

## ALEXANDER THE GREAT



## CHAPTER ONE

## THE CONQUEST OF PERSIA

ALEXANDER III, son of Philip II and the Epirote princess Olympias, was born in summer 356, and was twenty when in 336 he succeeded to the throne of Macedonia. Though both his parents claimed Greek descent, he certainly had from his father, and probably from his mother, some Illyrian, i.e. Albanian, blood. When his son was thirteen, Philip invited Aristotle to Macedonia to be his tutor; and, so far as his character was influenced by others, it was influenced by Aristotle and Olympias, by a philosopher who taught that moderation alone could hold a kingdom together<sup>1</sup> and by a woman to whom any sort of moderation was unknown. Olympias was proud and terribly passionate, with an emotional side which made her a devotee of the orgiastic worships of Thrace; but she kept her son's love all his life, and, though he inherited from Philip the solid qualities of capacity for affairs and military talent, his nature was largely hers, though not his mind. For if his nature was passionate, his mind was practical; he was found, when a boy, entertaining some Persian envoys by questioning them about the routes across Asia. For physical pleasures, except hunting, he cared little; but he read much poetry, and shared Euripides' dislike of the professional athlete. His heroes were his

<sup>1</sup> Arist. *Pol.* VIII (v), II, 1313 a, 19.

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traditional ancestors Achilles and Heracles, and he kept under his pillow a copy of the *Iliad* which Aristotle had revised for him. During their three years together at Mieza, Aristotle taught him ethics and his own views on politics and on the geography of Asia, and perhaps some metaphysics; later he wrote for him a treatise on the art of ruling, and perhaps another on colonisation. He also gave him a general interest in philosophy, scientific investigation, and medicine. The last two bore fruit in Alexander's care for his army's health in Asia and in the great contributions he made to the knowledge of geography, hydrography, ethnology, zoology, and botany; the first is illustrated by the philosophers who accompanied him to Asia, and by the treatise on kingship written for him by Xenocrates, while his admiration for Heracles may have been quickened by the Cynic teaching which was already making of Heracles the ideal king, labouring incessantly for the good of mankind. In appearance, Alexander was fair-skinned, ruddy, and clean-shaven; Lysippus' portrait-statues rendered famous the inclination of his head to the left side and the soft, upturned eyes. For the rest, he was at his accession easy to persuade but impossible to drive; generous, ambitious, masterful, loyal to friends, and above all very young. His deeper qualities, for good or evil, remained to be called out by events.

At sixteen he had governed Macedonia in Philip's absence and defeated a Thracian rising; at eighteen he had commanded Philip's left at Chaeronea, and broken the Sacred Band of Thebes. At nineteen he was an exile. Relations between Philip and Olympias had long been strained, for Olympias was not the woman to tolerate Philip's harem; and the trouble came to a head when, in

*Alexander's youth*

337, Philip married Cleopatra, niece of his general Attalus, which, unlike most of Philip's 'marriages', threatened Olympias' position. Philip, it was said, doubted whether Alexander were really his son—possibly a story invented by Attalus' friends; and at the wedding feast Attalus requested the company to pray for a legitimate heir to the throne. Alexander flung his cup in his face, took his mother, and fled to Illyria. Philip banished Alexander's friends, including Harpalus prince of Elymiotis, related to the royal house, Ptolemy son of Lagos,<sup>1</sup> and Nearchus, a Cretan settled at Amphipolis; finally Demaratus of Corinth acted as peace-maker, persuading Philip to recall his son and Alexander to return.

Next year Philip was assassinated. It was the official belief at the Macedonian court that the assassin was in Persian pay (see p. 37); it is possible enough. Antipater's attitude absolutely acquits Alexander of complicity. Olympias may have been privy to the plot; but the only evidence against her is Antipater's subsequent enmity to her, for our tradition on the subject derives from Cassander's propaganda later. Some in Greece believed that the conspirators meant to set on the throne Alexander son of Aeropus of Lyncestis; were this true, Olympias is acquitted. Aeropus' younger sons were certainly among the conspirators, but the eldest cleared himself for the time by being the first to hail Alexander as king. The usual confusion consequent on a change of ruler threatened; but Philip's generals Antipater and Parmenion declared for Alexander, and the new king acted with determination; he secured the army, put to death all the conspirators who did

<sup>1</sup> On the subsequent claim that Ptolemy I was related to the royal house see Tarn, *J.H.S.* LIII, 1933, p. 57.

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not escape to Persia, and executed Attalus for treasonable correspondence with Athens; he had no further trouble. Olympias is said to have murdered Cleopatra and her infant on her own account.<sup>1</sup> It was her last public action in Macedonia while Alexander lived; though devoted to her, he was determined that she should not interfere in affairs, and in 331 she retired to Epirus.

Alexander had still to establish his position outside Macedonia; Philip had had no time to consolidate the League of Corinth, and the Greeks regarded their treaties with him as terminated by his death.<sup>2</sup> Athens was rejoicing over his murder, Ambracia expelled his garrison, Aetolia recalled her exiles, there was excitement in Thebes and the Peloponnese; even in Thessaly the anti-Macedonian party for a moment seized power. Northward the Balkan peoples were flaming up; Macedonia might find herself between two fires. Alexander turned first to Greece, as more necessary to him and more dangerous; in late summer 336 he hurried south, turned Tempe, which the Thessalians were holding, by cutting steps—‘Alexander’s ladder’—up the flank of Ossa,<sup>3</sup> and regained control of Thessaly without fighting. He was elected head for life of her League in Philip’s place,<sup>4</sup> and thus secured her all-important cavalry; for Thessaly was still to a considerable extent a country of horse-breeding landowners<sup>5</sup> ruling a serf population, and

1 See App. 9.

2 On the death of a Macedonian king the crown became vested in the army till they had elected or confirmed a new king. There was thus no continuity, and every treaty, however expressed, ended with the death of the king who made it.

3 Polyænus IV, 3, 23.

4 See H. D. Westlake, *Thessaly in the fourth century B.C.*, 1935, p. 219.

5 Thessaly did not really become urbanised till the third century B.C.; see Westlake op. cit. ch. II and refs.

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cavalry was her natural arm. Greece was not prepared for resistance; he overawed Thebes, forgave Ambracia and Athens, and at a congress of the League states at Corinth was elected general of the League in Philip's place for the invasion of Asia, Sparta of course still abstaining: among the provisions of the new Covenant were that all League states should be free and self-governing and that their internal constitutions should not be interfered with. On his way back to Macedonia he visited Delphi, where the Pythia hailed him invincible.<sup>1</sup>

In spring 335 he turned against the Triballi, a people whom pressure from the advancing Celts had driven eastward across the Isker into northern Bulgaria, whence they were threatening Macedonia. Alexander took the coast road eastward from Amphipolis, turned Rhodope, went north, roughly, by Adrianople, and after a sharp fight crossed the Haemus, probably by the Kajan or Koja Balkan pass, though the Shipka is possible. He broke the Triballi in a battle, and reached the Danube somewhere between Sistovo and Silistria; but the Triballi had sent their families to an island in the river called Peuke, and, though some Byzantine warships joined him, he could not take it, while the Getae, famous for their belief in immortality, were gathering on the northern bank to aid the Triballi. Between warships and log canoes he got 5,500 men across the Danube, dispersed the Getae, and burned their town; this bold action caused the Triballi and their neighbours to surrender, and brought him an embassy from their enemies the Celts farther up the Danube, who swore alliance with him in a form still used by the Irish Gaels 1,000 years later—

<sup>1</sup> This word, *ἀνίκητος*, became a sort of title. On it and Alexander's visit to Delphi, see App. 21.

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‘We will keep faith unless the sky fall and crush us or the earth open and swallow us or the sea rise and overwhelm us’; they added that, of the three, they only feared the sky falling.<sup>1</sup> Alexander now heard that Cleitus of Illyria had allied himself with Glaucias of the Taulantini (south Illyria), invaded Macedonia, and captured the border fortress, Pelion; while the Autariatae of southern Serbia were ready to fall on his flank as he went west. But his friend Longarus of the Agrianes on the upper Strymon, whose people furnished some of his best troops,<sup>2</sup> undertook to hold the Autariatae, and Alexander, notwithstanding the great distance to be covered, reached Pelion before Glaucias joined Cleitus. He meant to blockade it; but Glaucias closed in on his rear, and he was not strong enough to fight on two fronts. His own audacity and his men’s discipline extricated the army from its dangerous position; then he turned and thoroughly defeated Cleitus. News from Greece prevented him doing more, but seemingly Illyria did not trouble him again; possibly fear of his Celtic allies counted for something.

A report had reached Greece that Alexander was dead, and the threatened defection was serious. The Theban democrats, exiled by Philip, had returned and seized power, and were attacking the Cadmea; Aetolia, Arcadia, and Elis were inclining to support them. Athens had voted help to Thebes; and though she had made no actual move, and had refused a subsidy of 300 talents offered by Darius, Demosthenes, it seems, had personally accepted the money—a

1 This oath was brilliantly reconstructed by H. d’Arbois de Jubainville, *Les premiers habitants de l’Europe*, II, p. 316. But his Irish parallel shows it was not in form an *imprecation*, as he thought.

2 As Longarus was neither a subject nor (apparently) an ally, Alexander’s recruitment of Agrianians must have resembled the British recruitment of Gurkhas.

*Illyria: Thebes*

dubious act, which was freely misconstrued—and with it was providing Thebes with arms. Alexander was afraid of a possible combination of the four chief military states<sup>1</sup> of Greece—Thebes, Athens, Aetolia, and Sparta. But he showed, for the first but not the last time, that his speed of movement was worth an army; his campaign had already been sufficiently strenuous, yet fourteen days after the news reached him at Pelion he stood under the walls of Thebes, having collected the contingents of Phocis and Boeotia on the way. His presence checked any further developments, and the other Greeks waited on the event. He himself hoped Thebes would submit; he wanted a peaceful and contented Greece behind him and waited for overtures, but none came; Thebes meant to fight. Naturally he intended to take the city if accommodation failed; that Perdikkas began the attack without orders is immaterial. The Thebans sallied out but were defeated, and Alexander's men entered the city with the fugitives, whom the Phocians and Plataeans massacred in revenge for their former wrongs. Alexander nominally left Thebes' fate to the League, but the only delegates with him were Thebes' enemies; Phocis and Boeotia indeed voted the city's destruction, but the responsibility lies with Alexander. Thebes was razed, the temples and Pindar's house alone being left; Macedonia's partisans and other classes were released, and some Thebans escaped to Athens, but many were sold as slaves—perhaps 8,000, if the recorded price be true.<sup>2</sup> Orchomenus and Plataea were fully restored, and the Boeotian cities divided

<sup>1</sup> Arr. I, 7, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Diod. xvii, 14, 4, 440 talents, which at  $3\frac{1}{2}$  minae apiece (the usual price was 3 to 4 minae) makes 7,500. The 30,000 of Diod. xvii, 14, 1 is only a stereotyped figure, which recurs at Tyre.

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up Thebes' territory. Thebes suffered what she had inflicted on Plataea and Orchomenus, and what other Greek cities had suffered at the hands of Greeks; but that does not acquit Alexander, and it is said that his own conscience troubled him later. But the blow produced its effect; every Greek state hastened to submit, and he showed general clemency; and though he demanded the leading statesmen from Athens, he withdrew the demand on the appeal of Phocion and Demades, the irreconcilable Charidemus alone being exiled; for he greatly desired a contented Athens. He retained Philip's garrisons in Corinth, Chalcis, and the Cadmea.

In autumn 335 Alexander returned to Macedonia to prepare for the invasion of Persia, and for this purpose recalled Parmenion from Asia, whither Philip had sent him in 336 with an advance force. Parmenion's successor was defeated by Memnon, who commanded Darius' mercenaries, but retained the all-important Dardanelles bridge-heads. Darius seems to have thought that Parmenion's recall and Memnon's success had removed any possibility of invasion; he made no preparations, and did not even mobilise his fleet or appoint a commander-in-chief on the coast.

The primary reason why Alexander invaded Persia was, no doubt, that he never thought of *not* doing it; it was his inheritance. Doubtless, too, adventure attracted him; and weight must also be given to the official reason. For officially, as is shown by the political manifesto which he afterwards sent to Darius from Marathus (p. 36), the invasion was that Panhellenic war of revenge which Isocrates had preached; and Alexander did set out with Panhellenic ideas: he was the champion of Hellas. It seems



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quite certain that he had read, and was influenced by, Isocrates' *Philippus*.<sup>1</sup> But Isocrates had envisaged the conquest of Asia Minor only; and certainly Alexander did not cross the Dardanelles with any definite design of conquering the whole Persian empire. There is a story that Aristotle once asked his pupils what they would all do in certain circumstances, and Alexander replied that he could not say until the circumstances arose;<sup>2</sup> and, so far as can be seen, he intended at first to be guided by events, and naturally found that each step forward seemed to lead inevitably to a fresh one. To discuss the morality of the invasion, and to call Alexander a glorious robber, is a mere anachronism. Of course, to the best modern thought, the invasion is quite unjustifiable; but it is equally unjustifiable to transfer our own thought to the fourth century B.C. Greeks certainly objected to barbarians—'lesser breeds without the Law'—attacking themselves, but the best thought of the time saw no reason why they should not attack barbarians whenever they liked; Plato said that all barbarians were enemies by nature, and that it was proper to wage war upon them, even to the point of enslaving or extirpating them;<sup>3</sup> Isocrates also called them natural enemies,<sup>4</sup> and warmly advocated such a war;<sup>5</sup> Aristotle called it essentially just,<sup>6</sup> and told his pupil to treat barbarians as what they were—slaves.<sup>7</sup> It was to be left to Alexander himself to rise to a higher level than Plato and Aristotle.

1 Benno von Hagen, *Philol.* LXVII, 1908, p. 113; U. Wilcken, *S.B. Berlin*, xxx, 1928, p. 578, n. 3 (on p. 579).

2 Ps. Call. A' 1, 16, 3 sq. A' has some genuine information, see App. 22, pp. 363 sq.

3 *Rep.* 470C–471A.

4 *Panegy.* 184, *Panath.* 163.

5 *Panegy.* 3.

6 *φύσει δίκαιον*, *Pol.* 1, 8, 1256b, 25.

7 Fr. 658 Rose = Plut. *de Alex. fort.* 1, 329B; cf. *Pol.* 1, 2, 1252b, 9, III, 14, 1285a, 20.

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In the spring of 334 Alexander crossed the Dardanelles, as commander-in-chief of the army<sup>1</sup> of Macedonia and the League of Corinth, with something over 30,000 foot and over 5,000 horse. He left Antipater with (probably) 9,000 foot and a few horse<sup>2</sup> as his general in Europe, to govern Macedonia and Thrace, act as deputy Hegemon of the League of Corinth in his place, supervise the affairs of Greece, and keep Olympias quiet, a more difficult task. Of Alexander's infantry, 12,000 were Macedonians, viz. the phalanx, 9,000, in six territorial battalions, and the hypaspists, 3,000, in three battalions; and 12,000 were Greeks, composed of allies (League hoplites) and mercenaries (partly peltasts). The remaining infantry were light-armed: Agrianian javelin-men, Cretan archers, and Thracians. Generally speaking, the League infantry was used mainly for garrisons and communications; but the Cretan archers, who were not League troops, were as indispensable as the Agrianians themselves, and their loss of five commanders successively<sup>3</sup> shows how heavily they were engaged. The phalanx was a far more flexible body than the later phalanx, and it is now certain that their spears were not more than 13 to 14 ft. long.<sup>4</sup> The hypaspists<sup>5</sup> were as heavily armed as the phalanx, and shared the heavy infantry work. The difference between the two corps lay, not in armament, but in history and recruitment; the phalanx was the national Macedonian levy, while the hypaspists were King's troops; one of their battalions, the *agēma*, was Alexander's foot-guard. Of the cavalry, the most important body was the

1 For everything connected with the army see App. I.

2 I.e. six battalions of the phalanx. He could only raise 600 horse for the Lamian war.

3 Arr. I, 8, 4; I, 22, 7; I, 28, 8; III, 5, 6 (two names); v, 14, 1.

4 App. 2, *The short Macedonian cubit*.

5 App. I, III.