Plutarch (c. 45-120 AD) produced several biographies of great figures from the ancient world and remains a key source for historians about that period. Plutarch was from the Greek town Chaeronea, and was one of the two priests at the temple of Apollo at Delphi responsible for interpreting the auspices of the Oracle. He was something of a celebrity in his own time, and the Romans loved to read his writing and listen to his speeches. He was regarded as one of the great thinkers of Rome’s golden age. Below is a selection of excerpts from his biography of Alexander the Great.

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Philonicus the Thessalian brought the horse Bucephalus to Philip, offering to sell him for thirteen talents; but when they went into the field to try him, they found him so very vicious and unmanageable, that he reared up when they endeavored to mount him, and would not so much as endure the voice of any of Philip's attendants. Upon which, as they were leading him away as wholly useless and untractable, Alexander, who stood by, said, "What an excellent horse do they lose for want of address and boldness to manage him!" Philip at first took no notice of what he said; but when he heard him repeat the same thing several times, and saw he was much vexed to see the horse sent away, "Do you reproach," said he to him, "those who are older than yourself, as if you knew more, and were better able to manage him than they?" "I could manage this horse," replied he, "better than others do." "And if you do not," said Philip, "what will you forfeit for your rashness?" "I will pay," answered Alexander, "the whole price of the horse." At this the whole company fell a-laughing; and as soon as the wager was settled amongst them, he immediately ran to the horse, and taking hold of the bridle, turned him directly towards the sun, having, it seems, observed that he was disturbed at and afraid of the motion of his own shadow; then letting him go forward a little, still keeping the reins in his hands, and stroking him gently when he found him begin to grow eager and fiery, he let fall his upper garment softly, and with one nimble leap securely mounted him, and when he was seated, by little and little drew in the bridle, and curbed him without either striking or spurring him. Presently, when he found him free from all rebelliousness, and only impatient for the course, he let him go at full speed, inciting him now with a commanding voice, and urging him also with his heel. Philip and his friends looked on at first in silence and anxiety for the result, till seeing him turn at the end of his career, and come back rejoicing and triumphing for what he had performed, they all burst out into acclamations of applause; and his father shedding tears, it is said, for joy, kissed him as he came down from his horse, and in his transport said, "O my son, look thee out a kingdom equal to and worthy of thyself, for Macedonia is too little for thee."

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The king had a present of Grecian fruit brought him from the sea-coast, which was so fresh and beautiful that he was surprised at it, and called Clitus to him to see it, and to give him a share of it. Clitus was then sacrificing, but he immediately left off and came, followed by three sheep, on whom the drink-offering had been already poured preparatory to sacrificing them. Alexander, being informed of this, told his diviners,
Aristander and Cleomantis the Lacedaemonian, and asked them what it meant; on whose assuring him it was an ill omen, he commanded them in all haste to offer sacrifices for Clitus’ safety, forasmuch as three days before he himself had seen a strange vision in his sleep, of Clitus all in mourning, sitting by Parmenio’s sons who were dead. Clitus, however, stayed not to finish his devotions, but came straight to supper with the king, who had sacrificed to Castor and Pollux. And when they had drunk pretty hard, some of the company fell a-singing the verses of one Pranichus, or as others say of Pierion, which were made upon those captains who had been lately worsted by the barbarians, on purpose to disgrace and turn them to ridicule. This gave offence to the older men who were there, and they upbraided both the author and the singer of the verses, though Alexander and the younger men about him were much amused to hear them, and encouraged them to go on, till at last Clitus, who had drunk too much, and was besides of a forward and willful temper, was so nettled that he could hold no longer, saying it was not well done to expose the Macedonians before the barbarians and their enemies, since though it was their unhappiness to be overcome, yet they were much better men than those who laughed at them. And when Alexander remarked, that Clitus was pleading his own cause, giving cowardice the name of misfortune, Clitus started up: “This cowardice, as you are pleased to term it,” said he to him, “saved the life of a son of the gods, when in flight from Spithridates’s sword; it is by the expense of Macedonian blood, and by these wounds, that you are now raised to such a height as to be able to disown your father Philip, and call yourself the son of Ammon.” “Thou base fellow,” said Alexander, who was now thoroughly exasperated, “dost thou think to utter these things everywhere of me, and stir up the Macedonians to sedition, and not be punished for it?” “We are sufficiently punished already,” answered Clitus, “if this be the recompense of our toils, and we must esteem theirs a happy lot who have not lived to see their countrymen scourged with Median rods and forced to sue to the Persians to have access to their king.”

While he talked thus at random, and those near Alexander got up from their seats and began to revile him in turn, the elder men did what they could to compose the disorder. Alexander, in the meantime turning about to Xenodochus, the Pardian, and Artemius, the Colophonian, asked him if they were not of opinion that the Greeks, in comparison with the Macedonians, behaved themselves like so many demigods among wild beasts. But Clitus for all this would not give over, desiring Alexander to speak out if he had anything more to say, or else why did he invite men who were freeborn and accustomed to speak their minds openly without restraint to sup with him. He had better live and converse with barbarians and slaves who would not scruple to bow the knee to his Persian girdle and his white tunic. Which words so provoked Alexander that, not able to suppress his anger any longer, he threw one of the apples that lay upon the table at him, and hit him, and then looked about for his sword. But Aristophanes, one of his life-guard, had hid that out of the way, and others came about him and besought him, but in vain; for, breaking from them, he called out aloud to his guards in the Macedonian language, which was a certain sign of some great disturbance in him, and commanded a trumpeter to sound, giving him a blow with his clenched fist for not instantly obeying him; though afterwards the same man was commended for disobeying an order which would have put the whole army into tumult and confusion. Clitus still refusing to yield, was with much trouble forced by his friends out of the room. But he came in again immediately at another door, very irreverently and confidently singing the verses out of Euripides’s Andromache,-
"In Greece, alas! how ill things ordered are Upon this, at last, Alexander, snatching a spear from one of the soldiers met Clitus as he was coming forward and was putting by the curtain that hung before the door, and ran him through the body. He fell at once with a cry and a groan. Upon which the king's anger immediately vanishing, he came perfectly to himself, and when he saw his friends about him all in a profound silence, he pulled the spear out of the dead body, and would have thrust it into his own throat, if the guards had not held his hands and by main force carried him away into his chamber, where all that night and the next day he wept bitterly, till being quite spent with lamenting and exclaiming, he lay as it were speechless, only fetching deep sighs. His friends apprehending some harm from his silence, broke into the room, but he took no notice of what any of them said, till Aristander putting him in mind of the vision he had seen concerning Clitus, and the prodigy that followed, as if all had come to pass by an unavoidable fatality, he then seemed to moderate his grief.

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And now a general assembly of the Greeks was held at the Isthmus, where a vote was passed to make an expedition against Persia with Alexander, and he was proclaimed their leader. And now, wishing to consult the god concerning the expedition against Asia, he went to Delphi; and since he chanced to come on one of the inauspicious days, when it is not lawful to deliver oracles, in the first place he sent a summons to the prophetess. And when she refused to perform her office and cited the law in her excuse, he went up himself and tried to drag her to the temple, whereupon, as if overcome by his ardor, she said: "Thou art invincible, my son!" On hearing this, Alexander said he desired no further prophecy, but had from her the oracle which he wanted.

As to the number of his forces, those who put it at the smallest figure mention thirty thousand foot and four thousand horse; those who put it at the highest, forty-three thousand foot and five thousand horse. To provision these forces, Aristobulus says he had not more than seventy talents; Duris speaks of maintenance for only thirty days; and Onesicritus says he owed two hundred talents besides.

With such an appalling lack of money and with the government still in confusion a young man just barely beyond boyhood had the audacity to entertain thoughts of Babylon and Susa, and even of an empire embracing all mankind. Then Alexander must have been an unthinking hothead to challenge such a formidable power with this meager resources? Not at all. Did anyone ever start out for war with greater or better preparation for succeeding than nobility of character, intelligence, self-mastery and courage – with which philosophy had equipped him for his journey? He crossed over against the Persians with greater resources furnished by his teacher Aristotle than by his father Philip. In fact there are writers who allege that Alexander once said that he had brought the Iliad and the Odyssey along as a provision for the army; and we believe them, honoring Homer. And if anyone maintains that he only used Homer for relaxation after toil and as a pleasant way of diverting his leisure moments, but that his real provision for the journey lay in the philosophic doctrines, in discourses on fearlessness and valor, of self-mastery and on high-mindedness we look on this with scorn. There were famous philosophers like Pythagoras, or Socrates, or Arcesilaus or Carneades who wrote nothing. And these men were not occupied with such great wars, or civilizing barbarian princes, or establishing Greek cities among savage peoples, nor did they
continue pressing on against lawless and ignorant tribes in order to instruct them in law and peace. Then why are they believed to have been philosophers? Because of what they said, how they lived and what they taught. Then let Alexander be judged on the same basis and he will be revealed as a philosopher by what he said, by what he did and by what he taught.

Thanks to Alexander, Homer was read in Asia, and the sons of Persia, Susiana, and Gedrosia sang the choruses of Euripides and Sophocles. Now Socrates was brought to judgment for introducing foreign gods by informers in Athens, but Alexander caused Bactra and the Caucasus to worship the gods of Greece. While Plato drew up a single form of government which was so strict he could induce no one to adopt it, Alexander, by founding more than seventy cities among the barbarian tribes, and seeding Asia with Greek outposts, suppressed their savage and uncivilized customs. Although a few of us read about the laws of Plato, countless numbers have adopted and continue to use the laws of Alexander. Those whom Alexander conquered were more fortunate than those who escaped, because there was no one to correct their foolish way of life, while the conqueror forced his subjects to live in prosperity.

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Now Demaratus of Corinth, the mercenary and a friend of Philip’s, wept tears of joy when he saw Alexander in Susa, exclaiming that those Greeks who had died earlier had been robbed of great happiness since they had not seen Alexander sitting on Darius’ throne. But I, by Zeus, do not envy those who saw a spectacle which is associated with Fortune and lesser kings, but I think I would have been more pleased at the fair and blessed sight of the marriage procession when, bringing together 100 Persian brides and 100 Greek and Macedonian grooms into a single tent bedecked with gold, with a single hearth and a single table, he was the first, crowned with flowers, to raise the hymeneal song, singing as it were a song of friendship, while he joined together the greatest and most powerful peoples into one community by wedlock.

. . . For he did not cross Asia like a robber, nor did he have it in mind to ravage and despoil it for the booty and loot present ed by such an unheard-of stroke of fortune – the way Hannibal treated Italy later on, or the way the Treres acted earlier in Ionia or the Scythians in Media. Instead he conducted himself as he did out of a desire to subject all the races in the world to one rule and one form of government, making all mankind a single people. Had not the divinity that sent Alexander recalled his soul so soon, there would have been a single law, as it were, watching over all mankind, and all men would have looked to one form of justice as their common source of light. But now, that portion of the world that never beheld Alexander has remained as if deprived of the sun.

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Let us examine what he said, since other kings and rulers reveal their character by the spirit of their pronouncements: When he talked to Diogenes himself, in Corinth, he was so captivated and overwhelmed by the man’s way of life and reputation that he would often refer to him later, saying:

“If I were not Alexander, I would like to be Diogenes! If I did not intend to blend the customs of the Greeks and the barbarians; to cross every continent and tame it; to
search out the farthest points of land and sea; to make Ocean the boundary of Macedon; and if I did not mean to transplant the peace and the justice of Greece to every people, even then I would not waste my energies in useless luxury, but I would emulate the frugality of Diogenes. But now, Diogenes, excuse me. I am imitating Hercules, rivaling Perseus and following in the footsteps of Dionysus, the ancestor of my line. I wish to bring the chorus of victorious Greeks to India once more, and to renew the memory of Bacchic revels among the wild mountainous peoples beyond the Caucasus. And there are said to be holy men in those parts who live under laws of their own, a rough and naked sect devoting their lives to the god. They are even more self-denying than Diogenes, in that they require no wallet, for they do not save any food since the land continually provides them with a fresh supply. Flowing rivers furnish them with drink, trees shed their foliage over them and herbs of the field serve them as a bed. Thanks to me they will come to know of Diogenes, and Diogenes of them. I, too, must coin money, and stamp the form of a Greek constitution on a barbarian mold."

Well then, do his deeds appear to be primarily the result of chance? Power in war? Government by force? Do they not rather suggest the great courage and justice, the great self-control and mildness of one who does everything in an orderly and intelligent manner and in accordance with a sober and sagacious plan?