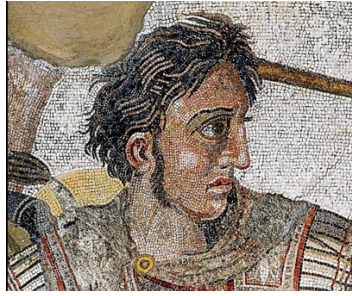


Alexander the Great



Who was Alexander the Great?

Depending on who you talk to, Alexander was the greatest conqueror and military genius the world has ever seen or the very devil himself. He appears in the Bible (Book of Daniel as The Third Beast) and in the Koran (the Two-horned One) but the Greek Orthodox Church canonised him. His story appears in hundreds of poems and epics throughout the Old World and in the Jewish tradition he is something of a folk hero. There are medieval versions from Germany, Iceland, Ethiopia and Mongolia (where he's treated as a predecessor of Genghis Khan) and, of course, in Greece he's in every school room and taverna. Such a character seems almost mythical but he was very much a real person fighting real battles.



He was born in 356BCE in Pella, the capital city of the ancient but relatively short-lived kingdom of Macedon in what is now northern Greece, the son and heir of Philip II and his wife Olympias. Life at court was typical of its day – a heady mix of heavy drinking, semi-barbaric rituals and beliefs and vicious feuds. His father practised polygamy (as was the custom) and took another wife after Alexander's mother and had a child with her. Once Alexander had taken the throne he took his revenge by having this child and his mother brutally murdered. It paid not to cross him.

For all this, Philip was mindful of his son's education and, when Alexander was 13 or 14, sent him to study with one of the finest minds of his or any other day:- Aristotle. This relationship had a profound and lasting effect on Alexander and it is said that Aristotle gave him his copy of the Iliad which Alexander carried with him for the rest of his life

Alexander was just 20 years old when his father was assassinated (possibly with the involvement of Alexander and his mother though this has never been proved) and he claimed the throne. Almost immediately there was trouble on his borders. Thebes – a major city in central Greece – revolted and Alexander was quick to put down the threat in the most brutal fashion, sacking the city and massacring or enslaving its inhabitants (other than the descendants of the great Theban poet Pindar – a characteristic Alexander gesture). Athens took one look at what had happened to Thebes and quickly made peace. With these major cities now under his jurisdiction, Alexander was in effect the king of the entire Greek world at the tender age of 21. It was time to turn his attention to greater prizes.

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The Epic Journey

It would be all too easy at this point to give a long list of battles fought and won over the next 11 years but you're here to listen to a concert, not a history lecture, and there are plenty of excellent accounts of Alexander's campaigns available. Suffice it to say that in 334 BCE, the largest known empire in the world was Persia, controlled by the Achaemenid dynasty with Darius III on the throne (the area coloured yellow in the map above). From his first footfall in Asia on the coast near Troy, Alexander avenged ancient defeats in a whirlwind of audacious raids and battles, his copy of the Iliad to hand. Heading first along the Mediterranean coast he found his way to Egypt where he consulted the Oracle at Siwa who confirmed that he would be the ruler of the whole world. This was enough for Alexander to declare himself the Son of God and the ruler of Egypt, bringing to an end 3000 years of native rule. With Egypt subdued he headed east, pausing only to establish the first, and greatest, of the cities to bear his name:- Alexandria.

It was now time to face Darius head on. Alexander and his army marched through Palestine, Damascus, Aleppo and on into Assyria (now northern Iraq) with the Persians all the while sending increasingly frantic offers to buy the Macedonian's off. All were refused. Darius had now amassed a huge army – probably twice the size of Alexander's – from the length and breadth of his remaining empire and the two sides finally met near the ancient city of Arbela north of Babylon. Despite being heavily outnumbered, Alexander's army routed the Persians leaving vast swathes of the Achaemenid empire under his control. The Battle of Gaugamela (as it's often called) has been described as one of the most decisive in history.

By 330 BCE, just 4 years after he landed in Asia, Alexander was in full control of the old Persian empire and decided to head further east, through modern-day Afghanistan, crossing the Hindu Kush, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan (including the great trading city of Samarkand) and Tajikistan, founding cities in his name along the way, including Alexandria Eschate, literally Alexandria the Furthest in Khujand, Tajikistan. By 326 BCE he was in Punjab in India at which point his army had been away for 8 long years and refused to go on.

Acknowledging that he couldn't force them, Alexander and his army sailed down the Indus river and back into Iran. Retracing his steps he arrived in Babylon in April 323 BCE but by now there was something rotten in the state of the court as power went to his head. Alexander was a heavy drinker and very superstitious. The man who had been declared the ruler of the world by an Oracle was faced with bad omens; ravens fighting, a sacrifice yielding bad news. The bottle became his crutch and constant companion. There were violent eruptions of anger and paranoia. In late May he held a banquet and after two days

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of heavy drinking, fell into a fever. He never recovered and died on 10 June 323BCE. He was 32. There were suspicions that he was poisoned but it could just have easily been alcoholic liver disease. In any case, it was just plausible that his inner circle were increasingly appalled by Alexander's excesses and a plot was hatched to get rid of him. His final resting place has never been located but various sources suggest that eventually his body made its way to the first great Alexandria and lies somewhere beneath the Mediterranean waiting to be discovered.

His Legacy

It is remarkable that 2000 years and more after his brief life, the story of Alexander is still very much alive in the folk stories and traditions of vast swathes of the lands he conquered. The Persians – followers of that most ancient of religions, Zoroastrianism – never forgot or forgave the violence and destruction he wrought on their cities, especially Persepolis. Zoroastrians still exist today, keeping alive a tradition which is at least 3,500 years old. Their sacred flame was rescued from under Alexander's nose in Persepolis in 330BCE and has been kept alive ever since. It currently resides in a little village close to the city of Yazd in the Great Salt Desert in Iran. There they speak of Alexander as the Great Devil and use the same rituals and prayers as was spoken in Darius's day. In the extraordinarily remote valley of Rombur in the Hindu Kush, the local Kalash people are known as the 'Black Pagans' and claim to be the descendants of remnants of the Macedonian army who passed through over 2000 years ago. Storytellers from Pakistan to Egypt, from Afghanistan to the Persian gulf still recall the Great Alexander or the Devil, depending on your point of view. In the years after his death, Greek culture continued to spread with merchants venturing way beyond the limits of Alexander's empire and in its flourishing, became the basis for Western civilisation. As the traditional Greek saying goes: "Great Alexander still lives. And rules."