ADVENTURES IN TIME

BY DOMINIC SANDBROOK

Alexander the Great



HE WANTED THE WORLD.
AND HE TOOK IT.

ADVENTURES IN TIME
BY
DOMINIC SANDBROOK

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Dominic Sandbrook has been passionate about history ever since he read the Ladybird children's books. As a historian, he has written eight books for adults. He has also presented several BBC television series, covering topics such as time travel, alien invasions, the James Bond films and the Harry Potter stories. His favourite book is *The Lord of the Rings*. His favourite football team is Wolverhampton Wanderers.

He lives in Oxfordshire with his wife and son, Arthur. It was Arthur who came up with the idea for Adventures in Time, after a family trip to the Imperial War Museum. He now serves as the books' chief battle consultant.

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With illustrations by Edward Bettison



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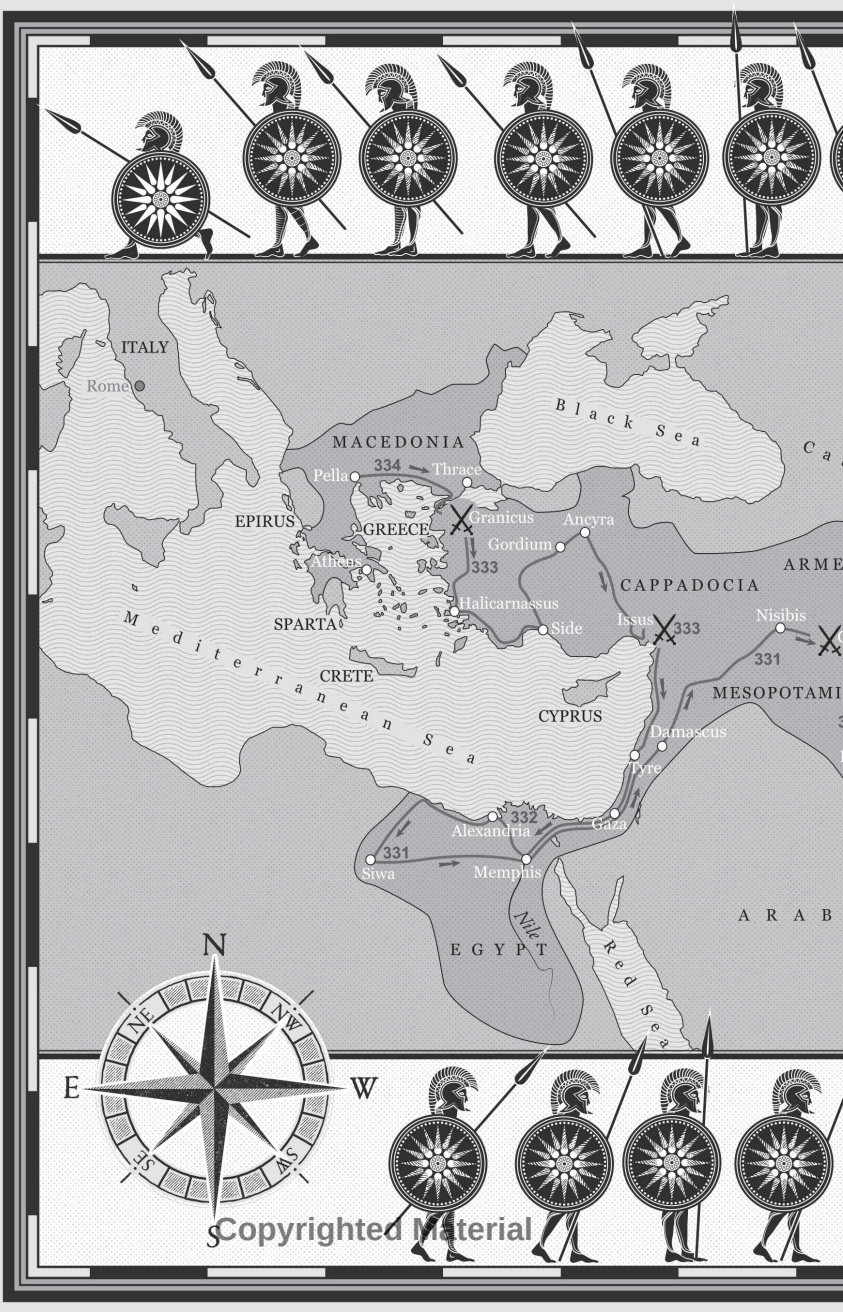
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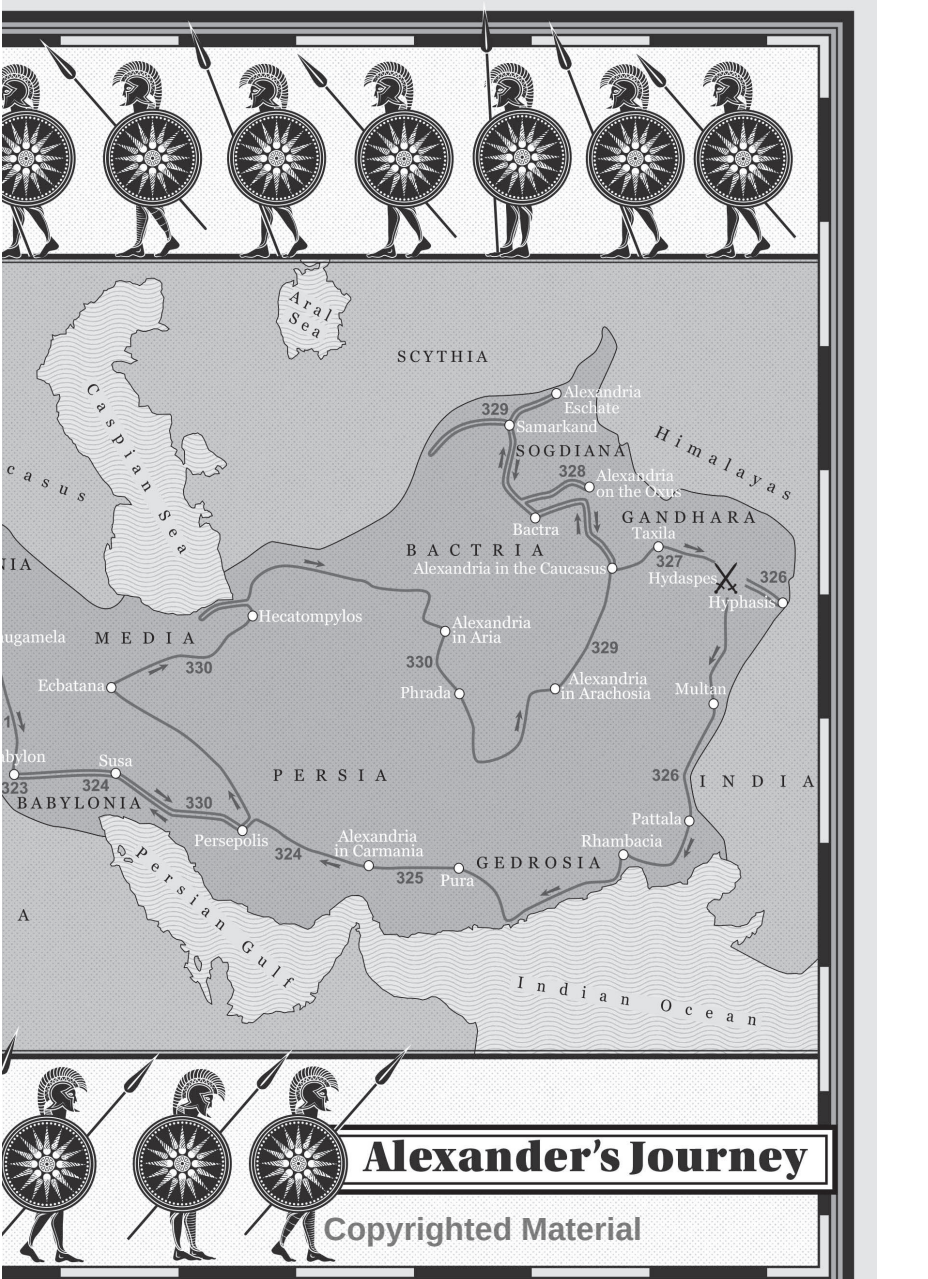
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Alexander's Journey

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PROLOGUE

The Dream

It was a beautiful day, the sun hot and high in a perfect blue sky. Light danced on the waters of the Hellespont, the narrow strait dividing Europe from Asia.

The young man stood at the helm of his ship. He was short and broad-shouldered, with soulful eyes and fair, curly hair that fell over his ears.

All his life, he had looked forward to this moment. As a boy, wandering with his friends in the woods, he had pictured himself leading his fleet across the sea, charging up the beach with his comrades, laying waste to his foes with sword and spear.

He was a warrior, born and bred. But he was a dreamer, too. He loved books and poetry, riddles and stories.

Above all, he dreamed of adventure. He saw himself scaling mountains, crossing deserts and discovering strange new lands.

Now he was making that dream a reality. And as the rowers pulled on the oars and the breeze whipped at his

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sails, he threw back his head to the heavens, and laughed for sheer joy.

When they were halfway across the channel, his servants led forward a bull, which they had brought as a sacrifice for the sea-god Poseidon.

The young man raised his knife. It took just a moment.

When it was done, he raised a golden wine-goblet above his head, and emptied it over the side – a gift for the Nereids, the nymphs of the sea waters.

The coast of Asia loomed ever larger. Resplendent in his shining armour, the young man faced the eastern shore. His eyes blazed with excitement. A spear gleamed in his right hand.

The shore came closer and closer. Sand crunched beneath the hull.

Then he was down, leaping into the surf. From his arm the spear streaked through the air, an arc of brilliant silver, plunging into the sand.

Now the young man raised his voice above the waves. This, he cried, was a sign that the gods had given him all Asia, as his spear-won prize!

Cheers rose from the ships behind him. And in their hundreds and thousands, his men leapt down into the shallows, following their king onto the soil of Persia.



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The young man's name was *Alexandros*, which means 'Defender of the People'. Today we know him as Alexander the Great.

He lived more than two thousand years ago, in the fourth century BC. Even at the time, he seemed the very image of courage and glamour. His life was packed with so many adventures that no storyteller would dare to invent it.

Born in the kingdom of Macedon, a wild realm on the edge of the ancient Greek world, Alexander fought his first battles when he was just a teenager. He rode to war alongside his boyhood friends, on a stallion he had tamed himself.

Becoming king at the age of twenty, he led his men on one of the most extraordinary journeys in history. In search of glory, they crossed the sea to fight the Great King of Persia, the most powerful ruler on earth.

For thousands of miles they marched, winning battle after battle. They crossed the mountains of Syria and the deserts of Egypt; they saw the pyramids and the River Nile.

Alexander and his friends visited exotic temples and sought the advice of mysterious, otherworldly gods. They conquered the largest city the world had ever seen, and captured the most valuable hoard of treasure in history.

And still they kept going: eastward, ever eastward, towards the rising of the sun. They climbed the peaks of Afghanistan, and crossed the rivers of India. They encountered gods and elephants, bandits and princesses.

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And then, when the edge of the world seemed almost in sight . . . well, that would give away the ending.



The world of Alexander, more than twenty centuries ago, was very different from our own. There were no modern medicines, no cars, no computers. It was a world steeped in myths and legends, yet it was just as real to its inhabitants as our world is to us.

Ancient Greece was not a single country. It was a constellation of rival cities and kingdoms, which spoke roughly the same language and worshipped the same gods.

At its centre was the Mediterranean Sea, especially its north-eastern corner, known as the Aegean. As the philosopher Plato put it, the Greeks lived on its shores like 'frogs around a pond'.

Much of the outside world was a mystery to them. They knew of the great civilization of ancient Egypt, and they were very familiar with their gigantic, much-feared neighbour, Persia, which dominated what is now the Middle East.

But the Greeks knew little of northern Europe or Africa. They knew virtually nothing of India, and nothing at all of China. And they had not the slightest idea that the Americas existed at all.

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In many ways this was a dark and dangerous world. Disease was very common. Many people died before they reached the age of forty, and about half died before their mid-teens.

Women were generally expected to stay at home and bring up children. Most men worked in the fields, and lived by a code of honour that many of us would find terrifyingly violent.

And yet Alexander's world was, in its own way, a place of light and beauty. The Greeks adored poetry, and wrote some of the greatest plays in all history.

They loved to argue and were fascinated by ideas. They studied mathematics and nature, the movement of the stars and the workings of the human body. It was the Greeks, along with their neighbours in Persia, Egypt and, later, Rome, who laid the foundations for our own civilization today.

Yet Alexander was not just any Greek. Even when he was young, he believed he was different, a boy with a unique destiny.

The first Greek historians thought he was driven by a feeling they called *pothos* – a deep longing for something more, something beyond, something impossible for ordinary mortals.

This was what made Alexander special. Lots of other boys daydreamed about monster-slaying heroes, such as Theseus, Perseus and Heracles, but they never seriously imagined they would match them, let alone surpass them.

Alexander did. Right from the start, he saw himself as the hero of his own legend, writing his name into history.

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That was why he hurled his spear towards the shore of Asia. He was telling his men this was a day to remember, a moment that would live in people's memories for centuries to come.

And he was, of course, quite right.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. It is time to go back to the very beginning of Alexander's story, long before he crossed the Hellespont, even before he was born.

And so, like all the best tales, our story begins not with mortal men and women. It begins with perhaps the most extraordinary Greek characters of all – the twelve gods of Mount Olympus.

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PART ONE

THE MACEDONIAN BOY

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I

The Boy and His Horse

High above the olive groves of Greece, wreathed in mist and mystery, towers the peak of Olympus. For hundreds of years, children listened to stories of life on its snow-capped summit, halfway between earth and stars.

Inside its great cloud-gates, said the poets, there was no rain or wind, only endless sunshine. Here the gods feasted on ambrosia and nectar, the honey-scented food and drink of the immortals.

From the waters of the Aegean to the woods of Macedonia, every child knew the names of the twelve Olympians. There was Hera the queen, proud and solemn. There was Poseidon the sea-king, who could set waters flowing with a stroke of his trident.

Ares the war-god, chariot-rider, shield-bearer. Fleet-footed Artemis, moon-goddess, hunt-mistress. Apollo the archer, god of the sun. Wise Athena, with her owl and her helmet.

Demeter, goddess of the harvest. Hephaestus the smith, with his hammer and his forge. Hermes the messenger,

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swift on winged sandals. Gentle Hestia, guardian of the home. Beautiful Aphrodite, goddess of love.

Before one god, though, all the others trembled: great Zeus, sky-father, storm-maker, lord of Olympus.

When he was young, Zeus had freed the world from the tyranny of his ancestors, the Titans, and crowned himself king of the gods. His bird was the eagle; his tree was the oak; his weapon was the thunderbolt.

In his epic poem *The Iliad*, Homer, the most beloved of all Greek storytellers, imagined Zeus giving a stern warning to the other Olympians.

'I am the mightiest of all the gods!' he says. 'Hang a rope of gold from heaven, and lay hold of it, all you gods and goddesses. Try as you might, you could not drag me down, Zeus the all-powerful!

'But if I wanted to, I could drag you and the earth and the sea together, and leave you hanging in the air from the peak of Olympus. So far am I above gods and men!'



For the children who grew up around the shores of the Aegean, gods like Zeus were more than just songs and stories.

Myths and legends were woven into their everyday lives. When an owl hooted in the night, it brought a message

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from Athena. When thunder broke overhead, then great Zeus was angry.

Every home had its sacred hearth. Every town had its temple. And every year, thousands of pilgrims travelled to the holiest shrines, scattered all over Greece, where the air seemed charged with magic.

One summer afternoon, in the middle of the fourth century BC, a young prince jumped off his ship onto the island of Samothrace. His name was Philip, and he had just arrived from Macedonia, the hard, rugged kingdom many miles to the north.★

Ever since he was a boy, Philip had dreamed of visiting Samothrace. Across the Greek world, people whispered about its Sanctuary of the Great Gods, with its wild ceremonies and dark sacrifices.

The annual festival, when newcomers entered the inner sanctum, bathed in the blood of the sacrifice and learned the mysteries of the underworld, was said to be the experience of a lifetime. Now Philip had come to find out for himself.

A few nights later, as the torches flickered, the dancers whirled and the drums struck up their savage rhythm, the young prince felt his heart pounding with excitement. In a moment, he would be admitted to the heart of the sanctuary. At last he would learn the secrets of the gods.

And it was then that Philip saw her.

★ Philip's homeland was called both Macedon and Macedonia. This book uses both. Today most of it is in Greece, and the rest in the Republic of North Macedonia.

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A slender, raven-haired girl, she was lost in the ecstasy of the dance, her eyes gleaming with a feverish brightness. She looked a little younger than he was: just a teenager. To Philip, she was beautiful.

Early the next morning, as the sun rose above the mountains of Samothrace, Philip spoke to her for the first time. Her name was Olympias, and she had royal blood. Her father, she said proudly, was king of Epirus, the wooded mountain country in the far west of the Greek world.

Philip nodded. He knew Epirus well.

As they talked, he could not take his eyes off her. Olympias was beautiful, but there was something more: a kind of wildness – mysterious, untameable.

When Philip sailed home a few days later, his mind was made up. This was the girl he would marry.

Time went by. In the year 359 BC,* at the age of 23, Philip became king of Macedon. But he had not forgotten the girl with the raven hair.

So it was that two years later, the eighteen-year-old Olympias rode east over the mountains of Epirus, past the snow-capped peak of the gods, towards the palace at Pella, citadel of the Macedonian kings.

There Philip was waiting, his hands outstretched in welcome.

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* BC stands for 'Before Christ', i.e. before the birth of Jesus. In the BC era, slightly confusingly, dates are counted backwards. So Alexander was born in 356 BC, was ten in 346 BC and would have celebrated his hundredth birthday in 256 BC, if he had lived that long.

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But the night before her wedding, Olympias had a dream.

Thunder crashed above the mountains of Macedon. Lightning flashed in the heavens. Closer and closer it came, but Olympias could not move.

Suddenly, the lightning was on her, a surge of white-hot electricity. It was as if Zeus were in the room alongside her. Everything was burning: there were flames in the bed, in the air, in her body . . .

Then Olympias opened her eyes, and there was only darkness.

The next day, she and Philip were married. But as she lifted her veil to kiss her new husband, she felt her skin tingle at the memory of the dream.



On the sixth day of the month of Hekatombaion,* in the summer of 356 BC, Olympias gave birth to a son.

She called him Ἀλέξανδρος, Alexandros, after two previous Macedonian kings. Her boy would be the third.

Years later, people told stories of the strange omens surrounding Alexander's birth. His father, Philip, was away

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* Probably 21 July in our calendar.

in the south, leading his mighty army against their Greek rivals, the Athenians.

On the very day Alexander came into the world, Philip captured the seaport of Potidaea. The messenger from Pella found him in his tent, flushed with the joy of victory.

That same day, a second messenger arrived from the west. Another Macedonian army had just crushed the ferocious Illyrian tribes in a bloody battle.

As the news spread through Philip's camp, the air rang with the soldiers' cheers. And then, as the sun sank below the Aegean horizon, Philip saw a third rider, his clothes covered with dust, his horse's flanks shiny with sweat.

He had ridden all the way from the Sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia, where thousands of people had been watching the Olympic Games. And he, too, brought wonderful news.

In the great horse race, Philip's prize stallion had stormed to victory. So in the space of a single day, he had captured a city, won a great battle, won Olympic glory and fathered a son. Truly, the gods had smiled on Macedon!

Yet there was another omen that day, which told a very different story.

Hundreds of miles to the east, in the city of Ephesus, stood the Temple of Artemis. To the Greeks living on the coast of Asia,* it seemed a wonder of the world, its high marble columns gleaming in the summer sun.

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* There had been Greek cities on the other side of the Aegean for centuries. Today this coastline belongs to Turkey.

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But that day a fire broke out in the great temple; and by the time it was out, the building was in ashes.

For the priests of Ephesus, it was almost too much to bear. Some ran weeping through the streets, shouting that the fire foreshadowed disaster for all Asia.

Only later, when Alexander's fame had spread to almost every corner of the earth, did people realize that the temple had burned down at the very moment he was born.



Little Alexander was a strong, healthy child, small for his age but bursting with energy. As a boy, he barely saw his parents. Philip was usually away, leading Macedonia's army against its neighbours.

As for Olympias, she liked to shut herself up with her sorcerers and snake-dancers, preparing magical potions and muttering strange incantations. Some of Philip's friends claimed to have seen her writhing in a trance, serpents curling around her shoulders. Some even said she took her snakes to bed with her.

In any case, Olympias had little time for her infant son. So it was Alexander's pretty young nanny, Lanike, who watched over his first games.

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Growing up in ancient Greece often felt like one long

adventure. With the weather so hot and sunny, children spent most of their time outside, exploring the woods and mountains.

Though most Greek children were poor, their toys were not so different from ours. They had marbles, rattles and hoops, rag dolls and clay soldiers, wooden swords and homemade footballs.

Like other boys, Alexander wore a loose tunic, a leather belt and sandals. But as a prince, he enjoyed a level of luxury that most children could barely imagine.

From the moment he woke, he was surrounded by slaves, who prepared his meals, lit the oil lamps and ran his baths. And while most children lived on beans, grapes, bread and cheese, he dined on octopus, venison and wild boar, and drank watered-down wine.

Few children went to school. Girls stayed at home to sew, cook and clean, while boys learned their father's trade, preparing for life as a farmer, a sailor, a blacksmith or a fisherman.

But as a prince, Alexander was different. Rich boys usually went to school when they were seven, studying with a tutor alongside a dozen classmates.

There they were taught to read and write, scratching marks on a wax tablet with a wooden pen called a stylus. And like other boys, Alexander had to learn his lessons by heart, reciting long stretches of plays and poetry.

At first, Olympias chose Alexander's tutors herself. But as Alexander entered his teens, Philip decided it was time for a change.

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With wealth flooding in from his gold and silver mines,

he could afford any tutor he wanted. So the word went out across the Aegean, and at last Philip made his choice.

Thin, bearded and bandy-legged, Aristotle, son of Nicomachus, had studied in Athens with the great thinker Plato, before writing hundreds of books on almost every imaginable subject.

There was nothing Aristotle didn't know. He wrote about plants and sea creatures, music and mechanics, war and politics. He wrote a book about magnets, an encyclopaedia of animals, a guide to making speeches and even a study of dreams.

Such a tutor deserved a spectacular classroom. So once Aristotle had arrived in Pella, he and his new pupil rode south to the hillside village of Mieza. With its sun-dappled woods and gently babbling streams, it was the perfect place for long walks and earnest contemplation.

Here, at Mieza, Aristotle taught Alexander about nature and animals, poetry and history. He told him of the first Greek explorers, who had colonized the shores of the Aegean, and of the long wars between the cities of Athens, Sparta, Thebes and Corinth.

Wide-eyed with fascination, Alexander listened to Aristotle's stories of the battles between the Greeks and their most ruthless foe, the vast, gold-rich Persian Empire. These were stories to stir the blood of any boy, and Alexander was no different.

As Aristotle spoke, Alexander imagined himself charging the Persian line, sword in hand; and at his side, his faithful friends, the boys sitting around him now . . .

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For Alexander was not the only boy in the class. Philip's commanders had also sent their sons to Mieza, and here they studied, played, ate and slept together, like boys at a boarding school.

Alexander knew many of them already. There was Cleitus, his nanny Lanike's brother, grumpy and stubborn, whom they all called Cleitus the Black because of his dark hair.

There was brave, impetuous Perdiccas, who came from one of Macedon's princely families. Then there was sharp-witted Ptolemy, older than the others, always planning ahead. His family had only recently made their money, and he blushed when his friends teased him about it.

Nearchus the Cretan loved to tell stories of his island home, and prided himself on his knowledge of the sea. Harpalus was lame in one leg, charming and roguish, but never entirely trustworthy.

Above all, there was Hephaestion, who became Alexander's closest companion. Tall and handsome, he was utterly loyal to the young prince.

Alexander and Hephaestion loved to go hunting together, venturing ever further afield in their escapades. The other boys joked that they were like Achilles and Patroclus, the inseparable friends in *The Iliad*, Homer's epic tale of the Trojan War.

Alexander laughed, but deep down he was thrilled. He adored the legends of the distant past, and dreamed of copying his heroes' adventures.

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One of his favourite heroes was Perseus, the son of Zeus, who had ridden the winged horse Pegasus and killed the snake-haired Medusa.

He also loved stories of Heracles, another son of Zeus, who had slain the many-headed Hydra, captured the monstrous Cretan Bull and ventured into the underworld to kidnap the three-headed dog Cerberus.★

But it was Achilles whom he worshipped most of all: Achilles, bravest of the Greeks at the siege of Troy, who had fought the Trojan champion Hector, and whose friendship with Patroclus had inspired poets and musicians.

For Alexander, this was not just a story. As he told his friends, he could trace his family tree back to Achilles, and was desperate to prove himself worthy of his great ancestor.

One day, he said, he and Hephaestion would go east. They, too, would fight great armies and capture formidable cities; they, too, would write their names into legend.

And one day the poets would no longer sing of Achilles. They would sing of Alexander.



★ Heracles is better known today by the name the Romans gave him, Hercules.

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Alexander was growing up fast. He was eager and impulsive, a short, broad-shouldered boy with flashing eyes, curly hair and fierce passions.

A fine sportsman and a natural leader, he also had a quieter, more thoughtful side. He loved books and poetry, and was curious about the world beyond Macedonia's borders.

One day, when he was back at the capital, Pella, some ambassadors arrived from Persia. Philip was out hunting, so Alexander asked to see them himself.

The Persians were ushered in to see young Alexander, who was brimming with questions. Where had they come from? How long had it taken them? What were the famous Persian roads like?

What about their master, the Great King? How many soldiers did he have? How did he punish his enemies?

And so on, and so on, until the Persians were almost worn out.

To the Persians, it all seemed a great joke, and they were chuckling as they turned to leave. But young Alexander was in deadly earnest. As the great doors swung shut, his face was thoughtful.

More than anything else, he dreamed of glory. Whenever news came that Philip had won another battle, the other boys would cheer, but Alexander looked a little wistful.

'Boys,' he would say sadly, 'if we're not careful, my father will beat everybody, and there'll be nobody left for us to conquer.'

He meant every word. Alexander knew Philip was a great man; but he was determined to prove himself greater.

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