RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great

Michael Wood

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Michael Wood retraces Alexander the Great’s amazing journey from Greece to India, searching for the truth behind the legend and experiencing the tremendous scale of his achievements.

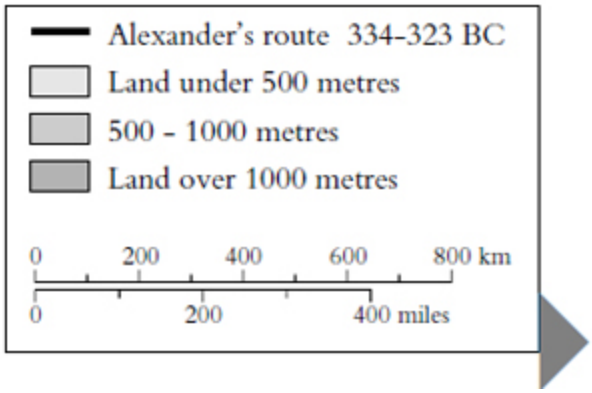
Using the ancient historians as his guides, Wood follows Alexander’s journey as closely as possible, crossing deserts and rivers, from Turkey to war-torn Afghanistan. As the journey progresses, he recreates the drama of Alexander’s epic marches and bloody battles. All along the way he finds proof of the survival of the legends surrounding Alexander, a leader whose life has excited the worlds imagination for the 2,000 years.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For more than 20 years, historian and broadcaster Michael Wood has made compelling journeys into the past, which have brought history alive for a generation of readers and viewers. He is the author of several highly praised books on English history including *In Search of the Dark Ages*, *The Domesday Quest*, *In Search of England* and *In Search of Shakespeare*. He has over 80 documentary films to his name, among them *Art of the Western World*, *Legacy*, *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great*, *Conquistadors* and *In Search of Myths* and *Heroes*.

Michael was born in Manchester and educated at Manchester Grammar School and Oriel College Oxford, where he did post-graduate research in Anglo-Saxon history. He is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

ALEXANDER'S JOURNEY




MACEDONIA
Pella
Byzantium
Black Sea
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Halicarnassos
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Aral Sea
Jaxartes
Oxus
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SOGDIANA
Macaranda (Samarkand)
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Alexandria in Areia
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Pasni
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IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF
ALEXANDER THE GREAT
A JOURNEY FROM GREECE TO INDIA

MICHAEL WOOD

BBC BOOKS

PROLOGUE

BUMPING AND JARRING over frozen roads, slewing through great cuttings of hardened snow drift, it took us twelve hours to get over the Lowari Pass and into Chitral. Then, just as the sun disappeared, the last valley in Pakistan's North-West Frontier came into view. Ahead, still lit by the setting sun, was the great wall of the mountains of the Hindu Kush. At Chitral we had black tea under a spreading plane tree and then pushed on. We still had two or three more hours to go, up the steep gorges which lead to Rombur, the valley where the last of the Kalash live, the 'black pagans' of the Hindu Kush. Above us now, tipped pink by the last light, loomed the snowy peaks of Afghanistan. At the bottom of the darkening valley a stream rushed over boulders, roaring in our ears; our headlights lit up a waving field of wheat and a graveyard planted with a clump of intense purple irises.

It is a land so remote that Islam only penetrated it in the last hundred years; its valleys so inaccessible that, until a dirt-track was blasted through terrifying over-hangs a few years ago, the only way in was on mule paths along vertiginous cliffs. All the early explorers agreed that this was a place where ancient legends and customs had been particularly tenacious. Here in Victorian days ragged chieftains produced Hellenistic bowls for British administrators, which they claimed had been given to them by Greek kings and proved their right to rule; such stories their ancestors had told to Marco Polo in the thirteenth century – and they are still told today.

It was pitch dark before we finally stumbled into Rombur, a tiny cluster of rubble and beam houses with wooden verandas. The electricity had failed and Engineer Khan came down to greet us waving a torch. We had last met in Peshawar in the North-West Frontier five months before, and I had no idea whether any of our messages had got through to him since. ‘Welcome to the land of the Kalash,’ he beamed. ‘So you finally made it. I got your letter. We’ve been awaiting you for two days!’

Up the dirt street we heard the distant sound of drumming and chanting. Above us, against a full-moon sky, the dark shape of the open-air temple stood over the village; dying flames licked the sacrifice stone, and in the shadows were the carved wooden effigies they use in their religion. (Astonishingly, alone in a surrounding sea of Islam, the Kalash pray to the ancient gods, in particular Di Zau, the great sky god, brother to the Greek Zeus.) The women’s dance was almost over. Shuffling and swaying in a long line, young and old together, arms around each other’s waists, sprays of walnut leaves in their hands, austere in black embroidered dresses and elaborate cowrie shell headdresses topped with pompons of crimson and marigold, their strange ululating wordless song echoed around the mountain sides.

That night, after the dance, we sat by the fireside and drank sweet white wine (unlike their Muslim neighbours the Kalash harvest and ferment the grape, which they revere). Then the tale-teller began his tale. His name was Kasi Khushnawaz, ‘the bringer of happiness’. A tiny bird-like man, with a pinched face, and a pair of old boots several sizes too big, he commanded instant respect from the big crowd of men all around. TV has not yet reached the Kalash valleys and here the storyteller is still an entertainer, a kind of magician. He has hundreds of tales and they have never been known to run out. We had come for one in particular:

Long long ago, before the days of Islam, Sikander e Aazem came to India. The Two Horned one whom you British people call Alexander the Great. He conquered the world, and was a very great man, brave and dauntless and generous to his followers. When he left to go back to Greece, some of his men did not wish to go back with him but preferred to stay here. Their leader was a general called Shalakash. With some of his officers and men, he came to these valleys and they settled here and took local women, and here they stayed. We, the Kalash, the Black Kafirs of the Hindu Kush, are the descendants of their children. Still some of our words are the same as theirs, our music and our dances too; we worship the same gods. This is why we believe the Greeks are our first ancestors.

I looked round at the faces in the flickering fire light. At such a moment in such a setting it is easy to suspend disbelief. It was an extraordinary idea that we were staring at the descendants of the last survivors of the Macedonian army which had burst across Asia like a meteor between 334 and 324 BC. And yet it was not so implausible: after all, 2000 years ago the Greeks did enter these obscure valleys on the edge of Nuristan. Indeed some had stayed on to found their own Raj, and these Indo-Greek kingdoms had lasted here for centuries after Alexander's day. Their language died out here only in Muslim times; their coins which proudly blazoned their petty dynasts as invincible maharajahs are still for sale in the bazaars of Kabul and Peshawar. A legend it may be, but the Kalash tale is still an extraordinary testimony to the enduring power of the tale, the myth of one of history's greatest conquerors, Alexander the Great.

It was by common consent one of the greatest events in the history of the world, opening up West and East for the first time; an extraordinary tale of bravery and cruelty, endurance and excess, chivalry and greed; a journey of ten

years and 22,000 miles all told, enough to circle the globe. Behind it, like the wrack of a receding tide, it has left strange and glittering debris: lost cities, blue-eyed Indians, exotic treasures, ancient manuscripts, and a great harvest of amazing stories, songs, poems, myths and legends.

The legend spread to every corner of the old world: Alexander appears in the apocalyptic visions of the biblical Book of Daniel as The Third Beast who unleashes a bloody tide on humankind. In the Muslim Koran he is the mysterious 'Two-horned One' who built a magical wall to keep out Gog and Magog, the evil ones who, in the Apocalypse, will ravage the earth with Satan in the last days. The Greek Orthodox Church by contrast turned him into a saint, a latter-day St George.

There are over 200 different Alexander epics and poems in medieval European languages alone, surviving in literally thousands of manuscripts: for example, in Russian, Polish, Old French, Czech and Serbian. In Jewish tradition Alexander is nothing short of a folk hero. There is a medieval German Alexander epic, an Icelandic Alexander Saga, and an Ethiopian Alexander Romance. By the mid fourteenth century the tale had even reached Mongolia, where Alexander appears as an almost supernatural predecessor of Genghis Khan. You will find him depicted as one of the four kings on the standard French pack of playing cards; you will find the map of his empire on every Greek school map, and every taverna wall; he's on Sicilian carnival carts, Ethiopian bridal cloths, Byzantine church murals, and on paintings from Moghul India. His tomb is claimed in Egypt, Pakistan and Uzbekistan.

His tale has been reinterpreted by every generation since his day. Jews told how he punished the ten lost tribes of Israel and found the wonderstone in the earthly paradise; Muslim poets told how he found the tree of everlasting life, plumbed the deepest sea in a diving bell, and rose to heaven on a magic chariot pulled by griffons. In Europe in

the Middle Ages he was the ‘perfect knight’ and the philosopher king, and the legend of his ascent to heaven, carved on cathedral stalls from Somerset to south Italy, became an anticipation of glory in the hereafter. In India, legend said he had found the Speaking Tree which had foretold his destiny: ‘to die young but win eternal glory’.

In our time the fascination shows no sign of dying out; rather, there has been an unparalleled outpouring of books and films on the king. Modern people, of course, have sought and found something different again in Alexander’s amazing career. In the latter days of the British Empire, imperial historians saw him as a visionary idealist, a benevolent empire-builder in their own mould, pursuing the dream of uniting mankind under one rule, irrespective of race, creed or colour. Conversely in Hitler’s Germany the greatest Alexander scholar (who had himself embraced Nazism) portrayed his hero as *Ingenium und Macht*, intellect and power, the Superman as real-life hero and model, the embodiment of manifest destiny.

Now, at the troubled start of a new century, another Alexander is being disentangled from the sources. Indeed never before, perhaps, has he been subject to such detailed investigation. Now the dark deeds of his reign are being investigated in the way that modern journalists have attempted to uncover the truth behind war crimes in Vietnam, Cambodia, and the Iraqi wars. The Macedonian conquest of the world as far as India, which has always been seen through Greek sources exclusively, is now being illuminated for the first time by native sources, newly discovered oracles and prophecies on papyrus or clay tablet.

In this light the Greek adventure in Asia is being reconsidered in terms of modern ideas on colonialism, orientalism, racism. So, too, are the king’s power-politics now being seen in the light of modern history: his purges and massacres, his reliance on intelligence spies, secret

police, his control of information, use of torture, manipulation of images, his state propaganda, his use of terror against civilian populations – all attested in our sources. They have taken on new meaning in our own time which has witnessed the communist utopian tyrannies and the European fascist states.

On the king's sexuality there are new insights, too, as more becomes known about Greek male attitudes to women, and to homosexuality. Others have attempted to look into the king's mind, in particular the psychology of leadership and the pitfalls of absolute power. A new study has suggested alcoholism as the root of his downfall. The most recent survey has found suggestive parallels with Cortés and the conquistadors, emphasizing his dark side: 'murderous and melancholy mad' as one hostile contemporary remembered him. It is all a far cry from the golden boy we have known for so long; it may, perhaps, be nearer to his truth – it is nearer to ours, no doubt.

The result of all this ferment of ideas is that a new and much richer picture is now emerging, all the more fascinating because of its apparent contradictions. The final word on Alexander, of course, will never be said. But it is an exciting time to look again at his story. This account of Alexander is based on the texts of the Greek and Roman historians which have come down to us, and which I carried with me in my rucksack. But its special interest is that it takes the form of a journey in Alexander's footsteps, perhaps the first time this has been done in full since Alexander's day.

It involved a journey on the ground even longer than Alexander's – his journey through Iran, for example, we did in its entirety twice. In Egypt, we, too, crossed the desert to Siwa to find the oracle of Ammon (and moreover we undertook the hazardous return across the trackless wastes of the Great Sand Sea). In Iran we, too, asked local guides to take us through the Zagros Mountains to find the lost

site of Alexander's epic battle at the 'Persian Gates' which has never been securely identified by scholars. There, in an unknown and unvisited corner of Persia, we slept out in the open for three chill November nights surrounded by a sea of golden poplars, as we attempted to uncover his secret route.

That same glorious autumn we crossed from war-torn Kabul to North Afghanistan, walking as Alexander did over the Khawak Pass in the Hindu Kush, with packhorses carrying our gear and gunmen by our side to ward off bandits. The following spring we came down off the Khyber and retraced Alexander's steps up the inaccessible heights of Mount Pir Sar in the North-West Frontier; we sailed Mohanno boats down the Indus just as the furnace heat of the hot season started to clamp on the plains, and finally we took a train of twenty-three camels across the Makran Desert in an effort to experience for ourselves what might have happened to Alexander's army during their disastrous retreat.

Popular legend imagines film-crews ensconced in air-conditioned luxury in between their brief forays into the real world. But this was not a journey like that. Nowhere did Hilton Hotels beckon for us – except the little known 'Hiltan Hotel' on the Afghan border near Chitral (five rooms, no beds, no running water, but that night no lodging could have been more welcome). Indeed, there were times when the crew was too ill to carry on, and we simply had to stop. Often we stayed in the houses of ordinary people whose hospitality was invariably unstinting, even in war-ravaged Afghanistan. We slept in Iranian station waiting-rooms and Afghan stables, on sail boats on the Indus, in a mosque in the North-West Frontier, and on desert dunes by the Arabian Sea under a starlit sky crossed by comet Hyakutake. We travelled as light as we could, and did not always plan ahead as well as we might, waking to chill dawns in the Great Sand Sea and the Desert of Death,

grateful for a few dried dates and a cup of water. After such days, steaming green tea flavoured with cardamom and hot coarse bitter bread on the snowy heights of the Hindu Kush seemed simply heaven.

As we journeyed it was astonishing how much more came out of the ancient texts when read on the ground. The words of the Greek historians came alive in a way in which even their authors could not have foreseen – for they had no more seen these sites than most of their modern counterparts. Often solutions to Alexander riddles were instantly apparent when one stood on the ground where these events had actually taken place. But even more than that, there was the sense of a continuing history: a realization that Alexander's tale still reverberated across eastern Asia, especially, strangely enough, in the Muslim world, where he is regarded as a great folk hero, whether as 'The Two Horned One', the 'Great' or the 'Devil'.

We saw his story retold by Greek and Turkish shadow players, and by tale-tellers in Isfahan and Tehran cafés. We saw the king come alive in an epic Hindi movie banned by the British occupiers in World War II. We saw one of the last of the travelling one-man shows in Iran, complete with painted backdrop showing the death of Darius in epic style, 'cutting a passion to tatters' like Hamlet's player king. We heard stories of Alexander from professional bards in Turkey and Central Asia; we crouched in a Tajik cave by the mummified body of Alexander's greatest foe, to hear his tale recounted by Muslim pilgrims; nearby at the blue mirror of Iskander Gol we heard of the dam of gold he left behind which still gives up gold at each flood time; we heard about Greek medicine from the doctors of Kandahar who claim descent from Alexander's medical team; we sat in a felt yurt on the Turkoman steppe to hear the story of his devil's horns and his two-week sex romp with an Amazon queen (as the tabloid newspapers would put it today: and, beware, such mythical creatures still exist out

there by the Caspian Sea and still carry off unsuspecting young men for use as studs before they kill them – or at least so the Turkomans say!).

In Pakistan we listened to Sufi singers on the river boats, telling tales of Alexander's encounter with Indian holy men. And all along the way, in chance meetings, we heard from ordinary people who had their own stories: a civil servant in Kabul, an Afghan horse-handler, an Uzbek mullah, and a Luri farmer in the Zagros who said Alexander's tale had been handed down in his village 'from chest to chest'. And the more we heard, the more we came to realize that, although our goal was to try to find the real historical events, the legend was almost as powerful and fascinating (and far more pervasive and long lasting). As John Ford, director of the film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, said, 'When the fact becomes a legend, print the legend!'

So this book, then, is both the story of Alexander's expedition and a record of our modern-day journey which followed as far as humanly possible the track of Alexander's journey from Greece to India. Only in one part, at the time of making these films, did it prove impossible for me to travel in his footsteps. After the Gulf War of 1991 I became involved in helping to publicize the atrocities done by the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein against the population of southern Iraq, especially the tragic fate of the Marsh Arabs. Because of this I was strongly advised by Iraqi friends in exile that it would be unwise for me to return to Baghdad; so, although I was subsequently able to journey through Free Kurdistan to Irbil, the description in this book of the journey from Irbil to Babylon, and of the cities and landscape of southern Iraq, is based on diaries of my journeys there before the 1991 war. Now, after the 2003 invasion, we can hope to return to a free and democratic Baghdad.

Alexander's expedition was a turning point in human history. It opened up contacts between East and West,

Europe and Asia, and laid the foundations for much of what followed. Like the European conquest of the Americas, it involved gigantic cruelty and destruction, and yet unleashed astonishing historical energies: in particular the interaction of Greek with Egyptian, Jewish, Iranian and Indian cultures, whose effect is still felt today in the lands between the Mediterranean and the Himalayas. Through the Romans and their successors the fruits of this great opening up were bequeathed to the Western world, too. As we shall see, the aftermath still affects us today in our ways of thinking and seeing.

And at the heart of this amazing and terrible story is the enigmatic character of Alexander himself. Only thirty-two when he died, there is still the widest disagreement on his true nature and motive, and no doubt there always will be. There is an old rhyme still repeated by Greek fishermen in the Aegean Sea. It can happen any time, they say, whether the sea is calm and sunny, whether squalls or a storm are coming up. A mermaid appears in the water by the boat searching for her lost brother, Alexander, and asks this question:

'Where is Great Alexander?'

On the answer your life depends. Say he is dead and, in her rage and anguish, she will call up the storm and you will be engulfed and drowned. The answer is:

Great Alexander still lives. And rules!

PRELUDE

THE YEARS BEFORE ALEXANDER'S BIRTH

THIS STORY OF alexander the great is the tale of one of the most extraordinary people in history. He ascended the throne at twenty, conquered much of the known world before he was thirty, and was dead by the age of thirty-two. But it is also a tale of enmity between two great and ancient civilizations. The story begins long before Alexander's lifetime – begins with the events of ten dramatic, never to be forgotten years in the fifth century BC – events which still loom large in the Greek myth of themselves and their historical destiny. At that point the Persians (today's Iranians) had created a great empire, stretching from Central Asia to Ethiopia, and from the Indus to the Aegean. The mainland Greeks, meanwhile, were just a group of tiny warring states occupying most of today's Greece, and only brought together by the threat that the Persians would attempt to conquer them and extend their empire into Europe.

The Persian King, Darius the Great, made the initial trial of strength. In 490 BC, at Marathon near Athens, a small Persian expeditionary force was defeated by the hoplites, the heavily armed footsoldiers of democratic Athens. Ten years later came the great invasion, led by Darius's son Xerxes. With a huge army, drawn from the forty-five nations of the Persian empire, Xerxes marched on the Dardanelles. Twelve hundred galleys accompanied the force by sea. At Troy, Xerxes sacrificed to the dead of the Trojan War (the Greeks had invaded Asia nearly 1000 years before – such

are the long memories in this story!). At the narrows between Sestos and Abydos, the Persians had built two great bridges of boats and there the Great King scourged the waves before crossing. What happened next would be etched forever on Western minds: for, in Europe, since the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, these events have always been seen not only as the salvation of Greece but also, in some sense, as the foundation of the West.

Confronted with the Persian invasion, the Spartans and Athenians buried their differences and joined forces. The Spartan king with his élite troops, the Three Hundred, attempted to hold back the Persians at the Pass of Thermopylae, but was killed in an heroic last stand against overwhelming numbers. The Persians then marched on towards Athens and, in desperation, the Athenians asked the oracle at Delphi what to do. In a memorable response the prophetess told them not to defend their city, but to ‘forsake the land and rely on wooden walls’. In the nick of time the entire population was shipped over to the island of Salamis, just offshore in the Saronic Gulf. The Persians burned the deserted city of Athens, pillaged and desecrated her temples, and cut down the sacred olive tree of Athena. With the Greek fleet apparently trapped behind Salamis the Persian fleet closed in for the kill.

Xerxes, seated on a golden throne, prepared to watch from a vantage point on the shore. But, the night before the battle, the Greek Commander Themistocles used an informer to spread a false rumour to the Persians. Xerxes was told that the Greek fleet would attempt to escape next day. Before dawn the Persians pushed their fleets into the narrow straits between Salamis and the coast of Attica. There, suddenly jammed into a narrow space and unable to manoeuvre, they were attacked by the Greek ships and suffered a catastrophic defeat. The poet Aeschylus, who was an eye-witness, reports Themistocles’s rousing cry: ‘On, on, sons of Greece, your wives and families, your

temples, the graves of your ancestors: now everything is at stake'. The straits around Salamis became a swirling mass of debris, wrecked ships, and drowned warriors. Although the Persians were able to extricate a part of their fleet, they were finished; the superior naval power of the Greeks forced them to withdraw. Xerxes left a large army of occupation on Greek soil, but this was decisively defeated the next year at Plataea in a combined effort by the usually divided Greek city states. So ended the Great Persian War.

From then on the Persians set the limit of their empire at the Aegean Sea, on what is today the western shore of Turkey, where rich Greek-speaking cities, such as Ephesus and Miletus, paid tribute to the Persian 'King of Kings'. On the walls of the palace at Persepolis we can still see their ambassadors represented bringing gifts to the annual durbars. Opportunities were great in such a land. The Persian kings employed Greek sea captains, mercenaries and doctors, and Greek contractors, stone-cutters and sculptors worked on their palaces. For the next century or so the Persians ruled the Near East, including the commercial and maritime city states of Phoenicia, and the richest and oldest country in the Eastern Mediterranean, Egypt. With efficient land communications linked to the great Persian Royal Road from Sardis, in Turkey, to Susa, in Iran, theirs was the first world empire.

The Greeks, though, never forgot. Above all, they never forgave Xerxes's sacrilege in destroying their holiest shrines. In Athens the Acropolis was rebuilt with magnificent temples whose roofless remains can still be seen today. But the fire-burned column drums of the old Parthenon, which Xerxes destroyed, were set into the wall overlooking the city so all could see them (they are still there today – perhaps the oldest war memorial in the world). The memory of the Great Persian War would remain etched in the Greek psyche. When the poet Aeschylus died a generation later, it was not his dramas which found pride

of place on his tombstone, but his pride in being a veteran of Marathon. What also lingered in Greek minds was the idea that one day they would take revenge; that one day the Greeks would mount a crusade against Persia.

THE RISE OF MACEDONIA

It was, however, the Macedonians not the Athenians who finally put the anti-Persian crusade together. The fifth century BC had been the heyday of classical Greek civilization with Athens as the undisputed cultural and political leader of Greece. But the century ended in a disastrous war with Sparta and the destruction of the Athenian empire. The middle years of the fourth century saw the rapid rise of a new power: Macedon. Who the Macedonians were, though, is today a very contentious issue. With the present troubled mix of races and religions in the Balkans there has been renewed controversy about Macedonian origins, with some scholars questioning whether they were really Greek at all, and whether the Macedonian language is actually related to Greek. Moreover, it is clear that, in Alexander's day, they were viewed by some in Greece as rough-edged northerners who, although they spoke Greek, were not quite fit to be called Hellenes, that is, true bearers of Greek civilization.

Politically and militarily, however, the Macedonians were masters of their world. In the 350s and 340s BC, under Alexander's father, King Philip, Macedonia became a kind of Prussian state, geared to war. At the core of its standing army was a new and highly disciplined fighting machine, the infantry phalanx. Inevitably, Philip turned his New Model Army on to the older city states of the south which had banded together in the face of the threat from the northern upstarts. In 338 BC, at a bloody battle at Chaeronea, the Macedonian phalanx overwhelmed the hoplites of the southern Greek states. In this battle the

teenage Alexander won acclaim for his courage and tenacity, and for his tactical acumen. Democracy was effectively abolished; the Macedonian monarchy now ruled Greece. The following year, Philip was assassinated in the theatre at Aegeae, and his young son Alexander became king. The stage was set.

ALEXANDER'S BIRTH AND PARENTAGE

Intimations of greatness: 'Through my father Philip I was born of the line of the deified Heracles, grandson of Zeus, and born of the line of Achilles through my mother Olympias …'

CHIGI RELIEF, ROME

Alexander was born in 356 BC, possibly on 20 July, which would make him a Cancerian for those who see significance in horoscopes. His father was Philip, King of Macedon, who had single-handedly created the Macedonian kingdom out of disparate tribes and principalities. Alexander's mother, Olympias, was a young princess from Epirus, the mountainous region bordering Albania. Philip had allegedly fallen in love with her when he saw her, aged about fourteen, at the celebrations of the mystery cult on the island of Samothrace. Later writers portray Olympias as eccentric and intense, devoted to strange mountain cults, and snake-handling, a devotee of Dionysus, the god of ecstasy and possession.

Alexander clearly owed some of his characteristic traits to both his parents. Like his father, he was a ruthless and practical politician. But he also exhibited a strong penchant for oracles, cults and omens which we might guess he inherited from his mother, along with her volatile and emotional temperament.

The relationship between his father and mother was never easy. It was said that Philip shunned Olympias after he saw her one night in bed with a snake – a tale which

gave rise to legends that she had been impregnated by a god, and that Alexander was not the son of a mortal father. Later it was not in the interests of mother or son to deny such tales. Olympias developed an intense and perhaps obsessive relationship with her son. As was the custom among Macedonian royalty, Philip practised polygamy, and when Olympias was in her mid-thirties, he abandoned her for a younger wife. The young Alexander sided with his mother and went home to Epirus with her for a while; when he returned he had to endure taunts about his father's second marriage and a new heir. (Later, Olympias and Alexander had their revenge; the child and its mother were mercilessly put to death by Olympias when Alexander attained power. Such savagery within the royal house needs to be borne in mind when we see the ruthlessness with which Alexander would liquidate erstwhile friends who crossed him; evidently he had learned the hard way in adolescence.)

ALEXANDER'S EARLY YEARS

For all the veneer of Hellenic culture, then, Alexander was brought up in a semi-barbaric world, in a hard-drinking hard-living court, torn by ferocious feuds. As we would expect with such a person, many stories are told of the young Alexander which anticipate his later fame. One tells of a visit to Pella by Persian ambassadors who found themselves being questioned in detail by the boy prodigy about roads and distances in their own country; it is said they left deeply impressed. The famous tale of Alexander's taming of the horse Bucephalus is in the same vein. The horse had been brought to Philip by a Thessalian breeder and was named after his distinctive brand mark: 'Ox-head'. It was a fine animal, and a fine price, too, but no one could master it. To everyone's amusement Alexander bet his father that he could, and facing the horse into the sun (so it

would not be disturbed by its own shadow), he walked it round, calmed it down, then jumped on and rode off. King Philip laughed ‘Get yourself another kingdom, my boy, for Macedonia is not big enough to hold you!’

When Alexander was thirteen or fourteen, his father sent him to study in the ‘Gardens of Midas’ at Mieza, under the greatest philosopher of that, or any other, day, Aristotle of Stagira. It is an extraordinary fact that two of the most significant figures in world histoy should have come together in this way, and if Alexander is politically the father of the Hellenistic Age, Aristotle can be seen as its spiritual or philosophical founder. Aristotle inspired in Alexander a life-long devotion to philosophy, and we would dearly love to know more about this relationship. Alexander is said to have looked up to Aristotle ‘like a father’. Many of their letters to each other survive, some of which may be genuine. Others are even now being discovered in Muslim libraries in India. Aristotle is said to have given Alexander his precious copy of the *Iliad*, the story of the Trojan War, and this was the book which Alexander carried with him to India. Seldom can any teacher have had the opportunity to see his theories put into practice on such a stage; and seldom can a teacher have ended up fearing his pupil’s potential so much. Aristotle’s nephew, Callisthenes, would accompany Alexander’s expedition as historian, but, as we shall see, he fell out with the king in the most dramatic circumstances, and in the end this led to the breakdown of Alexander’s friendship with Aristotle.

ALEXANDER’S SEX LIFE

Alexander’s sexual orientation is still the subject of great speculation, with the King portrayed across the spectrum from family man to gay icon. His key relationship with a woman was evidently with his mother. He was apparently twenty-three before he had a sexual relationship with a

woman, and, although he developed warm relationships with some older women (whom one might hesitantly call mother-figures, for example Queen Ada of Caria, and the Persian Queen Mother Sisygambis), his attitude to younger women is impossible to determine. If the Greek historians are to be believed he ostentatiously avoided contact with Darius's captive wife Stateira, who was said to be the most beautiful woman in Asia, calling her beauty 'torture to my eyes'. But this sounds rather strange for a man of his time. He is known to have fathered one child by his mistress Barsine, and two by his wife Roxanne, but his deepest emotional ties were apparently with men. So, when Alexander spoke of sex as one of the things which 'reminded him of his mortality', it is unclear whether he meant sex with men or women – or both. Such conundrums, however, may have seemed irrelevant to his contemporaries, who, unlike us moderns, were not concerned with making heterosexual relationships the norm.

His most intimate friendships were certainly with men. He lived in a thoroughly male society, and his friends were drawn from the upper crust, many of whom were his companions on the expedition to Asia. His closest relationship in the tight-knit circle of young companions was with Hephaistion whom he may have known from childhood. Later stories portray Hephaistion as Alexander's alter ego, sharer of his heroic dreams, 'another Alexander' who, pointedly, loved the king 'for himself'. On a funerary monument created soon after the king's death, the pair are portrayed almost like divine twins, smooth-faced androgynes in association with the goddess of fortune, Tyche. Real evidence for their friendship, though, is surprisingly scanty in our sources. Perhaps the key clue remains the king's extreme grief at Hephaistion's death – grief which speaks of a most powerful, even obsessive affection. Their youthful occupations were those of any

military aristocracy: riding, games, gymnastics, and hunting (at one point, during rest and recreation at Samarkand, a game reserve of several thousand animals was wiped out in a day's hunt). Another all-male occupation was drinking. The Macedonians were famed throughout Greece for their prodigious consumption of wine which shocked visitors to their court. Alexander was better able to handle these heavy drinking sessions at twenty-two with the world at his feet, than at thirty-two when fate was closing in.

WHAT KIND OF MAN WAS ALEXANDER?

His looks have been reproduced in a thousand images. These usually portray wavy leonine hair and quiff (*anastole*), tilted head and uplifted faraway eyes. It is the conventional ancient portrait of the ideal man – a dreamer with a lion's spirit. But whether he really looked like that is uncertain. Such images were first and foremost created to convey a political and cultural message, just as official portraits are today. But we have TV and photographs, so we all know what the President of the USA looks like. In Alexander's time, when so few people would have seen him in the flesh, the picture created by his artists for propaganda need only have had a very general resemblance to his real face. What counted above all was the idea. We know he was short (his father, Philip, was only about 5ft 2in), stocky, and that he had a reddish complexion which flushed when he was angry. In the only early representation we have of him in colour, the Issus mosaic now in Naples museum, his hair is shown as brown and unkempt. The same picture gives him a big chin, bulbous eyes and a prominent straight nose (like his father). This may be the nearest we can hope to get to his true looks, but ultimately they continue to elude us because, while all the Alexander images have the same general feeling, they are

not much alike in detail. It remains a paradox, then, that, although Alexander was one of the most famous people who ever lived, we don't really know what he looked like.

What is clear though is that Alexander grew up as an exceptionally tough young man with great stamina and mental resource; capable of rapid and ruthless action, adept at seizing the moment – one of the keys to his generalship. As to his psychological make-up, there was – and is – the widest divergence of opinion. He is portrayed as one of the noblest souls who ever lived, and as a murderous conquistador who waded through blood to rape Asia.

Many tales are told to illustrate his nature; some perhaps true. Plutarch, who had access to early histories, puts it well. At times, he says, 'his society was delightful and his manner full of charm beyond that of any prince of his age', but at others (especially when drunk) 'he would sometimes become offensively arrogant and descend to the level of the common soldier, not only allowing himself to give way to boasting but also to be led on by his flatterers'.

Alexander was, evidently, a man of extremes and contradictions. His story is full of chivalrous gestures, especially towards women, such as those of Darius's family. And yet he exhibited an almost sadistic malevolence towards those who crossed him. He was capable of intense spurts of energy, then long sulks; of ferocious self-denial, and then prodigious self-indulgence; of extreme generosity and then murderous cruelty against former friends. At heart, if we guess it right, there was perhaps a deep insecurity in him which must have originated in his childhood, and especially in his relationship with his father. This insecurity was not assuaged by him becoming the most powerful man in the world, indeed it was only exacerbated. In one sense his is a parable of the loneliness of power. But that is to anticipate the story …