



**Battle of Issus Mosaic, Pompeii**

# Alexander the Great

The Legendary Ruler and Conqueror  
Speaks about His Empire and Life



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**Alexander Sarcophagus, Istanbul**

Alexander III of Macedon, better known as Alexander the Great, was born on 20 or 21 July 356 BC in Pella Macedonia, nowadays Greece, and died on 10 or 11 June 323 BC (aged 32) in Babylon Mesopotamia, present day Iraq. He was the son of King Philip II of Macedon and Olympias of Epirus.

In his childhood, Alexander was tutored by no one else than Aristotle. He was taught subjects like philosophy, poetry, rhetorics, geometry and medicine. There were other Macedonian noblemen attending these sessions, some of which would become kings themselves like Ptolemy and Cassander. It was also during these years

that he started to be passionate about Greek poetry, especially Homer. Alexander's personal favorite was Achilles whom he even took as his role model.

## **Asia Minor**

In 334, Alexander started his campaign against the Persians, crossing the Hellespont and entering Asia. But as a sidestep, he first visited Troy where he brought homage to his Homeric heroes that he in a way also considered his ancestors.

The first large battle was at the river Granicus in May 334 (Biga river in the Çanakkale province in Turkey nowadays), where the Persians took position near the Granicus River to force Alexander to cross its high banks. It was a short but fierce battle, and the outcome was a staggering victory for Alexander's army. During the battle, Alexander was nearly killed by the Persians, but he was saved by Cleitus the Black, who chopped off an arm of one of the attackers.

After the battle, basically the whole of Asia Minor was for grabs for Alexander, and they continued south. Most of the cit-

ies were quick to welcome Alexander and his army, but some resisted like Miletus and Halicarnassus, causing Alexander's army to spend time there making a siege for these cities. Eventually, all cities fell, and Alexander appointed democracies in every city. This, by the way, was different from the Macedonian tradition underlining a more Greek or Panhellenic way of thinking.

In the winter of 334/333, he conquered most of western Asia Minor and eventually arrived in Gordium where a famous oracle had proclaimed that the person who would unwind the so-called Gordian knot, would become ruler of all of Asia. This, of course, intrigued Alexander and he, supposedly, "solved" the mystery by cutting the knot with his sword.

By fall of 333 Alexander's army had progressed to the east and south and was encamped at Myriandrus (now Iskenderun, Turkey) when he heard that King Darius III's enormous Persian army was encamped near the river . This is where one of the most famous battles of all times would take place.

The battle of Issus was a decisive and classic battle that had as an outcome that king Darius III ran away and left his army flee in full rout. Alexander took all Darius' possessions left behind containing many riches; he also captured Darius' family including his wife, daughters, and mother. Alexander treated the family members with respect and later even married Stateira II, one of Darius' daughters.

The battle of Issus marked the beginning of the end of Persian power.

## **Near and Middle East**

Instead of chasing the Persians, Alexander continued south into Syria to make sure he would cut off parts of the empire from the Persians. Most cities came over easily, but some like Tyre and Gaza resisted heavily and caused Alexander to have to fight for longer periods there. In Tyre, this lasted for seven months, and Alexander attacked the island city by creating causeways across the channel and then deploying siege towers with catapults to bomb and burn the city. But the Tyrians managed to destroy the towers by having them burned

in return. Eventually with the aid of a new naval force, he managed to win this siege.

Meanwhile, King Darius was continuously trying to negotiate to get his family back and to settle for truce. Alexander was offered large sums of money and all the lands west of the Euphrates. Parmenio, his senior general said: “I would accept, would I be Alexander”. “I would too, were I Parmenio” was Alexander’s famous response, as Plutarch writes. In short, the negotiations were not very successful.

Alexander reached Egypt in November 332 and was crowned pharaoh there. He spent winter in Egypt and founded the city of Alexandria. He also visited the oracle of the god Amon at Siwah where Alexander was told that his true father was the god Zeus Amon and that he would conquer the world. Starting from this time, Alexander is sometimes depicted with horns like Amon.

## **Persia**

In the summer of 331, Alexander left Egypt and returned North to enter Persia. He planned to go straight to Babylon,



Persepolis and Susa

but when he learned that King Darius had been spotted at Gaugamela, he turned north to look for the Persian king. The plain of Gaugamela (nowadays northern Iraq) was the setting for the battle that was chosen by Darius. Alexander's army was again heavily outnumbered. During the battle, Alexander won by initiating a fake attack that managed to create a hole in the Persian defenses, through which the Macedonians managed to penetrate and make an attack towards Darius himself. This made the king take flight causing the army to panic. Again Alexander won, although King Darius did manage to escape.

After the battle of Gaugamela, Alexander was welcomed and accepted as the new ruler in the capitals and polis. He found unimaginable riches in the treasures there as well, which would do him well



for his future campaigns and to motivate his troops.

In the spring of 330 Alexander returned chasing Darius who had found refuge with Bessus. However, Bessus had Darius killed and made himself king under the name of Artaxerxes IV. Alexander found the body of Darius and sent it to Persepolis for a proper Persian burial with Darius' family.

## **Bactria**

Bessus was on the run, and he went way east to Bactria which would be in modern day Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Bessus kept revolting, however, in the end he was captured by Alexander's army and brought back to Ecbatana where he was executed under the supervision of Darius' brother.

From Samarkand, Alexander moved to the Jaxartes (modern Syrdarya) river and extended into unknown territories even for the Persians, fighting Scythian nomads. In the lands that he captured here he founded another city after himself called Alexander Eschate (the farthest). It took him still until fall of 328 to get rid of all



opposition he found in these parts of the world. Near the so-called Sogdian Rock he captured the daughter of a war lord called Roxana. He fell in love with her on the spot and married her.

Back in Samarkand, an incident occurred that showcases the gap that has been slowly widening between Alexander and many of the Macedonians. During a drunken quarrel, Alexander murdered Cleitus, one of his most trusted generals and the person who saved his life at the Granicus.

## **India**

During the summer of 327 Alexander left Bactria and marched again east towards the end of the world into India, nowadays Pakistan and India. He crossed the Indus River encountering heavy resistance on the way. He also learned that here people fought differently. He managed, however, to adapt, making deals with local chieftains who supplied Alexander with local troops and war elephants for his battles. In return, he gave them protection. In all of India, the army did not just have problems

in battle. The land, rivers and the weather with its constant rain also managed to plunge the moral of Alexander's troops.

Alexander fought and won - although with great difficulties and many casualties - his last great battle against King Porus along the river Hydaspes in July 326. He founded two more cities: one called Alexander Nicaea for celebrating the victory, and the other called Bucephala to commemorate his horse that died during the battle. By the way, King Porus lost, but Alexander was so impressed with him that his territories were reinstated, even expanded, and he became an ally of Alexander.

Alexander wanted to continue east until the end of the world, but his army was not willing anymore and started to resist as we know from Curtius. Alexander therefore agreed to stop advancing and turned back west. They traveled along the Hydaspes and Indus rivers, with half of the troops in ships and half marching down the banks of the rivers. The march was not an easy one and they encountered a lot of resistance. For instance, during the siege of the

citadel of the Mallians, Alexander was hit by an arrow that pierced through his lung when he wanted to show his troops that they should make more progress. It nearly killed Alexander and left him weakened for a long time.

On reaching the delta of the Indus, they explored the area and prepared for their return. Alexander sent a large part of his army back west under Craterus' command. In October 325, they left India when Nearchus sailed west with the fleet, and Alexander traveled overland along the dangerous coast of Baluchistan through the Gedrosian desert.

Alexander's voyage turned out to be disastrous and he lost nearly three quarters of his army due to the severe conditions in the desert and unexpected monsoon floods. At the end though, at the river Amanis in Carmania, nowadays Minab river in Iran, they managed to join Nearchus' fleet which had also suffered severe losses. Of course, there was a new city founded: Alexandria Carmania.

## **Administration**

In the spring of 324, Alexander was back in Susa, the administrative center of the Persian empire. He organized feasts to celebrate the seizure of the Persian empire and, as Arrian writes, also tried to have Macedonians and Persians fuse into a master race by forcing 80 of his officers (Companions) into marrying Persian wives. Alexander and Hephæstion married daughters of Darius (Stateira marrying Alexander). Also, some 10,000 troops married Persian women each of which was given marriage gifts by Alexander. The racial fusion brought more and more friction between Alexander and the Macedonians though. Alexander wanted Persians to be on the same level in the army and administration as Macedonians. Many Macedonians saw this as a threat and there were acts of mutiny. Finally, this was resolved according to Arrian with a famous dramatic speech Alexander held at Opis, near nowadays Baghdad. Its result was that the soldiers asked Alexander for forgiveness and many older or wounded soldiers went back to Macedonia fully paid and with bonuses (according to Arrian and Diodorus



some 10,000 soldiers).

In August 324 Alexander's closest friend Hephaestion died in Ecbatana, and left Alexander in deep mourning with often uncontrollable grief. Hephaestion was cremated and there was a magnificent funeral in Babylon the likes of which the world had not seen before.

## **Death**

Suddenly in June 323, when Alexander was back in Babylon after some smaller campaigns, he was taken ill after a feast. 10 Days later, Alexander died. Supposedly, he was already planning new campaigns, but these would never happen. His reign had lasted less than 13 years.

During one of the many struggles for power after his death, Alexander's body was taken by Ptolemy and moved to Egypt. It was eventually placed in a golden coffin in Alexandria. It is said that his tomb was visited by many (famous) people like Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, Augustus and Caligula. The current location of the tomb of Alexander is a mystery.

*SILKROADIA: Your Majesty, your Highness, King of Macedon, Ruler of Greece, Pharaoh of Egypt, Son of God Amon, King of Kings.....*

**Alexander:** Stop, stop, just call me Alexander.

*S: Well, Alexander, first of all, I should confess that I am very excited to meet you face to face. You are more handsome than what I actually thought.*

**A:** Well, you know, this interview is exciting for me as well, as I have never been interviewed before. In my times, interviews like this simply did not exist. Our way of informing people was kind of different. But sorry...please.... go ahead with your first question.

*S: What would have happened if you would have lived longer?*

**A:** If I would have lived longer, well, who knows how the world would have looked like. Maybe the Hellenistic presence

would have been felt till Kamchatka, and my language would have been the Lingua Franca of the Silk Roads, and maybe even of the whole world.

*S: By the way, nice to see that you came to our interview together with Bucephalus, your amazing horse. He is really such a beautiful animal!*

A: Yes, I would not want to spend time without this stout animal. It is worth more than a battalion of pezhetairos, you know, the warriors on foot who were part of the phalanx.

*S: It is truly an impressive animal. And such beautiful blue eyes! We all read about his blue eyes before, but I didn't expect such beauty! Can you tell us something about how you met?*

A: It was as you would say love at first sight from my side. Bucephalus was offered to my father for a very high price. He was still untamed and really wild. I was 12 at the time, and I just had to have it. I man-

aged to convince my father to buy Bucephalus for me if I could tame him. You know, horses can get frightened easily, even by their own shade. So...I spoke to Bucephalus and pointed him towards me with the sun in my back, so that his shadow would not scare him anymore. Then I could mount him, and Bucephalus gave me his trust. That was all that it took: trust from two sides. I am sure that day I convinced my father to believe I was up for bigger things. Yeah, Macedonia was just too tiny for me....

**A:** May I ask you a question?

**S:** *Sure!*

**A:** Why did you actually choose me for this interview?

**S:** *Well, you are one of the most famous persons in all of world history. Your stories are known by virtually anyone and there are many legends related to you in many different cultures. You are even mentioned in various religious texts. On*



*a personal level, my husband and I have always been very intrigued by your life, perseverance, and accomplishments. We have even spent our honeymoon traveling to places that involved your life, your battles, and the silk road.*

**A:** Wow! If I would have lived in this day and age, I for sure would have given you a 'like' on one of those social media platforms.

*S: Thank you Alexander, you are very kind. We have actually already created a profile for you on our exclusive Silk Road Universities Social Exchange Platform where we hope that you can help us with the moderation of the discussions about your life, battles and other related topics. All Silk Road Universities Social Exchange users would be more than thrilled when the real Alexander could finally tell the truth about what really happened but got lost in time. Would you be willing to become a Content Manager on our Silk Road Universities Social Exchange Platform? We really could use your expertise*

*a lot. Last but not least, our Board of Rec-tors would like to offer you an honorary professorship in return for your coopera-tion.*

A: Wow, great idea. That sounds very exciting! I died young, true, too young. But now I have a great opportunity to show the world of today what my life and ac-complishments were like. See you soon, I'll also start a super exclusive group for me and my fellow conquerors called "Rul-ersSupreme" so we can keep in touch eas-ier than we do now. We have a nice group of friends up there with Caesar, Chinggis, Attila, Babur, Timur and Mehmed, just to mention a few.

**Elisabetta Ragagnin** - Associate Professor of Turkic and Mongolic studies at the Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca' Foscari University of Venice - and her husband, **Daan van Meel**, traveled along the silk road following the traces of Alexander the Great and Marco Polo during their honeymoon for half a year in 2012.