

THE SEARCH FOR ALEXANDER

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While in Washington in February, I visited the National Gallery of Art as I make it a point to do every time I'm in our nation's capital. For me, there is no place like the National Gallery - not even the Smithsonian. The original National Gallery of Art, now called the West Building, was a gift to the nation from Andrew W. Mellon. It is a magnificent edifice in the classic style, and was opened in 1941 as an appropriate setting for works of the Old Masters, both paintings and sculpture. Gradually, because of the generosity of nearly four hundred donors, the collections grew to the point where the West Building could no longer contain them. To meet the need for expansion, Paul Mellon and the late Ailsa Mellon Bruce, son and daughter of the founder, provided funds for the construction of the East Building on land located immediately east of the original building where Pennsylvania Avenue and the Mall converge near the foot of Capitol Hill. This new building of contemporary style, which opened in 1978 is faced with marble from the same quarry in Tennessee which furnished the marble for the original building. The two buildings are joined by an underground concourse, on top of which is a plaza paved with rough granite as a foil for the smooth marble facings. But, as magnificent as these buildings are, the works of art they contain and the special exhibits which are shown there, in my opinion, outshine even the buildings themselves.

One such exhibit which was on display during my recent visit is entitled "The Search for Alexander". It brings together art from the lifetime of Alexander the Great of Macedonia and the age he introduced, known as the Hellenistic Era. Over

one hundred and seventy-five objects highlight the craftsmanship and artistry of Macedonia metalwork, sculpture, jewelry and terracotta. Many of these object were recently discovered by Greek archaeologists near Vergina, which had once been Aigai - burial place of Macedonian kings. This marvelous exhibit not only appealed to whatever artistic sense I possess, it also rekindled an interest in Alexander of Macedon - one of the real "super-stars" of world history. Like all school-boys, I had learned the story that Alexander, while still a very young man, sat down and cried because he thought he had no more worlds to conquer. And I remembered that his armies had driven the Persians out of Asia Minor and had conquered not only the entire Persian Empire but also most of present day Afghanistan and portions of Pakistan and India. But I had very little knowledge or understanding of his exploits as a king or as a warrior, or of the true significance upon history of his mighty deeds. I decided to make my own search for Alexander.

I found immediately that there is no shortage of material about this most powerful of Macedonian kings. There are literally hundreds of books and articles purporting to tell of Alexander and of his exploits. Apparently, this has been so ever since the years shortly following his death in 323 B.C. More than twenty contemporaries wrote of his career, but not one of their books survives and only one extract from a letter of Alexander is genuine beyond dispute. Four hundred years or more after his death, two Roman historians and abbreviators interwove and cut down his original histories and it is from their long narratives that his life must mostly be recovered. And what an eventful life it was, even though it lasted slightly less than thirty-three years.

Alexander the Great was born in 356 B.C., probably on or about the 20th of July, in Pella, capital of Macedonia. He was the son of Philip II of Macedon and Olympias, a princess from Epirus whose marriage to Philip had been arranged mostly to cement relationships between the two royal families. Although she was a woman of half-wild blood, weird, visionary, strange; she was, at the time of Alexander's birth and boyhood, the most influential of Philip's wives. Philip was pre-eminently a man of practical genius, both in statecraft and in warfare. Using both, he had united the hill country nobles of Macedonia and Illyria as a defense force against invasion by the barbarian tribes from the North, and during Alexander's boyhood was raising Macedonia to the headship of the Greek states. Nevertheless, he did not neglect his son's education. In 343-342 B.C., Aristotle came to Pella at Philip's bidding to direct Alexander's classical education. He brought to bear the sum and essence of the great literary and philosophic achievements of the Greeks; and although their full effect upon Alexander is not known, he did carry with him through life an ardent passion for Homer. In fact, it is said that he could recite the entire Iliad from memory. He greatly admired its hero, Achilles, from whom according to legend, he was descended through his mother.

But his education was not all from books. The coming and going of envoys from many states, Greek and Oriental, taught him much about the actual conditions of the world. He loved music and learned to play the lyre; and while still a lad gave performances for visiting diplomats. But Alexander's favorite pastime was hunting. Every day, if possible, he

liked to hunt birds and foxes; and occasionally he rode into the highlands with others to hunt bears and deer. He became a fine horseman by the time he was twelve, at which age he was given his father's wild, black stallion, Bucephalas, which he promptly tamed and rode for the next twenty years, all the way to India. In fact, he later named a city for him. And Alexander was schooled in war at an early age. At the age of 16 he commanded in Macedonia during Philip's absence and quelled a rising of the hill-tribes on the northern border. In the following year, he led the charge which carried the day at Chaeronea. And he accompanied his father on an expedition through Thrace to the banks of the Danube. By the time he was eighteen, Alexander was well educated and well seasoned in battle.

Then an event occurred which changed his life considerably. On the verge of middle age, Philip had fallen in love with Eurydice, a girl from a noble Macedonian family, and decided to marry her, perhaps because she was found to be bearing his child - perhaps, too, because her relatives were powerful in the royal court and the army. His five other wives watched the affair with indifference, but his queen, Olympias, could not dismiss it as another triviality among the many of the past. As mother of Alexander, Philip's only competent son, and as princess of neighboring Epirus, she had deserved her recognition as queen of Macedonia for the past twenty years. But Eurydice was a Macedonian, and an affair of the heart; children from a Macedonian girl of noble lineage could upset Olympias's plans for her son's succession. At the wedding banquet, a brawl began over this very point and Alexander drew a sword on his father to protect his mother. Both he and Olympias fled to Epirus; and though Alexander

returned shortly to the royal court at Pella, his mother remained in exile in her native land. Eurydice soon bore a daughter, whom Philip named Europe, and the next year she bore Philip a son. Alexander was no longer his only competent son.

Then, as a final rejection of his queen Olympias and to establish a new link by marriage to his neighboring subjects in Epirus before he left to take charge of his advance forces in Asia for the invasion of the Persian Empire, Philip arranged the marriage of his daughter, Cleopatra, who was also the daughter of Olympias, to the King of Epirus, who was the bride's uncle and the younger brother of Olympias. The marriage took place in Aigai, the ancient capital of Macedon, and was a magnificent affair. Guests came from all of the Greek world; and there were banquets and athletic games, prizes for artists of all kinds and recitations by famous Athenian actors. For several days the Macedonians' strong red wine flowed freely, and golden crowns were given to Philip by allied Greek cities who knew where their advantage lay. But one morning, as Philip entered the arena for the athletic games accompanied only by his son Alexander and his new son-in-law of the same name, a young bodyguard who had lingered near the entrance suddenly seized him and drove a short Celtic dagger into his ribs, killing him at once. The reasons for Philip's murder were never definitely established. But it seems quite likely that Olympias was responsible in a behind-the-scene role.

At any rate, she and Alexander did not wait long to take advantage of Philip's death and claim the crown for her son. Alexander immediately had Eurydice's infant son put to death;

and as soon as possible he had his cousin, Amyntas, who had once been the "child-heir" to the throne before Philip took it over, executed as well. He wooed or pressured most of the Macedonian highland nobles to his side, and won the support of the elderly Antipater, one of Philip's two most respected officers. The other such officer, Parmenion, was commanding troops in Asia, and since his three sons were in effect trapped in Alexander's court in Pella, he decided to throw in his lot with Alexander. Philip's third field marshal, Attalus, was irrevocably tied by family to Eurydice so there could be no dealings with him; but Alexander euchered him into actions which appeared treasonous and had him hunted down and executed. By this time, all opposition in northern Greece vanished as it became clear that Alexander had taken over Philip's power. He then took an army and marched southward, demonstrating his power to the city states previously ruled by his father and, at the Diet of Corinth, he was recognized as captain-general of the Hellenes against the barbarians. At the age of 20, he was almost ready to take over his late father's interrupted work - invasion of the great dominions of the Persian King Darius III. These dominions extended from the Hellespont on the northwest and Egypt on the southwest to the boundaries of India on the East.

But before Alexander could undertake this great task, he deemed it necessary to secure his northern flank; so in the spring of 335, he struck out across the Balkans and through the Shipka Pass, frustrating the mountain warfare of its defenders by a precision of discipline which probably no other army of the time could have approached. His army marched through the land of the Triballians to the Danube.

To gratify his own imagination or to strike the imagination of the world, Alexander took his army across the Danube and burned a settlement of the Getae upon the other side. But just then word reached him that the Illyrians had seized Pelion, which commanded the passes on the west of Macedonia. By forced marches, his army hurried straight there and restored Macedonian prestige and Alexander's power in that quarter. Then word came that lower Greece was aflame, Thebes had taken up arms and Athens was extremely restive. Again, by a forced march, his army took the Thebans completely by surprise and the city, which a generation before had won the headship of Greek city-states, was taken. The city was wiped out of existence except for its temple and the home which had belonged to the poet Pindar, and its citizens were sold into slavery. Athens, although known to be hostile at heart to the Macedonian, got the message in a hurry and treated Alexander with extreme courtesy when he arrived there a few days later. Alexander was now ready for his great adventure.

In early May, 334, Alexander set out for Asia. A brisk march along the coastal roads of Thrace brought him from Pella to the Dardanelles in about three weeks. There he met the 160 warships of his Greek allied fleet. Before him lay three miles of sea, and if Persia's far stronger fleet were to threaten in mid-channel, the crossing might end in catastrophe. But, as Alexander knew, the Persian fleet was still in Egyptian waters trying to quell a local uprising there. So his army of between 30,000 and 40,000 men, Macedonians, Illyrians, Thracians and the contingents from the Greek city-states, crossed the Hellespont into Asia without difficulty. Alexander himself went first to the site of

Troy and there went through acts of sacrifice to Athena, assumption of the shield believed to be that of Achilles, and offerings to the great Homeric dead.

To meet the Greek invaders, the great king of the Persians had an army of approximately equal size. But he also had, when his fleet returned from Egypt, control of the Aegean Sea. Alexander could communicate with his base only by the narrow line of the Hellespont; and he ran the risk of being cut off altogether if he went far from it. To draw him after them, while avoiding a conflict, was sound strategy for the Persian generals. But strategic considerations were cancelled by the Persian baron's code of chivalry, and Alexander found them waiting for him on the banks of the Granicus River. It was a cavalry melee in which the common code of honor caused Macedonian and Persian chieftains to engage hand to hand; and at the end of the day the remnants of the Persian army were in flight, leaving the high-roads of Asia Minor clear for the invader. Alexander could now accomplish the first part of his task as captain-general of the Hellenic liberation of the Greek cities of Asia Minor for which Panhellenic enthusiasts had cried out so long. He took the old Lydian capital of Sardis, the headquarters of the Persian government west of the Taurus mountains, without a fight. And now in all the Greek cities of Aeolis and Ionia the oligarchies friendly to Persia fell and democracies were established under the eye of Alexander's officers. Only in those cities held by Greek mercenaries in the Persian service was there any resistance, and this resistance was easily overcome. Alexander's army took Ephesus without much fight, but it met stiff resistance at Halicarnassus. By the time winter fell, Alexander had captured this city, and

with it, control of the east bank of the Aegean Sea. During the winter, while his general Parmenio advanced upon the central plateau of what is now Turkey to complete the occupation of Phrygia, Alexander himself passed along the coast to receive the submission of the Lycians and the Greek cities of the Pamphylian seacoast. Then he turned north into the interior and met his other forces at Gordium (where he cut the Gordian Knot) and cleared the cities of that region of Persian forces. Meanwhile, he had disbanded the Graeco-Macedonia fleet after the seige of Miletus, surrendering for the time all attempts to challenge the Persian fleet under the command of Memnon the Rhodian. Memnon saw an opportunity to detach from Alexander's control the city-states where discontent always smouldered, and might well have done so if he had not died at the critical moment. But that incident determined Alexander's plan for his next campaign. He decided to return to the coast of the Mediterranean and take control of its eastern port cities, leaving the Persian fleet afloat in the eastern Mediterranean with no place to go. The Syrian coast was his immediate objective when he broke up from Gordium for the campaign of 333. He was through the Cilician Gates before Darius had set up a force adequate to hold him; but a violent fever hit him in Tarsus and when he arrived in Syria a Persian army under Darius awaited him. Alexander, following hard by the coast, marched past the Persian army while it was crossing the Amanus mountains farther to the east. To cut Alexander's communications to the rear, Darius now committed the error of entangling his forces in the mountain defiles. Alexander turned and near the town of Issus fought his second pitched battle with Darius, sending him

and the relic of his army in wild flight back to the east. The victory did not modify Alexander's plan, he did not pursue far but did capture the great king's harem and the chivalarous manner in which he treated these princesses became legend. Then he continued on his way to occupy Syria and Phoenicia. Darius opened negotiations in which he ultimately went so far as to offer all of his empire west of the Euphrates to Alexander. Alexander refused to bargain - he intended to have all of the Persian empire.

The conquest of the Phoenician coast was not to be altogether easy. Tyre shut its gates and for seven months Alexander had to sit outside - one of those obstinate sieges which mark the history of the Semitic races. When it fell, Alexander had the Tyrian people scattered to the winds, sold as slaves. Gaza offered a resistance equally heroic, lasting two months, and here too the population was dispersed. The occupation of the rest of Syria and Palestine proceeded smoothly, and after the fall of Gaza Alexander's way lay open into Egypt. Egypt was the last of the Persian's Mediterranean provinces to be won, and here no defense was made. To the Egyptians, Alexander appeared as a deliverer from the Persian tyranny. He spend the winter of 332-331 in Egypt and while there, took two memorable actions. One was an expedition into the Libyan desert to the oracle of Zeus Ammon, where he was hailed by the priest as son of that god. The purpose of this journey has never been fully explained, but later Alexander liked to play the role of the Son of Zeus in a semi-serious vein. The other memorable action was the founding of the city of Alexandria at the mouth of the Nile, a city destined to become the center of commerce and learning for

the entire eastern Mediterranean region.

In the spring of 331 Alexander would at last leave the Mediterranean without fear of having his lines of communication with Pella cut by the enemy, and strike into the heart of the Persian empire. Returning through Syria, and stopping at Tyre to make final arrangements for the conquered provinces, he marched through Mesopotamia and crossed the Tigris above the city of Ninevah. Not far from that city Darius was waiting with an army gathered from all parts of his empire. Alexander came within sight of the Persian host without having met any opposition since he left Tyre. But he now faced the formidable task of routing the defending army of superior size on the plains near the village of Gaugamela. But the Macedonian army was equal to the task. In one of the 15 most decisive battles in history, they completely shattered the last of Darius' armies. Darius fled eastward in Media, but again Alexander secured the region which lay before him to the south. He followed the Tigris into Babylonia, the central seat of the Persian empire and its richest region, and from there he went on to seize the fabulous riches which the Persian kings had amassed in their spring residence, Susa. Then he finally ascended upon the Iranian plateau in pursuit of the remnants of Darius' forces. Alexander entered Persis, the cradle of the Persian royal house, and came upon fresh masses of treasure in the royal capital, Persepolis. He destroyed the royal palace there - ostensibly in revenge for the burning of Greek temples by Xerxes during his invasion of Greece some one hundred years previously. As his army approached Ecbanata, Darius fled and left the

city with its masses of treasure for Alexander to seize. Then he continued his pursuit of Darius, and in an exciting chase of king by king, Alexander came in sight of the broken train of the Persian king near the Caspian Sea. Darius had become a puppet in the hands of his cousin, Bessus, and his friends, and in this extremity they stabbed Darius and fled, leaving only his corpse for Alexander.

Only a few "mopping-up" operations were left before Alexander, at the age of 26 years, completed the conquest of the mighty Persian empire. He had now completed the task which his father's death had left unfulfilled. He ruled over more territory and more subjects than any other person in the known world ever had, and his wealth was at least a thousand times that of Philip. But still Alexander was not satisfied with his conquests. For the next four years he pushed his army (which by this time contained many Oriental as well as Greek officers and men) farther and farther into the mountains and valleys of present day Afghanistan, Pakistan and northern India. At last, after reaching the easternmost branches of the Indus River, the Macedonians in his army refused to go any farther. It was a bitter mortification to Alexander, who probably believed that he had not much farther to go to reach the ocean and the eastern limit of the inhabited world. For three days the will of the king and that of his Macedonian troops were locked in antagonism; then Alexander gave way, the long eastward movement was ended, the return began.

He built a fleet which carried part of his army down the Indus toward its mouth in the Indian Ocean while the rest of his army marched near the banks of the river, overrunning hostile tribes on its way. At the town of Malli, Alexander

exhibited extreme personal bravery and was wounded almost fatally, but recovered and completed his task. In the summer of 325, his forces reached Patala (near present-day Karachi) at the apex of the Indus delta, and then explored both arms of the delta to the ocean. After gathering more ships, he dispatched a fleet under Nearchus to head for the Persian Gulf while he and his land forces set out to go by the coast of Baluchistan to meet them at the Gulf. After an extremely difficult march through desert wastes and tortuous mountains, Alexander's forces arrived at Carmania and received word from Nearchus that his fleet had arrived in the Persian Gulf. Moving northward through the towns in the heart of his empire, Alexander discovered that the machine of empire had not operated altogether smoothly during his absence. Many incompetents and rogues in high office had to be replaced by better men. New orders and appointments, however, brought the empire into hand again, and at Susa in the spring of 324 Alexander rested at the royal palace, the task of conquering and compassing the Persian realm having been completed.

But the task of its internal reorganization now began to occupy him. The policy of fusion of both Macedonian and Oriental soldiers into the army was extended into the realm of public administration. It was furthered by a great marriage festival at Susa, when Alexander took two more Persian wives from the royal house, married a number of his generals to Oriental princesses, and even induced as many rank-and-file soldiers as he could to take Asiatic wives. But this policy didn't suit many of his Macedonian soldiers, and a full-fledged mutiny was averted only by Alexander's personal magnetism. In the spring of 323, he moved down to Babylon, receiving on the way embassies from lands all over the known world. All nations now turned

with fear or wonder to the figure with such superhuman effect upon the world's stage. But Alexander had one more task he wanted to complete before resting on his laurels. He wanted to explore fully the waterways around his empire; and during the spring of 323 he gathered an immense fleet for that purpose. At last all was ready, and June 20th was set as the day for the expedition to begin. On the 15th and 16th Alexander caroused deep into the night at the home of his friend, Medius, and on the 17th he developed a fever. He treated it as a momentary impediment to the expedition; but on the 27th his speech was gone, and the Macedonians in his army were allowed to pass, man by man, through his chamber to bid him farewell. On the 28th of June, Alexander died.

His funeral was, of course, the most magnificent event of its kind that the world had ever seen. And his empire flourished for a short while. But soon bickering and jealousies began among those he had established as leaders, and within 13 years of Alexander's death, his empire had crumbled. The empire that it had taken the Persians over 200 years to establish and Alexander about ten years to conquer and at least partially assimilate had, for all practical purposes, disappeared. But the Hellenistic culture which he carried with him and tried to establish has partially persisted even unto this day.

After my search for Alexander, what can I say about his life? Probably nothing more appropriate than the melancholy words from Grey's Elegy -

"The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike the inevitable hour,
The paths of glory lead but to the grave."

Nevertheless, the thought of Alexander the Great continues to spark my imagination. Like his legendary hero and model, Achilles, he wrought deeds mightier than anyone had ever wrought before. He lived his life to the absolute limit. Perhaps that is enough.