

# The Founder of Empires

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D. GRAHAM BURNETT

**A**bu al Hasan 'Ali ibn al-Husain ibn 'Ali ibn 'Abdullah al-Mas'udi, the Baghdad-born chronicler of Abbasid Islam and its peripheries, composed *The Meadows of Gold* in the fourth century after the Prophet's flight to Medina, or around the middle of the tenth century of the Christian calendar. An itinerant encyclopedist with a penchant for historical geography, Mas'udi gave most of his life to a series of peregrinations that traced petals out from the torus of urban, cosmopolitan Iraq. On these lengthy loops through Persia, Yemen, Oman, Syria, Palestine, the Caspian provinces, Egypt, Sind, the Western Deccan, and the marches of Byzantium, he recorded what he saw and heard, writing tales for readers in the capitals of the medieval intellectual world.

Without recourse to a reliable system of copyright, Mas'udi hedged *The Meadows* with a formulaic curse on anyone who dared to misquote or otherwise pervert his stories. It is therefore safest to say only that his account of the founding of Alexandria is not entirely unlike the following:

**A**lexander the Great, having established his power in Macedonia, set out to extend his reach beyond Greece. Arriving on the shores of North Africa, he and his men came upon the remnants of what had once been a great city. In the very center of these ruins stood a commanding marble column, which bore the following inscription in ancient script:

I Cheddad, the son of Ad, the son of Cheddad, the son of Ad, whose arm gave shelter to the Earth—I cut mighty pillars in the distant mountains, bore foundation stones from afar, and built *Irem*, a city without equal.

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This had been my life's work, to build a place of greatness, where noble and generous people, the chosen from all nations, might gather, enjoying a land free from fear, blessed by fortune, beyond the reach of the old disasters. But I met that fate which binds men to renounce their plans, which presses sighs upon them and robs them of peaceful sleep. Thus I departed this place, not driven before a greater king, or taking fearful refuge, but because my time had come. You who stand before these ruins, who know my story, do not be seduced by the promises of this world.

Wisely, Alexander paused to do proper deference to these worthy sentiments. Then he set about assembling the most skilled craftsmen in the world, builders and stonecutters, masons and engineers from every nation, and with their help he began to gather the finest rock from the most distant quarries: marvelous colored stone from Sicily, Crete, Rhodes, and even strange lands beyond the Mediterranean.

Having done so, he traced the plans for a great city on this excellent site above the sea, marking out foundations in the dirt. The outline was many miles in length, and many miles in breadth. All around this perimeter he set his workers, and he arranged for a long cord, strung on pylons, to make the circuit of their camps. This cord Alexander affixed to a bell atop the commanding marble column that stood in the center of everything; at its foot he put his tent. When this large bell was rung, it set precise works in motion, which in turn triggered the long cord to sound smaller bells all the way around the vast ring of the planned walls. In this way Alexander intended to coordinate his men, so that at his signal all the foundation stones of Alexandria might be laid simultaneously at a single auspicious moment, ensuring that the city would have excellent fortune, and stand for all time. With everything thus arranged, Alexander spent his time making astronomical calculations, staying up through the night to observe the stars, and waiting for the perfect conjunction of celestial elements.

After a long night of such labor, Alexander's head grew heavy and he nodded off to sleep. As he dozed, a large crow appeared atop the column beside his tent, and set the bell ringing. Instantly the mechanism went to work, just as Alexander had devised according to the principles of science and the laws of motion: the cord jerked, the little bells sounded around the earthworks of the foundation, and the workers threw themselves into action, laying in the first rank of stones in perfect synchrony, while raising their voices in prayer and supplication. Roused by their cries, Alexander rushed out in confusion, to gaze astonished on what had come to pass. After a silence, he spoke, saying: "I wanted one thing, but God another; and he has rejected what was contrary to his will. I wished to seal this city against fortune, so that it would endure, well-ruled, but God has decided that it shall perish after changing hands many times." With that, he ordered that the construction of the city should continue.

No sooner had the work gotten under way, however, than under cover of night strange and monstrous animals emerged from the sea and wrecked whatever the masons had accomplished. In the morning, contemplating the destruction, Alexander understood that these unusual events confirmed his bleakest prognostications: "And so it begins," he cried. "Already my city is in decay; already her future ruin, decreed by God, is made manifest." Indeed, no progress could be made. So vigilant were these monsters, so fearsome, that two stones stacked in the evening would be found side by side at dawn, regardless of the guards who paced the strand, alert and armed.

Each day this sad spectacle greeted Alexander, who grew more and more troubled, and longed to find some way to protect the city from these depredations. Alone in his tent at night he pondered all these things, until he seized upon a daring strategy. The next morning he called in his carpenters, and had them construct a coffer, six cubits long and five cubits wide. He instructed them to fix panes of clear glass all around the box and carefully to seal the joints with pitch and resin, making them perfectly waterproof. Alexander entered this cell with two of his trusted scribes, fine draftsmen, and he ordered that it should be carried out to sea, weighted with lead, and lowered into the depths by means of stout ropes.

Two large vessels bore this rare machine out onto the main, and, as instructed, the sailors rigged up tackle between their ships, and dropped their precious cargo down to the bottom of the sea. Because the water was very clear, and the glass very pure, Alexander and his two companions could clearly make out many sea creatures, and they soon spotted the monsters, whose form was strangely human, but whose heads were those of a beast of prey. Many of them were carrying implements of destruction—axes, saws, and hammers; and as they came and went on the sea floor, the creatures looked a little like workmen, since their tools were not so different from the ones used by ordinary builders.

Alexander and his men made sketches of these monsters on paper, very exactly, and recorded their hideous features, their size and form. Then the sea explorers yanked the ropes that led to the boats, the signal that the sailors should hoist them to the surface. Up they came, and soon all were back ashore, where Alexander again drew his workmen around him. Showing the images to his most skilled smiths, leatherworkers, and stonemasons, he ordered them to make lifelike models of the sea monsters, faithful in all ways to the hard-won designs. As soon as these large figurines were finished, Alexander had them placed on plinths all along the coast, facing out upon the roiling waves. This done, work on the city began once again.

Night came, and when the sea monsters rose up out of the water, they found themselves face-to-face with their very selves, peering out fiercely at the sea. With a start, they slipped back into the blackness and never showed themselves again.

Once Alexandria stood complete, and its fortifications showed a bold front to the world, Alexander saw to it that the following inscription was cut into the great doors of the main gate:

Behold Alexandria. I wanted to build this city on the imperishable foundation of security and health, to assure its happiness and its good fortune, to see to it that this city would endure. But the Almighty, the king of heaven and earth, the destroyer of peoples, had other ideas. I built the city on solid, even ground, and I buttressed its high walls. I had science, wisdom, and a good path—all gifts from on high. Nothing I touched before this ever failed.

There was more to the inscription, which is said to have included a remarkable description of everything that would befall the city in the future, but the full text did not survive.

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