

Alexander the Great is one of the most admired and celebrated military leaders in history. Never defeated on the battlefield, he transformed the Greek kingdom of Macedonia into an empire that stretched from Greece in the west to present-day India in the east. Like his mythological ancestors, Alexander became the subject of legends and a model for later military commanders.

Alexander's Early Life

Alexander III was born in 356 BCE to King Philip II of Macedon and his wife Olympias. Both his parents traced their lineage to Greek gods and heroes. Philip claimed to be descended from Hera, wife of Zeus, king of the gods. Olympias was believed to be descended from Achilles, the hero of Homer's epic poem *The Iliad*. Achilles's conquests in the Iliad inspired Alexander, who modeled his life on that of his mythological ancestor.

Before Alexander's reign, Macedonia, a kingdom in northern Greece, was not a world power. The Persian Empire under Emperor Darius III controlled most of central Asia and Egypt. Philip, Alexander's father, made conquests into other Greek kingdoms, but he never challenged the Persians.

Alexander's teacher was Aristotle, the famous Greek philosopher. Under Aristotle's tutelage, Alexander learned about Greek culture, history, and philosophy. Alexander sought to spread Greek culture through his military conquests. He was said to always carry a copy of Homer's epics when he traveled with his army.

Writers throughout history have preserved legends about Alexander's childhood. That included an instance in which he tamed the wild horse Bucephalus, which allowed no one to approach him, including King Philip. One day, Alexander approached Bucephalus without fear, grabbed his bridle, and turned the horse toward the sun. By doing so, the horse no longer saw his own shadow, which young Alexander astutely noticed had been frightening him. After speaking softly to Bucephalus and stroking him, Alexander mounted the horse and rode him to his proud father. Stories such as this circulated during and after Alexander's life, solidifying his legacy as a leader with legendary powers.

From the time he was a child, Alexander's friend Hephaestion was his constant companion and associate. Hephaestion became one of Alexander's generals, serving beside him and advising him. Some historians believe Alexander and Hephaestion may have had an intimate relationship. Homosexuality in Greece was common, and Alexander would not have had regular female companionship on his conquests.

King Alexander Begins His Conquests

When Alexander was 20 years old, King Philip was assassinated and Alexander took the throne. Soon after, he strengthened the power his father had achieved over the other Greek states. Most of the states acknowledged Alexander as their leader without a fight, but the state of Thebes rebelled. In response, Alexander and his army invaded the city, killing not only Theban soldiers but also civilians. Alexander wanted to make an example of Thebes, demonstrating how he would treat those who opposed him.

Alexander soon turned his attention to the Persian Empire. First, he campaigned to the east, meeting the Persian army led by Darius III on the plain of Issus in present-day Syria. His ability to inspire his troops and to fight in any terrain, in addition to the discipline of his army, gave Alexander the advantage he needed to defeat a much larger Persian force. Next, Alexander marched toward Egypt, taking control of the city of Tyre along the way. To conquer Tyre, an island off the coast of present-day Lebanon, Alexander built a land bridge across the ocean. This strategy was unprecedented and daring, and it proved to be effective. After he defeated Tyre, Alexander brutally killed thousands of its inhabitants to make an example of them in the same way he did with the rebellious Thebans.

Alexander in Egypt

Following his conquest of Egypt, Alexander founded the city of Alexandria, which became a center of learning and culture for centuries and remains a tribute to his achievements. Before he headed west to pursue further conquests, Alexander is said to have risked a long trip through the desert to visit a shrine to the god Jupiter Ammon, the Egyptian equivalent of the Greek god Zeus. This raised the morale of his soldiers, who believed that the gods favored Alexander in his conquests, no matter how outnumbered he was. It also demonstrated that Alexander took his divine ancestry seriously.

Conquests in the East

To complete his conquest of the Persian Empire, Alexander marched east, through present-day Pakistan to present-day India. To reach the Persian army, his troops marched over high mountain passes and through the snow. His army defeated a Persian force many times its size, which included elephants, to take the Persian capital of Persepolis. Still not satisfied with the size of his empire, Alexander continued west. His goal was to expand the boundaries of the known world and bring previously unconquered lands under his control. Alexander brought Greek culture and customs to all the lands he conquered, spreading classical Greek knowledge of mathematics, science, philosophy, and government. These ideas had a lasting impact on later cultures in all these regions.



This marble relief of Alexander the Great by Italian artist Andrea del Verrocchio was created in the mid-1400s, nearly 1,800 years after Alexander's death. It demonstrates Alexander the Great's enduring legacy.

During his eastern campaigns, Alexander's desire for power and his increasing arrogance created internal and external resistance to his rule. He began requiring his subjects to bow on the ground before him as though he were a divine monarch, which was a traditional Persian custom. This conflicted with Greek culture and angered many of Alexander's supporters. In addition, he and Hephæstion both married Persian women, which made many Greeks believe he had lost touch with his heritage and was becoming more Persian than Greek.

Hephæstion, Alexander's closest friend, died during the eastern campaigns. Alexander was devastated by the death of his friend and built a monument to honor him. In 2015, archaeologists uncovered a lavish Ancient Greek grave in northern Greece that is believed to be Hephæstion's burial monument. The fancily decorated grave, which includes mosaics and marble statues, demonstrated Alexander's affection for his friend.

Alexander's Death and Legacy

Alexander was wounded many times in battle and, at age 32, while returning to Macedonia from his conquests in the east, he died as a result of infection. After his death in 323 BCE, several of the states and regions Alexander had conquered rebelled against Greek rule. As no clear leader emerged to succeed Alexander, his generals and their sons split his vast empire into several states.

Many of the people he had conquered, and who had experienced his brutality, celebrated Alexander's death; others mourned him. Regardless of their feelings about his tactics and personality, leaders from his time to the present admired and adopted some of his military tactics and leadership qualities. In the 12 years he ruled, Alexander the Great reshaped Greece, Egypt, and central Asia through cultural and military victories. His legacy lives on in legend, history, and modern cultures around the world.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

1. What text structure does the author use to organize information in this passage?
 - A. cause and effect
 - B. sequence
 - C. compare and contrast
 - D. description
2. Why was Alexander the Great undefeated in battle?
 - A. He had the largest army of the time.
 - B. He used cautious, well-tested strategies.
 - C. He inspired his troops.
 - D. He showed mercy to those he captured.
3. How did Alexander's life and achievements shape later cultures and modern life? Provide at least two examples, using details and evidence from the passage to support your answer.