

ALEXANDER THE GREAT PRIMARY SOURCES

Directions: Read through each of the primary sources provided for you and answer the corresponding questions.

Primary Source 1

Alexander Tames Bucephalus by Plutarch

There came a day when Philoneicus the Thessalian brought Philip (Alexander's father) a horse named Bucephalus. The king and his friends went down to the plain to watch the horse's trials, and came to the conclusion that he was wild and unmanageable, for he would allow no one to mount him. The king became angry at being offered such a vicious animal unbroken, and ordered it to be led away. But Alexander, who was standing close by, remarked, "What a horse they are losing, and all because they don't know how to handle him, or dare not try!"... Alexander went quickly up to Bucephalus, took hold of his bridle, and turned him towards the sun, for he had noticed that the horse was shying at the sight of his own shadow, as it fell in front of him and constantly moved whenever he did. He ran alongside the animal for a little way, calming him down by stroking him, and then, when he saw he was full of spirit and courage, he quietly threw aside his cloak with a light spring vaulted safely on to his back... Finally, when he saw that the horse was free of his fears and impatient to show his speed, he gave him his head and urged him forward.

At First Philip and his friends held their breath until they saw Alexander reach the end of his gallop, turn in full control, and ride back triumphant. Thereupon the rest of the company broke into loud applause; while his father, we are told, actually wept for joy, and when Alexander had dismounted he kissed him and said, "My boy, you must find a kingdom big enough for your ambitions. Macedonia is too small for you."

1. What do you think is the significance in King Philip's advice to his son? Defend your answer.

Primary Source 2

The Macedonian Army Before the Battle of Gaugamela by Quintus Curtius

In this document, an Athenian exile speaks to Darius III (King of Persia):

Possibly, Lord, you may not be pleased with my telling you the truth; but if I don't do it now it will be too late afterwards. Gold and purple glitter in every part of your army, which is so very splendid that those who have not seen it could have no idea of its magnificence, but the soldiers, who make up the Macedonian army, terrible to see and bristling with arms, do not amuse themselves with such idle show. Their only care is to form their battalions in a regular manner and cover themselves closely with their bucklers (shields) and pikes (long spears). Their phalanx is a body of infantry which fights without flinching and keeps so close in its ranks that the soldiers and their arms form an impenetrable wall. In a word, every single man among them is so well trained that, at the least signal, they can make every motion of the art of war. You may be sure that these Macedonians have not come in hopes of gold and silver; their excellent discipline comes from their poverty. If they are hungry they eat anything; if they are tired they rest on the bare ground. Soldiers like themselves will be necessary to death them.

2. What advice is being offered to Darius III?

Primary Source 3

Alexander Seeks Persian Support by Plutarch

He (Alexander) began to adapt his own style of living more closely to that of the country and tried to reconcile Asiatic and Macedonian customs: he believed that if the two traditions could be blended his authority would be more securely established when he was far away, since it would rest on goodwill rather than on force. For this reason he selected thirty thousand boys and gave orders that they should be taught to speak the Greek language and to use Macedonian weapons... His marriage to Roxane was a love match, which began when he first saw her at the height of her youthful beauty taking part in a dance at a banquet, but it also played a great part in furthering his policy of reconciliation. The (Persians) were encouraged by the feeling of partnership which their alliance created, and they were completely won over by Alexander's moderation and courtesy.

3. Why did Alexander believe it to be necessary to mix two traditions and cultures? Do you think it worked to his advantage?

Primary Source 4

The Macedonian Soldiers Refuse to Go On by Quintus Curtius

This document describes the fears of the Macedonian troops as they reach India:

But when the Macedonians, who believed that they had already encountered every danger, knew that a fresh war with the most warlike nations of India still remained, they were struck with sudden fear and began again to upbraid the king (Alexander) with mutinous language; that after being compelled to cross the Ganges and the regions beyond it, they had nevertheless not ended but only shifted the war. They were exposed to unconquered nations in order that at the cost of their blood they might open a way for him to the ocean... For their new arms new enemies constantly appeared. Granted that they routed and put to flight all these, what reward awaited them? Gloom and darkness an perpetual night brooding over an unplumbed sea, a deep teeming with schools of savage sea-monsters, stagnant waters...

4. Why were Alexander's men afraid to move through India? Would you continue to fight for Alexander?

Primary Source 5

Alexander's Aims by Arrian

As for the exact thoughts in Alexander's mind, I am neither able nor concerned to guess them, but this I think I can state, that nothing common or mean would have been his intention; he would not have remained content with any of his conquests, not even if he had added the British Isles to Europe; he would always have searched beyond for something unknown, and if there had been no other competition, he would have competed against himself.

5. What does this source tell us about Alexander's ambition? Had he not died what do you think would have happened?
