

Alexander the Great

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The life of Alexander the Great has inspired people from antiquity to modern times. Such generals as Julius Caesar have looked to Alexander, compared themselves against his success, and copied his tactics. Alexander's meteoric conquest of Persia, his excursion into India, his military skill, his vision for a unified people, and his role as an agent of Greek culture changed the Mediterranean world in a multitude of ways, ushering in what historians have come to call the Hellenistic period. It is perhaps unsurprising that Alexander achieved all that he did given that his father, Philip II of Macedon, took obvious care in Alexander's upbringing and in laying the foundation for the conquest of the east, but the personality and ability of Alexander cannot be ignored.

Alexander III of Macedonia, later known as Alexander the Great, was born in 356 BCE to Philip II, the king of Macedonia, and Olympias of Epirus. Ancient historians and biographers all agree that Alexander was bright and charismatic. He was fortunate to have the philosopher Aristotle as his teacher after Philip invited Aristotle to the Macedonian court in 342. Upon the assassination of his father in 336, Alexander became king. While the succession was not contested, Macedonia had long been a place of court intrigue and a kingdom at war with the barbarian peoples to its north. Alexander wished to carry out his father's plan of invading Persia, but before doing so, he first ensured that Macedonia would not be in chaos when he left by brutally suppressing a revolt in Thebes.

In 334, Alexander left Macedonia with a combined army of Macedonian and Greek soldiers from the League of Corinth (the confederation Philip had created after his victory at the First Battle of Chaeronea in 338) and crossed the Dardanelles into Asia Minor. The size of his army was relatively small. He had approximately 30,000 infantry and 5,000 cavalry. The inspiration for the Persian expedition was in part revenge for the Persian Wars more than a century earlier, but Persia also offered the Greeks land for new colonies and the plunder of a mighty kingdom. Alexander's first task was to liberate Greek cities along the Ionian coast from Persian control.

The Persian satraps (governors) of Asia Minor assembled an army to fight Alexander and waited for him on the east bank of the Granicus River. Alexander himself led his guard cavalry through the river into the Persian line, and the Macedonians achieved a stunning victory over the Persian force. The dramatic triumph established Alexander as a bold commander and inspired fanatical devotion in his troops.

After the Battle of the Granicus, what remained of the forward guard of the Persian army was forced to retreat, and Alexander could claim to have freed the Greek cities. Alexander then worked his way south towards Egypt, but met the bulk of the Persian army on his way. That engagement, the Battle of Issus, once again proved Alexander's reputation. The Macedonian infantry, arranged in phalanxes with long spears called sarissas, kept the Persian army busy, allowing the cavalry to outflank the enemy in a decisive victory. The Persians sued for peace, but Alexander refused, a decision historians have seen as signaling the conqueror's intent to march deep into Persia.

Alexander continued south into Egypt. While there, he visited the famous oracle of Amon at Siwa in 331 and was greeted by the priest as the son of Amon (whom the Greeks identified as Zeus, their own chief god). Egypt had long considered their rulers living gods, and Alexander, as the new "pharaoh," was thus entitled to such an address. It is difficult to estimate whether

that event sparked Alexander's belief in his own divinity, if indeed he truly believed it. A good number of the sources for Alexander's life were written long after he had died, so it may never be known, but the majority of sources agree that he attempted to convince the Greek poleis to recognize his divinity in 324. Not long after visiting the oracle, Alexander left Egypt to continue the push into Persia.

Alexander and his army met with success after success, and at the Battle of Gaugamela, King Darius III of Persia lost a second army. That victory ended the Persian Empire, and when Darius was killed in 330 by members of his own court, Alexander became king. Alexander took his army as far as the Indus, where after some very hard campaigning and another brilliant victory, his army forced him to return. Along the way, Alexander had founded such cities on the Greek model as Ai Khanum, with a town center, or agora, and gymnasia. Part of the populations of those cities was made up of Greek soldiers. Those new cities were emblematic of at least one of Alexander's plans—to spread Greek culture. Along with his troops, Alexander traveled with scientists and men of the liberal arts in an effort to spread Greek thought across the known world.

Back in Babylonia in 324, Alexander encountered mounting opposition. His adoption of Persian dress and custom upset the Greeks he had brought with him. In addition, Alexander had his generals marry the daughters of Persian nobles (he, too, married a Persian woman). Those marriages have been the subject of much speculation. Though there was no formal policy, most scholars believe that what Alexander wanted to do was create one people, and, by intermarrying with the Persians, he might not only form strong ties through marriage but also begin the process of fusing the two cultures. When he attempted to mix the army, however, some of his men revolted. In June 323, after a night of heavy banqueting, Alexander took ill for several days before dying in the city of Babylon on June 13. His empire quickly became a prize over which his generals fought.

Alexander was not just significant for his military brilliance and impressive conquest of much of the known world. His reign also ushered in a new era, one in which Greek culture spread to new areas. The Hellenistic kings who followed him adopted similar court practices, emphasis on their relationship to divinity, and continued Alexander's Hellenizing policy.

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