



## I. THE VIEW FROM THE RIDGE

Under the scorching September sun, Colin Farrell and three supporting filmstars steadied their horses on a hill-ridge in Morocco and prepared to look across the desert-valley which swept away in the distance. The four of them had ridden up to play Alexander the Great and his officers on the verge of the battle of Gaugamela which would change the course of history. Two thousand three hundred years ago, in late September 331 BC, Alexander and his officers had also ridden out on reconnaissance, looking out from just such a vantage-point at the massive army of the Persian King Darius with whom, on October 1st, they would engage their far smaller army in a battle for the mastery of Asia.

Unlike Alexander and his men, Farrell and his officers had only learned to ride their horses a month before. Like Alexander, they were not using stirrups, but unlike Alexander they had small leather saddles tucked beneath their horses' covering blankets. Like Alexander's men they had been prepared on a harsh routine of physical training but whereas Alexander's troops had trained for more than twenty five years, they had only been in a boot-camp for the past three weeks. Unlike Alexander's troops, they had been denied breakfast and women throughout. In silence, Colin and his guards had to size up the enemy's enormous numbers with a cool and confident gaze. However, it was particularly difficult to give one, because in the valley beyond them not a single tent or soldier was to be seen. Every one of the 200,000 enemy warriors was to be added later to the film-shot by 'visual effects' in the post-production phase.

For Colin, it was a first attempt at representing a character of history, let alone the greatest of all heroes from a distant ancient world. His heavy black horse, Bonze, was also a newcomer, having only been broken to the part of Alexander's Bucephalus since June. As Bonze played with the bit, the film-shot was to be one of Colin and his companions, shown in isolation on their hill. In real life, no shot is ever isolated. Dozens of crew-members busied round to realize it, running electric cables, focussing the cameras, announcing each take through a hand-held loud hailer and placing the specially-constructed camera-crane at an angle to the truck which had carted it up the steep hill-track. On a film-set, as shooting is prepared, everybody focuses on their own job. Up on the ridge there was one exception. In a short-sleeved, single-coloured shirt, with a soft grey hat tilted back on his head, stood the commanding presence of the film, its Director, Oliver Stone.

Four years had now gone by since Oliver last filmed outdoors on location. Each director has his own style and pattern, but the Stone style is famous for sudden improvisations on

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site. Would he move the entire shot round and redistribute his actors in a sequence as yet unspecified in his script? Many directors take the same shot a dozen times in a row without a clear view of which shot will be the valuable one in production. On his camera-monitor, Stone watches exactly what he is taking each time and when he knows he has taken what he wants, he is quick to move on, regardless of the number of possible shots left to him. The filming schedule for 'Alexander' would exploit this skill to the limit: ninety five days, whereas other epics of this scale are allowed about a hundred and twenty.

'Alexander: Day One, Take One, Scene One', the clapper-board announced: during every hour of filming for the next sixteen weeks, the script editor, Sue Field, would be standing at Oliver's side, noting down the points which have to be repeated to keep up continuity and writing down the camera-angles and the comments of Oliver on every single shot. On September 19th, the record began: "Sky-photo for Alexander. Point of view of Eagle [bird to be added later]. Static, then slow right to left drift...Track reveals Ptolemy and Hephaestion in B[ack] G[round]...Very good look from Alexander." "Next shot in sun with 2 actors looking up. Very good. Stutter on pan. Oliver liked a lot." "Next shot: Ptol[emy] looks up to Eagle with L[eft] H[and] up to shade eyes. Camera tracks to C[entre] S[creen] Hephaestion and Ptolemy. Their eye-line is to the Persian army. Cross from Right to Left on track. Good at start. N[ot] V[ery] G[ood] Ptolemy eyeline." From these comments, noted down on hundreds of shots in each of the days of shooting, the continuous epic is then cut and constructed.

What ever would Alexander the Great have made of it all? For nearly thirteen years, from 336 BC until his death on June 10th 323 BC, Alexander had been King of the Macedonians, leading them from their kingdom in northern Greece eastwards into Asia, through what is now Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Iran, on into Afghanistan and north-western India. In three battles, he defeated armies of the Persian Empire, the ruling power in Asia. By the age of 25, he had become Pharaoh of Egypt, master of Babylon and many thousands of times richer than anyone in his Greek world. His aim was to reach the eastern edge of the world, bounded (he believed) by the Outer Ocean. In north-west India his troops would eventually refuse to go on, obliging him to return down the river Indus. He marched them through the south-east Iranian desert and eventually back to Babylon, bringing a chastened army to the site of his former welcome as a conqueror seven years before. But he was still only 32, the self-styled rival, and now the superior, of the heroes of the old Greek myths.

Alexander is the greatest conqueror and military genius in world history, the youthful overthrower of an Empire which had held down Asia for two hundred years. He has the spell of youth and the controversial fascination of a man of vast ambition who died without its aims being fully known. Was he only a conqueror and a killer, striving to master the world to the south and west after the hardships of India had denied him what he believed to be the boundary of the world in the East? Or did he also have a vision, an alarming one perhaps or an integrating one, of a world which he would then rule as its conqueror? And what, in his inner nature, drove him on to take such personal risks in hand-to-hand combat in the front line?





*Alexander (Colin Farrell) reviews the Macedonian phalanx at Gaugamela.*



*Director Oliver Stone, Colin Farrell and the camera crew prepare a tracking shot 'on the ridge'.*





*Wounded Alexander (Colin Farrell) leaves the Indian battle on his Homeric Shield of Achilles.*



*Director Oliver Stone sets up a camera angle with photographic director Rodrigo Prieto.*



His life has an epic sweep, and he himself was alive to the power of epic and drama. Homer's incomparable poem, the *Iliad* (the 'Tales of Troy'), was his constant companion and its scrolls were kept under his pillow (as the film's Roxane discovers). Homer's hero Achilles was his publicly-acknowledged role model. Before his first battle, Alexander went up to the ancient city of Troy, contrary to all the demands of military strategy at that moment. There, he ran naked with his beloved friend, Hephaestion, and put crowns on what were believed to be the tombs of the hero Achilles and his similar friend, Patroclus. From Troy Alexander took what was thought to be the ancient shield of legendary Achilles, like the one described so unforgettably by Homer in his poem. It would accompany Alexander on his march as far as India, just as its replica, designed in six weeks for the film, would support the wounded Colin Farrell when carried from battle against opposing Indians.

These gestures by Alexander have a dramatic ring to them, and like his later successors, Alexander brought a theatrical element to the style of being a king. He quickly became the subject of fiction and legend. People invented a text of his Will, collections of his letters to his mother or to Aristotle, his famous tutor, and stories of marvellous exploits which he never undertook. In Egypt, by the third century AD, they became part of history's best-selling fiction, the 'Romance of Alexander', which was to spread into dozens of languages, a medieval 'Lord of the Rings' during the next thousand years. It described an awesome Alexander who crossed the world in search of immortality and even tried to fly in a basket or explore the ocean-floor in a forerunner of the submarine. One version of this Romance became known in seventh-century Arabia, and so Alexander is mentioned with honour in the Muslim Koran. In its Sura 18, he is praised for his piety and his reception from God of a mastery over all the world: he travelled to the places where the sun rose and set and built a barricade to protect the world from invaders. As a result, Alexander has been a respected figure in art, poetry and legend in the Muslim world. In real life, nonetheless, Alexander also enjoyed and exploited drama for his own and his troops' entertainment. As far as India, he had plays put on to amuse his men and he himself sent for the scripts of the great classic playwrights of Athens's past. Every week, unlike many directors, Oliver Stone would arrange for showings of selected 'dailies', or uncut film-sequences, of his 'Alexander' to his actors and the members of his crew. Alexander would have loved to see 'dailies' of his march and exploits, although they would have been vetted, no doubt, before being shown to his men.

For thirty years and more, Hollywood directors have toyed with the ultimate epic, a film on Alexander the Great. In 2004, it came true, but as Colin Farrell and his guards trotted down from their ridge, completion still seemed a far-off mirage. For Oliver, it had been a carefully-chosen breaking-in, so as to go gently on his actors, but there was also the uplifting sense of a dawn, an adventure with a new beginning. "Fortune favours the bold," he had written as the foreword to his filmscript, taking the words from the Roman poet Virgil's *Aeneid*. By the eighth shot on the ridge, there had been a sudden darkening in the sky behind, and then, a perfect rainbow spanning the view. It seemed a divine omen, like the missing eagle which was to be added to the shot. The gods, perhaps, were on the enterprise's side after all.





*Olympias (Angelina Jolie) offers a tame snake to the frightened child Alexander (Jessie Kamm).*



*Pre-production image of the Lighthouse, one of the seven wonders of the world, to be seen from Ptolemy's balcony in Alexandria.*