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978-1-107-55979-0 - Alexander the Great: Drawn Mostly from Q. Curtius'
Life Of Alexander

Edited by W. S. Hett

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ALEXANDER THE GREAT

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(from a Sarcophagus of the 4th Century B.C., found at Sidon)

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EDITED BY

W. S. HETT, M.A.

Second Master, Brighton College



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The frontispiece is from a Sarcophagus of
the Fourth Century B.C., found at Sidon

The figure on the title-page is from a coin
of Lysimachus

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INTRODUCTION

There are very few to whom the verdict of History has awarded the title “The Great”. The present account of Alexander the Great, drawn almost entirely from the pages of Quintus Curtius, will prove that the title is deserved, but a sketch of his career may help to show in what this greatness consists.

A glance at the map makes the extent of his military conquests sufficiently obvious, stretching as they do from Europe to India. Of course such conquests would have been impossible unless the conditions had been favourable, and the state of the Persian Empire at this date was one of Alexander’s greatest assets.

Until the beginning of the fifth century B.C. the Persian Empire had continually expanded until it controlled even the Greeks on the coast of Asia Minor. In 490 and 480 B.C. the Greeks had checked Persian expansion, and the kings who succeeded Darius and Xerxes had taken little part in the affairs of Greece, except to supply money to Athens and Sparta alternately in the Peloponnesian War. Not only had Persia tacitly abandoned her claim to supremacy in Greece, but her kings had only a very loose control over the unwieldy Empire, which they called their own. Greece had always been theoretically at war with Persia, and the famous

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march of the Ten Thousand under Xenophon had shown that a small and well-disciplined force could make its way from Babylon to Trapezus without encountering any very determined opposition.

It was the destiny of Alexander to carry the war into the enemy's country, and it is to be noted that he himself repeatedly insisted, and with justice, that he was the champion of Hellenism against Barbarism. The fact that later on in his career he came under Oriental influence, and, to the disgust of his Macedonians, adopted many eastern customs, must not make us blind to this important claim.

As the story develops we shall realize that he succeeded beyond even his own wild dreams in carrying the civilization of Greece to the East, and transplanting it to live as a vigorous growth for centuries.

It is this which, from the point of view of the world's history, is Alexander's greatest achievement. As it was due in the first place to his brilliant success as a general, the story of his conquests as told by Curtius will give us an insight into the astounding results attained by this remarkable man, who never lost a battle.

After the assassination of Philip, king of Macedon in 339 B.C., his son Alexander lost no time in convincing both his own Macedonians and the southern Greeks that he intended not only to succeed to his father's powerful position in Greece, but also to

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carry on Philip's plans from the point at which his death had broken them off. He was quickly accepted as supreme commander of Greece against Persia, and in 336 B.C. left his native land, never to see it again.

His progress through the continent of Asia will be found in outline in the text which follows but, as there is a danger of losing sight of the broad lines in the details of campaigns and battles, some general points are noted here.

His career of foreign conquest began with the Battle of Granicus, in which he met and conquered the Persian cavalry commanded by Persian nobles. This one victory was sufficient to bring over the whole of Asia Minor to his side. Probably many of the Greek towns on the coast regarded Alexander rather as a liberator than as a conqueror, but even his opponents opened their gates with alacrity.

He spent the next year in a tour through Lydia, Caria, Pamphylia, Pisidia and Phrygia before meeting Darius in person at the Battle of Issus in 333 B.C. This battle resulted in a complete victory for Alexander's army, and the whole Persian Empire really lay at his mercy. But unwilling to leave Syria and Egypt unconquered in his rear he postponed the final round with Darius' troops, until he had dealt with the southern lands. The siege of Tyre gave him considerable trouble, but he was ultimately successful, and with the reduction of Gaza all the south lay at his feet. His next important

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step was a visit to Egypt, and the foundation of Alexandria—the most famous of the many cities to which the conqueror gave his name.

In 331 B.C. came the Battle of Arbela in Mesopotamia, and soon after it the death of Darius at the hands of Bessus. The next three years were spent in Hyrcania, Bactria and Sogdiana—a vast area covered to-day by Afghanistan, Bokhara and Turkestan. In 327 and 326 B.C. Alexander was engaged in the invasion of India and the conquest of the Punjab. The defeat of the Indian prince Porus at the Hydaspes (Jhelum) was followed by an advance as far as the Hyphasis (Sutlej). This however was the limit of his eastward progress, as his Macedonians refused to follow him further, and Alexander was reluctantly obliged to abandon a vast scheme of conquest, which might have led him as far as China.

There are two possible land routes to the far East, one to the north of the Great Salt Desert and one to the south through Baluchistan. Having advanced by the northerly route Alexander determined to return by the south. He therefore sailed down the Indus, and sending his fleet by sea to the Persian Gulf led the bulk of his army through Gedrosia and Carmania. The stories of the sufferings of his troops on the sixty days march through the coast desert of Baluchistan are confirmed by the fact that he lost three-quarters of his army on the way. Ultimately he met his fleet, and proceeded up the Persian coast to Susa, and in the spring of

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323 B.C. he reached Babylon, where his presence was needed to reorganize the control where it was weak, and to correct the misgovernment of some of his subordinates.

It was here that Alexander died of fever not long after reaching the city.

This brief summary of Alexander's conquest of the East, aided by a study of the map, will be enough to prove his claim to be one of the greatest conquerors of the world. But the lasting effects of his work are not to be found in Curtius or indeed in any other author. He had subdued and in a measure welded together three distinct civilizations—the Hellenic, the Semitic and the Iranian, and the results of his achievement extend even to the present day.

Athens in the fifth century had created and lost an Empire in Greece, but she had done much more. She had given a tremendous impulse to science, art and philosophy, and, when by the fourth century her strength was failing, Alexander, himself educated by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, carried much of Greek thought to the East, where it reappeared in many different forms. Long after Athens had ceased to be the university of the world, Pergamum, Rhodes and above all Alexandria were the homes of Hellenic culture. The extent to which the East was Hellenized is a complex question, and it is easy to be led into exaggeration. But there are certain facts which leave no doubt that the Hellenic influence was widespread. The

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“Koine”, as the language of the New Testament was called, was the usual language of Asia Minor, and extended a long way eastwards. It was the language spoken by the educated Jew, and throughout the Seleucid Empire. Bactrian coins of the dates 250–150 B.C. are not only Greek in style, but bear Greek lettering. There is even no doubt that some Hellenic influence can be traced over native art, though the extent of its effect over Indian sculpture is open to question.

But the greatest debt which the modern world owes to Alexander is in the realm of thought. Not only did the East produce original Greek philosophy (Zeno the founder of Stoicism was said to be Phoenician by descent), but the later advances made by the Arabs in science and mathematics were immensely influenced by Hellenism. Aristotle’s philosophy was translated into Arabic at an early date, and some of his work has only reached its present Greek form through successive translations into Arabic and Latin.

Finally Christianity, although it was given to the western world largely by the Romans, is much more Greek than Roman in thought. Not only was the “Koine” the language in which the New Testament became familiar to western Europe, but St Paul, who was responsible more than any other one man for the modes of thought in which western Christianity was cast, was Greek both by outlook and education. It was largely due to his teaching that so many of the early Christian theologians con-

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stantly traced the connexions between Christianity and Stoicism.

All this we owe to Alexander the Great. Posterity has rightly regarded him as a great conqueror, and legends of his life have always persisted even in districts so remote as India. But his work of conquest and political consolidation is almost as if it had never been. The impulse he gave to Hellenism lives on even until to-day.