

## INTRODUCTION TO ARISTOTLE<sup>1</sup>

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### Early life and studies at the Academy

A bust of Aristotle is a nearly ubiquitous ornament in places of high culture in the West.

Aristotle was born at Stageira, a colony of Andros on the Macedonian peninsula of Chalcidice in 384 BC. His father, Nicomachus, was court physician to King Amyntas III of Macedon. It is believed that Aristotle's ancestors held this position under various kings of the Macedons. As such, Aristotle's early education would probably have consisted of instruction in medicine and biology from his father. Little is known about his mother, Phaestis. It is known that she died early in Aristotle's life. When Nicomachus also died, in Aristotle's tenth year, he was left an orphan and placed under the guardianship of his uncle, Proxenus of Atarneus. He taught Aristotle Greek, rhetoric, and poetry (O'Connor *et al.*, 2004). Aristotle was probably influenced by his father's medical knowledge; when he went to Athens at the age of 18, he was likely already trained in the investigation of natural phenomena.

From the age of 18 to 37 Aristotle remained in Athens as a pupil of Plato and distinguished himself at the *Academy*. The relations between Plato and Aristotle have formed the subject of various legends, many of which depict Aristotle unfavorably. No doubt there were divergences of opinion between Plato, who took his stand on sublime, idealistic principles, and Aristotle, who even at that time showed a preference for the investigation of the facts and laws of the physical world. It is also probable that Plato suggested that Aristotle needed restraining rather than encouragement, but not that there was an open breach of friendship. In fact, Aristotle's conduct after the death of Plato, his continued association with Xenocrates and other Platonists, and his allusions in his writings to Plato's doctrines prove that while there were conflicts of opinion between Plato and Aristotle, there was no lack of cordial appreciation or mutual forbearance. Besides this, the legends that reflect Aristotle unfavorably are allegedly traceable to the Epicureans, although some doubt remains of this charge. If such legends were circulated widely by patristic writers such as Justin Martyr and Gregory Nazianzen, the reason lies in the exaggerated esteem Aristotle was held in by the early Christian heretics, not in any well-grounded historical tradition.

### Aristotle as philosopher and tutor

After the death of Plato (347 BC), Aristotle was considered as the next head of the Academy, a position that was eventually awarded to Plato's nephew. Aristotle then went with Xenocrates to the court of Hermias, ruler of Atarneus in Asia Minor, married his niece, Pythias, and with her had a daughter named Pythias after her mother. In 344 BC, Hermias was murdered in a rebellion, and Aristotle went with his family to Mytilene. It is also reported that he stopped on Lesbos and briefly conducted biological research. Then, one or two years later, he was summoned to Pella, the Macedonian capital, by King Philip II of Macedon to become the tutor of Alexander the Great, who was then 13.

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<sup>1</sup> Text from Wikipedia online encyclopedia at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristotle>.

Plutarch wrote that Aristotle not only imparted to Alexander a knowledge of ethics and politics, but also of the most profound secrets of philosophy. We have much proof that Alexander profited by contact with the philosopher, and that Aristotle made prudent and beneficial use of his influence over the young prince (although Bertrand Russell disputes this). Due to this influence, Alexander provided Aristotle with ample means for the acquisition of books and the pursuit of his scientific investigation.

It is possible that Aristotle also participated in the education of Alexander's boyhood friends, which may have included for example Hephæstion and Harpalus. Aristotle maintained a long correspondence with Hephæstion, eventually collected into a book, unfortunately now lost.

According to sources such as Plutarch and Diogenes, Philip had Aristotle's hometown of Stageira burned during the 340s BC, and Aristotle successfully requested that Alexander rebuild it. During his tutorship of Alexander, Aristotle was reportedly considered a second time for leadership of the Academy; his companion Xenocrates was selected instead.

### **Founder and master of the Lyceum**

In about 335 BC, Alexander departed for his Asiatic campaign, and Aristotle, who had served as an informal adviser (more or less) since Alexander ascended the Macedonian throne, returned to Athens and opened his own school of philosophy. He may, as Aulus Gellius says, have conducted a school of rhetoric during his former residence in Athens; but now, following Plato's example, he gave regular instruction in philosophy in a gymnasium dedicated to Apollo Lyceios, from which his school has come to be known as the Lyceum. (It was also called the Peripatetic School because Aristotle preferred to discuss problems of philosophy with his pupils while walking around -- *peripateo* -- the shaded walks -- *peripatoi* -- around the gymnasium).

During the thirteen years (335 BC–322 BC) which he spent as teacher of the Lyceum, Aristotle composed most of his writings. Imitating Plato, he wrote *Dialogues* in which his doctrines were expounded in somewhat popular language. He also composed the several treatises (which will be mentioned below) on physics, metaphysics, and so forth, in which the exposition is more didactic and the language more technical than in the *Dialogues*. These writings succeeded in bringing together the works of his predecessors in Greek philosophy, and how he pursued, either personally or through others, his investigations in the realm of natural phenomena. Pliny the Elder claimed that Alexander placed under Aristotle's orders all the hunters, fishermen, and fowling of the royal kingdom and all the overseers of the royal forests, lakes, ponds and cattle-ranges, and Aristotle's works on zoology make this statement more believable. Aristotle was fully informed about the doctrines of his predecessors, and Strabo asserted that he was the first to accumulate a great library.

During the last years of Aristotle's life the relations between him and Alexander became very strained, owing to the disgrace and punishment of Callisthenes, whom Aristotle had recommended to Alexander. Nevertheless, Aristotle continued to be regarded at Athens as a friend of Alexander and a representative of Macedonia. Consequently, when Alexander's death became known in Athens, and the outbreak occurred which led to the Lamian war, Aristotle shared in the general unpopularity of the Macedonians. The charge of impiety, which had been

brought against Anaxagoras and Socrates, was now brought against Aristotle. He left the city, saying, "I will not allow the Athenians to sin twice against philosophy" (*Vita Marciana* 41). He took up residence at his country house at Chalcis, in Euboea, and there he died the following year, 322 BC. His death was due to a disease, reportedly 'of the stomach', from which he had long suffered. The story that his death was due to hemlock poisoning, as well as the legend that he threw himself into the sea "because he could not explain the tides," is without historical foundation.