

Conqueror and Hero: The Search for Alexander Short Guide

Conqueror and Hero: The Search for Alexander by Stephen Krensky

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Overview

After twenty-three hundred years, interest in the brilliant and enigmatic Alexander continues unabated. At least seven biographies have been published in the 1980s, four of which are written for young people. Civilizations as far back as the Roman Republic have admired Alexander as a hero, for he was an unexcelled general who conquered most of the known world before he was thirty years old. The account of his conquests makes a fascinating adventure story: he seems to have achieved his ambition to be the greatest warrior of all time, and in eleven years of fighting, he never lost a battle. The marches, the sieges, the skirmishes, the hardships, and the spoils all combine to render an exciting story.

After his death, legends sprang up immediately, and Alexander has remained a prominent figure in Western art and literature. While arguably the most dramatic figure in history, he is nonetheless undeniably human.

About the Author

Stephen Krensky, a contemporary free-lance writer and critic, has authored several successful books for children and young adults. Born on November 25, 1953, in Boston, Massachusetts, Krensky grew up in the Boston area and has been a professional writer ever since his graduation from Hamilton College in 1975. He currently lives in Lexington, Massachusetts, with his wife, a textbook editor, and their son.

Since 1977, when he published his first book for young people, Krensky has written more than twenty books. He credits his ability as a children's writer to his vivid childhood imagination and experiences that continue to color his view of the world. Drawing on this source for his books, he creates fantasy worlds of witches, trolls, and dragons, combining familiar themes from folklore with his own humor in works such as *A Big Day for Scepters* (1977), *The Perils of Putney, Castles in the Air and Other Tales*, and *A Troll in Passing* (1980). He inserts these fantastic elements into a contemporary setting in his tales about the five modern-day Wynd children in *The Dragon Circle* (1977), *The Witching Hour* (1981), and *A Ghostly Business* (1984). He omits the fantasy, but not the humor, in *The Wilder Plot* and *The Wilder Summer*, a pair of novels that relate the adventures of young Charlie Wilder at school and at summer camp.

For young adult readers, Krensky has written a biography of Alexander the Great, *Conqueror and Hero: The Search for Alexander*, as part of the resurgence of interest in Alexander spurred by the "The Search for Alexander" major art exhibition, television series, and adult biography by Robin Lane Fox in 1980 and 1981. Krensky has also created works for very young children, including *My First Dictionary* (1980) and, with co-author and illustrator Marc Brown, *Perfect Pigs: An Introduction to Manners* (1983).

Krensky has adapted two of his works to other media, writing a 1984 motionpicture version of *The Wilder Summer* and a filmstrip-with-cassette version of *Dinosaurs, Beware!* in 1985. His other writings for young people include short stories published in *Cricket*. His writings for adults include reviews for magazines and newspapers, such as the *New York Times Book Review*, *New Republic*, and *Boston Globe*. His book *Maiden Voyage: The Story of the Statue of Liberty* (1985), written to celebrate the statue's centennial, was chosen as one of the 1985 Children's Books of the Year by the Child Study Association of America.

Setting

Alexander's homeland was the country of Macedon, north of central Greece. In the early fourth century B.C., Macedon, also known as Macedonia, was a backward, relatively weak kingdom overshadowed by the prosperous and powerful city-states to the south, such as Thebes, Sparta, and Athens. Inheriting the throne in 359 B.C., Philip II, the greatest Grecian general of the time, established control over most of Greece, uniting the fiercely independent citystates under a common desire for revenge on the Persian Empire. Before Philip could put this plan into action, however, he was assassinated, and in 336 B.C. his twenty-year-old son Alexander became king.

Well-educated, well-trained in military matters, and already experienced in commanding cavalry in battle, Alexander quickly established control by eliminating rivals. Krensky's biography chronicles his victories over the Thracians, the Celts, and the Thebans; his subsequent defeat of Darius II, emperor of Persia, in 331 B.C.; his climactic battle against the rajah Porus in India at the Hydapses River in 326 B.C.; and his army's dispirited return to Mesopotamia. Back in Babylon, in 323 B.C., as he began to reorganize his new empire, Alexander fell ill and died at the age of thirty-two. Although in his short life he conquered almost all of the thenknown world, his most enduring legacy was the dissemination of knowledge among cultures—the spread of Greek civilization into Egypt, the Near East, and Asia, and the enrichment of Western cultures with Oriental ideas.



Social Sensitivity

The society of ancient Greece was male-oriented; women had few, if any, rights and no political power. Because women play only a minor role in Alexander's life, the status of women is not emphasized. Teachers and parents may want to help young readers understand this society's treatment of women.

In addition, life in the ancient world could often be brutal. Standards of behavior that today are regarded as indefensibly cruel were the norm. But this cruelty and the violence inherent in war is mostly implicit in Conqueror and Hero.

Violence rarely occurs, but even when it must be mentioned, it is never described directly. Whenever possible, Krensky leaves any violence to the imagination.

Literary Qualities

In his brief foreword, Krensky reports both the scarcity of ancient sources and the difficulty in determining their reliability, and he indicates which of these sources he has drawn on. Although Krensky makes "some educated guesses" in reconstructing Alexander's life, he does not fictionalize his subject and announces plainly when he is speculating about the cause of some event. Krensky enriches the story by sometimes presenting alternative legendary accounts of a single event. The author enlivens the early chapters by recounting such famous legends as the child Alexander's entertaining visiting Persian envoys, his taming of the wild horse Bucephalus, and his "solving" the riddle of the Gordian knot. Krensky's style is elegantly simple, concise, and generally clear, although he sometimes neglects to identify his topics directly or locate regions whose names he introduces.



Themes and Characters

Much of the adult Alexander's character can be ascribed to the formative influence of his parents. Alexander's mother, Olympias, greatly influenced Alexander and, remarkably, given that women in ancient Greece usually lacked political power, the affairs of their country as well. Born a princess of Epirus, Olympias was a willful young woman when she came to Macedon to become Philip's primary wife. After years of an increasingly discordant marriage, Philip married Cleopatra, a young woman of pure Macedonian blood. This so angered Olympias that she returned to Epirus, taking the teen-age Alexander with her. Apparently a force to be reckoned with throughout her son's life, Olympias contributed to Alexander her prideful self-possession and strong will and fostered his sense of his destiny, while also helping to estrange him from his father.

His father's own notable achievements both helped and hindered Alexander.

Philip's creation of a formally trained, professional army introduced Alexander to better methods of waging war. Philip's military successes and the resulting enlargement of Macedon's power gave his son a larger inheritance but made it harder for Alexander to surpass his father as a warrior. Philip's own stubbornness and temper created friction as Alexander grew to manhood; the two men quarreled over the threats to Alexander's succession presented by Philip's marriage to Cleopatra and the arrangements for the marriage of Philip's inept other son. In the last years of his father's reign, Alexander worked together with Philip, but presumably he could never trust his father fully.

As the wagons rumbled down...he had his soldiers lie on the ground beneath their shields. The wagons then rolled harmlessly over them.

In an age when a man's character was of paramount importance, Alexander's character was his greatest asset; indeed, it loomed so great among the people of his time that it has been mythologized by succeeding generations. Preferring not to surmise his subject's thoughts or words, Krensky reports only Alexander's deeds; readers must then assess Alexander's character through his actions. Foremost among the components of Alexander's character was his desire for glory and ambition, which originated in his father's own ambitions and the Greeks' hatred of Persia. Krensky notes that the adolescent Alexander, taking his reputed ancestor Achilles as a model, vowed to surpass even that hero's achievements. In addition, Alexander seems to have been blessed with unflinching boldness and confidence, and he had trouble understanding that others might not share his vision. Also remarkable in a brilliant and ruthless warrior were Alexander's respect for genuine wisdom in philosophers and his great concern, even love, for his men, a feeling they reciprocated.

Among Alexander's various opponents, two, Darius and Porus, highlight Alexander's nobility. Darius, the emperor of Persia, had been weakened by the hedonistic life of the Persian court. History remembers him as a coward for fleeing twice from Alexander, at the battles at Issus and Gaugamela, thereby causing his soldiers to panic.



Contrasting with Darius, the Indian general Porus had qualities similar to Alexander's virtues. A fine soldier, this rajah was brave and proud, even in defeat. So impressed was Alexander that, rather than deal harshly with his vanquished enemy, he awarded Porus a territory to govern even larger than that he had ruled previously.

Alexander's character becomes the theme of the biography. Achieving glory and lasting fame as a warrior was a wholly acceptable ambition to ancient peoples, and Alexander's single consuming passion was to attain such glory. Another theme arises in Alexander's falling back on his inner resources to sustain himself during his trials, a self-reliance that contributed to his considerable strength of character; setbacks, hardships, or pain failed to weaken his fortitude, indomitable will, and determination. In addition, Alexander's eloquence, his graciousness to defeated enemies, his ability to inspire loyalty in his troops and to impress enemy cities into surrendering outright—all these remarkable traits develop the theme underlying the entire book, the nature of the hero. Yet for all his qualities and achievements, Alexander's actions show him still to have been a fallible human being, one who died having made no provision for the welfare of his family or the survival of his empire. Despite his grandeur, the biography suggests that readers judge him as a human being, not a hero.

Adaptations

A four-episode PBS television series *The Search for Alexander* (1981) is available on videocassette from Time-Life TV.

This carefully researched documentary presents known fact and unanswered questions about this great leader. The television series, combined with the catalog of the much acclaimed art exhibition of the same name, brings to life an ancient civilization.



Topics for Discussion

1. In what ways did the teen-age Philip's journey to Thebes aid him when he became leader of Macedon?
2. Why did Philip give the young Alexander over to the tutelage of Leonidas and see to it that Alexander was well-educated?
3. What sort of father was Philip to Alexander? In what ways did his treatment of his son aid the future king? In what ways did it hinder him? Would you describe Philip's overall influence on Alexander as positive or negative?
4. What kind of mother was Queen Olympias? Would you say that she was a good mother? Why?
5. Do you think Alexander had a hand in his father's death? How likely is this?

Why?

6. Name some of the methods or strategies Alexander created to win military engagements. Remember, for example, the problem of the Thracians on the mountain summit, the sieges of Tyre and Gaza, and the confrontation of Porus at the Hydapses River. What do these reveal about Alexander as a military leader?
7. Look again at the words exchanged between Alexander and the defeated Indian rajah Porus after the battle at the Hydapses River. What does this exchange, considered along with Alexander's subsequent treatment of Porus, reveal about Porus? About Alexander?
8. Evaluate Alexander as a general and a political leader. What were Alexander's strengths as a leader? In what ways did he fail? What were his lasting accomplishments? Does Alexander ultimately deserve to be known as "great"?

Why or why not?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read an account of one of the following gods or heroes of classical mythology—Zeus, Apollo, Hercules, Achilles. Write a report summarizing the myth about this figure and explaining how Alexander saw the myth as relating to his life.
2. Investigate the techniques of warfare used by ancient Greeks and Persians of the fourth century B.C. What were the weapons available and how were they used? What strategies were used for deploying armies and navies, and how do they compare to those of modern military tactics?
3. Find a map of the ancient world and locate the Balkans, Dardanelles, the Hydapses and Indus rivers—all the places the book mentions but does not locate. As a project, construct a large map showing the route taken by Alexander's army and indicate on it the locations and dates of important events in Alexander's career, such as battles and major cities he founded.
4. Investigate the story of the ancient Persian Empire from its founding by Cyrus I, through Xerxes, to the last emperor, Darius III. Read of the wars between Persia and Greece. Write a report summarizing the history of the Persian Empire and the relations and conflicts between Persia and Greece between 600 B.C. and 300 B.C.
5. Write a paper on the history of the Olympic games. How did this athletic festival originate and what was it like?

How did the Olympic games manage to continue while the Greek city-states were at war with one another? When and why did the games cease?

6. Look into the legends and romances about Alexander that people have created since his death, from Roman times through the Renaissance. Pick out one and read it, and compare it with Krensky's story of Alexander. Write a paper pointing out the differences and similarities and try to offer an explanation for any differences.

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Twichell, E. R. "Review." *Horn Book* 57 (December 1981): 677-678. In a decidedly negative review, Twichell, although commending Krensky's meticulous attention to sources, criticizes his biography for being flat and "failing to stir the imagination ...

about the ... charismatic leader."

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New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986. This biography contains abundant photographs and engravings from various periods, and includes an introductory essay, list of further readings, chronology, and index.

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