

The life and motives of alexander the great

People



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The Life and Motives of Alexander the Great Many people around the world have heard of Alexander III of Macedon, better known as Alexander the Great. One does not have to be a historian to know of his near deity-like status among the Greeks and other cultures in his time, as there have been books, movies, and other forms of media that tell of his conquests and his rise to prominence as a military commander. This paper will focus on two biographies of Alexander the Great written by two different authors, W. W. Tarn and J. R. Hamilton, and their personal thoughts on Alexander's characterizations and motives. Alexander was born in the summer of 356 BCE and was the son of Philip II and princess Olympias. When Alexander was thirteen his father invited Aristotle, a profound Greek philosopher, to be his son's tutor (Tarn 1). According to J. R. Hamilton in his biography of Alexander he appears to believe that Tarn stresses Alexander's Greek education as the motive in which Alexander thinks and carries out his actions, whereas he (Hamilton) believed it to be more of a result of Alexander's heredity and background, which was Macedonian descent. Hamilton justifies his thinking by pointing out Alexander's predisposition to heavy drinking (especially in his later years) and his ruthlessness at times when conquering his rivals, which were typical characterizations of the Macedonians and his father Philip II (Hamilton 9). Also pointed out by Hamilton was the fact that Tarn significantly denies Alexander's alcoholism and that to Tarn, Alexander was just what you would call, a "social drinker," drinking only when keeping his companion's company (11). Both authors briefly cover Alexander's early life, as Hamilton himself mentions that little is known for certain about Alexander's childhood (31). Tarn tells a story as if it were fact about how Alexander was found, as a boy, "entertaining some Persian envoys by <https://assignbuster.com/the-life-and-motives-of-alexander-the-great/>

questioning them about the routes across Asia" (1). Hamilton however, regarding the same story, mentions that " some of the anecdotes told about him (Alexander)... may be picturesque rather than true, " and proceeds to cite this happening as one of those stories (31). Hamilton, while giving Alexander credit for likely being " an intelligent and inquiring child, " also concludes that if Alexander was as intelligent as other biographers made him out to be, then he most certainly would have left those types of inquiries to other refugees in his father's court at the time (i. e. Artabazus or Memnon) (31). Both Tarn and Hamilton attribute Alexander's mother Olympias as the dominant influence in his early life, as his father Philip was usually fighting in distant locations and not home much except for between battles. Each author, using different but similar words, uses the phrase " she (Olympias) kept her son's love all of his life. " In 336 BCE, Philip II was assassinated while attending a wedding party. Alexander and his mother Olympias were the chief beneficiaries of Philip's death, but neither were charged for the murder of the king. Tarn says Antipater's (a general serving under Philip) attitude regarding the assassination was enough to exonerate Alexander of a conspiracy against his father (3). What Tarn means by Antipater's " attitude" must be that Antipater was the one who brought Alexander to the assembly of people and was one of Philip's generals that declared for Alexander to be Philip's successor as king. Interestingly, Hamilton in his biography says this on the matter: " But, even if this is true... we cannot be sure that Antipater was not privy to the plot" (42). He goes on to say that Antipater was an advisor for Alexander four years prior to Philip's murder in 340 BCE, and was also a close friend to Alexander's childhood tutor Aristotle (42). For Hamilton to include this in his writings it seems that he questions the true nature of

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the assassination, but since Philip's bodyguard and murderer was himself killed while fleeing the crime no one can really know for sure who was involved in the plot. Two years after his father's death, Alexander led his army across the Hellespont in 334 BCE on a campaign to conquer the Persian Empire. He was met with resistance at the Granicus River by a Persian army led by satraps and an army of Greek mercenaries led by Memnon of Rhodes. The first major battle between Alexander and the Persian army was about to take place. Memnon, citing the superiority of the Macedonian phalanx, suggested that the Persians retire and wait for Darius before battling Alexander and his men, but the Persian leaders would not heed his advice and advanced their position to the bank of the river (Hamilton 56). Tarn's interpretation of the Persian leaders not wanting to give up their ground was because " they had in fact a very gallant plan; they meant if possible to strangle the war at birth by killing Alexander" (Tarn 16). While the death of Alexander at the Battle of the Granicus could have greatly altered history, Hamilton suggests that this was not the Persian's primary battle tactic since " this was not the best way to do so, " referring to their positioning and plan of attack on Alexander's army (56). Hamilton further explains that Major-General Fuller's insight on the matter was perhaps more probable. Fuller also wrote a book about Alexander entitled *The Generalship of Alexander the Great*. While Fuller granted that the Persians were indeed aiming to kill Alexander, he believed the more significant reason of their decision to keep their position at the forefront of battle was that the Persian leaders' pride had taken a shot due to Memnon's remarks and that they also might not have completely trusted Memnon and his men (Hamilton 56). Regardless of each biographer's opinion on the Persian's agenda, Alexander and his men

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were victorious at Granicus, and continued their conquest in bringing down the Persian Empire. In the spring of 333 BCE Alexander reached the city of Gordium and before leaving he visited the acropolis to see the legendary chariot of Gordias. It would not seem fitting if Hamilton and Tarn each did not have their own version of Alexander's untying of the Gordian knot, and they do not disappoint. Legend had it that the man who could untie the knot would rule all of Asia. Most versions of the story tell of Alexander drawing his sword and cutting the knot, as Hamilton explains it. He also goes on to say that " whichever method he adopted, he cheated" (64). Conversely, Tarn denies that this could be true in his biography, but states that this version of the story became too famous to change one's mind (22). Tarn leaves it at that and does not offer an explanation of what he believes really happened, but the fact that he does not believe Alexander could have " cheated" attributes to his high opinion of Alexander's character. Alexander was again victorious in a second battle against the Persian army and King Darius III himself in the Battle of Issus following his departure from Gordium. From there he moved south toward Egypt in order to secure the shoreline so Greece would not be under any immediate danger by the Persian army from the sea. On his march toward Egypt he successfully besieged Tyre and Gaza, the only two cities that gave him resistance. Tarn and Hamilton agree and account for very similar events that transpired during this portion of Alexander's life, including Alexander's time in Egypt and the founding of perhaps the most famous of all his cities, Alexandria. One difference in opinion between the two biographers however, was Alexander's journey to Siwah to see the oracle. Hamilton writes that Alexander could have very well been informed that the priest at Siwah would greet him as " son of Ammon. "

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If Alexander indeed knew of this information, he could have made the journey so his men could hear this and he could proclaim his divine descent (Hamilton 77). Tarn on the other hand could not have more of a contrasting account on Alexander's visit to the oracle, as he explicitly reports that Alexander made the trip because he was influenced by the story of his ancestors Heracles and Perseus making the same journey, so it was more to honor tradition. Not only that, but Tarn writes " he (Alexander) certainly did not go... to be recognized as a god for the Greek world or for anything else" (Tarn 43). From Siwah, Alexander and his men marched to Memphis, where he set up a government for Upper and Lower Egypt and appointed two native governors instead of a satrap. All throughout Alexander's conquest he was attempting to Hellenize (spread ancient Greek culture) to cities and cultures as he moved through the Middle East into Asia, and Tarn gives much credit to Alexander for this in his biography. In 331 BCE, Alexander met Darius' army on a battlefield not far from the town of Guagamela in what turned out to be the final blow to the Persian army. Alexander's army, though outnumbered five to one according to ancient estimates was victorious at the Battle of Guagemela, and although Darius was not killed in this battle, he soon was killed by two of his own men while on the run from Alexander's hot pursuit. Tarn says Alexander barely stopped to rest during the pursuit because " he was determined that the enemy should never reform as an army (51). King Darius' death opened up the path to Alexander's conquest into Asia, for Alexander was not yet finished with his journey " to the ends of the earth. " Proceeding Darius' death Alexander acknowledged himself as his successor and called himself Lord of Asia (Tarn 59). In the years that passed, Alexander and his men traveled east toward India making stops in Persepolis <https://assignbuster.com/the-life-and-motives-of-alexander-the-great/>

and Susa. The accounts during this time frame are also very similar according to both biographers. Both men attribute to Alexander's swift acts of judgment on anyone who put his own safety in danger (i. e. Philotas, Parmenio). Hamilton even mentions and agrees with Tarn's evaluation of the execution of Parmenio as " plain murder" (Hamilton 96). Tarn and Hamilton also write about similar events when dealing with Alexander murdering of Cleitus the Black at Maracanda in the summer of 328 BCE, and later the execution of Callisthenes (Alexander's " publicist"). In 326 some of the Indian clans who did not want to submit to Alexander's authority, formed an army and waited for Alexander's army in the kingdom of Porus along the Hydaspes River. They amassed an army that included not only infantry and cavalry, but war elephants as well. The battle that ensued is consistent among Tarn and Hamilton for the most part, except for one strategic detail. Hamilton suggests that in an effort to even the odds in battle formation, Alexander concentrated all his cavalry on his right wing to compel Porus to move his cavalry accordingly to even the odds; " not, as Tarn suggests, by enticing them to attack his force, inferior after Coenus' departure (from battle)" (Hamilton 114). Alexander was again victorious in this battle but his losses were great, including the death of his beloved horse Bucephalas which he had ridden since childhood. In honor of his horse he named one of the two cities he founded in this region after him, Bucephala. Though Alexander's intentions may have been to keep moving east as far as the ocean, his men were tired and would not follow so he planned to return to Babylon to rest and regroup. Tarn also argued that Alexander had not decided to abandon his Indian conquest by his march back to the west, but fully intended to link his eastern conquests with the west both by sea and by land (124). In 324

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while in Opis, Alexander encountered a revolt from his men when attempting to unite his Macedonian and Persian empires by marrying the daughter of Darius. In the presence of 9,000 men, Alexander is said to have spoken a prayer. Hamilton says that Alexander prayed for "harmony and partnership in rule between Macedonians and Persians," and not for the "brotherhood of man" as he says Tarn eloquently misinterpreted (Hamilton 143). In this same year while in Ecbatana, Alexander's dearest companion Hephaestion died after battling a fever for seven days, some believe it may have been typhoid. Both Tarn and Hamilton document that Alexander's grief was uncontrollable and Hephaestion's death caused him great sorrow. Following Hephaestion's death, Alexander was not the same and became increasingly suspicious of plots against him. This demeanor of Alexander is shared by both Hamilton and Tarn, as Tarn even writes "The Alexander of 324 was not the Alexander of 334" (Hamilton 164). After some brief expeditions from 324-323 BCE, Alexander himself fell ill with a fever and after several days of battling it he died on June 10, 323 BCE in Babylon at the palace of Nebuchadnezzar II at the young age of 32 (Hamilton 152). Tarn, as insignificant as this may be, says Alexander died on June 13, 323 BCE (120). Tarn and Hamilton as you can see each had some differences in opinion and views on Alexander's life and character, but each gives him much credit for what he was able to accomplish on his conquest. "That he was great general is certain" (Tarn 125). More than just being great general though, Alexander was a pragmatic politician (Hamilton 163). He is responsible for the founding of many cities and unifying cultures through establishing government and marriage among many other things. The impact Alexander the Great had on the known world with his "policy of fusion" is hard to comprehend, but thanks to historians <https://assignbuster.com/the-life-and-motives-of-alexander-the-great/>

such as Tarn and Hamilton we can learn and attempt to understand what an important figure Alexander was/is to the world we live in currently as well.

Works Cited Hamilton, J. R. Alexander the Great. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973. eBook. Tarn, W. W. Alexander the Great. Boston: Beacon Press, 1966. Print.