Alexander the Great

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Born: September 20, 356 BC in Pella, Macedonia
Died: June 13, 323 BC in Babylon, Persia
Other Names: Alexander III, the Great; Alexander III; Alexander of Macedonia; Alexander III of Macedon
Nationality: Macedonian (Ancient)
Occupation: King

Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) was the king of Macedon, the leader of the Corinthian League, and the conqueror of Persia. He succeeded in forging the largest Western empire of the ancient world.

With his Macedonian forces Alexander subdued and united the Greeks and reestablished the Corinthian League after almost a century of warfare between the Greek city-states following the Peloponnesian War. Thus Alexander set the stage for his conquest of the Persian Empire, motivated both by personal ambition and by the Greeks' centuries-old hatred for their perennial Asian foes since the Persian Wars. His campaigns were not only wars of liberation of Greek colonies in Asia Minor but also revenge for Persian depredations in Greece in years past. Within 11 years Alexander's empire stretched from the Balkans to the Himalayas, and it included most of the eastern Mediterranean countries, Mesopotamia, and Persia. He died in Babylon contemplating the conquest of Carthage and perhaps Rome. His legacy was a fragmented empire, but he had inspired a new Hellenistic age of cosmopolitan culture.

Alexander was born in 356 B.C. to King Philip II of Macedon and Queen Olympias, the daughter of Neoptolemus, King of the Molossians. Alexander's sister was born the following year, and the two children grew up at the royal court in Pella. Since his paternal grandmother, Eurydice, was an Illyrian, Alexander was barely Macedonian in blood but clearly so in temperament. Of average height, he had deep-set dark eyes which shone out beneath a heavy brow, and a mass of dark, curly hair. As a youth, Alexander rarely saw his father, who was embroiled in long military campaigns and numerous love affairs. Olympias, a fierce and overly possessive mother, consequently dominated her son's early years and filled him with a deep resentment of his father and a strong dislike for women and wine, in which his father heavily indulged.

Education by Tutors

One of Alexander's first teachers was Leonidas, a relative of Olympias, who struggled to curtail the uncontrollable and defiant boy. Philip had hired Leonidas to train the youth in arithmetic, horsemanship, and archery. Alexander's favorite tutor was the Acarnian Lysimachus, who devised a game whereby Alexander impersonated the hero Achilles. This delighted Olympias, for her family claimed the hero as an ancestor. In Alexander's youthful mind, Achilles became the epitome of the aristocratic warrior, and Alexander modeled himself after this hero of Homer's Iliad.

In 343 Philip summoned the philosopher and scientist Aristotle from Lesbos to tutor Alexander. For 3 years in the rural Macedonian village of Mieza, Aristotle instructed Alexander and a small group of
friends in philosophy, government, politics, poetry and drama, and the sciences. Aristotle prepared a shortened edition of the *Iliad*, which Alexander always kept with him. Aristotle believed in despotic control of the Persians, but Alexander agreed with the ideas expressed in Isocrates's *Philip* that Macedon should free the barbarians from despotism and offer them Greek protection and care.

**Beginnings of the Soldier**

The education at Mieza ended in 340. While Philip campaigned against Byzantium, he left the 16-year-old prince as regent in Pella. Philip's general Antipater cautiously but strongly advised Alexander, but other generals looked on Alexander as a pawn, more easily managed than Philip. Within a year Alexander undertook his first expedition against the Thracian tribes, and in 338 he led the Companion Cavalry and helped his father smash the Athenian and Theban forces at Chaeronea.

The brief relationship and military cooperation with his father ended soon after Philip had united all the Greek states except Sparta into the Corinthian League, over which Philip then governed as military leader. When Philip married Cleopatra, the daughter of his general Attalus, and expelled Olympias, Alexander with his mother and his closest friends fled Macedon and lived in Epirus with Olympias's family until Demaratus of Corinth brought about a reconciliation between father and son.

**Alexander as King**

In the summer of 336 at the ancient Macedonian capital of Aegai, Alexander's sister married her uncle Alexander, the Molossian king. In the festival procession Philip was assassinated by a young Macedonian noble, Pausanias. The reason for the act was never discovered.

Alexander sought the acclamation of the Macedonian army for his bid for kingship, and the generals, Antipater, and Alexander's own troops which had fought at Chaeronea proclaimed him king. Alexander then systematically killed all possible royal claimants to the throne, and Olympias murdered the daughter of Philip and Cleopatra and forced Cleopatra to commit suicide.

Although elected feudal king of Macedon, Alexander did not thus automatically gain command of the Corinthian League. The southern Greek states rejoiced at Philip's assassination, and Athens, under the staunch democrat Demosthenes, sought to lead the League. Throughout Greece independence movements arose. Immediately Alexander led his armies southward, and Thessaly quickly recognized him as leader. Alexander summoned members of the League to Thermopylae and received their recognition of his command. At Corinth in the autumn of 336 Alexander renewed the treaties with the member states. Sparta refused to join. The League entrusted Alexander with unlimited military powers to campaign against Persia.

**A Panhellenic Leader**

A spirit of Panhellenism ruled the first stages of Alexander's career. A united Greece free of petty wars would bring to the barbarian worlds the Hellenic culture. As the descendant of Achilles, Alexander would correct the ills Persia had created for Greece and remove Persian intervention in Greek affairs. Although he became a Panhellenic leader, he nevertheless remained a Macedonian king bent upon conquering new territories.

Alexander did not prepare for war with Persia immediately. In the spring of 335 he conquered the
Thracian Triballians south of the Danube. He secured Macedon and its northern borders without the help of the general Parmenion, who was already in Asia Minor, and Antipater, who governed as Alexander’s regent in Macedon.

**Destruction of Thebes**

In Asia, Darius III, King of Persia, had become aware of Parmenion's presence in Asia and of Alexander's future plans. Darius attempted to bribe the Greek states to revolt, but only Sparta accepted the gold. However, when a rumor spread that Alexander was dead, Demosthenes prodded the Athenian assembly to unilaterally consider the Corinthian League defunct and Athens independent. Thebes at once rejoiced and slew its Macedonian garrison. Alexander, very much alive, raced southward and besieged Thebes. In the name of the League, Alexander waged war against the rebellious members but still attempted to negotiate peace. When Thebes rejected Alexander's demands, he leveled the city, killed the soldiers, and sold the women and children into slavery, sparing only the temples and the house of the poet Pindar. Alexander destroyed the city to warn others of the price of rebellion. Athens revoked its declaration of withdrawal from the League, honored Alexander, and offered to surrender Demosthenes.

**Asiatic Campaign**

In October 335 Alexander returned to Macedon and prepared his Asiatic expedition. In numbers of troops, in ships, and in wealth, Alexander's resources were markedly inferior to those of Darius. Parmenion was recalled to Pella to be Alexander's chief aide. The army was not Panhellenic but essentially Macedonian, led by a Macedonian king, and the expedition quickly became the royal Macedonian’s personal campaign for aggrandizement and empire.

In the early spring of 334 the army crossed the Hellespont (modern Dardanelles) to Abydos, and Alexander visited ancient Troy. There he sacrificed and prayed, dedicated his armor to Athena, and took an antique sacred shield for his campaign. Not far away at the Granicus River, Alexander met Darius's army in May, employed for the first time his oblique battle formation, and defeated the Persians. To commemorate the victory, Alexander sent 300 sets of Persian armor to the Parthenon in Athens with the dedicatory inscription: "Alexander the son of Philip, and the Greeks, all but the Spartans [dedicated these] from the barbarians who inhabit Asia." Alexander thus maintained the official propaganda that he was not only a king but the Panhellenic leader.

Western Asia Minor and Darius's capital at Sardis fell easily, followed by Miletus and Halicarnassus. The territories Alexander conquered retained their satrapal administrations, continued to pay the same taxes as before, and formed the foundations of his Asian empire.

By autumn Alexander had crossed the southern coast of Asia Minor, and Parmenion had entered Phrygia. Both armies spent the winter at the Phrygian capital of Gordium. Divine portents and miracles were ascribed to Alexander by the local peoples, Greeks, and barbarians. When Alexander cut the famous Gordian Knot to fulfill a prophecy, he himself started to believe the myths circulated about him.

When news reached Alexander of Greek naval victories in the Aegean, he sped eastward to the passes of the Taurus and Syria. By the late summer of 333 Alexander was in Cilicia, south of Darius and his armies. At Issus the two kings met in battle. Alexander was outnumbered, but utilizing the
oblique formations he rushed the Persian center line and Darius turned his chariot and fled. The Persian line crumbled. In November, Alexander attacked the Persian royal camp, gained hoards of booty, and captured the royal family. He treated Darius's wife, mother, and three children with respect. Darius's army was beaten, and the King became a fugitive. Alexander publicly announced his personal claim to the throne of Persia and proclaimed himself king of Asia.

But before he could pursue his enemy into Persia, he needed to control the seas and the coastal territories of Phoenicia, Palestine, and Egypt to secure his chain of supply. Aradus, Byblos, and Sidon welcomed Alexander but Tyre resisted. In January 332 Alexander began his long and arduous siege of Tyre. He built mole to the island city, employed siege machines, fought off the Tyrian navy and army, and 8 months later seized the fortress.

Darius now sought to come to terms with Alexander and offered a large ransom for his family, a marriage alliance, a treaty of friendship, and the part of his empire west of the Euphrates. Alexander ignored Darius's offer, planning to conquer all.

**Campaign in Egypt**

From Tyre, Alexander marched south through Jerusalem to Gaza, besieged that city, and pushed on into Egypt. Egypt fell to Alexander without resistance, and the Egyptians hailed him as their deliverer from Persian hegemony. In every country Alexander had respected the local customs, religions, and peoples. In Jerusalem he had retained the priestly rule of the Temple, and in Egypt he sacrificed to the local gods. At Memphis the Egyptian priesthood recognized him as pharaoh, offered him the royal sacrifices, and invested him as king on the throne of Ptah. They hailed Alexander as a god. When Alexander visited the oracle of the Phoenician god Ammon at Siwa, the priest greeted him as the son of Ammon. From this time he seems to have accepted the idea of his own divinity. All across his Asian empire, oracles confirmed Alexander's divinity, and the people paid him divine honors.

Alexander promoted Greek culture in Egypt. In 331 he founded the city of Alexandria, which became the center of Hellenistic culture and commerce. Devoted to science, Alexander dispatched an expedition up the Nile to investigate the sources of the river and the true explanation for its inundations.

**Arbela, Babylonia, and Persia**

In September 331 Alexander defeated the Persians at Arbela (modern Erbil); the event is also called the Battle of Gaugamela. The Persian army collapsed, and Alexander pursued Darius into the Kurdish mountains.

Abandoning the chase, Alexander systematically explored Babylonia, the rich farmlands, palaces, and treasuries which Darius had abandoned. In Babylon, Alexander celebrated the New Year's Festival in honor of the god Marduk, whereby the god extended his divine pleasure and confirmed the lawful monarchy. Alexander became "King of Babylon, King of Asia, King of the Four Quarters of the World."

The royal palace of Susa and its treasuries fell to Alexander in the summer of 331, and he set out for Persepolis, the capital of the Persian Empire. To prevent a royal uprising and to exact punishment for
the Persian destruction of Athens in 480, Alexander burned Persepolis, a rash but symbolic act. In the spring of 330 he marched to Darius's last capital, Ecbatana (modern Hamadan). There Alexander left Parmenion in charge of the vast confiscated treasuries and all communications and set off in pursuit of Darius.

Darius had fled beyond the Caspian Gates with his eastern satraps. When Alexander caught up with them in July 330, the satraps had assassinated Darius. Alexander ordered a royal funeral with honors for his foe. As Darius's successor and avenger, Alexander captured the assassins and punished them according to Persian law. Now Persian king, Alexander began to wear Persian royal clothing and adopted the Persian court ceremonials. As elsewhere, Alexander employed local officials in his administration. He did, however, maintain his position of leader of the Corinthian League toward the Greek ambassadors.

Iran and India

At the Caspian Sea, Alexander became occupied with geography, the location of the Eastern Ocean, and its relation to the Caspian Sea. Consequently, he pushed eastward and for 3 years campaigned in eastern Iran. He secured the region, founded cities, and established colonies of Macedonians. In the spring of 327 he seized the almost impregnable high rock fortress of Ariamazes and captured the Bactrian prince Oxyartes. Alexander married Oxyartes's daughter Rhoxana to bind his Eastern empire more closely to him in a political alliance.

The Macedonians began to resent Alexander's Oriental customs and dress and his demand that they prostrate themselves before him. Parmenion's son Philotas conspired against Alexander, who executed the traitor according to Macedonian law and also ordered the death of Parmenion on false charges.

In the summer of 327 Alexander marched to the Punjab and the Indus Valley. The following year his first son died in India. In northern India, Alexander defeated the armies of King Porus. Impressed with his bravery and nobility, Alexander reestablished Porus as king and gained his loyalty. Continuing his progress eastward, Alexander reached the Ganges, where his armies refused to go farther, and after 2 days of struggle Alexander turned back. The army returned westward along the Indus, but when Alexander was seriously wounded while fighting the fierce Malli warriors, his army was overwhelmed with grief. They cheered his recovery, and all animosities were forgiven.

By July 325 the army and its fleet had reached the Indus Delta. The fleet continued north in the Persian Gulf, while the army began to march along the barren and inhospitable coast. Hardship and death brought havoc to the army, which joined up with the fleet weeks later. In January 324 Alexander reached Persepolis, which he had left 5 years earlier, and in February he was in Susa. But disorder had spread throughout the empire during Alexander's campaigns in the East.

Festival at Susa

Greatly concerned with the rule of his empire and the need for soldiers, officers, and administrators, Alexander attempted to bind the Persian nobility to the Macedonians to forge a ruling class. At Susa he ordered 80 of his Macedonian companions to marry Persian princesses. Alexander, although married to Rhoxana, married Stateira, a daughter of Darius, to legitimize his sovereignty.
When Alexander incorporated 30,000 Persians into the army, his soldiers grumbled. At Opis that summer, when he decided to dismiss his aged and wounded Macedonian soldiers, the angry soldiers condemned his Persian troops and his Persian manners. Alexander arrested 13 of their leaders and executed them. He then addressed the army and movingly reminded them of their glories and honors. After 3 days the Macedonians repented, and in a thanksgiving feast the Persians joined the Macedonians as forces of Alexander--but not as brothers.

**Alexander's Death**

In the spring of 323 Alexander moved to Babylon and made plans to explore the Caspian Sea and Arabia and then to conquer northern Africa. On June 2 he fell ill with malaria, and 11 days later, at the age of 32, he was dead. A few months later his wife Rhoxana bore him a son, who was assassinated in 309.

Alexander's empire was little more than a vast territory improperly ruled by the king and his bureaucrats. Nations and peoples did not blend harmoniously together but were governed by Macedonians for their King. The empire collapsed at his death, and nations and generals vied for power. The Greek culture that Alexander introduced in the East had barely developed. But in time, and under the "successor" kingdoms, the Oriental and Greek cultures blended and flourished as a by-product of the empire.

**Further Readings**


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