



Chapter 1

Crown Prince

Royal Stables, Pella, Macedonia, 347 BCE

I was hiding behind a statue of Apollo. My friends Erigyius and Harpalus were still on the other side of the courtyard, cowering in a grove of olive trees. I signalled them to follow me, but they'd lost their nerve. We were supposed to be learning about the Trojan War. I already knew that part of history by heart, so when our tutor nodded off in the afternoon sun, I suggested we creep away and go for a swim in the lake.

"If your father catches us we'll be in trouble, Alexander," Erigyius said.

"Last time the King discovered we'd played truant, he made us march 300 stades barefoot in the blistering sun," Harpalus added.

They were too timid. They wouldn't follow me. The sound of

shouting came from the stables. It reminded me that a horse breeder had arrived from Thessaly that morning. I'd asked my father if I could go with him to view the horses, but he'd told me that my lessons were more important. I forgot about the swim and went over to the stables, taking care that no one saw me.

There were about a dozen horses. All fine looking animals. Most of them were quietly grazing, ignored, as the horse breeder, my father and six or seven of the royal grooms stood around one particular horse.

He was the most beautiful creature I have ever seen, jet black except for a white mark on his forehead. Not a big horse, but sturdy and strong.

One of the grooms tried to mount him as I watched. The horse reared up. One of its hooves struck him. The groom fell to the ground holding his bleeding head. I noticed that the other grooms were all standing at a safe distance nursing cuts and bruises. None of them had been able to mount the beast.

I edged closer, crouching behind a pile of hay. The marking on the horse's head was shaped something like an ox head.

Two of my father's cavalry officers sauntered over. The first—a big man with muscles as hard as marble—pushed the grooms aside.

"Let a real man show you how it's done," the officer said.

The horse breeder was wearing one of those straw sunhats that Thessalians are fond of. He was standing behind my father, anxiously winding the corner of his cloak around his fingers.

The officer grabbed the horse's mane with one hand and leapt on its back. The horse reared. The soldier managed to hang on for a few seconds, but then found himself lying in the dust. The horse shook his head. His mane shimmered like silk in sunlight.

"Why did you bring such a surly beast, Master Horseman?" my father snapped. "What did you say you wanted for him? Thirteen talents?"

"I'm sorry, Your Highness," the horse breeder said, bowing so low his hat fell off. "I made a mistake. The horse is too wild. Please accept my apologies. I'll take the beast away and flog him until he learns some respect."

"No!" Everyone turned in my direction. It was my voice that had called out, but I was as surprised as anyone to hear it.

I came out of my hiding place and went over to the horse. "I'll tame him."

My father scowled at me. "Why aren't you at your lessons?"

"It would be a shame to send such a fine horse away," I said, ignoring his question. "Please let me try, Father."

"You think you can do a better job than the royal grooms? Than my cavalry officers?"

"I'll wager 13 talents I can," I replied. I didn't have 13 talents, but I knew I could calm the horse.

"The horse is dangerous, Your Highness," the horsebreeder said. "Prince Alexander could be killed!"

My father held up his hand. "Let him try. If he's shirking his history lesson, at least he'll get a lesson in the dangers of overconfidence."

I moved slowly towards the horse. I barely came up to his shoulder. The grooms and the officers were all smirking. I stroked the horse's smooth flank, talking to him in a low voice. I gently took his bridle and slowly turned him so that he was facing into the sun.

It was obvious to me that the horse was frightened by shadows—his own and that of whoever was trying to mount him. Facing into the sun, he couldn't see any shadows and was a little sun-blind as well. I continued to pat him and talk to him. He calmed down. I didn't rush. I whispered into the horse's ear and stroked his noble head. I already knew what I would call him.

"I'm going to get up on you now, Bucephalas," I said, not that the horse understood a word of Macedonian, but I knew he would understand that I didn't mean him any harm.

I took hold of his mane and sprang onto his back as lightly as I could. He skittered a little, but I softly reassured him. I had never felt so comfortable on a horse. It was like sitting in a chair carved exactly for my size and shape.

I touched his flanks with my heels and he cantered off. I let him go wherever he wanted at first, then I gently tugged the bridle and he went where I wanted him to go. The royal grooms applauded as we rode around the field. So did the horse breeder, who was no doubt relieved he wouldn't get a beating for bringing my father an unmanageable horse. The cavalry officers stood sternly with their arms folded.

"Your tutor should be waking from his afternoon nap," Father smiled at me. "You had better go back to your lessons."

I knew the horse was mine.

Alexander's father bought the horse for his son, paying 13 talents for it. This was a huge sum of money, enough for an ordinary Macedonian to live on all their life. Alexander named the horse Bucephalas, which is Greek for "ox head".

In Alexander's day, just one talent was a lot of money. It still is. A talent of gold weighed about 26 kilograms (57 pounds). The value of that much gold today is about half a million US dollars.

He rode Bucephalas in all of his campaigns until the horse died at the ripe old age of 30.

Precocious

Another story recounts how Alexander, when he was even younger, welcomed some Persian ambassadors to the palace. His father was away on a campaign. The ambassadors were surprised to find such a youngster greeting them. They were even more surprised when he announced he wanted to ask them some questions about their homeland. They expected that the young prince would ask them about the wonders of Persia—the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the magnificent palaces, the fabulous wealth. These weren't the sorts of things that interested seven-year-old Alexander. He wanted to know about the condition of the Persian Royal Road. He wanted to know how many men were in the Persian army and what sort of weapons they used.

A stade is an ancient Greek measurement of distance. It was the standard length of a furrow in a field—approximately 160 metres (525 feet).

It seems that the young Alexander was no ordinary boy.

Family Life

Alexander was born in 356 BCE. His father was King Philip II of Macedonia. His mother, Olympias, was a princess from the neighbouring country of Epirus.

Alexander lived the privileged life of a prince. His home was the royal palace in Pella, the capital city of Macedonia. His father was a battle-scarred military man who was more often than not away fighting campaigns. Alexander loved



his mother, but she belonged to a strange religious cult. She worshipped the god Dionysus, who was the Greek god of wine and vegetation. Followers of Dionysus were mainly women who took part in secret ceremonies that some said involved killing animals with their bare hands and eating the flesh raw. People believed that these women had magical powers, including the ability to tame snakes. Olympias kept snakes as pets. This prompted lots of gossip around the palace. It was rumoured that she slept with them in her bed.

Alexander was the king's eldest son. Philip's only other son was intellectually disabled, so Alexander was the only heir to the throne. But the path to the throne of Macedonia was never easy. More often than not it involved murder and conspiracy, mistrust and betrayal.

Alexander's grandmother had tried to kill her husband, King Amyntas, and his brother so that she and her lover could rule Macedonia. She only succeeded in killing the brother. When King Amyntas eventually died, all three of his sons took a turn as king. One son was assassinated and one died in battle, leaving only Philip to take the throne. Even then there were several other contenders who thought they deserved to be the king more than Philip. As Philip's only heir, Alexander's passage to the throne should have been easy.

Alexander's World

When Alexander was born, the world was a very different place to the one we know today. People at that time didn't know that Britain, China, Russia, America, most of Africa and Australia existed. They thought the world consisted of one big landmass made up of Europe, north Africa and part of Asia. Like everyone else, Alexander believed that this land was surrounded on all sides by a vast ocean.

Greece was the most powerful and cultured place in Europe at that time. But Greece wasn't really a nation then. It was a collection of independent city-states, each with its own government, laws and army. There were more than a thousand city-states, though some of them were hardly big enough to be called cities.

Athens, Sparta and Thebes were three of the biggest and most powerful Greek city-states. They each had a similar culture—they spoke the same language, their governments were elected, they worshipped the same gods and they had similar education systems. Sometimes they banded together to fight a common enemy. Sometimes they fought each other.

Macedonia was a small but beautiful country of forest-covered mountains and fertile plains where crops grew well. There were deposits of gold and silver to be mined from the hillsides. The Greeks, however, thought that Macedonia was a pretty insignificant place. They considered the Macedonians to be a rabble of uncultured, bickering

tribes, inferior to the Greeks. The Macedonians spoke their own language instead of Greek, they were warlike and they weren't educated in the classical Greek style. Nowadays we would call the Greeks' attitude to Macedonians racial discrimination.

During his reign, Alexander's father changed Macedonia. He built up a large, well-trained army and united the hill tribes and independent territories. He made Macedonia a strong military power that the Greeks were forced to take notice of.

A Famous Teacher

There were no schools in Macedonia back then, but Alexander's father decided that his heir should have a good Greek-style

Modern doctors have suggested that the reason for the permanent tilt of Alexander's head and his different coloured eyes might have been a condition called "ocular torticollis". This is when certain nerves from the brain to the eye are paralysed.

education. He appointed tutors to teach his son. From them, Alexander learned how to argue a point using careful debate. He studied geometry and astronomy. He discussed poetry with his tutor and memorised long poems by Homer. He learned military skills—swordplay, archery and

javelin throwing. He also learned how to play the lute.

When Alexander turned 13 his father appointed a new tutor for his son. The tutor's name was Aristotle. He was a famous Greek philosopher whose writings are still studied today. Philip sent Alexander and his new teacher to a village called Mieza with a few other highborn boys to keep him company. This

beautiful area was on the slopes of a mountain planted with vineyards and shady orchards. It was known as the Precinct of the Nymphs. Some of these boys, such as Hephaestion, Harpalus and Nearchus became important members of Alexander's army when they grew up.

Aristotle is considered to be a great scholar and thinker, but some of his views don't fit with the way we think today. Like all Greek people, he referred to anyone who wasn't Greek as a barbarian. Aristotle believed that non-Greeks were inferior people suited only to being slaves. Since Macedonia had become a powerful country, Aristotle, like most Greeks, didn't refer to Macedonians as barbarians (not to their faces anyway). His advice to the young Alexander was to treat barbarians the same way as he would treat animals and plants. It was advice that Alexander later ignored.

Aristotle was a strong supporter of democracy, though his idea of democracy was different to ours. In ancient Greece, only men of good birth could vote to decide who led the government. Slaves, women and foreigners were not allowed to vote. This was something that Aristotle thoroughly approved of. He was also a republican. He thought a country's leader should be chosen because of his knowledge and skills, not just because he happened to be the king's son. It is strange then that this anti-monarchist was chosen to be the future king's teacher. Aristotle adapted his views so that he could continue teaching his most famous student, saying that it was okay for a king to rule as long as he was an exceptional person.

Deputy Leader

After three years studying with Aristotle, Philip decided that Alexander had had enough education and it was time

Alexander gave Lysippos the sole authorisation for producing all his portrait statues, because he alone expressed in bronze Alexander's character ... others, who sought to imitate the characteristic turning of his head and the liquid, melting softness and brightness of his eyes, were unable to preserve the manliness and lion-like ferocity of his countenance.

Plutarch, Alexander

for him to start his training as Macedonia's next king. Philip sent word that his son was to return to Pella. Philip was, as usual, away fighting a war, so he appointed his son as Regent of Macedonia. Alexander was only 16 years old, but his father trusted him with the responsible job of being deputy leader of the country.

While Alexander was regent, one of the warlike tribes that

Philip had brought under control rebelled. Young Alexander organised an expedition to subdue them. He led the army himself. When the rebels were defeated, he renamed their city Alexandropolis. This was the first of many places that he was to name after himself. From an early age Alexander wanted to leave his mark on the world.

Philip must have been impressed with his son's capabilities as a general. When the Greek city-states banded together against him, Philip sent for his son and gave him command of 2000 cavalry—soldiers who rode on horseback—in the Battle of Chaeronea. Alexander led an attack on the Sacred

Band—the very best soldiers from the city of Thebes, and defeated them.

Alexander was then appointed to travel to Athens with one of his father's generals to negotiate a peace treaty. To make sure that the Athenians understood who had the upper hand in the negotiations, they carried with them the ashes of the 1000 Athenian soldiers who had died in the battle.

Ambitious

Before long, Philip had all the Greek city-states under control and he forced them to join an alliance with Macedonia, which was known as the League of Corinth. He made sure that he was appointed the leader of the league. In just four years, Philip had turned Macedonia from a backward nation racked by internal squabbling into a superpower.

Philip's next goal was to conquer Persia. One hundred and fifty years earlier, there had been another war involving Greeks and Persians. The Persian King Xerxes had crossed into Europe with his army. He had subdued Macedonia and burned Athens. It had been a humiliating defeat. As leader of the League of Corinth, Philip decided that it was his job to take revenge.

Young Alexander admired his father's great feats, and he

Persia is the old name for the country that is called Iran today. In Alexander's time Persia had conquered many of its neighbours, including Babylonia and Egypt and other countries with less familiar names such as Bactria and Sogdiana. It was the biggest empire the world had ever known.

wanted to be a great king and general himself. But he was worried that his father was so successful that there wouldn't be any great deeds left for him to do when he became king. Alexander needn't have worried.



Macedonia and neighbouring lands

