



Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.E.)

by Louis Godbout

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King of Macedonia and conqueror of a kingdom extending from Greece to Persia, Egypt and India, Alexander the Great is one of the most fascinating men of all times. He was not only a great soldier, but he was also renowned for his love of his comrade-in-arms Hephaestion.

The handsome and courageous Alexander was already, in antiquity, the subject of many histories, some written by people who had known him, most unfortunately lost. The irrefutable achievements of his short life are so extraordinary that they seem almost legendary. It is therefore difficult to distinguish the truth from the many myths that coalesced around such an appealing figure.

Alexander's father Philip was himself a brilliant general who had greatly strengthened his kingdom and brought it to dominate the Greek city-states; his dream was to lead them against the Persian Empire, the arch-rival under whose rule Greek colonies on the coast of Asia had fallen.

Philip undoubtedly felt very early on that his son, who was born in 356 B.C.E., had exceptional potential, for he hired Aristotle to be the boy's tutor, even though the cost incurred was the rebuilding of Stagira, the philosopher's hometown, which had been razed and its population sold into slavery.

Examples of Philip's trust in Alexander's abilities abound. When his son was but sixteen, Philip made him regent of Macedonia while he was away on campaign. When Alexander was eighteen, he led the Companions, the cavalry that constituted the left wing of Philip's army, at the decisive battle of Chaeronea against the alliance of Thebes and Athens.

In spite of Philip's confidence in Alexander, the father and son had a tumultuous relationship. Alexander was torn between parents who had come to hate each other.

His mother Olympias was the willful and proud daughter of a king of Epirus, who traced her ancestry back to Achilles' son Neoptolemus and Hector's widow Andromache. But this glorious lineage was not sufficient for the pragmatic Philip, who married many times in order to seal other alliances and sire heirs. This situation was unacceptable to the jealous Olympias, who coaxed Alexander to stand by her side and defy his father.

This would have been shaky emotional ground for Alexander's ambitions to rest on; fortunately, he found a bedrock of support in his friends. Many of the noblemen with whom he was raised and tutored were to become his comrades in arms, his generals, and the governors of his empire.

One of them, Hephaestion, was clearly his lover. Alexander, like many ancient Greeks, cultivated an ideal of heroic friendship that did not exclude sexual expression. He carried with him on his conquests a copy of the *Iliad*, and sought to emulate its heroes. When he first crossed into Asia and reached Troy, he sacrificed on the tomb of Achilles while Hephaestion did the same on that of Patroclus.



An ancient bust of Alexander the Great. Photograph by Andrew Dunn. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike License.

So close did Alexander feel to Hephaestion that when the captured women of the Persian King's household mistakenly threw themselves at Hephaestion's feet rather than at his own, he found no offense in this and excused them by saying that his friend was another Alexander. Finally, his grief at the death of Hephaestion, one year before his own, was also--in its intensity and public display--to parallel that of the Homeric lovers.

Pederasty was a pervasive aspect of Greek society and an especially important feature of military life. Before his reign, Philip had been a hostage in Thebes, at the time that Epaminondas had formed the Sacred Band, an army of lovers who would stand by each other at all costs. Ironically, it was this battalion that Alexander and Philip annihilated at Chaeronea and to whom they paid homage by building a memorial that stands to this day.

Pederasty also played a role in bringing Alexander to the throne unexpectedly early, in 336 B.C.E., when Philip was murdered by Pausanias, a slighted male youth whom he had taken as a lover.

Apart from Hephaestion, we know of one other love of Alexander's, the young and beautiful Bagoas (the name he is known by is Persian for "eunuch"). According to Plutarch, in 325 B.C.E. at Gedrosia, in one of the many feasts and games organized to celebrate victories or the submission of cities or entire regions, Bagoas, after winning the dancing competition, joined Alexander to sit by him, whereupon the Macedonian soldiers raised a ruckus demanding that they kiss, which they did.

Alexander as a youth was reluctant to marry, though he later did so for political reasons; he forced many of his top generals to do likewise. The last of his marriages, with Roxane, a Sogdian chieftain's daughter, was not without sentiment and was to give him an heir, eventually slaughtered in the chaos that followed his death at Babylon in 323 B.C.E.

Because his reign was brief, it is difficult to determine whether Alexander is best regarded as an enlightened conqueror open to different cultures (as enthusiasts have painted him), or as an anti-democratic, overambitious, and vain warrior (as his detractors suggest). If he did show some very dramatic failings and excesses, such as his setting fire to the palace of Persepolis, they were due to his abuse of drink and he expressed much regret for them.

The homosexual aspect of Alexander's life was so public that it could not be obfuscated, even at times of extreme homophobia. Alexander was a model for other homosexual or bisexual soldier-kings, such as Julius Caesar, Hadrian, and Frederick the Great. His devotion to his lover serves as a counterpoint to the sexual follies and frenzies of other homosexual historical figures such as Nero or Elagabalus.

The story of Alexander the Great has appealed to liberated gay men and lesbians, as evidenced by the phenomenal success of the historical fiction based on his life and exploits by lesbian author Mary Renault and gay male author Roger Peyrefitte.

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About the Author

Louis Godbout is a collector and amateur historian. He is a longtime member of the Archives gaies du Québec and has participated in the preparation of several exhibits in Montreal. He has also produced three multi-media lectures that reflect his varied interests: *Beaux enfants de Sodome*, on eighteenth-century sodomitical imagery; *Ébauches et débauches*, on gay French literature from 1859 to 1939; and *Le rideau rose*, on French gay and lesbian theater before 1969.