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Andrew Thomson , Kathryn Waterfield , Robin Waterfield

Who Was Alexander the Great?

United States (2016)

TAGS: Alexander the Great Architecture Aristotle Darius III Egypt Gods Graeco-Persian Wars Greek History Greek Philosophy Homer Iliad Macedonia Olympias Persians Philip II of Macedonia Ptolemy Sirens Zeus





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Creators



Andrew Thomson (Illustrator)



Kathryn Waterfield (Author)

Kathryn Waterfield (née Dunathan) is an American author and tour-guide based in Greece. She took a BA in History and Art History at the University of South Florida before working there as an Academic Advisor (2001–2007) alongside being the Curatorial Assistant of Greek and Roman Art at Tampa Museum of Art (2002–2006). She took an MA in Classical Studies at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (2012–2016). She co-authored *The Greek Myths: Stories of the Greek Gods and Heroes Vividly Foretold* (2011, Sterling Publishing) with her husband, Robin Waterfield. Kathryn and Robin Waterfield have been based in Greece since 2005.

Sources:

Profile at goodreads.com (accessed: October 12, 2019).

Profile at Linkedin.com (accessed: October 12, 2019).

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Robin Waterfield , b. 1952
(Author)

Robin Waterfield is a British author based in Greece. He studied classics at school and then at the University of Manchester. In 1974 he began a PhD on Plato's *Philebus* but left before finishing in order to take up a post at St Andrews University. After being made redundant from St Andrews he took up a copy-editing post at Penguin, who were then publishing his first book. He continued to work as a writer and copy-editor and, in the 2000s, began free-lance teaching academic writing skills. He has published a number of books on the ancient world, including *Dividing the Spoils: The War for Alexander the Great's Empire* (OUP, 2011), and he co-authored *The Greek Myths: Stories of the Greek Gods and Heroes Vividly Foretold* (2011, Sterling Publishing) with his wife, Kathryn Waterfield. Kathryn and Robin Waterfield have been based in Greece since 2005.

Sources:

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Additional information

Translation

Arabic: □□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□ □□ □□, Penguin Random House, 2018.

Summary

Introduction: *Who Was Alexander the Great?* begins the work with a novelistic retelling of Alexander's taming of Bucephalus, written in the present tense. King Philip says that Alexander needs a kingdom bigger than Macedon and Alexander goes on to conquer the known world in just 13 years, "No wonder he becomes known as Alexander the Great!" (p. 6).

The Son of his Father. A map of Greece and Macedon can be seen at the beginning of chapter 1. It is explained that Alexander was born in 356 BC and a two-page section explaining the AD/BC dating system follows, concluding "he was born 356 years before Jesus" (p. 9). The family background is then explored. Olympias is described as Philip's favourite wife. She spread stories that Alexander was descended from heroes and that Zeus was his father. Alexander believed the stories. Macedon was a very wealthy country with many animals. Aristocrats had to prove themselves through hunting and there were many raids between mountain tribes. Alexander's father became a great king and general and he let Alexander lead the army at age 16. Alexander named a city after himself – the first of many. Philip decided that he wanted more and turned to conquer the Greeks. Greeks were a lot like Macedonians but they did not normally have kings and did not think that the Macedonians could beat their army. They were wrong. Alexander respected his father but was anxious there would be nothing left for him to do. The chapter concludes with a sub-section on ancient Greek clothing.

A Prince's Life. Alexander was strong and handsome with light hair that he brushed back to look wind-swept. Unlike most men he went beardless. Some people were drawn to him because he was handsome, but they did not always like him because he had an "iron will" and "quick temper" (p. 18). He had a 'fine education' in reading, writing, maths, singing and music, riding, hunting, wrestling, weapons-fighting, and "Homer's poetry" (pp.18–19). A sub-section on Homer follows, after which Aristotle is introduced, "the wisest man in Greece" (p. 21). Alexander studies with other noble boys and his best friend, Hephaestion.

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Around 150 years before, the Persians had invaded Greece. Philip "wanted to punish the Persians for those past attacks" (p. 22) and wanted to be the "greatest king in the world". The Macedonians were confident that they could conquer Persia as they thought that a Macedonian soldier was worth ten Persians. Their weapons were better. Philip did not get to try as he was killed at his daughter's wedding. "Alexander was ready to take power" (p. 27). A sub-section follows on the possible discover of Philip's tomb.

The Adventure Begins. Alexander wishes to fight the Persians as his father did. He follows General Parmenion over to Asia Minor. He throws a spear into the ground and claims the territory. There is a subsection, *Arms and Armor*, which explains that while ancient soldiers did not wear uniform they used similar weapons to fight in a phalanx or in the cavalry. Their basic functions are outlined. Alexander was glad to be in Troy because it connected him to the *Iliad*. He was almost killed in battle at the Granicus river, but Clitus saved his life. Cities welcomed Alexander. A subsection on the Gordian knot follows in which Alexander cuts the knot. Alexander won another battle at Issus; he became very rich after seizing Damascus. Historians think him one of the best generals ever. Darius' family mistook Hephaestion for Alexander; Alexander just smiled and said Hephaestion was Alexander too. "He was showing how close he felt to Hephaestion" (p. 41).

Alexander in Egypt. Chapter 4 opens with a map showing Egypt and Syria. The first people to resist were in Tyre "in what is today Lebanon" (p. 43). Alexander had a 'clever plan' to reach the island city. They destroyed the city, which sent a clear message: "Do not dare resist me!" (p. 48). The Egyptians welcomed Alexander because they had always had their own kings called pharaohs so they did not like being under Persian rule; Alexander became their pharaoh. He found Alexandria "to show that Egypt was his" (p. 48). A sub-section on Alexandria follows, including the seven wonders of the world. Alexander visited Siwah to find out if Zeus was his father. No one knows what the answer was, but after that Alexander "expected others to recognize him as a god" (p. 53).

Showdown! There was more empire to conquer, stretching right out to modern day Pakistan. Alexander's army met Darius' at Gaugamela in modern-day Iraq. Everything was in Darius' favour, so the generals advised Alexander to attack at night; he would not because he did not wish to act like a thief. Parmenion's section requested help, but

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Alexander did not send it because "a great general does not act in haste" (p. 58). The Persians made a mistake in focusing their attack on Parmenion's wing and Alexander took the opportunity to charge at Darius, who turned and fled. This made the other Persians frightened, and "frightened men fight badly" (p. 59). Alexander's army killed thousands of fleeing Persians and tried to catch Darius. Alexander turned back to help care for the wounded using what he had learned from Aristotle. He was now king of Asia and had "made his father's dream come true" (p. 61). Many years before, the Persians had burnt Athens. Alexander wanted revenge, so when a woman suggested that he burn Persepolis down, he did. Archaeologists found proof of the fire in the 20th century (pp. 62–63).

King of Persia. Alexander follows Darius to Ecbatana. Darius fled further East. The Persians then killed Darius, which is what they often did with kings who failed in war. Alexander went on to Afghanistan. The men 'grumbled'; Philotas heard of a plot to kill Alexander but did not tell anyone as he did not think that the plotters really meant it (p. 65). Alexander had Philotas tortured and killed and had Philotas' father, Parmenion killed too. The generals approved but the soldiers did not understand so they did not approve. They also did not like that Alexander now had Persian friends and often dressed in a Persian style. A sub-section on Great Kings of Persia follows. It explains the difference in clothing between Greeks and Persians; the king's adornment in jewels, and the governance of the kingdom through 20 satrapies. The main text then explains that Alexander had to behave like a Persian now and that he did not think he needed to explain himself to his soldiers who did not understand. Alexander told his men to bow to him as the Persians did. It was normal for the Persians to do it, but Greeks only did it to their gods so they did not want to. Soldiers thought being Great King was changing Alexander. Then he got drunk and "in a rage" he killed Clitus for criticising him (p. 74). Alexander felt terrible. His officers told him that what had happened was Clitus' fault. Alexander seemed more himself and married Rhoxana, "daughter of an Afghan chief" (p. 75). This might have made the soldiers unhappy too.

To the Edge of the World. A map what is now Pakistan and part of India opens the chapter. Alexander wished to find out "how far India went" (p. 77). He wanted to prove he was "more than human" (p. 78). Alexander defeated King Porus using a clever plan. Alexander showed Porus respect. "Sadly, Bucephalus died after the battle" (p. 81). There is a sub-section on war elephants. Alexander defeated all his enemies,

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but he could not defeat the weather. His men grew ill. He was "furious" when his men did not wish to go on, but he could see that it was not worth the risk. They turned back although there was more that he wished to do.

The Desert March. Alexander was wounded attacking a city. His furious men "killed everyone" in revenge (p. 87). He left his tent open so that his soldiers could see him alive. The army divided to return. Many people died crossing the desert; but he soldiers cheered when he poured out the little water they found to the gods. Once they arrived in Susa, Alexander got his officers to marry Persian women. He married Darius' daughter, and Hephaestion married her sister. Now they were like brothers. Some people were unhappy because they did not want Persian wives.

Death in Babylon. Everyone wanted to visit Alexander in Ecbatana and "be his friend" (p. 93). Hephaestion died and Alexander felt alone. He ignored the advice of his priests and entered Babylon. Rhoxana was expecting a baby. Alexander was planning new adventures. He fell ill. The soldiers visited; the nobles worried about what would happen next. Alexander died, not yet quite thirty-three. No one is sure what he died of. Ptolemy stole his funeral wagon and took it to Egypt.

"Alexander was 'great' because he did so much so quickly". He was a great war leader who brought Europeans into Asia where many stayed, sharing their culture and changing the world. Maybe Alexander was great because he thought people from east and west could "live together in peace" (pp. 101–102). The empire was divided into parts by Alexander's successors, and only Alexander was "the Great".

Two timelines follow the main text, one detailing Alexander's life, the other placing that life in a broader context. A brief *Bibliography* follows.

Analysis

Who Was Alexander the Great? is a short readable work written with simple language and illustrated throughout with black and white realistic cartoon sketches. It is written as a biography of Alexander, taking many of its cues from Plutarch's *Life*, and it offers explanations of a range of features of society in the ancient world. The work's main strength is to get so much into a short narrative; its main weakness is

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arguably the lack of prompting to reflect on the events described.

The introduction to the book is unique in being written in a present tense novelistic style. This draws the reader in with its immediacy and invites the reader to identify with Alexander as the story is written from the perspective of Alexander as a child experiencing an important turning point. The rest of the book is written more like a normal history work, but the child reader may by then feel connected to Alexander.

That opening narrative is Alexander's taming of Bucephalus. The narrator says that, "This is Alexander's first conquest" (p. 4), adding Philip's famous line that Macedonia will be to small, and explaining that Alexander would go on to conquer the world. This is an example of the authors repeating Plutarch's technique of using a childhood anecdote to illuminate the character and life of the adult subject – and they use the anecdote to make the same point (Plutarch, *Alexander*, 6). The use of the "thief" comment at Gaugamela is used in same way (p. 57; Plutarch, *Alexander*, 31) – Alexander's greatness is shown in his refusal to win through what he regards as underhand means. Similarly, Alexander's self-restraint is illustrated by the well-known anecdote in which he smiles and forgives the family of Darius when they mistake Hephaestion for Alexander (pp. 40–41; Curtius, 3.12.17) and in which he refuses water rather than drink when others have none (p. 90; Plutarch, *Alexander*, 42), although in the latter case Plutarch has Alexander hand the water back, whereas here Alexander pours it out as a libation which places emphasis on his piety.

On the other hand, ancient anecdotes which are more morally ambiguous or even critical of Alexander either do not feature or feature without the same degree of criticism. Philotas is exonerated to a great extent in this account of the conspiracy against Alexander, yet Alexander is spared criticism of his torture and of the execution of Philotas and his father Parmenion; the officers agreed with Alexander but the soldiers disapproved because they did not understand (p. 66; Plutarch, *Alex*. 49). Plutarch, by contrast, implies Alexander's paranoia and ingratitude towards Parmenion. For him disapproval would not be a failure of understanding. The destruction of Persepolis incudes reference to it leaving 'greatest buildings of the ancient world… in ruins', but while this implies that something worthwhile was lost, Alexander's role in it is framed uncritically as his desire to take revenge for the destruction of Athens and as the influence of an unnamed "woman" (pp. 62–63). For several ancient writers this was

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an example of Alexander's failure of self-control and lapse into thuggery. When we have heard so much of his steely will it is striking to hear him described as so influenced by the suggestion of a single woman, a trope ancient authors drew on to ameliorate his actions but which seems more out of place when presented without comment by modern authors. Similarly, the suggestion that he did it deliberately as revenge for Athens echoes the earlier assertion that Philip wanted revenge for the Persian invasion (p. 22). These ideas were put forward by the Macedonians in antiquity, but it is remarkable to hear them repeated uncritically as fact without the concept of propaganda being explored. Then again, Plutarch uses the anecdote of the Gordian Knot to express Alexander's dual nature; some say he cut the knot and thus won via force, while others say he undid the knot by removing the pin, showing ingenuity. In this work, Alexander definitely cuts the knot; force has been chosen as his characteristic and it is represented as an unmitigated positive (p. 37; Plutarch, *Alexander*, 18). The use of ancient source material puts the reader in touch with ancient traditions about Alexander, yet the manner in which they have been treated to give an almost entirely positive image of such a complicated figure feels somewhat reductive, even for a book which has to simplify things for its young audience.

There are maps throughout the work which help to orientate the reader. They are kept simple in order to be accessible for a young audience, yet there are occasions when they could be regarded as misleading. Chapter 4 opens with a map which shows Egypt and Syria; Syria is labelled in the same manner as the city of Tyre, but differently from Egypt, creating the impression that Syria is a city. Another map refers to "modern-day Afghanistan" alongside "Iran" rather than "modern-day Iran", potentially creating confusion about Iran/Persia (p. 64). The text refers to Alexander visiting "where Pakistan is today" although the map with it labels only "India" (p. 77). Nonetheless, the frequent use of maps is beneficial and also helps readers to associate the events with the modern world and with real world rather than fantasy. Frequent reference in the text to places' modern-day equivalents also help with this, as does a depiction of modern Alexandria complete with cars (p. 49).

All of the major battles are included, including a brief mention of Philip's conquest of Greece. Granicus and Issus are both included, and there is a fair bit of detail on the siege of Tyre. The Battle of Gaugamela receives the most attention and gives a sense of the ancient general's need to read the ebb and flow of battle. A sub-

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section offers some information on Alexander's troops, although it might have been helpful to have something on how that changed over time or how his army compared to the Persians'. It is stated as a matter of fact that Alexander's army had "better" weapons, which could have been unpacked a little (p. 23).

Alexander's early life is related in an extremely romanticised manner. It is surprising to see Olympias referred to as Philip's "favourite" wife without reference to any of the difficulties between them. There is a single hint of rivalry between father and son, but nothing more (p. 15). There is a lot of detail on Alexander's education, including reference to his application to his studies, the topics he studied, and to Homer and Aristotle. The reader is offered a gentle prompt to find out more about Homer if they wish and Homer features in an individual sub-section (p. 20). This theme recurs again in reference to Alexander being pleased to visit Troy because it connects him to Homer and the Trojan War (p. 34) and in Alexander treating his wounded soldiers (p. 60). The initial emphasis on education offers a relatable aspect of Alexander to the child reader and implies the lifelong usefulness of education, even to an active figure like Alexander.

Alexander's personal life is touched on fleetingly. Hephaestion is represented as Alexander's "best friend" (p. 22). The Curtius story is said to show, "how close he felt to Hephaestion" (p. 41), which is true and which offers young readers an explanation of the meaning of the story, although there is no equivalent attention to the story acting as an assertion of Alexander's mercy. Bagoas does not feature. There is reference to Alexander marrying Rhoxana and Statiera (here simply "Darius' daughter", p. 91), but they play no role in the narrative, nor does Olympias feature once Alexander has left home. Clitus is referred to as Alexander's 'friend' who had saved his life, yet it is somewhat implied that he is to blame for his own murder through an unguided account of the other officers' attempts to reassure Alexander (pp. 72–74).

Religion features throughout, which gives young readers a sense of its importance within ancient culture. There is reference to opinions regarding Alexander's divine parentage. This is followed up with the visit to Siwa; Arrian's reticence about what was said (Arrian, 3.4) is preferred over Plutarch's reference to various traditions (p. 53; Plutarch, *Alex*. 27). There is some attempt to explain the disagreement between Alexander and his troops over his adoption of Persian custom. This includes the issue of *proskinisis*, here "bowing"; it is

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explained that the Greeks only do it for their gods while the Persians were used to doing it for their king (p. 72), but there is nothing further on Persian custom or religious traditions.

There is a brief summary at the end which tells readers that Alexander was great because he achieved so much so fast and because he wanted Persians and Greeks to live together in peace. This is a laudable sentiment but it would have been more compelling if there had been more on Persian culture or on Alexander's attempts to combine it with Hellenism. As it is, this work offers a lively if uncritical account of the life of Alexander and may encourage them to find out more. The bibliography features recent works on Alexander: Winthrop Lindsay 2006, Heckel and Tritle 2009, Heckel and Yardley 2003, Renault 1975, and Worthington 2012. These are included to reference works drawn on rather than recommendations for further reading.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Alexander the Great Architecture Aristotle Darius III Egypt Gods Graeco-Persian Wars Greek History Greek Philosophy Homer Iliad Macedonia Olympias Persians Philip II of Macedonia Ptolemy Sirens Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adolescence Adventure Adversity Character traits Child, children Childhood Conflict Death Desires Diversity Divorce Emotions Expectations Family Friendship Heroism Hierarchy Historical figures History Homesickness Journeys Judgement Loss Multiculturalism Murder Prediction/prophecy Princes and princesses Race Relationships Religious beliefs Resilience Sacrifice School Violence War Water
Further Reading	Moore, Kenneth Royce, ed., *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Alexander the Great*, Leiden: Brill, 2018. Nevin, Sonya, "Negative Comparison: Agamemnon and Alexander in Plutarch's *Agesilaus-Pompey*", *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 54 (2014): 45–68.

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