

# **PLUTARCH**

Lives That Made Greek History

Edited, with Introductions and Notes, by  
James Romm

Translated by Pamela Mensch

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## Alexander

*Plutarch's Alexander is among the longest of his Lives, both because of Alexander's constant, unceasing activity and because of the complexity of his character. Plutarch seems to have admired Alexander immensely at the time he wrote his two speeches, "On the Fortune or Virtue of Alexander"—probably well before he wrote the Lives—referring to the Macedonian king as a "philosopher in arms" who tried to bring Greek enlightenment to the barbarian world. In the account below, Plutarch takes a more measured view of Alexander while still giving him the benefit of many doubts.*

*Alexander (356–323 BCE) transformed Greece, and the ancient world as a whole, more thoroughly than any other leader. The league established by his father Philip, consisting of all the European Greek states except Sparta, would surely have come apart had Alexander not thrown himself into action upon taking the throne. Then the conquest of the Persian empire that followed—a project undertaken, at least ostensibly, as a Greek crusade—made Asia subordinate to European power for the first time ever. Hellenism became the dominant culture in urban centers from the Aegean to modern Afghanistan and Pakistan and would continue to hold sway over much of the world for centuries thereafter—the so-called Hellenistic Age. Had Alexander lived longer, he might have brought Greek culture westward to the Atlantic, but a fateful illness cut short his life in 323.*

[2] That Alexander, on his father's side, was a descendant of Heracles by Caranus, and on his mother's a descendant of Aeacus by Neoptolemus,<sup>1</sup> has never been called into question. It is said that Philip was initiated into the Mysteries in Samothrace<sup>2</sup> at the same time as Olympias. Though he was still a boy and she an orphan child, he is said to have fallen in love with her and betrothed himself to her at once, on persuading her brother Arymbas. The night before they confined her in the bridal chamber, the bride dreamed that thunder was heard and that a thunderbolt fell on her belly and kindled a great

1. These two mythic genealogies were advanced by the royal houses of Macedon and Molossia, respectively. The Argeads of Macedonia, the line of Philip's father, was said to descend from Heracles, while the Molossian dynasty to which Alexander's mother belonged traced its descent from Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles and great-grandson of Aeacus. Both lines thus ultimately went back to Zeus, the father of both Heracles and Aeacus.

2. Samothrace, an island in the northern Aegean, was the center of a cult of deities called the Cabiri.

fire, which burst into flames that darted everywhere and finally died out.

[3] Alexander was born early in the month of Hecatombaean (Lous is its Macedonian name), on the sixth<sup>3</sup>—the very day the temple of Ephesian Artemis was burned down. In referring to that event, Hegesias the Magnesian made a witty remark, the coolness of which might have extinguished that blaze. For he said that the temple was probably burned down because Artemis was occupied with Alexander's delivery. All the Magi who were currently residing in Ephesus,<sup>4</sup> believing that the destruction of the temple foreshadowed another disaster, ran through the town striking their faces and shouting that that day had given birth to ruin and dire misery for Asia.

[4] Alexander's physical appearance was best represented by the statues of Lysippus,<sup>5</sup> the only artist Alexander thought worthy to sculpt his likeness. And in fact the traits that many of his successors and friends tried to imitate later on—the tilt of his neck, which inclined slightly to the left, and the moistness of his eyes—have been accurately observed by the artist. . . .

When he was still a boy, his self-control manifested itself in the fact that, though violent and impetuous in other respects, he was unmoved by the pleasures of the body and indulged them very sparingly. His ambition kept his spirit grave and magnanimous beyond his years. For he was not eager for fame of every kind or from every quarter, unlike Philip, who prided himself like a sophist on his eloquence and had his Olympic victories in chariot-racing engraved on his coins.<sup>6</sup> Instead, when the men who attended Alexander asked if he wanted to compete in the footrace at the Olympic Games (for he was swift-footed), he replied, "Only if I can compete with kings."

3. It is impossible to precisely correlate dates on the ancient calendrical system with modern ones, but the date indicated here is around July 20. The year is 356 BCE.

4. The Magi were a caste of Persian priests. It is strange to find any of them near Ephesus, a Greek city of western Asia, when they were concentrated near the Persian royal capitals.

5. One of the greatest Greek sculptors, a contemporary of Alexander. His work survives only in Roman copies. The head of Alexander in the Louvre is probably a copy of one of his portraits.

6. Coins issued by Philip, Alexander's father, in the 340s BCE do indeed show a two-horse chariot on one side.

[5] In Philip's absence, Alexander entertained and became acquainted with envoys from the Persian king,<sup>7</sup> who were won over by his affectionate nature and impressed that he asked no childish or trivial question, but inquired about the lengths of the roads and the manner of their journey, and about the King himself,<sup>8</sup> his manner of dealing with enemies, and the Persians' power and prowess. The envoys were so dazzled that they thought nothing of Philip's famed severity as compared with the drive and high ambition of his son. . . . Whenever Philip was reported either to have captured a notable city or to have won a famous battle, Alexander appeared by no means elated, but would say to his comrades, "Boys, my father will get everything first, and will leave no great or glorious deed for *me* to perform with your help."

[6] When Philonicus of Thessaly had brought the horse Bucephalus<sup>9</sup> to Philip and offered to sell him for thirteen talents, they went down to the plain to make trial of him. Bucephalus seemed savage and altogether intractable: he let no rider approach him, and submitted to no one's voice among the men in Philip's suite, but reared up against everyone. In his annoyance, Philip ordered the animal to be led away, thinking him utterly wild and undisciplined, whereupon Alexander, who was present, said, "What a horse they are losing because in their inexperience and softness they cannot manage him!" At first Philip kept silent, but when Alexander continued to interrupt and to murmur indignantly, he said, "Do you criticize your elders in the belief that you are more knowledgeable and better able to manage a horse?" "I would manage this one, at any rate, better than anyone else," replied Alexander. "And if you fail, what penalty will you pay for your indiscretion?" "By Zeus," said he, "I'll pay the price of the horse." This raised a laugh, and they then came to an agreement as to the amount. Thereupon, running right up to the horse and taking hold of the rein, Alexander turned him toward the

7. Relations between Macedonians and Persians were complex. Macedonia had for a long time been part of the Persian empire, in the late sixth and early fifth centuries BCE, and had developed friendly ties with the Persian elite. More recently, suspicions had grown that Philip was planning to invade Asia, and no doubt the envoys Plutarch mentions here were seeking to prevent such an attack.

8. As always in this volume, "King" when capitalized refers to the Great King of Persia.

9. The name means "ox-head" in Greek, after the shape of a brand on the horse's shoulder.

sun, having apparently guessed that Bucephalus was confused by his own shadow as it fell in front of him and darted about. Alexander ran alongside him for a little way as he trotted, and stroked him with his hand. When he saw that Bucephalus was full of courage and spirit, he quietly flung off his cloak, leaped up, and bestrode him securely. . . . At first there was silence and anguish among the men of Philip's suite. But when Alexander had rounded the turning post properly and rode back to them, elated and swaggering, they all cheered, and his father is said to have wept for joy and to have kissed his son when he dismounted. "Son," said he, "seek a kingdom equal to yourself; for Macedonia cannot contain you."

[7] Observing that his son's nature was uncompromising and that he resisted the use of force but was easily led by reasoned argument to do what was proper, Philip tried to persuade rather than command him; and since he was by no means willing to entrust Alexander's training and discipline to the masters who were instructing him in the arts and general studies, understanding that this was of greater importance—a task for many bits and rudders, as Sophocles says—Philip sent for Aristotle,<sup>10</sup> the most celebrated and reputable of the philosophers, and paid him a handsome and suitable fee: though he had destroyed Stagira (Aristotle's native place), Philip resettled it and restored those of its citizens who had fled or been enslaved. As a resort for their leisure and study, Philip gave Aristotle and Alexander the precinct of the temple of the nymphs near Mieza,<sup>11</sup> where to this day they point out the stone seats and shaded walkways of Aristotle.

[9] While Philip was making war on Byzantium,<sup>12</sup> Alexander, who was sixteen years old and had been left behind in Macedonia as regent and master of the seal-ring, subdued the rebelling Maedians,<sup>13</sup> and after seizing their city expelled the barbarians, settled a mixed population there, and named the city Alexandria. Present at

10. Aristotle was a native of Stagira, a Greek city not far from Macedonia's borders. His father Nicomachus, a doctor, had served as physician to Philip's father, who was then king, so that Aristotle grew up partly at the Macedonian court. Later Aristotle went to Athens and studied with Plato and then to Asia Minor, where he did research in biology. He was called back to Macedonia by Philip in 343 BCE, to tutor Alexander, then thirteen.

11. A relatively rural area of Macedonia, where the distractions of court life would not interfere with instruction.

12. In 340 BCE Philip tried to get control of the Chersonese, a region vital to Athenian interests. See *Phocion* 14.

13. A Thracian tribe who had been forced into the Macedonian empire.

Chaeronea, Alexander took part in the battle against the Greeks and is said to have been the first to assault the Theban Sacred Band.<sup>14</sup> Even today in Cephisus they point out an ancient oak that is called Alexander's oak; for it stands near the spot where he pitched his tent on that occasion, not far from the Macedonians' common burial-place.

These exploits naturally endeared Alexander to Philip, who rejoiced to hear the Macedonians saying Alexander was their king, Philip their general. But Philip's domestic troubles, which were caused mainly by his marriages and love affairs, and which in some sense infected the kingdom with the concerns of the women's quarters, occasioned many accusations and serious quarrels. These were aggravated by the harshness of Olympias, a jealous and sullen woman, who egged Alexander on. Attalus precipitated a notorious clash at the wedding of Cleopatra, a young girl Philip was taking to wife<sup>15</sup> (he had fallen in love with her when well past his prime). Attalus was the bride's uncle. Having drunk deep at the carousal, he called on the Macedonians to ask the gods for a legitimate son to be born of Philip and Cleopatra, to be a successor to the throne. Provoked, Alexander cried, "Villain, do you take me for a bastard?" and threw a cup at Attalus.<sup>16</sup> Philip then rose up, his sword drawn, to confront Alexander. But luckily for both, owing to his anger and the wine, Philip slipped and fell. Alexander now insulted him, saying, "This man, gentlemen, was preparing to cross from Europe to Asia, yet

14. Plutarch gives strangely short shrift here to the battle of Chaeronea (338 BCE), one of the most important turning points in Greek history (*Demosthenes* 18–19 gives a bit more detail). Philip and Alexander crushed the combined armies of Athens and Thebes, proving decisively that the Greek phalanx could not stand up in battle to the Macedonian. The Greeks reluctantly organized themselves into a Panhellenic league that, though nominally independent, had little choice but to accept Philip's leadership. For the Theban Sacred Band, see *Pelopidas* 18.

15. Kings were permitted multiple marriages in Macedonia, and Philip in fact contracted seven, mostly in an effort to cement alliances with neighboring peoples. Olympias was fifth in the series. Cleopatra, the last, was Macedonian, so evidently Philip's reasons for marrying her had more to do with personal feelings than foreign policy.

16. Attalus may have been implying that Alexander was illegitimate, but also that his mixed parentage made him a poor heir to the throne. Olympias, Alexander's mother, was from neighboring Molossia, whereas Cleopatra, Philip's latest wife, was from native-born aristocracy.

he is overturned merely crossing from couch to couch." After this drunken episode, Alexander took Olympias away and settled her in Epirus. He himself took up temporary residence in Illyria.

Meanwhile, Demaratus the Corinthian, a plainspoken friend of the family, paid Philip a visit. After their first affectionate greetings, Philip asked Demaratus how the Greeks were getting along with one another. The latter replied, "How appropriate, Philip, for you to concern yourself about Greece, now that you have filled your own house with such strife and misery." Coming to his senses, Philip sent for Alexander and brought him home, having persuaded him through Demaratus to return.

[10] When Pausanias, who had been affronted through the machinations of Attalus and Cleopatra and had obtained no justice, assassinated Philip,<sup>17</sup> most of the blame was laid on Olympias, on the grounds that she had encouraged and whetted the young man's anger, though Alexander also came in for a share of discredit.<sup>18</sup> For it is said that when Pausanias encountered him after that affront and lamented it, Alexander quoted the iambic verse from *Medea*:

the giver of the bride, the groom, and the bride.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, after seeking out the accomplices of the plot, Alexander punished them, and was angry with Olympias for treating Cleopatra cruelly in his absence.<sup>20</sup>

[11] Thus at twenty years of age Alexander succeeded to a kingship beset by serious jealousies, fearsome hatreds, and dangers from all quarters. . . . He brought a swift end to the barbarians' revolts

17. Philip was stabbed to death in 336 BCE by Pausanias, a young man who had formerly been Philip's lover but had been rejected by him and cruelly abused by Philip's cronies.

18. There is no evidence on which to accuse either Alexander or Olympias of involvement in Philip's death (assuming the anecdote Plutarch quotes here is spurious), but historians have often suspected one or both.

19. In Euripides' *Medea*, Medea reviles all three of these enemies after her husband Jason casts her off for a new wife. In Alexander's case, they would be Attalus, Cleopatra, and Philip. The implication behind the recitation of the quote, if it actually happened, was that Alexander planned to imitate Medea in slaying the three who had most injured him.

20. Other sources report that Olympias had Cleopatra and her infant executed.

and wars<sup>21</sup> by overrunning their country with an army as far as the Danube, where he also defeated Syrmus, the king of the Triballians, in a great battle. On learning that the Thebans had revolted<sup>22</sup> and that the Athenians were conspiring with them, he immediately led his force through Thermopylae. He declared that he wanted Demosthenes, who had called him a boy while he was among the Illyrians and Triballians, and a lad when he had reached Thessaly, to regard him as a man at the walls of Athens.

On reaching Thebes and offering her a chance to repent her actions, he demanded the surrender of Phoenix and Prothytes,<sup>23</sup> and proclaimed an amnesty for those who came over to his side. When the Thebans demanded Philotas and Antipater from him in return,<sup>24</sup> and proclaimed that all who wished to liberate Greece should range themselves on their side, Alexander directed the Macedonians to prepare for combat.

The battle was fought with courage and zeal on the Thebans' part against an enemy many times more numerous. But when the Macedonian guards, after abandoning the Cadmeia,<sup>25</sup> attacked them from the rear, most of the Thebans, finding themselves surrounded, fell in the battle itself, and the city was seized, plundered, and razed to the ground. This was done mainly because Alexander had expected that the Greeks, astonished by such a tragedy, would cower and keep quiet; but he also prided himself on gratifying his allies' complaints, since the Phocians and Plateans had lodged accusations against the Thebans.<sup>26</sup> Having exempted the priests, all the Macedonians'

21. The "barbarians" at issue here are the peoples of eastern Europe—Thracians, Triballians, and others—who were prompted to rebel. The Triballians, a Balkan people, had submitted to Philip, but rebelled after his death.

22. In 335 BCE; see *Demosthenes 23, Phocion 17*.

23. Not otherwise known; presumably leaders of the revolt.

24. The Thebans' reply was a barb; Philotas and Antipater were two of Alexander's highest-ranked generals.

25. The Cadmeia was a fortified piece of high ground within the walls of Thebes. It had been garrisoned by the Macedonians after the battle of Chaeronea, but the Thebans seized the garrison troops at the outset of the revolt and were keeping them prisoner there.

26. Plutarch's assessment of mixed motives for Alexander's destruction of Thebes is probably correct. Other sources highlight either Alexander's anger and desire for revenge or his deference to the enemies of Thebes serving in his army.

hosts and guests, the descendants of Pindar,<sup>27</sup> and those who had opposed the citizens who voted for the revolt, he sold the rest, nearly thirty thousand, into slavery.<sup>28</sup> But the dead numbered upward of six thousand.

*Having stunned the Greek cities into submission and stabilized his father's empire, Alexander took up the invasion of Asia his father had been preparing at the time of his death. Alexander won from the Greeks—with the exception of the Spartans, who held aloof—an appointment as supreme commander of the army of invasion, a largely Macedonian force to which most Greek cities, especially Athens, also contributed men, money, or ships.*

[14] The Greeks had assembled at the Isthmus<sup>29</sup> and voted to march against Persia with Alexander, and Alexander was proclaimed commander. Since many statesmen and philosophers had met and congratulated them, Alexander was hoping that Diogenes of Sinope,<sup>30</sup> who was living near Corinth, would do the same. But as Diogenes had very little regard for the king, and remained quietly in Craneion, Alexander went to *him*, and came upon him lying in the sun. Diogenes sat up a little, at the approach of so many men, and squinted at Alexander, who greeted him and asked if there was anything he needed, to which Diogenes replied, "Only for you to move a little out of the sun." It is said that Alexander was so affected by this, and so admired the haughtiness and grandeur of the man who despised him, that when they were departing, and his attendants were laughing and making fun of the philosopher, Alexander said, "Well, had I not been Alexander, I'd have been Diogenes."

[15] As for the size of the expedition, those who give the smallest figures write that it included 30,000 foot soldiers and 4,000 horsemen; those who give the largest, 43,000 foot soldiers and 5,000 horsemen. For provisioning these men, Aristobulus says that Alexander had no more than seventy talents, Duris that he was in possession of only thirty days' sustenance, and Onesicritus that he was also two

27. Pindar was a famous Theban poet of the early fifth century BCE.

28. This mass enslavement of a large, populous city was an extremely harsh measure in the context of Greek warfare.

29. The Isthmus of Corinth was the designated meeting place for the league, a confederation of Greek states (Sparta excluded) established by Philip under Macedonian leadership.

30. A famous Cynic philosopher who rejected the values espoused by Greek society, especially the pursuit of power and wealth.

hundred talents in debt.<sup>31</sup> But though he started out with such small and meager means, he did not board his ship until he had looked into the circumstances of his Companions<sup>32</sup> and distributed to one a farm, to another a village, and to still another the revenue of some hamlet or harbor. And when almost all the royal property had been spent or allocated, Perdiccas<sup>33</sup> said, "But what, sire, do you leave for yourself?" When Alexander replied, "My hopes," Perdiccas said, "Then surely we too, who serve with you in the expedition, will share also in these." And when Perdiccas had declined the property that had been allotted to him, some of his other friends did the same. But Alexander eagerly gratified those who accepted or requested allotments, and most of what he possessed in Macedonia was spent in this way. With such ardor, and his mind thus disposed, he crossed the Hellespont.<sup>34</sup>

Ascending to Troy, he sacrificed to Athena and poured a libation to the heroes. And when he had anointed Achilles' gravestone with oil, he and his Companions ran a race around it, naked, as is the custom, and crowned it with a garland.<sup>35</sup>

[16] Meanwhile, since Darius' generals had mustered and arrayed a mighty force at the crossing of the Granicus,<sup>36</sup> it was necessary to fight at the gates of Asia, as it were, for an entrance and dominion there.

Most of the Macedonian officers feared the depth of the river and the unevenness and ruggedness of the farther banks, which they would have to scale during battle. . . . And when Parmenio<sup>37</sup> tried to

31. Plutarch here names three of the historians who had written about Alexander during his own time. There were many such primary sources that Plutarch was able to consult, but all have since perished, leaving modern historians with only the secondary sources that drew on them.

32. The inner circle of nobles and chiefs attending the Macedonian king were formally known as Companions.

33. One of Alexander's oldest Companions and highest officers.

34. In the spring of 334 BCE, almost two years after taking the throne.

35. One of many symbolic rites Alexander performed to evoke the ancestral link between himself and Achilles, and to portray his invasion of Asia as a new Trojan War.

36. A river in northern Turkey, the spot at which the regional Persian forces had elected to oppose Alexander's progress. The Persians had not defended the Hellespont crossing because Macedonian advance forces had well before established a beachhead there.

37. The senior general and right-hand man of Alexander's father and now of Alexander as well.

prevent Alexander from running risks, as it was late in the season, Alexander said that the Hellespont would be ashamed if, now that he had crossed it, he feared the Granicus. He then plunged into the stream with thirteen companies of cavalry.<sup>38</sup> Charging toward enemy missiles and steep positions fortified with infantry and cavalry, and across a stream that was surging around his men and sweeping them away, his actions seemed those of a mad and desperate commander, rather than one whose judgment was sound. But he persevered in the crossing, and when he had with difficulty scaled the opposite banks, though these were wet and slippery with mud, he was instantly forced to fight in disorderly, headlong haste, and to engage his attackers man by man, before his men who were crossing could form up in any order. For the enemy assaulted with a roar; and matching horse against horse, they made good use of their spears, and of their swords once the spears were shattered. Many thrust themselves at Alexander, who was easily distinguished by his light shield and the crest of his helmet, on either side of which was fixed a plume of marvelous size and whiteness. Though hit by a javelin at the joint of his breastplate, he was not wounded; and when the generals Rhoesaces and Spithridates rushed at him together, he avoided Spithridates and struck Rhoesaces, who was wearing a breastplate. After his own spear broke, Alexander used his sword. When the two men were engaged at close quarters, Spithridates rode up on one side, raised himself up on his horse, and brought his battle-axe down with main force on Alexander's helmet. His crest was broken off, along with one feather, and his helmet could barely and with difficulty resist the blow: the edge of the axe grazed Alexander's topmost hairs. And when Spithridates was rising up for another blow, Cleitus—the one known as Black Cleitus—anticipated him and ran him through with his spear. At that very moment Rhoesaces fell, struck by Alexander's sword.

While this dangerous cavalry combat was under way, the Macedonian phalanx completed its crossing of the river, and the two infantry forces came to blows. But the enemy infantry did not hold its ground firmly for long; it was routed and put to flight, except for the Greek mercenaries.<sup>39</sup> These men, making a stand on a certain

38. The heroic account given here of the battle of Granicus is one of two extant versions. Diodorus (*Library of History* 17.18.4–21) records a very different battle, in which Alexander approached the river cautiously, avoiding Persian strongpoints, and crossed more stealthily.

39. The Persians employed many thousands of Greek infantrymen, who were better trained and equipped than the native peoples from whom they

ridge, asked Alexander for quarter. But he, more in anger than by calculation, charged at them ahead of his men and lost his horse, which was struck through the ribs with a sword (this was not Bucephalus, but another). And it was there, as it turned out, that most of the Macedonians who died and were wounded fought and fell, engaging at close quarters with warlike and desperate men.<sup>40</sup>

It is said that twenty thousand barbarian foot soldiers fell, and twenty-five hundred horsemen. On Alexander's side, Aristobulus says that there were thirty-four dead in all, nine of whom were foot soldiers. Alexander ordered that bronze statues of these men be set up. (The statues were sculpted by Lysippus.) Wishing to share the victory with the Greeks, he sent the Athenians in particular three hundred shields taken from his captives; and on all the remaining spoils, grouped together, he ordered that this highly ambitious inscription be engraved: "Alexander, son of Philip, and the Greeks, except for the Spartans, from the barbarians who inhabit Asia."<sup>41</sup> But the drinking cups, purple robes, and any articles of that kind that he took from the Persians were sent, with a few exceptions, to his mother.

*Alexander made a sweep through Asia Minor after the Granicus battle, "liberating" Greek cities (which meant transferring them from the Persian empire to his own) and chasing out Persian satraps. The following year (333 BCE) he brought his army deeper into Asia, a move opposed by a much larger Persian army than he had faced at the Granicus, commanded this time by the Great King Darius III, himself. Darius had assembled forces many times as numerous as Alexander's and had chosen a level, open battlefield where he could deploy his superior numbers. But after Alexander delayed longer than expected in Cilicia, Darius grew impatient and decided to march out and meet the Macedonians rather than await them on his chosen ground.*

could levy troops. Alexander had, before starting his invasion, gotten a decree passed by the Greek cities forbidding Greek soldiers to fight for the Persians.

40. Plutarch does not record the grim results of this attack: some ten thousand Greek mercenaries were slaughtered by Alexander's forces, partly as a warning to other Greeks serving the Persians.

41. This inscription was designed to highlight Alexander's self-proclaimed partnership with the Greek cities of the league, even if that alliance had been achieved only by his show of cruelty at Thebes. The omission of the Spartans, who were not league members, reinforced the point. By sending the spoils to Athens, Alexander hoped to curry favor with the most powerful and politically influential Greek city, which had thus far regarded him with deeply mixed feelings.

[20] In Darius' army there was a Macedonian, Amyntas, who had fled from Macedonia and was fairly well acquainted with Alexander's nature. This man, when he saw Darius eager to advance into the narrow passes against Alexander, begged him to stay where he was and contend, with his enormous numbers, against the inferior force of the enemy in plains that were broad and open. When Darius replied that he was afraid the enemy might escape by stealth and Alexander elude him, Amyntas replied, "Rest assured, sire, on that score; for this man will march against you, and indeed will soon be at hand." Despite what he had said, Amyntas failed to persuade the king. Setting forth, Darius marched into Cilicia, and at the same time Alexander advanced into Syria against him. Missing one another overnight, they turned back.<sup>42</sup> Alexander was delighted with this turn of events and eager to encounter Darius near the passes, while Darius was glad to extricate his forces from them and regain his previous encampment. For he now realized that it was not to his advantage to launch himself into a region flanked by the sea and mountains, bisected by a river (the Pinarus), and riddled with broken ground—a setting that favored the small numbers of his enemy. Alexander's good fortune provided the site,<sup>43</sup> though his victory was due more to generalship than luck. For though in numbers he was inferior to the barbarians by so large a multitude, Alexander gave them no chance to surround him, whereas he himself outflanked their left wing with his right, and on getting opposite their flank put the enemy to flight. Through it all he fought in the front ranks, and as a result was wounded in the thigh with a sword while contending with Darius at close quarters, according to Chares, though Alexander himself, in the letters about the battle that he dispatched to Antipater, does not say who wounded him, reporting only that he had been stabbed in the thigh with a dagger, but was not seriously inconvenienced by the wound.

Upon winning a splendid victory and destroying more than 110,000 of his enemies, Alexander nonetheless did not capture

42. Plutarch has not troubled to explain these movements clearly. The two armies marched past one another unawares, separated as they were by a tall mountain range. Darius' army thus got around to the north of Alexander, cutting him off from his supply lines and escape route. After realizing his unexpected good fortune, Darius turned southward again, hoping to trap and destroy Alexander's army, and Alexander moved northward to meet him.

43. Close to Issus, the city that has given its name to the battle.

Darius, who had got the start in the flight by half a mile or more,<sup>44</sup> but by the time Alexander had turned back he had captured Darius' chariot and bow.

[21] Among the captives were Darius' mother, wife, and two daughters. . . . But Alexander, considering it more kingly to master himself than to conquer his enemies, laid no hand on these women nor consorted with any other before marriage<sup>45</sup> besides Barsine, who had become a widow after the death of Memnon and was captured near Damascus.<sup>46</sup>

[23] Where wine was concerned he was less susceptible than was generally thought. He came by that reputation because of the time he spent, talking more than drinking, over each cup, always engaging in some long discussion when he had nothing else to attend to.<sup>47</sup> . . .

But though in other respects he was the pleasantest of all kings to consort with, and lacked none of the social graces, he had now become unpleasant in his arrogance and very much the rude soldier; not only was he carried away when it came to boasting, but he also allowed himself to be ridden by his flatterers, by whom the more refined among the company were irritated, since they wished neither to compete with these men nor to fall short of them in praising Alexander. For the former course seemed shameful, the latter dangerous. After the carousal, Alexander would bathe and then retire to sleep, often until midday; there were even times when he spent the entire day sleeping.

44. In the heat of the battle, Darius, standing in his war chariot at the center of the Persian line, had perceived that Alexander's forces were penetrating. Realizing that he was in danger of being captured, Darius turned and fled at top speed, escaping with his life but precipitating the total collapse of his army.

45. The romantic legends surrounding Alexander made much of his chivalrous treatment of Persian royal women. Alexander later married Stateira, the eldest daughter of Darius (see chapter 70).

46. Barsine was a half-Greek, half-Persian noblewoman with whom Alexander carried on an affair in the 330s BCE. With her he had a son, Heracles.

47. One of the many points on which Plutarch has trusted the more pro-Alexander sources, in this case Aristobulus, who was at pains to defend Alexander from charges of excessive drinking. When in the next paragraph Plutarch reports that Alexander sometimes slept the whole day through, one has to believe that overindulgence in wine was involved.

After defeating Darius and putting him to flight at Issus, Alexander swept down the coast of Phoenicia, taking over the port cities that the Persian navy might use as a base. The Persians were at this time using their naval superiority to good advantage in the Aegean, and Alexander recognized that he could not challenge them on the sea; indeed, he had already dismissed his Greek-led fleet. Instead he tried to neutralize Persian naval strength by taking over all the anchorages and harbors along the coast of Asia. This required him to fight a long, grueling siege at Tyre, a nearly impregnable island city, in 332 BCE.

After capturing the entire Phoenician coast, Alexander turned westward, toward Egypt. This province of the Persian empire was happy to welcome him, having long hated its Persian masters. Here Alexander's army spent a cheerful and restful sojourn in late 332 and early 331. During this time Alexander founded the most famous of the many cities that were to bear his name.

[26] They say that on conquering Egypt Alexander wanted to found a large and populous city and to name it after himself, and on the advice of his architects was just about to measure off a certain site and build a wall around it. Then, one night in his sleep he saw an astonishing vision: a man of majestic appearance, with a great thatch of grey hair, stood beside him and uttered these epic verses:<sup>48</sup>

An island lies in the high-surfing sea  
Before Egypt; Pharos is what men call it.

As soon as he had risen, he went to Pharos, which at the time was still an island (it lay a short distance off the Canopic mouth), though today it is connected by a pier to the mainland. When he saw a surprisingly fertile spot—a strip of land, nearly equivalent in breadth to an isthmus, that separates a large lagoon and an arm of the ocean that terminates at a large harbor—he declared that Homer was not only admirable in other respects, but also the cleverest of architects, and he gave orders for his builders to trace the city's outline to conform to that site. . . . He ordered his contractors to get the work under way, while he himself set out for Ammon.<sup>49</sup> This was a long journey, one that furnished considerable trouble and hardship.

[27] When Alexander had crossed the desert and reached the site of the oracle, the prophet hailed him with a greeting from the god as from a father, whereupon Alexander inquired whether any of the

48. Homer's *Odyssey* 4.354–55.

49. Ammon was an Egyptian god, equated with Zeus by the Greeks. The oracle of Ammon, in a remote oasis west of Egypt, was considered one of the most reliable sources of prophecy.

murderers of his father had escaped him. When the prophet urged him to guard his tongue, as his father was not mortal,<sup>50</sup> Alexander rephrased the question and inquired whether the murderers of Philip had all been punished; he then inquired about his own empire, asking whether the god had granted him supreme power over all mankind. When the god had answered that this too had been granted, and that Philip had been fully avenged, Alexander presented the god with splendid votive offerings, and the priests with gifts of money.

That is what most writers report about the oracles. But Alexander himself, in a letter to his mother, says that he received certain secret prophecies, which on his return he will reveal to her alone. Some say that the prophet, wishing to hail him with the affectionate Greek greeting, "*O paidion*," misspoke, owing to his barbarian accent, and pronounced the last word with an "s" instead of an "n," saying, "*O pai Dios*," and that the slip delighted Alexander, whereupon the story spread abroad that the god had addressed him as "son of Zeus."<sup>51</sup>

[28] On the whole, Alexander treated the barbarians haughtily and behaved as if he actually believed in his divine begetting and birth, but to the Greeks he was moderate and restrained when it came to assuming his own divinity.<sup>52</sup> But when writing to the Athenians about Samos<sup>53</sup> he said, "I cannot have given you that free and famous city, for you received it from the man who was then your master and was called my father," meaning Philip. . . .

[29] When Darius sent a letter to Alexander and his friends, requesting him to accept ten thousand talents in return for his captives, to keep all the territory east of the Euphrates, to marry one of

50. The oracle hereby implied that Alexander was the son of a god rather than of Philip.

51. In Greek, *paidion* is a way of hailing a friend, "hey, young man," whereas *pai Dios*, heard as two words, means "son of Zeus."

52. Alexander's Greek subjects were much more wary of human pretensions to divinity than were Egyptians and Asians. The Greeks eventually passed resolutions giving Alexander divine worship, but the measures were very controversial.

53. In 323 BCE, near the end of his life, Alexander decreed that all those exiled by the Greek cities must be returned to their homes, a measure that would have resulted in Athens losing Samos, a territory from which it had expelled all the native inhabitants. The Athenians appealed to Alexander to exclude them from the decree, but were denied.

his daughters, and to be his friend and ally,<sup>54</sup> Alexander shared the letter's contents with his Companions. When Parmenio said, "Well, if *I* were Alexander, I would accept these terms," Alexander replied, "And so would *I*, by Zeus, if *I* were Parmenio." He accordingly wrote in reply that if Darius came to him, he would be shown every courtesy; if not, Alexander would march against him at once.

*In the spring of 331 BCE, Alexander left Egypt and headed east, having heard that Darius had gathered a new army to defend his empire. Plutarch says this force numbered one million, but that is doubtless an exaggeration. By any measure, though, it was huge and included Darius' most fearsome weapons: expert Bactrian cavalrymen, scythed chariots with blades protruding from their wheels, and even a handful of trained Indian war elephants. Determined to preserve the advantage of favorable ground, Darius brought this force to an open plain near Gaugamela, in what is now Iran, and cleared the land of rocks and obstructions so that his cavalry would not be impeded. Alexander approached this battleground cautiously, in late September 331, and prepared for his most important showdown yet.*

[33] And now, after Alexander had addressed the Thessalians and the other Greeks at great length, and they had urged him, with a roar, to lead them against the barbarians, he shifted his spear to his left hand and with his right called on the gods, as Callisthenes<sup>55</sup> says, beseeching them, if he was truly the offspring of Zeus, to defend and strengthen the Greeks. The seer Aristander, wearing a white shawl and a golden crown, rode by and pointed out an eagle soaring over Alexander's head and flying straight toward the enemy, at the sight of which the men grew bold and encouraged one another, the cavalry charged at full speed against the enemy, and the phalanx surged forward like a wave. But before the first ranks had come to blows, the barbarians gave ground and there was a relentless pursuit, Alexander driving the conquered force toward their center, where Darius was. For Alexander saw him from a distance—a tall, handsome man mounted on a high chariot, fenced about with many splendid horsemen, who stood in compact array around the chariot to

54. The different Alexander sources give varying accounts of what Darius offered Alexander and when, but all of them make clear that the price Darius was willing to pay to buy Alexander off was huge.

55. The expedition's official historian, a Greek intellectual and kinsman of Aristotle, Callisthenes was later killed on Alexander's orders, after defying the king's policies, in an episode not included in this volume.

resist the enemy's attack. But once Alexander, formidable when seen at close range, had charged after the fugitives toward the ranks who were standing their ground, he astounded and scattered almost all of them. The best and noblest, however, who were slain in front of their king and falling in heaps on one another, hindered the Macedonians' pursuit, struggling convulsively and flinging themselves around the men and horses.

But Darius, faced with all these horrors and seeing his defenders retreating toward him and making it impossible to turn his chariot around and drive through easily, since its wheels were obstructed and jammed by the large numbers of fallen bodies, while his horses, overcome and hidden by the masses of corpses, were rearing up and alarming his charioteer, abandoned his chariot and weapons, mounted a mare that, according to report, had just foaled,<sup>56</sup> and fled. But it is thought that he would not have escaped had other horsemen not come from Parmenio, summoning Alexander with the plea that a large enemy force was still in formation there and would not give ground. In fact Parmenio is generally criticized for having been sluggish and idle in that battle, either because old age was already impairing his courage, or because he was oppressed by the arrogance and pomp, as Callisthenes phrases it, of Alexander's sovereignty, and regarded it with envy. At the time, though the king was vexed by the summons, he did not tell his men the truth, but signaled retreat, declaring that he would refrain from further slaughter since darkness was falling. And as he drove toward the division that was in danger, he heard on the way that the enemy had been roundly defeated and was fleeing.<sup>57</sup>

56. Mares that had recently given birth were thought by the Greeks to have extra speed.

57. Plutarch had little interest in military history, and his account of the battle of Gaugamela is only a rough outline. Interested readers should consult the battle plans given in *The Landmark Arrian: The Campaigns of Alexander*, ed. James Romm and trans. Pamela Mensch (New York: Pantheon, 2010). The outcome at least is clear: Darius once again turned his chariot and fled the field, rather than risk being taken prisoner by Alexander. The center of his line followed him in flight, but his right wing had already made good inroads against Alexander's left, led by Parmenio, and continued to threaten it. Alexander had to turn back from pursuit of Darius in order to aid Parmenio, allowing the Persian king to get away unscathed with a few followers.

[34] The battle having had this outcome, the empire of the Persians appeared to have been utterly destroyed, and Alexander, proclaimed king of Asia,<sup>58</sup> performed splendid sacrifices to the gods and presented his friends with large sums of money, houses, and commands. In his eagerness to be honored by the Greeks, he wrote that all their tyrannies had been abolished and that they might govern themselves autonomously.<sup>59</sup>

[36] On becoming master of Susa,<sup>60</sup> Alexander came into possession, in the palace, of forty thousand talents of coined money and all the other trappings of untold wealth.<sup>61</sup>

[38] After this, when he was about to march against Darius,<sup>62</sup> he chanced to take part in a playful carousal with his Companions that was also attended by women who came to revel with their lovers. The most popular among them was Thais, an Athenian by birth, and the mistress of Ptolemy, who subsequently became king.<sup>63</sup> Partly wishing to praise Alexander properly, and partly in jest, she was moved during the carousal to make a speech in keeping with the character of her native land, though it was too high-flown for a person of her sort. She said that for all she had suffered wandering about Asia she was on that day receiving her reward, enjoying a luxurious party in the splendid

58. Alexander assigned himself this unprecedented title.

59. Upon gaining control of Asia Minor three years earlier, Alexander had removed the Persian-installed puppet governments in the Greek cities and installed democracies. In theory these cities were now free, but in practice, of course, they could not defy Alexander, and many had to pay "voluntary" tribute to him. The idea that Alexander's campaign was in fact a Greek war of liberation from Persia was thereby maintained.

60. Susa was the principal Persian capital, though Babylon, Persepolis, and Pasargadae were also royal seats.

61. A fantastic sum of money, and yet this was only a small portion of the total that Alexander captured after all the Persian treasuries had been emptied. The Persians had been hoarding the tribute money collected from all of Asia for more than two centuries.

62. After resting his troops and enjoying the pleasures of Babylon and Persepolis, Alexander set out for Bactria in the spring of 330 BCE to find and capture Darius.

63. Ptolemy, son of Lagus, was one of Alexander's oldest friends and top commanders. After the death of Alexander in 323 BCE, Ptolemy became satrap of Egypt, and some sixteen years later, after Alexander's royal family had been killed off by those competing for control of the empire, he and several other former generals crowned themselves kings.

palace of the Persians. But it would be pleasanter still to go on a revel and burn down the house of Xerxes, who had burned Athens,<sup>64</sup> she herself kindling the fire while Alexander looked on, so that a legend might be preserved for mankind that the women of Alexander's entourage imposed a greater punishment on the Persians on behalf of Greece than all her naval and infantry commanders. This speech was received with uproarious applause, and the king's Companions eagerly cheered him on. Captivated, the king leaped up with a garland and a torch and led the way. The other revelers, following with a merry shout, stood around the palace, and other Macedonians who learned of it ran there with torches and were filled with joy. For they were hoping that the burning and destruction of the palace were the acts of a man who had fixed his thoughts on home and would not settle among barbarians. Some say that these events came about in this way, while others say they were planned;<sup>65</sup> but it is agreed that Alexander quickly repented and gave orders for the fire to be extinguished.

[42] Alexander now marched out in the belief that he would again do battle with Darius. But on hearing that the king had been captured by Bessus,<sup>66</sup> Alexander sent the Thessalians home, giving the mercenaries a gift of two thousand talents over and above their pay. And in the course of the pursuit, which proved troublesome and prolonged (in eleven days he covered upward of four hundred miles on horseback), most of his men gave out, mainly from lack of water.

[43] It is said that only sixty rushed together into the enemy's camp, where they actually rode over much silver and gold that had been discarded, passed many wagons of children and women being carried this way and that, bereft of drivers, and pursued the first fugitives, thinking that Darius was among them. They finally found Darius lying in a wagon, his body full of javelins, on the point of death. Yet he asked for something to drink, and on taking some cool

64. In 480 BCE, when the Athenian population had been evacuated to Salamis; see *Themistocles* 10.

65. Plutarch gives a nod to the alternative, and in most historians' eyes more likely, version recorded in Arrian's *Anabasis*: Alexander soberly decided to burn the palace, as a signal to the Persians that the Achaemenid dynasty was over and also as a sign to the Greeks that the promised revenge on the Persians had been achieved.

66. Bessus, satrap of Bactria, had accompanied Darius in flight, but when it was clear that Alexander was overtaking the fugitives, Bessus and his followers staged a coup and put Darius in chains and eventually killed him. Thereafter Bessus tried to claim the throne that Darius had lost.

water said to Polystratus, who had given it to him, "This, my good fellow, is the climax of all my bad luck—to be treated well without being able to make a return. But Alexander will thank you for the favor, and the gods will reward Alexander for his kindness to my mother, wife, and children. To him, through you, I give this right hand." So saying, and taking Polystratus' hand, he died. When Alexander arrived, he was visibly grieved by the man's death; loosening his own cloak, he threw it over the body and shrouded it. And later on, when he found Bessus, he had him dismembered. Bending two straight trees toward each other, he attached a part of the man's body to each; then, when the trees were let go, and swung back with a rush, the part attached to each went with it.<sup>67</sup>

[45] From there, after moving the army into Parthian territory, Alexander found himself at leisure, and for the first time donned barbarian attire, either because he wanted to adapt himself to the local customs (in the belief that community of race and custom is a great humanizer of men), or as an attempt to introduce the practice of ritual bowing<sup>68</sup> to the Macedonians by gradually accustoming them to tolerate changes in his way of life and habits.<sup>69</sup> . . . And the sight pained the Macedonians. But since they admired all his other virtues, they supposed they should forgive some of the things he chose to do for the sake of his own pleasure and renown.

[47] Alexander now adapted his way of life more and more to that of the local inhabitants, and encouraged the latter to adopt Macedonian customs, thinking that by means of assimilation and fellowship—by good will rather than by force—he would ground his authority more securely while he himself was far away. That was why, upon selecting thirty thousand boys, he gave orders that they were to

67. This version of Bessus' death is probably fanciful, but it is clear from other sources that Alexander had Bessus tortured and mutilated before execution. Arrian's *Anabasis* takes Alexander to task for this, but it seems to be in line with Persian (though not Macedonian or Greek) norms.

68. In one of his most controversial moves, Alexander attempted to have his officers bow down to him in greeting as the Persians did before the Great King.

69. Plutarch presents the two contrasting views of his sources, some of which excused Alexander's Asianizing dress as an attempt to gain authority among his new Asian subjects, while others blamed him for arrogance and pomp. This was the first of many steps in Alexander's "fusion" program, his attempt to meld European and Asian political cultures and even force their aristocratic families to intermarry.

study Greek literature and be trained in Macedonian warfare, having assigned them several instructors.<sup>70</sup> As for his union with Roxane,<sup>71</sup> while it is true that, charmed by her youth and beauty, he fell in love when he saw her dancing at a drinking party, the match was also thought to accord well with his immediate aims. For the barbarians were heartened by the fellowship his marriage created, and admired Alexander beyond measure because he had proved so temperate in these matters that he would not even consent to touch, without legal right, the only woman by whom he had been vanquished.

*Once Darius and Bessus were dead, Alexander was the unchallenged ruler of the former Persian empire, but he elected not to stop his campaign. He spent two years in Bactria and Sogdiana (modern Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), the wild frontier of the Persian world, subduing tribes that had no inclination to respect his authority. Here, several incidents occurred that revealed tensions, or even breakdown of unity, in Alexander's army. Two plots against Alexander's life were uncovered during these two years, and purges were conducted after each. Alexander personally punished a grumbling dissident, a high officer named Cleitus, by killing him with a spear in full view of the whole senior staff. But ultimately Alexander's authority stood the test, and his army, now reorganized to give the king added security, held together.*

In 327 BCE Alexander left Bactria, headed not homeward but farther east. He had accepted an alliance with Taxiles, a ruler near the Indus River, and took his army across the Hindu Kush mountains and into the land he knew as India (modern northern Pakistan). This region had once belonged to the Persian empire, so Alexander had a slight political pretext for entering it. But he also needed to give his army, now indisputably the world's most powerful, something to do, and he himself longed to make a journey that only the gods Heracles and Dionysus, according to Greek legend, had made before him.

[57] When Alexander was about to cross the mountains into India, he saw that his army was overburdened, its mobility impaired by its vast spoils. At dawn, when the wagons had been packed up, he burned his own wagons first, along with those of his Companions, and then commanded that those of the Macedonians be set on fire. And the ambition that prompted this exploit seemed greater and more formidable than the deed itself. For though a few of his soldiers were

70. This corps of select Asian youths had been trained to fight in Macedonian fashion, beginning probably in 327 BCE.

71. Alexander's first wife Roxane was the daughter of a Bactrian chieftain. Alexander married her in 327 BCE, largely in an effort to make allies and willing subjects of the recalcitrant Bactrian tribes.

vexed, most of them, raising an impassioned war cry, shared their necessities with those who needed them, and burned and destroyed their own superfluous goods, thereby filling Alexander with zeal and eagerness. By then he had also become a fearsome and implacable punisher of any who misbehaved. For after appointing Menander, one of his Companions, as chief of a garrison, he had the man killed for declining to remain in office, and personally dispatched Orsodates, one of the barbarians who revolted from him, with a bow shot.

[59] Taxiles is said to have been in possession of a portion of India no smaller in size than Egypt—a region especially rich in pastures and land that bore fine fruit, and to have been, in his own way, a clever man. Welcoming Alexander, he said, “What need have we, Alexander, to fight with one another if you have come intending to deprive us neither of water nor of necessary sustenance, the only things for which sensible men are compelled to fight? As for the other riches and possessions so-called—if I prove the stronger man, I am ready to treat you well, but if the weaker, I do not hesitate to show my gratitude when treated well.” Delighted, Alexander clasped Taxiles by the hand and said, “Do you somehow imagine that after such friendly words our meeting will not lead to a battle? But you will not get the better of me; for I shall contend against you and fight on behalf of the favors I bestow, that you may not surpass me in generosity.” Receiving many gifts, and giving more, Alexander finally made Taxiles a present of 1,000 talents of coined money. In doing so, though he greatly pained his friends, he made many of the barbarians regard him more kindly.

But the most warlike of the Indians, who were mercenaries, went about to the various cities, defending them stoutly and doing Alexander great harm. Eventually, after making a truce with them in a certain city, Alexander caught them on the road as they were departing and killed them all.<sup>72</sup> And this adheres like a stain to his military record; in all other instances he waged war lawfully and in a manner worthy of a king. No less than the mercenaries, the philosophers<sup>73</sup>

72. This occurred at the town called Massaga, near the end of 327 BCE. According to Arrian's account (*Anabasis* 4.27), Alexander attacked the mercenaries after learning that they intended to break their oath and desert him.

73. Like many Greeks, Plutarch was deeply impressed by the religious ascetics of India, known to the Greeks variously as Brahmans, gymnosophists, wise men, or (as here) philosophers. The various religious orders in the region—Hindus, Jains, and perhaps also early Buddhists—were opposed to Alexander's occupation.

made trouble for him by abusing any kings who allied themselves with him, and by encouraging free peoples to revolt—which was why he had many of these men hanged as well.

[60] Alexander himself, in his letters,<sup>74</sup> has described his campaign against Porus.<sup>75</sup> He says that their two camps were separated by the river Hydaspes, and that Porus, stationing his elephants on the opposite bank, kept constant watch on the crossing. Accordingly, day after day Alexander created plenty of noise and uproar in his camp, and thereby accustomed the barbarians not to be alarmed. And then, one stormy, moonless night, taking a detachment of his infantry and his best horsemen, he marched a distance from the enemy and crossed to a smallish island. Rain poured down furiously there, and many hurricanes and lightning bolts assailed his men. But though he saw some of them perishing and burned to death by the lightning, he nevertheless set forth from the island toward the opposite banks. But the Hydaspes, swollen and agitated by the storm, forced a large breach in its bank, and a large part of the stream surged through it; and the ground between the two channels was too slippery and jagged to provide any secure footing. At that point Alexander is said to have cried, “Athenians, can you believe the dangers I undergo to earn your praise?” . . . Alexander himself says that after abandoning their rafts they crossed the breach with their armor on, the water coming up to their chests; and that after getting across he led his horsemen two and a half miles in advance of his infantry, calculating that if the enemy attacked with their cavalry, he would prove superior, whereas if they advanced their phalanx, his own infantry would arrive in time. And his expectation was justified. For after routing a thousand horsemen and the sixty chariots that had attacked him, he seized all the chariots and killed four hundred of the horsemen. As Porus now guessed that Alexander himself had crossed the river, he advanced against him with his entire force, except the party he left behind to prevent the Macedonians from crossing.<sup>76</sup> But Alexander, dreading

74. Plutarch evidently had access to a collection of Alexander's letters, of uncertain authenticity. They have become almost entirely lost.

75. An important local leader, an enemy of Taxiles, with whom Alexander had allied.

76. A detachment of Macedonians had been left in position on the riverbank opposite Porus while Alexander led the rest to the crossing point. Porus wanted to deter this squadron, which included cavalry horses, from crossing, so he left some of his elephants there, knowing that horses were not willing to approach elephants. Alexander in fact never reached the Ganges.

the beasts and the enormous numbers of the enemy, attacked the left wing himself, and ordered Coenus to assault the right. A rout occurring at each wing, Porus' men, forced back, retreated in each case toward the beasts, and crowded in among them. From then on the battle was a scramble until, in the eighth hour, the enemy gave up. This is the account the victor himself gives in his letters.

Most of the historians agree that Porus' height exceeded four cubits by a span,<sup>77</sup> and that because of his stature and the dignity of his physique, his size in relation to his elephant was proportional to that of a horseman's to his horse. Yet his was the largest elephant; and it showed a wonderful understanding and concern for the king, angrily warding off his attackers and repulsing them while the king was still vigorous. But when it sensed that he was wearied by scores of missiles and wounds, and dreaded that he might slip off, it lowered itself gently to its knees; and gently grasping the spears with its proboscis, drew each of them from Porus' body. When Alexander asked the captive Porus how he should treat him, Porus replied, “Like a king”; and when Alexander then asked whether he had anything else to say, Porus answered, “Everything is comprehended in ‘like a king.’” Accordingly, Alexander not only allowed Porus to rule the territories over which he had been reigning, appointing him as satrap, but added another territory, having subdued its autonomous tribes, in which there were said to be fifteen peoples, five thousand noteworthy cities, and a great many villages. And he appointed Philip,<sup>78</sup> one of his Companions, as satrap over a territory three times as large.

[62] The battle with Porus sapped the Macedonians' vigor, and discouraged them from advancing farther into India. After barely repelling Porus, who had arrayed twenty thousand infantry and two thousand cavalry against them, they firmly opposed Alexander when he insisted on crossing the river Ganges;<sup>79</sup> for they had learned that it was four miles wide and one hundred fathoms deep, and that the opposite banks were concealed by enormous numbers of infantry, horses, and elephants. For it was said that the kings of the Gandarites and Praesii were awaiting him with 80,000 horsemen, 200,000 foot

77. Making him over six feet tall, large for his time.

78. No relation to Alexander's father.

79. Plutarch's error for the Hyphasis River. Alexander's army refused his order to cross this river and proceed toward what he claimed was the eastern edge of the world.

soldiers, 8,000 war chariots, and 6,000 warrior elephants.<sup>80</sup> And this was no idle boast. For Androcottus,<sup>81</sup> who reigned shortly thereafter, made Seleucus a present of 500 elephants, and with any army of 600,000 invaded and subdued all of India.

At first, in his despair and anger, Alexander shut himself up in his tent and lay there, claiming no satisfaction with what he had accomplished unless he crossed the Ganges and regarding retreat as an admission of defeat. But when his friends, who gave him suitable consolation, and his men, who stood weeping and wailing by his door, appealed to him, he relented and broke up camp, fashioning many false and deceptive devices to enhance his renown; for he ordered the manufacture of armor that was larger than usual, taller horse stalls, and heavier bridles,<sup>82</sup> and left these items behind, scattered about, and built altars of the gods, which to this day are held sacred by the kings of the Praesii, who cross the river and perform sacrifices on them in the Greek manner.<sup>83</sup>

[63] From there, eager to see the outer sea,<sup>84</sup> he built many rafts and ferry boats furnished with oars and was transported down the rivers<sup>85</sup> in a leisurely manner. But the voyage was not free of toil or even of battles: on landing and disembarking at the cities, he subdued them all.<sup>86</sup> Against the so-called Malli, whom they say were the most

80. The Nanda kingdom in the Ganges valley, the people apparently known to the Greeks as the Praesii, was indeed quite powerful at this time, and reports of their resources may well have played a part in the unwillingness of the troops to proceed.

81. Chandragupta, the founder of the Mauryan empire.

82. The outsized gear was intended to give the impression that the realm was ruled by giants, to deter potential invaders.

83. A fascinating statement, though how Plutarch could have known this is unclear. The altars of Alexander, if they ever really existed, have disappeared entirely today.

84. With his vague notions of geography, Alexander imagined that the Arabian Sea, the body of water by the Indus River mouth, was in fact part of the world-encircling Ocean or "outer sea" that stretched around both Africa and northern Asia to join the Atlantic.

85. That is, the tributaries of the Indus and the Indus itself.

86. The army's voyage down the Indus and its tributaries saw some of the hardest fighting, and harshest treatment of enemies, in all of Alexander's campaigns. Either Alexander wanted to terrorize the region in hopes of keeping it tractable, or he wanted to punish his men for defying him at the Hyphasis, or both.

warlike of the Indians, he just missed being cut to pieces. For he dispersed the Indians from their walls with spears, and was the first to mount the wall by a ladder; and when the ladder was shattered, and he was sustaining blows from the barbarians who were resisting from below, he wheeled about, though he had few companions, and leaped down into the midst of his enemies, and luckily landed on his feet. When he brandished his weapons, the barbarians imagined that some flamelike specter hovered before his body, which was why they fled at first and scattered. But when they saw him with two of his shield-bearers, they rushed at him, some of them trying to wound him with their swords and spears as he defended himself; and one, standing a little way off, released from his bow an arrow so forceful and steady that on piercing Alexander's breastplate it lodged in the bones near his chest. He himself yielded to the blow, his body bending double, whereupon his assailant, having hit him, advanced with his scimitar drawn, while Peucestas and Limnaeus<sup>87</sup> stood over the king. When both of these men were struck, Limnaeus perished, but Peucestas held out, and Alexander slew the barbarian.

After sustaining many wounds, Alexander was finally hit on the neck with a cudgel, at which point he planted his body against the wall and merely gazed at his enemies. Thereupon the Macedonians crowded around him, and he was seized, already unconscious, and carried to his tent. And at once there was a rumor in the army that he had died. When with great difficulty and effort they had excised the arrow's shaft, which was made of wood, and succeeded in removing his breastplate, they had to excise the barb that had entered one of his bones. It is said that the barb was three finger breadths wide and four long. That was why, as it was being extracted, he fainted repeatedly and nearly died; but he nonetheless recovered. And when he was out of danger, but still weak and receiving prolonged care and treatment, he became aware, from the disturbance outside, that the Macedonians were longing to see him. He then donned a cloak and went out.<sup>88</sup> After sacrificing to the gods, he again set sail and voyaged along the coast, subjugating great cities and extensive territory.

87. The two men who had accompanied Alexander over the wall. Other writers say the second was not Limnaeus but Leonnatus, or they include a third man, Abreas.

88. Plutarch's brief finale does little justice to the intensely emotional episode. According to Arrian, Alexander's troops were ready to riot, believing him dead, until he summoned enough strength to mount a horse and ride out among them. The response of the troops was ecstatic.

[66] His voyage down the rivers to the sea took seven months.<sup>89</sup> When he surged into the ocean with his fleet, he sailed out to an island that he called Scillustis, though others call it Psiltucis.<sup>90</sup> Disembarking there, he sacrificed to the gods and observed the natural features of the sea and the points on the coast that were accessible. Then, on praying that no man after him might travel beyond the bounds of his own expedition, he turned back. Appointing Nearchus as admiral, and Onesicritus as chief pilot, he gave orders for the fleet to sail along the coast, keeping India on its right.<sup>91</sup> He himself, advancing on foot through the Oreitans' territory, was led into the direst hardship and lost an enormous number of men, so that not even a fourth of his fighting force was brought back, though his infantry had numbered 120,000, and his cavalry 15,000.<sup>92</sup> Virulent diseases, bad food, the burning heat, and famine destroyed most of them, as they were crossing the untilled country of men who lived poorly and owned only a few miserable sheep whose flesh was inferior and foul-smelling, since the animals had been fed on ocean fish. After crossing the region with great difficulty in sixty days, he reached Gedrosia, where he suddenly had all things in abundance, since the nearest satraps and kings had provided them.

[68] When Nearchus and his men reached him from the coast, Alexander so enjoyed hearing in detail about their voyage that he himself decided to sail down the Euphrates with a large armament, and then, after circumnavigating Arabia and Africa, to pass through

89. Roughly, the first half of 325 BCE.

90. Arrian gives the name as Cilluta (*Anabasis* 6.19.3). Its location is unknown.

91. With these orders, Alexander gave his old friend Nearchus a formidable task. The coast of Carmania, in modern eastern Iran, was nearly barren, harborless, and totally unexplored. Alexander's plan was for a portion of the army to march along the coast and keep in contact with the fleet, finding water and anchorages for the sailors, while the ships supplied the land army with food. But the fleet and army became separated early on and both endured terrible hardships. Nearchus' account of his voyage has been largely preserved in Arrian's *Indica*.

92. The numbers and the scale seem fantastic, but some historians have found Plutarch's figures—the only surviving estimate for Gedrosia losses—credible. Hard evidence is lacking, but there is no doubt that the trip (in 325 BCE) was a harrowing ordeal.

the Pillars of Heracles and into the inner sea.<sup>93</sup> He had vessels of all sorts built for him at Thapsacus, and sailors and helmsmen were assembled from all quarters. But his difficult return march, the wound he sustained among the Malli, and the reports of his army's heavy losses raised doubts about his survival, which in turn incited his subject peoples to revolt and occasioned great iniquity, greed, and insolence among his generals and satraps. In short, unrest and revolutionary impulses spread everywhere. . . . For these reasons he sent Nearchus back to the coast (for he was determined to fill the entire seaboard with wars), while he himself proceeded to punish the rogues among his generals.<sup>94</sup> He himself killed one of Abuletes<sup>95</sup> sons, Oxyartes,<sup>96</sup> by running him through with a spear; and when Abuletes failed to furnish him with the necessary provisions, bringing him three thousand talents of coined money instead, Alexander ordered the money to be thrown to the horses. When they would not touch it, he said, "What use to us are these provisions of yours?" and cast Abuletes into prison.

[70] Holding a wedding for his Companions at Susa, he himself married Darius' daughter Stateira and assigned the noblest women to the noblest men;<sup>97</sup> and for the Macedonians who had already married<sup>98</sup> he provided a public wedding feast at which he is said to have given each of the nine thousand invited guests a golden drinking cup for the libations. Distinguishing himself admirably in every way, he

93. Other sources also credit Alexander with this plan, to reach home by circumnavigating Africa and entering the Mediterranean (the "inner sea") at the strait of Gibraltar ("Pillars of Heracles"), but it is doubtful that he really entertained it.

94. This purge of unreliable satraps in 324 BCE resulted in the flight of Harpalus to Athens, among other upheavals; see *Demosthenes* 25.

95. Abuletes the Persian was satrap of Susiana, first under the Persians, then under Alexander.

96. His name was Oxathres; Plutarch has confused him with Oxyartes, Roxane's father.

97. The mass marriage Plutarch refers to occurred in the spring of 324 BCE. Alexander matched nearly a hundred of his high officers with Persian and Bactrian brides, selected from the royal and noble families of Asia. The goal was to create a closer collaboration between the elites of the Greek and Persian worlds. Alexander himself married not only Stateira, as Plutarch says here, but also Parysatis, daughter of the Persian king who had preceded Darius. Alexander remained wedded to Roxane.

98. That is, those who had Asian mistresses.

even cleared the debts his men had incurred, which amounted to 9,870 talents.

[71] Since the thirty thousand boys he had left behind for training and exercises<sup>99</sup> had acquired manly physiques and handsome looks, and displayed a wonderful ease and lightness in their drills, Alexander was delighted, though the Macedonians grew despondent and feared that he would regard *them* as less valuable. That was why, when he sent the weak and disabled to the coast,<sup>100</sup> they said it was insulting and humiliating that after using men in every capacity he discarded them in disgrace and cast them back to their native cities and parents, no longer the men they had been when he recruited them. They therefore urged him to send them *all* away and to consider all the Macedonians useless, since he now had these young dancers of the war dance<sup>101</sup> with whom he could go forth and conquer the world.

To this Alexander responded harshly, and in his anger showered them with abuse. On driving them away, he gave his guard posts to Persians, out of whom he chose his bodyguards and heralds. When the Macedonians saw him escorted by Persians, while they themselves were excluded and dishonored, they were humbled; and in talking among themselves, they realized that they had been almost mad with envy and rage. Coming to their senses at last, they visited Alexander's tent, unarmed and wearing only their tunics. . . . For two days and nights they persisted in standing at his door, weeping and appealing to him as their master. On the third day, coming forth and seeing them humbled and sobbing pitifully, he wept for a long time;<sup>102</sup> then, after duly scolding them, he addressed them kindly and released the men who were unfit, giving them splendid gifts and

99. For Alexander's decision some years earlier to train a corps of Asian youths to fight with the Macedonians, see chapter 47 and note 70.

100. Alexander decommissioned not only the "weak and disabled" but also many of the most egregious troublemakers from the Hyphasis mutiny. About ten thousand Macedonian veterans were to be sent "to the coast," that is, the west coast of Asia, and then home to Macedonia by ship, under the leadership of Craterus. The events described here occurred at the town of Opis, on the Tigris River, in the spring of 324 BCE.

101. Evidently a sarcastic reference to the youth and vigor of the new recruits. The veterans taunting Alexander were in their fifties and sixties.

102. Arrian, in his account of the same episode (*Anabasis* 7.11), does not show Alexander behaving nearly so emotionally.

writing to Antipater<sup>103</sup> that at all public games and theaters they were to occupy the front seats, crowned with laurel. He also awarded pensions to the children, now orphans, of the men who had died.

[73] As he was advancing to Babylon, Nearchus, who had rejoined him after sailing through the ocean to the Euphrates,<sup>104</sup> said that some Chaldaeans<sup>105</sup> had met him and recommended that Alexander keep away from Babylon. But Alexander ignored this advice and proceeded onward. . . . He was also perturbed by many other signs. For example, a tame ass, attacking the largest and most beautiful lion in his menagerie, kicked it to death. And when he had stripped to anoint himself and exercise, and was playing ball, and the young men who were playing went to put on their clothes, they found a fellow sitting silently on the throne, wearing the diadem and cloaked in the royal robe. The man, when asked who he was, was silent for a long time. Then, collecting himself, he said that his name was Dionysius, a Messenian by birth, and that charged with some crime he had been brought there from the coast and kept in chains for a long time; but just now the god Sarapis,<sup>106</sup> standing before him, had removed his chains, led him to that spot, and told him to don the robe and diadem, sit on the throne, and remain silent.

[74] On hearing of this, Alexander obeyed the seers and did away with the man. He himself now lost heart, and grew dubious about divine protection, and suspicious of his friends. He particularly feared Antipater and his sons, one of whom, Iolaus, was his chief cup-bearer; the other, Cassander, had lately arrived.<sup>107</sup> And when Cassander, on catching sight of some barbarians performing a ritual

103. Antipater was in command of the Macedonian home front in Alexander's absence.

104. That is, through the Persian Gulf.

105. A caste of Mesopotamian priests, famous for their powers of divination.

106. Sarapis was a god worshiped primarily in Egypt during the post-Alexander period, thought by some to have been invented by Ptolemy, the ruler there. But the mention of Sarapis here and of a temple called the Sarapeion in chapter 76 predate Ptolemy's sovereignty. The problem has been variously dealt with by modern historians.

107. Antipater was presumably an enemy because Alexander had ordered him to step down from his post in Macedonia and report to Babylon. But it is unclear whether Alexander was displeased with Antipater or meant him harm. Antipater did not comply, indicating he felt at least some misgivings, but sent his son Cassander to Babylon in his place. Those who suspected Alexander was poisoned (see chapter 77) largely believed that Cassander

bow, could not help laughing, since he had been reared in the Greek manner and had never seen such a thing before, Alexander flew into a rage, grasped Cassander's hair firmly with both hands, and knocked his head against the wall.

[75] Once Alexander had permitted himself to believe in divine influences, his mind grew so troubled and apprehensive that he regarded any odd or unusual occurrence, no matter how trivial, as a sign or portent; and his palace was full of people sacrificing, performing ritual purifications, and prophesying. . . .

After entertaining Nearchus and his men with a brilliant banquet, he bathed, as was his habit before going to bed; but then he joined Medius<sup>108</sup> in a carousal, at the latter's invitation. Then, after drinking all the next day, he fell into a fever.

[76] The royal diaries<sup>109</sup> give the following account of his disease. On the eighteenth of the month of Daesius<sup>110</sup> he slept in the bathhouse because of his fever. On the next day, after bathing, he moved back to his bedroom and spent the day playing at dice with Medius. Then, after bathing late in the day, he performed his sacrifices to the gods, took a little food, and was feverish during the night. On the twentieth, after bathing again, he performed his customary sacrifice; reclining in the bathhouse, he devoted himself to Nearchus, listening to his account of his voyage and of the Great Sea.<sup>111</sup>

On the twenty-first, spending the day in the same way, his fever worsened; he passed a difficult night, and on the next day was in a raging fever. After being carried outside, he lay down beside the great bath, where he talked with his officers about the vacant posts of his

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had brought poison with him to Babylon, at his father's behest; but Plutarch rejects that theory.

108. This man, evidently a trusted friend of Alexander, is unknown apart from the large role he played in Alexander's final days.

109. There is great dispute as to what this document was or how much it can be trusted. Apparently a set of diaries was kept throughout Alexander's campaign, recording events day by day. Whether the account of Alexander's illness that Plutarch drew on here actually came from that set is unclear. Arrian claims to quote from the same royal diaries in his narrative of Alexander's fever (*Anabasis* 7.25–26), but the two versions differ in some details.

110. The beginning of June of 323 BCE. Alexander died, as we know from a Babylonian record, on June 11.

111. Plutarch refers to the Arabian Sea as though it were a part of the world-encircling Ocean.

realm and how they might be filled by able men. On the twenty-fourth, though in a high fever, he had himself carried out to perform his sacrifices. He gave orders for his most important officers to wait in the courtyard, and for the taxiarchs and pentakosiarchs<sup>112</sup> to pass the night outside. On the twenty-fifth, he was carried to the palace on the other side of the river, where he slept a little, though his fever did not let up. When his officers came to him, he could not speak. His condition was unchanged on the twenty-sixth, which was why the Macedonians, thinking he had died, came shouting to his door, threatened his companions, and forced their way in. And when the doors had been thrown open to them, they all filed past his couch, one by one, wearing only their tunics. . . . And on the twenty-eighth, toward evening, he died.

[77] Most of these details have been set down here exactly as recorded in the diaries. In the immediate aftermath, no one suspected poisoning; but five years later, they say, when information was given, Olympias had many persons put to death,<sup>113</sup> and cast out the ashes of Iolaus,<sup>114</sup> alleging that he had administered the poison. . . . But most think that the story about the poisoning is a complete fabrication.<sup>115</sup>

112. The various commanders and subcommanders of the army brigades. It is unclear why Alexander wanted them all present. In Arrian's account of the fatal illness, which overlaps closely with that of Plutarch but is not identical, Alexander was about to launch an invasion of Arabia.

113. Olympias, Alexander's mother, got power in Macedonia in 317 BCE by a strange series of twists and turns; see James Romm, *Ghost on the Throne: The Death of Alexander the Great and the War for Crown and Empire* (New York: Knopf, 2011), for a fuller account of this turbulent period. While in power Olympias had one of Cassander's brothers, and many of his supporters, executed. Rumors that had spread through the Greek world accused Cassander and his father Antipater of having poisoned Alexander.

114. Iolaus was Cassander's brother, and had been serving as the royal wine pourer at the time of Alexander's illness.

115. Of the surviving sources, several support the theory that Alexander was poisoned, while only Plutarch explicitly rejects it; Arrian implies that he believes Alexander died of illness. Modern historians remain divided on this question, or on whether it can even be answered.