



Alexander: The Ends of the Earth: A Novel

By Valerio Massimo Manfredi

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All his life, Alexander defied the limits the gods gave mortals. That passion overwhelmed cities and armies...and united a vast empire. Alexander was no longer simply King of Macedonia: The Pan-Hellenic League had named him Supreme Leader. Egypt crowned him Pharaoh. And all Persia acknowledged him as Great King. He was a true heir to Achilles and Hercules, a leader who had guided troops to victory beyond the Nile, the Tigris, and the Euphrates. Now, conquering India would place all of Asia in his hands.

But his army reached the limit of its endurance, and the cost of triumph had been high -- in blood, betrayal, and tragedy. Alexander lost Barsine, his first beloved; Bucephalus, a steed unequaled; Peritas, his loyal hound; and Hephaestion, the closest companion of his youth. Still he sought the wisdom and might to transform the empire he had claimed into the one of which he dreamed, no longer divided into victors and vanquished, but a unified people under his rule. For Alexander was destined for timeless glory in the domain of heroes and gods -- both in his lifetime and in the realm of eternal legend.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Dr. Valerio Massimo Manfredi is an Italian historian, archaeologist, and journalist. The professor of archaeology in the "Luigi Bocconi" University in Milan and a familiar face on European television, he has published a number of scientific articles and essays as well as thirteen novels, including the *Alexander* trilogy and *The Last Legion*. *Alexander* was published in thirty-six languages in fifty-five countries and was sold for a major film production in the U.S., and *The Last Legion* is soon to be a major motion picture starring Colin Firth and Ben Kingsley. Dr. Manfredi is married with two children and lives in a small town near Bologna.

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ONE

The King set off again across the desert, taking the route that led from the Oasis of Ammon directly to the banks of the Nile near Memphis. He rode alone for hours and hours astride his Sarmatian bay, while Bucephalus galloped alongside wearing no halter or tack at all. When Alexander realized just how long their journey was going to take, he sought to spare his horse whenever possible, keen to preserve its strength and vigor.

The march took three weeks under the baking hot sun, and they suffered greatly before the thin green line marking the fertile banks of the Nile came into view. However, Alexander seemed to be immune to exhaustion, hunger and thirst, so immersed was he in his thoughts and in his memories.

His companions tried not to disturb these reveries because they realized he needed to be alone in the midst of those endless, desert spaces, alone with his feeling of infinity, with his anxious dreams of immortality, with the passions of his soul. Only when evening fell was it possible to approach the King, and occasionally some of his friends would enter the tent to speak to him and keep him company while Leptine bathed him.

One day Ptolemy took him by surprise with a question he had been wanting to ask his King and friend for too long: "What did the god Ammon tell you?"

"He called me 'son,'" replied Alexander.

Ptolemy picked up the sponge that had fallen from Leptine's hand and returned it to her. "And what did you ask him?"

"I asked him if all of my father's murderers are dead or whether any of them have survived."

Ptolemy said nothing. He waited for the King to come out of the tub and then placed a towel of clean linen over his shoulders and began rubbing him dry. When Alexander turned, his friend looked firmly and deeply into his eyes and asked him, "So do you still love Philip, your father, now that you have become a god?"

Alexander sighed. "If you weren't here before me now, I would say that this question had come from Callisthenes or Cleitus the Black....Give me your sword."

Ptolemy looked at him in surprise, but he did not dare reply. He simply unsheathed his sword and held it out.

Alexander took the weapon and cut the skin on his arm with the sharp metal point so that a bright red rivulet started trickling down.

"What is this, Ptolemy, if it is not blood?"

"It is indeed blood."

"Quite. It is not the *ichor* which is said to run through the veins of the celestial gods," he continued, reciting from Homer. "Therefore, my friend, try to understand me, and if you love me, then put an end to these pointless jibes."

Ptolemy understood and apologized for having spoken in that way, while Leptine washed the King's arm with wine and put a bandage on the wound.

Alexander saw that his friend was truly sorry and invited him to stay for supper, even though there was not much to eat -- dry bread, dates, and some rather sharp palm wine.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Ptolemy.

"We will travel back to Tyre."

"And then?"

"I do not know. I think Antipater will send me news on what is happening in Greece, and our informers will let us know what Darius is planning. At that stage we will make our decision."

"I know that Eumenes has given you the bad news regarding your brother-in-law, Alexander of Epirus."

"Yes, he has. My sister Cleopatra will be beside herself with grief, and my mother too, for she loved her brother very much."

"But I am sure the greatest grief will be your own. Am I not right?"

"Yes, I believe you are."

"What was it that brought the two of you so close together, apart from your family ties?"

"A great dream we shared. Now the entire weight of that dream lies on my shoulders. One day we will invade Italy, Ptolemy, and we will annihilate the barbarians who killed him."

He poured some wine for his friend and then said, "Would you like to hear some poetry? I have invited Thessalus to keep me company."

"Indeed I would. Which poems have you chosen?"

"Works by a variety of poets, all of which are about the sea. These endless sands around us remind me of the great expanse of the sea, and then all this dryness makes me long for it."

As soon as Leptine had cleared away the two small tables, the actor entered. He wore a stage costume and had makeup on his face -- bister around his eyes, his mouth lined with minium, a red dye to create a bitter expression, like those of the masks from the tragedies. He strummed some subdued chords on his lyre and began:

"O breeze, breeze of the sea,

That wafts swift galleys, ocean's coursers,

Across the surging main!

Where will you bear me, the sorrowful one?"

Alexander listened in the deep silence of the night, enchanted by the voice that was capable of any intonation, of resonating through all human feeling and passion, of imitating the very wind and the crash of thunder.

They sat up until late in the night listening to the voice of the great actor as it mutated through every shade of feeling, wailing through the tears of women, or rising proud as he gave voice to the heroes.

When Thessalus finished, Alexander embraced him. "Thank you," he said, his eyes moist with emotion. "You have evoked the dreams that will come to me this night. Now go and rest -- we have a long march ahead of us tomorrow."

Ptolemy waited up a little longer to drink some wine with Alexander.

"Do you ever think about Pella?" he suddenly asked. "Do you ever think of your mother and your father, of the days when we were boys and we rode all over the hills of Macedon? Of the shining waters of our rivers and our lakes?"

Alexander considered the question for a moment and then replied, "Yes, often, but it's as though they are distant images, like things that happened many, many years ago. Our life is so intense that each hour is like a year."

"This means, then, that we will grow old before our time, does it not?"

"Perhaps, or perhaps not. The lamp that burns brightest in the room is the one that is destined to burn out first, but all those present will remember just how beautiful its light was during its heyday."

He pulled the door of the tent to one side and accompanied Ptolemy outside. The sky over the desert was filled with a myriad of stars and the two young men lifted their eyes to look.

"Perhaps this too is the destiny of the stars that shine brightest in the celestial vault. May your night be a peaceful one, my friend."

"And yours too, *Aléxandre*," replied Ptolemy, as he moved off toward his tent on the edge of the camp.

Five days later they reached the banks of the Nile at Memphis, where Parmenion and Nearchus were waiting for them. That same night Alexander saw Barsine again. She was staying in a sumptuous building that had

belonged to a pharaoh, and her apartments had been arranged on the upper floors. In the evening the northerly winds brought to these rooms a pleasant coolness as they stirred the blue byssus curtains, as light and delicate as butterfly wings.

She waited for him, sitting on an armchair decorated with gold and enamel friezes, dressed in a light gown in the Ionian style. Her black hair with its violet highlights lay loose over her shoulders and she wore light makeup after the Egyptian manner.

The moonbeams and the light of the lamps hidden behind alabaster screens mingled in an atmosphere perfumed with nard and aloe, glowing with amber reflections from the onyx tanks full of water, on the surface of which lotus flowers and rose petals floated. From an openwork screen of stylized ivy branches and gliding birds came the quiet, gentle music of flutes and harps. The walls were completely frescoed with ancient Egyptian pictures representing scenes in which naked maidens danced to the sound of lutes and tambouras before the royal couple on their thrones, and in a corner there was a large bed with a blue canopy supported by four columns of gilded wood, with capitals in the shape of lotus flowers.

Alexander entered and looked long and ardently at Barsine. His eyes were still full of the dazzling-light of the desert, his ears rang with the sacred words of the Oracle of Ammon, his whole body, emanated an aura of magical enchantment: the golden locks falling on his shoulders, his muscled chest with the scars it carried, the changing color of his eyes, his slender, nervous hands with their blue veins. Over his naked body he wore only a light chlamys, held loosely on his left shoulder with an ancient silver buckle, an age-old inheritance of the Argead dynasty, and a golden ribbon around his forehead.

Barsine stood up and immediately felt lost in the light of his gaze, "*Aléxandre...*," she said as he pulled her into his arms and kissed her lips, as full and moist as ripe dates. He pulled her down to the bed and caressed her hips and her warm, perfumed breasts.

But suddenly the King felt her skin go cold and her limbs stiffen under his hands; a menacing air permeated the room, sending all his warrior's senses into alarm. He turned quickly to face the imminent danger and found himself being attacked head-on by a body running toward him. He saw a hand raised as it brandished a dagger, he heard a wild, strident cry reverberate around the walls of the bed-chamber he heard Barsine cry out in grief and in pain.

Alexander quickly pinned the aggressor to the floor, twisting his wrist and forcing him to release the weapon. He could have massacred him there and then with the heavy lamp holder he had instinctively grabbed, but he had recognized the young fifteen-year-old -- Eteocles, Memnon and Barsine's eldest son! The boy struggled and turned like a young lion caught in a trap, shouting all sorts of insults, biting and scratching now that he was unarmed.

The guards burst in, having heard the scuffle, and they took hold of the aggressor. The officer in command understood immediately what had happened and called out, "An attempt on the King's life! Take him below and have him tortured before he's executed."

But Barsine threw herself crying at Alexander's feet. "Save him, my Lord. Spare my son's life, I beg you!"

Eteocles looked at her with contempt written all over his face and then, turning to Alexander, said, "The best thing for you to do is to have me killed, because I will try again and again...a thousand times until I succeed in vindicating the life and honor of my father." He was still shaking, partly because of the excitement and agitation of the scuffle, and partly because of the hatred burning in his heart. The King gestured to the guards

to leave.

"But, Sire -- " protested the officer.

"Out!" said Alexander. "Can't you see he's just a boy?" and the man obeyed. Then the King turned once again to Eteocles. "Your father's honor is fully intact. He died because of a fatal disease."

"It's not true!" shouted the boy. "You had him poisoned and now...now you're trying to take his woman. You are a man with no sense of honor!"

Alexander moved closer and repeated, his voice firm. "I admired your father; I considered him my only worthy adversary and I dreamed of one day fighting him in a duel. I would never have had him poisoned; when I have to deal with my enemies I do so face-to-face, with sword and spear. As for your mother, she has made of me a victim because I think of her every waking moment; I am tormented by the thought of her. Love has all the strength of a god; love is irresistible and invincible. Man knows neither how to avoid it, nor how to escape it, in the same way that ultimately man cannot avoid the sun and the rain, birth and death."

Barsine sobbed in a corner, her face hidden in her hands.

"Have you nothing to say to your mother?" the King asked.

"From the very instant you first laid hands on her, she has no longer been my mother, she is nothing to me now. Kill me, I tell you, it is in the best interests of both of you. Otherwise I shall kill you and I will offer the blood of both your bodies to my father's soul, so that he may find peace in Hades."

Alexander turned to Barsine. "What shall I do?"

Barsine dried her eyes and composed herself. "Let him go free, I beg you. Give him a horse and provisions and let him go. Will you do this for me?"

"I warn you," said the boy once more, "that if you let me go I will speak to the Great King and I will ask him for armor and a sword so that I may fight in his army against you."

"If this is the way it must be, then so be it," replied Alexander. Then he called the guards and issued orders for the boy to be given a horse and provisions before being set free.

Eteocles walked away toward the door, seeking to hide the violent emotions gripping his soul as his mother called out to him. He did stop for an instant, but then turned his back once again, crossed the threshold, and went out into the corridor.

Barsine called out again, "Please wait!" Then she went to a chest and out of it pulled a shining weapon together with its scabbard. She rushed into the corridor and held it out to her son. "It is your father's sword."

The boy took it and held it close to his chest, and as he did so burning tears flowed from his eyes and made tracks down his cheeks.

"Farewell, my son," said Barsine, her voice quavering. "May Ahura Mazda protect you and may your father's gods protect you, too."

Eteocles ran off along the corridor and down the stairs until he came to the courtyard of the palace, where the guards placed a horse's reins in his hands. But just as he was about to leap astride the animal, he saw a shadow emerge from a small side door -- his brother, Phraates.

"Take me with you, I beg you. I won't stay here, a prisoner to these *yauna*," and Eteocles hesitated as his brother continued to plead with him. "Take me with you, I beg of you, I beg you! I don't weigh much, the horse will manage both of us until we find another one."

"I cannot," replied Eteocles. "You are too young and then...someone must stay with our mother. Farewell, Phraates. We will see each other again as soon as this war is over, and I will free you then." He held his tearful younger brother in a long embrace, then he leaped onto the horse and disappeared.

Barsine had witnessed the scene from the window of her bed-chamber and she felt herself wither at the sight of her fifteen-year-old boy galloping off into the night to face the unknown. She cried disconsolately, thinking of just how bitter the fate of human beings can be. Just a short time before she had felt like one of those Olympian goddesses painted and sculpted by the great *yauna* artists, and now she would gladly have changed places with the most humble of slaves.

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