

West Meets East: The Travels of Alexander

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Unlike Alexander's earlier tutors, [Aristotle] encouraged his students to question everything and to seek out the cause of each natural occurrence. Alexander was fascinated by his teacher's methodical classification of plants and animals. Aristotle was, in fact, the first scientist to categorize living things according to species, and he was ever on the lookout for new specimens. Following his example, Alexander spent hours crawling on his hands and knees in the woods and meadows, looking for samples to add to his own growing collection of flora and fauna. It had never occurred to him to study the pattern of the veins in a laurel leaf or the arrangement of the legs of a beetle, but now he marveled at the complexity of living things.

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But what kind of a king would he be? Alexander had clearly inherited the ambition, intellect, and leadership skills of his father, but the personalities of the two men were worlds apart. While Philip had been cautious and extremely patient, Alexander was a risk-taker, who trusted his instincts and was never hobbled by uncertainty. Once he chose a course of action, he moved quickly and decisively... True to the vow he'd adopted from Achilles ("ever to be the best, outstanding above all others"), he was determined to achieve what other men only dreamed about. Of course, all those stories about his immortal ancestors could only have bolstered his self-confidence!

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While in Memphis, Alexander made a point of offering a sacrifice to Apis. The Egyptians believed that this sacred bull was the incarnation of the city's patron deity, Ptah. The best was specially selected for his markings, and when he died, he was given a lavish funeral and then replaced by another bull that resembled him. Alexander's reverent act demonstrated to the local people that their days of repression were over.

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Both wings of the army were engaged in battle as Alexander brought in his last reserves. Suddenly, he spied a gap in Darius' center line. This is what he had been waiting for. He knew that the Great King was stationed in his chariot just behind his infantry. Quickly, he signaled the Companions to form their wedge and, shouting a fierce war cry, he led them in a charge. The phalanx followed them at a run, crashing through the greatly depleted Persian center. Darius must have gasped in disbelief as he spied Alexander urging Bucephalus toward him, sword raised above his head. Not again! He hurled his spear and missed, then turned in horror to see his driver fall to the ground, mortally wounded by a Macedonian arrow. Frantic, he grabbed the reins, screamed to his horses, and raced off the battlefield.

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The land that lay beyond the Indus was unfamiliar territory. Most geographers believed that India was a narrow peninsula bounded on the east by the all-encircling Oceanus. Aristotle claimed that this body of water was visible from the summits of the Hindu Kush, but Alexander had already discovered this to be untrue. Herodotus had contributed to India's exotic reputation by his fanciful description of gigantic ants that dug up tons of gold in underground mines. The precious metal was guarded, he said, by griffins. Alexander longed to find out for himself what lay beyond the Indus, and he was excited about the possibility of extending his empire to the very end of the earth. No one, not even Cyrus the Great, had ever done that!

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As a young boy in Macedonia, Alexander had dreamed of great adventures. But unlike ordinary people, he had the genius and ability to make his dreams become reality. In his short life he accomplished what others would have considered impossible. And he ultimately got his wish - "to live with courage, and to die leaving behind an everlasting fame."