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ALEXANDER THE GREAT

356 B.C. - 323 B.C.

Alexander the Great, the most celebrated conqueror of the ancient world, was born in 356 B.C. in Pella, the capital city of Macedonia. His father, King Philip II of Macedon, was a man of truly outstanding ability and foresight. Philip enlarged and reorganized the Macedonian army, and converted it into a fighting force of the highest caliber. He first used this army to conquer surrounding regions to the north of Greece, and then turned south and conquered most of Greece itself. Next, Philip created a federation of the Greek city-states, with himself as leader. He was planning to make war on the vast Persian Empire to the east of Greece; indeed, the invasion had already commenced, in 336 B.C., when Philip, still only forty-six years old, was assassinated.

Alexander was only twenty years old when his father died, but he succeeded to the throne without difficulty. Philip had carefully prepared his son to succeed him, and the young Alexander already had considerable military experience. Nor had his father neglected his intellectual education. Alexander's tutor had been the brilliant philosopher Aristotle, perhaps the greatest scientist and philosopher of the ancient world.

In both Greece and the northern territories, the peoples conquered by Philip saw the occasion of his death as a good opportunity to throw off the Macedonian yoke. However, Alexander, in the two years following his accession to the throne, was able to subdue both regions. He then turned his attention to Persia.

For two hundred years, the Persians had governed a vast territory that stretched all the way from the Mediterranean to India. Although Persia was no longer at the height of its powers, it was still a formidable adversary—the largest, mightiest, and wealthiest empire on Earth.

Alexander launched his invasion of the Persian Empire in 334 B.C. Since he had to leave part of his army at home to maintain control of his European possessions, Alexander had only 35,000 troops with him when he set out on his audacious quest—a very small force compared with the Persian armies. In spite of the numerical disadvantage, Alexander won a series of crushing victories over the Persian forces. There were three main reasons for his success. In the first place, the army which Philip had left him was better trained and organized than the Persian forces. In the second place, Alexander was a general of outstanding genius, perhaps the greatest of all time. The third factor was Alexander's own personal courage. Although he would direct the early stages of each battle from behind the lines, Alexander's policy was to lead the decisive cavalry charge himself. This was a risky procedure, and he was frequently wounded. But his troops saw that Alexander was sharing their danger, and was not asking them to take any risks that he himself would not take. The effect on their morale was enormous.

Alexander first led his troops through Asia Minor, defeating the smaller Persian armies stationed there. Then, moving into northern Syria, he routed an immense Persian army at Issus. Alexander then moved further south, and after a difficult seven-month siege, conquered the Phoenician island-city of Tyre, in present-day Lebanon. While Alexander was besieging Tyre, he received a message from the Persian king offering to cede Alexander half of his empire in return for a peace treaty. One of Alexander's generals, Parmenio, thought the offer rather good. "I would take that offer, if I were Alexander," he said. "And so would I," Alexander replied, "if I were Parmenio."

After the fall of Tyre, Alexander continued south. Gaza fell after a two-month siege. Egypt surrendered to him without a fight. Alexander then paused for a while in Egypt to rest his troops. There, though still only twenty-four years old, he was crowned pharaoh and declared a god. He then led his armies back into Asia, and at the decisive battle of Arbela, in 331 B.C., he completely routed a much larger Persian army.

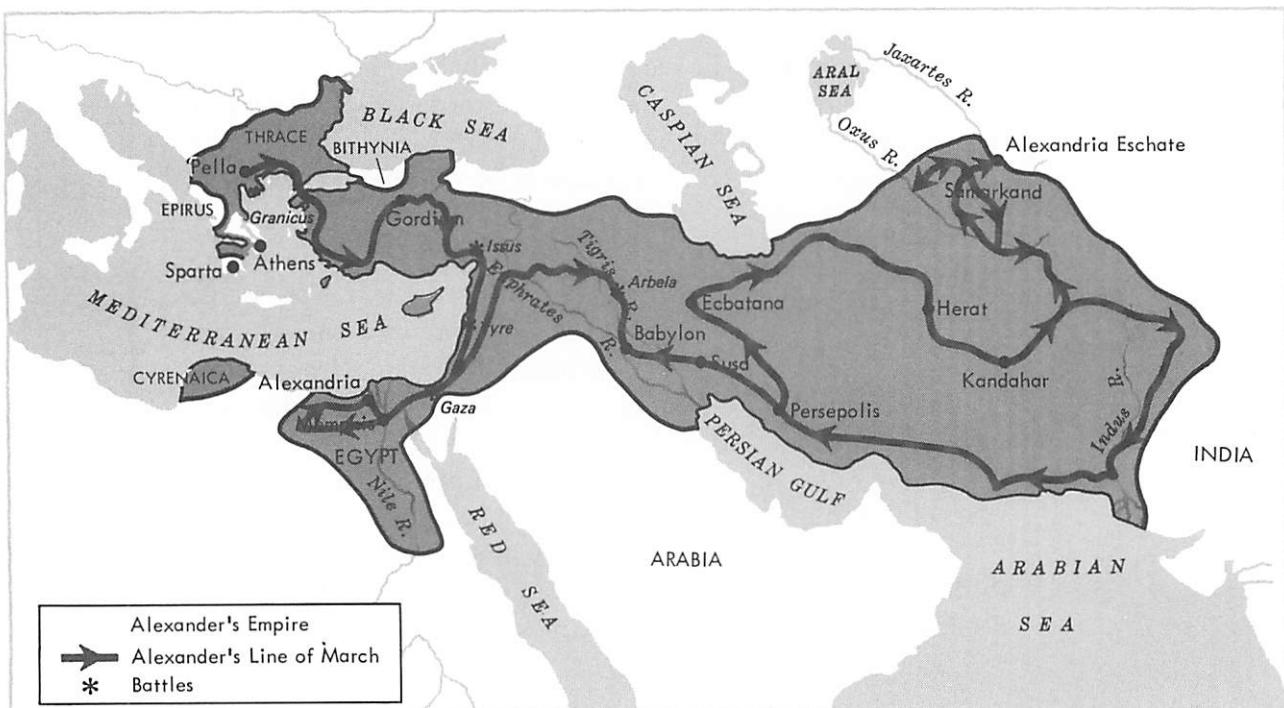
After that victory Alexander led his troops into Babylon, and into the Persian capitals of Susa and Persepolis. The Persian king, Darius III (not to be confused with his predecessor, Darius the Great), was assassinated by his officers in 330 B.C., to prevent him from surrendering to Alexander. Nevertheless, Alexander defeated and killed Darius's successor, and in three years of fighting, subdued all of eastern Iran and pushed on into Central Asia.

With the whole Persian Empire now subject to him, Alexander might now have returned home and reorganized his new dominions. But his thirst for conquest was still unslaked, and he continued on, into Afghanistan. From there he led his army across the Hindu Kush mountains into India. He won a series of victories in western India, and intended to continue on to eastern India. His troops, however, exhausted by years of fighting, refused to go any farther, and Alexander reluctantly returned to Persia.

After returning to Persia, Alexander spent the next year or so

reorganizing his empire and army. And a major reorganization it was. Alexander had been brought up to believe that Greek culture represented the only true civilization, and that all of the non-Greek peoples were barbarians. Such, of course, was the prevailing view throughout the Greek world, and even Aristotle had shared it. But, despite the fact that he had thoroughly defeated the Persian armies, Alexander had come to realize that the Persians were not barbarians at all, and that individual Persians could be as intelligent, capable, and worthy of respect as individual Greeks. He therefore conceived the notion of fusing the two parts of his empire together, thereby creating a joint Graeco-Persian culture and kingdom, with himself, of course, as ruler. So far as we can determine, he really intended the Persians to be equal partners with the Greeks and Macedonians. To implement this plan, he took large numbers of Persians into his army. He

The Empire of Alexander the Great.



also held a great feast, "the marriage of East and West," at which several thousand Macedonian troops were formally married to Asian women. He himself, although he had previously married an Asian princess, married the daughter of Darius.

It is plain that Alexander intended to make additional conquests with this reorganized army. We know that he planned to invade Arabia, and probably also the regions north of the Persian Empire. He may also have intended another invasion of India, or the conquest of Rome, Carthage, and the western Mediterranean. Whatever his plans may have been, as it turned out, there were to be no further conquests. In early June, in the year 323 B.C., while in Babylon, Alexander suddenly fell ill of a fever, and he died ten days later. He was not yet thirty-three years old.

Alexander had named no successor, and soon after his death a fight for power ensued. In the struggle that followed, Alexander's mother, wives, and children were all killed. His empire was eventually divided among his generals.

Because Alexander died young and undefeated, there has been much speculation as to what might have occurred had he lived. If he had led his forces into an invasion of the western Mediterranean lands, he would most likely have been successful, and in that case, the entire history of western Europe might have been vastly different. But such speculations, however interesting, have little relevance to an assessment of Alexander's actual influence.

Alexander was perhaps the most dramatic figure in history, and his career and personality have remained a source of fascination. The true facts of his career are dramatic enough, and dozens of legends have grown up around his name. It was plainly his ambition to be the greatest warrior of all time, and he seems to deserve that title. As an individual fighter, he combined ability and courage. As a general, he was supreme, and in eleven years of fighting, he never lost a single battle.

At the same time, however, he was an intellectual who had studied under Aristotle and treasured the poetry of Homer. Indeed, in his realization that non-Greeks were not necessarily bar-



Alexander on horseback, detail from "The Battle of Alexander," mosaic at Pompei from the 2nd century, B.C.

barians, he showed far more vision than most Greek thinkers of his day. In other ways, however, he was surprisingly short-sighted. Although he repeatedly risked his life in battle, he made no provisions for a successor, and his failure to do so was in large part responsible for the rapid breakup of his empire after his death.

Alexander reputedly could be very charming, and he was often extremely conciliatory and charitable to defeated enemies.

On the other hand, he was also an egomaniac with a ferocious temper. On one occasion, in a drunken argument, he killed a close associate of his, Cleitus, a man who had once saved his life.

Like Napoleon and Hitler, Alexander had an overwhelming effect upon his own generation. His short-term influence, however, was less than theirs, simply because the limited means of travel and communication existing at the time restricted his influence to a smaller portion of the globe.

In the long run, the most important effect of Alexander's conquests was to bring the Greek and Middle Eastern civilizations into close contact with each other, and thereby to greatly enrich both cultures. During and immediately after Alexander's career, Greek culture spread rapidly into Iran, Mesopotamia, Syria, Judea, and Egypt; before Alexander, Greek culture had been entering these regions only slowly. Also, Alexander spread Greek influence into India and Central Asia, areas which it had never reached before. But the cultural influence was by no means a one-way affair. During the Hellenistic Age (the centuries immediately following Alexander's career), eastern ideas—particularly religious ideas—spread into the Greek world. It was this Hellenistic culture—predominantly Greek but with strong oriental influences—that eventually affected Rome.

In the course of his career, Alexander founded more than twenty new cities. The most famous of these was Alexandria, in Egypt, which soon became one of the leading cities of the world, and a notable center of learning and culture. A few others, such as Herat and Kandahar in Afghanistan, also developed into cities of importance.

Alexander, Napoleon, and Hitler seem fairly close in overall influence. One gets the impression, though, that the influence of the other two men will be less enduring than that of Alexander. On that basis, he has been ranked slightly above them, even though his short-term influence was somewhat less than theirs.