Alexander the Great

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Summary
Born in 356 BC to a Macedonian king and his headstrong queen, Alexander the Great becomes king at age twenty. Many Middle Eastern cities fell under Macedonian rule before Alexander reached present-day India before turning back. His final journey sees tens of thousands of people perish in the Gedrosian Desert before arriving in Persia once again. It is during this peaceful time that Alexander takes ill and dies at age thirty-two.

Chapter 1: Alexander’s defeat of the Persians in 366 BC ends a period during which the enemies of Persia were the Greek city-states, and Macedonia was not an important part of the Greek world. This Greek world left an important legacy for the western world: democracy, a style for building religious temples that has been copied for more than two millennia, a love of theatre and literature, philosophy, early contributions to medicine, mathematics and science, the valuing of physical beauty and well-being and the Olympic games.

Chapter 2: It is probably his strong parents and outstanding teachers that made Alexander a great leader. His mother, Olympias, was his father’s first wife. Strong in character, she returned to her country when Philip – Alexander’s father – married Eurydice. Philip, in turn, was a great commander and a strong leader. Busy with governing, he hires Aristotle to educate Alexander. Alexander is curious and intelligent. He likes music and literature, animals and hunting. At age thirteen he surprises the court by riding a wild horse, Bucephalas, who will accompany him in all his campaigns. At age sixteen, he is left in charge of the government for a time and at eighteen he has won his first battle. When Philip is murdered, Alexander is only twenty.

Chapters 3–4: Alexander ensures his position in Macedonia by killing all other candidates to the crown and sets off towards Greece and Asia. Along his campaign, he makes use not only of his strength but also of his intelligence, creativity and knowledge. Besides fights on the battlefield and the siege of towns, his tactics include reductions of taxes and leaves for soldiers to make himself popular, the use of his knowledge of history and even the creation of a new month to avoid religious beliefs interfering with his plans. On his way, he destroys Troy, home of the legendary Achilles, and arrives in Gordium, where he unties, whether through skill or cheat, a legendary knot, which makes him the undisputed ruler of Asia.

Chapters 5–6: Led by Memnon, the Persians start a march to face Alexander, who in turn marches to meet them. Memnon dies and King Darian III takes command of his army. Alexander finds out that the armies have gone past each other and takes the Persians by surprise. Darian’s family and Barcine – Memnon’s wife – are made prisoners. Alexander falls in love with Barcine, with whom he spends several years. The city of Tyre resists his siege and Alexander’s engineers build a 200-metre wall in the sea. Then, after defeating Gaza, he marches towards Egypt and builds the city of Alexandria. Later, in Siwah, he communicates privately with the god Ammon. By now, he believes he is more than human.

Chapter 7: Alexander refuses Darius’s proposal for negotiation and gives him time to gather all his army so as to defeat him completely. He uses his great military skill to defeat a much larger army at Gaugamela, and marches to Babylon and then Susa and Persepolis, the heart of Persia. Although the city is well protected and he has to order a retreat, once again his strategic capacity leads him to success. He takes control of Persepolis and its riches and burns the palace in revenge for Xerxes’s burning of the Acropolis 150 years earlier. Darius is killed by his own men.

Chapter 8: Alexander advances to Bactria, to defeat Bessus, one of Darius’s murderers. He knows that punishing the killer of a King will make him popular. Along his march, two plots to kill him are discovered, which General Parmenion, his son Philotas and the historian Callisthenes pay for with their lives. Alexander also kills his commander Cleitus after an argument with him. He then conquers Sogdiana, marries Roxane – the daughter of the Sogdian’s leader – and marches towards
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India, where he meets no resistance except for Porus, a local king, whom he defeats thanks to a combination of witty strategy and good luck. Ready to march towards the Eastern Ocean that the Greeks believed was the edge of the world, Alexander is defeated by his own soldiers, who are tired and homesick and refuse to continue. He feels frustrated for not having conquered one of the many worlds that exist.

Chapters 9–10: Alexander decides to return home through the Arabian Sea and conquer the tribes on his way. He survives a wound and reaches the Gedrosian Desert. Thousands of his soldiers die on the way, and survivors reach Carmania, near Persepolis, where they meet Nearchus, who is bringing part of Alexander’s army and cargo on ships. Alexanderpunishes the generals and governors who have become disloyal and organizes the wedding of Macedonians to Persian wives. Soon, he is taken ill or poisoned, and dies. His death is followed by fights for power within his Empire. Eventually, and after many deaths, Cassander rules in Macedonia, Ptolemy rules over Egypt and Seleucus rules over Asia.

Discussion activities

Chapter 1

Before reading

1 Guess: Tell students: In this chapter, you'll read that the Persians defeated the Greeks in two battles, and the Greeks defeated the Persians in two battles. If the Greeks won the last battle, nobody won two consecutive battles, and the first battle was started by the people that wanted to free themselves from the rule of the other but couldn't, who ruled over who at the opening of the narration? Read and check.

After reading

2 Discuss: Ask students: Do you think it would be possible that today countries practised the form of democracy that the Greeks had? Why/why not? Which is, in your opinion, the fairest form of government?

3 Artwork: Students make crowns of olive leaves, which will be worn by the winners in activity 4.

4 Game: Divide the class into groups. Give them the following problem. The first to finish wins the olive crowns. Complete the missing number. Ignore the negative signs of years.

Year of the Battle of Marathon – the year of the Battle of Thermopylae + the year the Greeks fought for their independence with the help of the Athenians – the year Philip became king of Macedonia – ………. = Number of years that Athens and Sparta were at war in the 5th century BC.

5 Research: Students search the Internet for information about the original Olympic Games and compare them with the Olympics today.

Chapter 2

Before reading

6 Guess: Tell students: In this chapter you’ll see that Alexander, Cleopatra, Olympias and the King of Epirus are two pairs of brother and sister. Two of them get married. If Olympias is Alexander’s mother, are the couple who gets married blood relatives? If so, how do they relate?
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After reading

7 Discuss: Tell students: For Aristotle, a young man can't be taught political science because 'he still follows his emotions'. Do you agree? Do older people learn to control their emotions? Is this a matter of age?

8 Role play: Students take the roles of Philip and Olympias and role play their conversation when Philip decides to marry Eurydice.

9 Write: Students write the message that Alexander sent through his friends to the Carian court.

Chapters 3–4

Before reading

10 Guess: Tell students: The proverb 'Give a dog a bad name and hang it' explains what happened in the Greek city-states when news spread about Alexander's response to Thebes's fight for independence. What do you think happened?

After reading

11 Group work: Ask students: Both Achilles and Alexander chose an early death and fame over a long and peaceful life. Why do you think they did so? Was it for their countries or was it for themselves? How important do you think it is, for human beings, to stay alive forever through their actions? Groups share their ideas.

12 Pair work and write: Tell students to imagine that after Achilles killed Hector, he went to Petroclus's tombstone to speak to him. Pairs write his short speech. The class votes for the most moving.

13 Artwork: Tell students: In these chapters there are two stories within the story — the story of Troy and the story of Gordium. How could this be shown in a picture in the book? In groups, students make their pictures.

14 Role play: Students role play Callisthenes interviewing a person from Gordium who saw Alexander break the Gordian Knot. Then they decide what Callisthenes will record in his book.

Chapters 5–6

Before reading

15 Guess: Tell students that Alexander and his engineers are going to do two things that will modify the landscape forever. Ask them: What do you think they are going to do?

After reading

16 Debate: Divide the class into two groups. Ask them how the Persian landlords lived (page 22). Have them debate the following: A: It is better to live comfortably, even if you depend on somebody else. B: It is better to be independent, even if you do not live so comfortably.

17 Role play: Students take the roles of a member of Darius's family – Alexander's prisoners – and Barsine, and role play their conversation when Barsine tells them she is close to Alexander.

18 Discuss: Tell students: After his private communication with the god Ammon, Alexander starts to believe he is more than human. What events in his life does Alexander look back upon to see himself as godlike? Do some famous people behave as if they were more than human today? If so, can you think of examples? Groups share their ideas with the class.

Chapter 7

Before reading

19 Guess: Ask students: King Darian's family is still in Alexander's hands. What do you think Darian will do?

After reading

20 Group work: Students imagine that they travel back in time to record a news programme about the conquest of Persepolis. Groups have a reporter, Alexander, the local guide, a resident of Persepolis and soldiers from both armies. Groups prepare their programme in a news bulletin style and present it to the class.

21 Artwork: In groups, students make an illustrated map of the battlefield in Gaugamela, and draw the movements of the Persian and Macedonian armies with arrows using two different colours.

Chapter 8

Before reading

22 Guess: Tell students: In this chapter you'll see Alexander suffer more than once. Can you think of what may make him feel sad and even cry?

After reading

23 Role play: Students take the roles of Alexander and Cleitus and role play their argument.

24 Artwork: Students imagine the Macedonians found pictures illustrating the stories told about India, then make the pictures.

25 Write: Tell students: One of Alexander's historians made an entry in his book starting 'Once again, Alexander proved that tactics is better than strength.' They complete the entry explaining either Alexander's strategy with the Sogdians or how he defeated Porus.

Chapters 9–10

Before reading


After reading

27 Discuss: Students discuss whether Alexander was a great man or an ambitious bloodthirsty murderer, and whether the changes he produced in the world were good or not and why.

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.