Alexander the Great

Alexander the Great's father, Philip, was the brother of King Perdiccas III of Macedon or Macedonia, in northern Greece. In 359 BCE, King Perdiccas died. His young son Amyntas was expected to succeed him, with Philip as his regent, but Philip usurped his nephew's throne, making himself King Philip II. He proved to be a strong ruler, and in a few decades he conquered most of Greece.

Philip's wife was Olympias, daughter of King Neoptolemus I of Epirus, which was located in what is now southern Albania and northwest Greece. Their son Alexander was born in 356 BCE. Alexander also had a younger sister, Cleopatra (not the famous Egyptian queen).

Unfortunately for Alexander and Cleopatra, their parents hated each other. In keeping with Macedonian tradition, Philip had several lesser wives, and Olympias regarded these other women and their children with great animosity. When one of her rivals gave birth to a mentally challenged son, Philip Arridaeus, it was rumored that Olympias had caused his disability with poison. Olympias told Alexander that Philip wasn't his real father, but this probably wasn't true. Philip certainly seems to have believed that Alexander was his son. He made sure the boy was well educated; the great philosopher Aristotle was one of Alexander's tutors. But Philip wasn't a particularly kind father. Alexander had a high-pitched voice, and Philip once told him that he should be embarrassed by it.

In his childhood or teens Alexander became friends with a handsome boy his age named Hephaestion. It is possible that they were lovers. Homosexuality was accepted in Greece at that time; Alexander's father had many male lovers. All that is known for sure is that Alexander and Hephaestion remained devoted to each other throughout their lives.

A Bold and Angry Prince

When Alexander was 16 his father went away to war, leaving Alexander to serve as regent of Macedon. During Philip's absence Alexander led an expedition to a wild region of modern day Bulgaria, where he subdued rebellious barbarians and established his first city, Alexandropolis. After this triumph he became a general in his father's army. But things were tense between father and son. On one occasion Philip was injured by rioting soldiers. He fell to the ground and played dead while Alexander shielded him and fought off his attackers. Yet Philip never acknowledged that Alexander had saved his life, which Alexander resented.

Alexander was prone to temper tantrums. One of them took place at a feast held to celebrate his father's marriage to his final wife. The bride's uncle, Attalus,
toasted the couple, saying that he hoped his niece would give birth to a
legitimate heir to the throne. "What about me? Am I a bastard?" Alexander
shouted, hurling his goblet at Attalus. Attalus threw his own goblet back and a
general brawl ensued, during which Alexander and his father snarled at each
other. History does not record what they said, but it was enough to enrage
Philip. He pulled his sword, lunged at Alexander - and fell drunkenly to the floor.
"Look, men," Alexander sneered, "he's about to cross from Europe to Asia, and he
falls crossing from couch to couch." (Philip was planning to invade Asia Minor.)

After this incident Alexander and his mother left Macedon. Later they
reconciled with Philip and returned home, but Alexander continued to mistrust
his father. When Philip arranged for his mentally challenged son Alexander
Arridaeus to marry the daughter of a Persian satrap (governor), Alexander
feared that this meant Philip intended to make Arridaeus his successor. In a
panic Alexander secretly schemed to marry the satrap's daughter himself. Philip
learned of the plot and placed Alexander under house arrest. He banished all of
Alexander's friends, except Hephaestion, from the kingdom, and decided to
divorce Olympias, who had encouraged the plot in the first place. Philip
smoothed things over with Olympias's brother, the king of Epirus, by giving him
his daughter Cleopatra's hand in marriage, despite the fact that Cleopatra was
the king's own niece.

In celebration of this marriage a great festival was arranged. An opening
ceremony was to be held in a theater. As Philip was entering the theater he was
stabbed in the heart by the captain of his bodyguard, Pausanias. The assassin
fled across a vineyard behind the theater. He tripped and fell, and was killed at
once by three of the king's bodyguards. Not surprisingly, many people suspected
that Olympias and/or Alexander had played some part in Philip's death. Many
historians believe Olympias and Alexander were innocent.

**King and Conqueror**

After his father's murder in 336 BCE, Alexander became King Alexander III. He
had several rival claimants to the throne executed, including his cousin
Amyntas, whose throne Philip had usurped (taken). However, he spared the life
of his half-brother, Arridaeus. Olympias, too, rid herself of enemies. Philip's last
bride had given birth to her second daughter, and Olympias is said to have had
the child killed in the mother's presence before forcing the unhappy woman to
hang herself.

Alexander became king when he was 20 years old. He was an exceptionally
handsome man who set a fashion for the clean-shaven look. Although he was a
heavy drinker, his health was excellent and he was very athletic. He enjoyed
reading, music, and the theater. He was intensely loyal to his friends and the
men he led. And he was, of course, a brilliant general.
Soon after taking the throne Alexander proceeded with Philip's planned war on Persia. In a few years he conquered most of Asia Minor. He was called "Lord of Asia," a title he had chosen for himself.

Because Alexander wanted the Persians to accept him as their leader, he tried to treat them fairly. But his impulsiveness, caused by his bad temper and hard drinking, sometimes got in the way of his good intentions. According to one account Alexander decided to sack the Persian city of Persepolis after a courtesan suggested it at a drunken party. The city and its palace were reduced to rubble. The king of Persia, Darius III, fled from Persepolis and Alexander pursued him. Darius appealed to a satrap named Bessus for help, but Bessus and his allies killed Darius. Some believe this was at Darius's request, while others believe Bessus was a traitor who realized that as long as Darius lived Alexander would continue to wreak havoc around Persia. Alexander brought Darius's body back to the ruins of Persepolis and gave him a grand funeral. Then he had Bessus hunted down, publicly flogged, and executed for Darius's murder.

Alexander's attempts to appease the Persians, along with his increasing power and ego, antagonized some of the men around him. The son of one of his most trusted generals became involved in a plot to assassinate him. Although the general had no part in the conspiracy, he was executed along with his son, which did not please Alexander's soldiers. Later another general insulted Alexander at a party and Alexander killed him on the spot.

In 327 BCE Alexander captured a group of rebels and fell in love with the chief's daughter, Roxane. They were married and Roxane soon became pregnant, but the child was stillborn. Due to his constant campaigns Alexander had little time to spend with his wife, and it was four years before she became pregnant again. After marrying Roxane, Alexander invaded India and conquered much territory there. Following one bloody battle (which his forces won) his men refused to go any further. Reluctantly Alexander agreed to turn back. He attacked many cities on the march home; during a battle at Mali he took an arrow in the chest and almost died.

In the winter of 325-324 BCE he returned to Persia. Finding that several of his governors had abused their authority in his absence, he had them executed. To promote harmony between his people and the Persians he ordered 80 of his most important men to marry highborn Persian women in traditional Persian wedding ceremonies. He himself married King Darius's daughter, who was named either Barsine or Stateira (he was still married to Roxane). His best friend, Hephaestion, married Barsine's sister Drypetis. Alexander also began promoting Persians to high ranking positions in his army, saying that Persians and Macedonians should share the empire. His efforts to create unity failed; even the marriages between his men and the Persians mostly broke up after Alexander's death.
But Alexander was not forgotten in Persia. He was remembered as Sikander or Iskander and was called Dhul Quarayn, or "the Two-Horned," possibly because he was once depicted on a coin wearing a helmet with horns.

In the fall of 324 BCE Alexander's beloved friend Hephaestion died. Alexander was heartbroken. The following summer Alexander too became ill, and on June 13 323 BCE he died in Babylon. He was 32. Modern historians have long suspected that he died from malaria, but recently it has been suggested that the culprit was typhoid fever.

The Diadochi

Roxane was pregnant when Alexander died. It is possible that Barsine was also pregnant, which may explain why Roxane dealt with Barsine so ruthlessly. After Alexander's death Roxane sent a letter to the Persian princess in Alexander's name (Barsine would not have known he was dead yet), telling Barsine to come at once to Babylon. When Barsine and her sister Drypetis arrived in Babylon, Roxane had them murdered and their bodies cast into a well. Roxane gave birth to a son, Alexander Aegus, who became King Alexander IV. Alexander the Great's mentally challenged half brother, Arridaeus, was his nephew's co-king until Olympias had Arridaeus murdered. One of Alexander's generals, Perdiccas, was the kings' first regent.

The empire was soon torn apart by the power struggles of Alexander the Great's former advisors and generals, collectively called the Diadochi (Greek for "successors"). In 321 BCE Perdiccas was killed by mutinous soldiers and replaced as regent by his rival Antipater. In 319 Antipater died and was succeeded as regent by Polyperchon, who was quickly ousted by Antipater's son Cassander.

Olympias had been opposed to Antipater's regency and she tried to oppose his son. In 317 BCE she made herself regent, but Cassander overthrew her. His soldiers couldn't bring themselves to kill the mother of Alexander the Great, so Cassander turned Olympias over to some vengeful relatives of people she had murdered, and they executed the queen.

In time Roxane and her son were also killed by Cassander, who became the king of Macedon in 305 BCE. Alexander Aegus was 13 when he died. Nothing else is known about him.