

Ancient History Sourcebook: Plutarch: Selections from the Life of Alexander

Plutarch, a Roman historian who lived during the first century AD (ca. 46-119), wrote his Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans intending to draw parallels between great figures of Greek antiquity and Romans of his own time. He chose to compare Alexander the Great with Julius Caesar. In his Life of Alexander, Plutarch tells some of the most famous stories related about Alexander.

Questions:

1. Plutarch tells about an important episode in Alexander's life. What characteristics is it intended to show?
2. What, in Plutarch's opinion, makes a "great man"? Is Alexander great?

When Philonius, the Thessalian, offered the horse named Bucephalus in sale to Philip [Alexander's father], at the price of thirteen talents, the king, with the prince and many others, went into the field to see some trial made of him. The horse appeared extremely vicious and unmanageable, and was so far from suffering himself to be mounted, that he would not bear to be spoken to, but turned fiercely on all the grooms. Philip was displeased at their bringing him so wild and ungovernable a horse, and bade them take him away. But Alexander, who had observed him well, said, "What a horse they are losing, for want of skill and spirit to manage him!" Philip at first took no notice of this, but, upon the prince's often repeating the same expression, and showing great uneasiness, said, "Young man, you find fault with your elders, as if you knew more than they, or could manage the horse better." "And I certainly could," answered the prince. "If you should not be able to ride him, what forfeiture will you submit to for your rashness?" "I will pay the price of the horse."

Upon this all the company laughed, but the king and prince agreeing as to the forfeiture, Alexander ran to the horse, and laying hold on the bridle, turned him to the sun; for he had observed, it seems, that the shadow which fell before the horse, and continually moved as he moved, greatly disturbed him. While his fierceness and fury abated, he kept speaking to him softly and stroking him; after which he gently let fall his mantle, leaped lightly upon his back, and got his seat very safe. Then, without pulling the reins too hard, or using either whip or spur, he set him a-going. As soon as he perceived his uneasiness abated, and that he wanted only to run, he put him in a full gallop, and pushed him on both with

the voice and spur.

Philip and all his court were in great distress for him at first, and a profound silence took place. But when the prince had turned him and brought him straight back, they all received him with loud acclamations, except his father, who wept for joy, and kissing him, said, "Seek another kingdom, my son, that may be worthy of thy abilities; for Macedonia is too small for thee..."

[Philip] sent for Aristotle, the most celebrated and learned of all the philosophers; and the reward he gave him for forming his son Alexander was not only honorable, but remarkable for its propriety. He had formerly dismantled the city of Stagira, where that philosopher was born, and now he re-built it, and reestablished the inhabitants, who had either fled or been reduced to slavery... Aristotle was the man Alexander admired in his younger years, and, as he said himself, he had no less affection for him than for his own father...

[Alexander] was only twenty years old when he succeeded to the crown, and he found the kingdom torn into pieces by dangerous parties and implacable animosities. The barbarous nations, even those that bordered upon Macedonia, could not brook subjection, and they longed for their natural kings... Alexander was of opinion, that the only way to security, and a thorough establishment of his affairs, was to proceed with spirit and magnanimity. For he was persuaded, that if he appeared to abate of his dignity in the least article, he would be universally insulted. He therefore quieted the commotions, and put a stop to the rising wars among the barbarians, by marching with the utmost expediency as far as the Danube, where he fought a great battle...

The barbarians, we are told, lost in this battle twenty thousand foot and two thousand five hundred horse, whereas Alexander had no more than thirty-four men killed, nine of which were the infantry. To do honor to their memory, he erected a statue to each of them in brass, the workmanship of Lysippus. And that the Greeks might have their share in the glory of the day, he sent them presents out of the spoil: to the Athenians in particular he sent three hundred bucklers. Upon the rest of the spoils he put this pompous inscription, **WON BY ALEXANDER THE SON OF PHILIP, AND THE GREEKS (EXCEPTING THE LACEDAEMONIANS), OF THE BARBARIANS IN ASIA.** The greatest part of the plate, the purple furniture, and other things of that kind which he took from the Persians, he sent to his mother.