineers, artisans, and tradesmen were foreigners. The Greeks of Sicily and the Persians had made advances