

Alexander the Great and the Persian Empire
World History
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The Peloponnesian War severely weakened several Greek city-states. This caused a rapid decline in their military and economic power. In the nearby kingdom of Macedonia, King Philip II took note. Philip dreamed of taking control of Greece and then moving against Persia to seize its vast wealth. Philip also hoped to avenge the Persian invasion of Greece in 480 B.C.

The kingdom of Macedonia, located just north of Greece, had rough terrain and a cold climate. The Macedonians were a hardy people who lived in mountain villages rather than city-states. Most Macedonian nobles thought of themselves as Greeks. The Greeks, however, looked down on the Macedonians as uncivilized foreigners who had no great philosophers, sculptors, or writers. The Macedonians did have one very important resource—their shrewd and fearless kings.

In 359 B.C., Philip II became king of Macedonia. Though only 23 years old, he quickly proved to be a brilliant general and a ruthless politician. Philip transformed the rugged peasants under his command into a well-trained professional army. He organized his troops into phalanxes of 16 men across and 16 deep, each one armed with an 18-foot pike. Philip used this heavy phalanx formation to break through enemy lines. Then he used fast-moving cavalry to crush his disorganized opponents. After he employed these tactics successfully against northern opponents, Philip began to prepare an invasion of Greece.

Demosthenes (dee•MAHS•thuh•NEEZ), the Athenian orator, tried to warn the Greeks of the threat Philip and his army posed. He urged them to unite against Philip. However, the Greek city-states could not agree on any single policy. Finally, in 338 B.C., Athens and Thebes—a city-state in central Greece—joined forces to fight Philip. By then, however, it was too late. The Macedonians soundly defeated the Greeks at the battle of Chaeronea (KAIR•uh•NEE•uh). This defeat ended Greek independence. The city-states retained self-government in local affairs. However, Greece itself remained firmly under the control of a succession of foreign powers—the first of which was Philip's Macedonia.

Although Philip planned to invade Persia next, he never got the chance. At his daughter's wedding in 336 B.C., he was stabbed to death by a former guardsman. Philip's son Alexander immediately proclaimed himself king of Macedonia. Because of his accomplishments over the next 13 years, he became known as Alexander the Great.

Although Alexander was only 20 years old when he became king, he was well prepared to lead. Under Aristotle's teaching, Alexander had learned science, geography, and literature. Alexander especially enjoyed Homer's description of the heroic deeds performed by Achilles during the Trojan War. To inspire himself, he kept a copy of the Iliad under his pillow.

As a young boy, Alexander learned to ride a horse, use weapons, and command troops. Once he became king, Alexander promptly demonstrated that his military training had not been wasted. When the people of Thebes rebelled, he destroyed the city. About 6,000 Thebans were killed. The survivors were sold into slavery. Frightened by his cruelty, the other Greek city-states quickly gave up any idea of rebellion.

Invasion of Persia With Greece now secure, Alexander felt free to carry out his father's plan to invade and conquer Persia. In 334 B.C., he led 35,000 soldiers across the Hellespont into Anatolia. (See the map on page 144.) Persian messengers raced along the Royal Road to spread news of the invasion. An army of about 40,000 men rushed to defend Persia. The two forces met at the Granicus River. Instead of waiting for the Persians to make the first move, Alexander ordered his cavalry to attack. Leading his troops into battle, Alexander smashed the Persian defenses.

Alexander's victory at Granicus alarmed the Persian king, Darius III. Vowing to crush the invaders, he raised a huge army of between 50,000 and 75,000 men to face the Macedonians near Issus. Realizing that he was outnumbered, Alexander surprised his enemies. He ordered his finest troops to break through a weak point in the Persian lines. The army then charged straight at Darius. To avoid capture, the frightened king fled, followed by his panicked army. This victory gave Alexander control over Anatolia.

Conquering the Persian Empire Shaken by his defeat, Darius tried to negotiate a peace settlement. He offered Alexander all of his lands west of the Euphrates River. Alexander's advisers urged him to accept. However, the rapid collapse of Persian resistance fired Alexander's ambition. He rejected Darius's offer and confidently announced his plan to conquer the entire Persian Empire.

Alexander marched into Egypt, a Persian territory, in 332 B.C. The Egyptians welcomed Alexander as a liberator. They crowned him pharaoh—or god-king. During his time in Egypt, Alexander founded the city of Alexandria at the mouth of the Nile. After leaving Egypt, Alexander moved east into Mesopotamia to confront Darius. The desperate Persian king assembled a force of some 250,000 men. The two armies met at Gaugamela (GAW•guh•MEE•luh), a small village near the ruins of ancient Nineveh. Alexander launched a massive phalanx attack followed by a cavalry charge. As the Persian lines crumbled, Darius again panicked and fled. Alexander's victory at Gaugamela ended Persia's power.

Within a short time, Alexander's army occupied Babylon, Susa, and Persepolis. These cities yielded a huge treasure, which Alexander distributed among his army. A few months after it was occupied, Persepolis, Persia's royal capital, burned to the ground. Some people said Alexander left the city in ashes to signal the total destruction of the Persian Empire. The Greek historian Arrian, writing about 500 years after Alexander's time, suggested that the fire was set in revenge for the Persian burning of Athens. However, the cause of the fire remains a mystery.

Alexander now reigned as the unchallenged ruler of southwest Asia. But he was more interested in expanding his empire than in governing it. He left the ruined Persepolis to pursue Darius and conquer Persia's remote Asian provinces. Darius's trail led Alexander to a deserted spot south of the Caspian Sea. There he found Darius already dead, murdered by one of his provincial governors. Rather than return to Babylon, Alexander continued east. During the next three years, his army fought its way across the desert wastes and mountains of Central Asia. He pushed on, hoping to reach the farthest edge of the continent.

Alexander in India In 326 B.C., Alexander and his army reached the Indus Valley. At the Hydaspes River, a powerful Indian army blocked their path. After winning a fierce battle, Alexander's soldiers marched some 200 miles farther, but their morale was low. They had been

fighting for 11 years and had marched more than 11,000 miles. They had endured both scorching deserts and drenching monsoon rains. The exhausted soldiers yearned to go home. Bitterly disappointed, Alexander agreed to turn back.

By the spring of 323 B.C., Alexander and his army had reached Babylon. Restless as always, Alexander announced plans to organize and unify his empire. He would construct new cities, roads, and harbors and conquer Arabia. However, Alexander never carried out his plans. He became seriously ill with a fever and died a few days later. He was just 32 years old.

After Alexander died, his Macedonian generals fought among themselves for control of his empire. Eventually, three ambitious leaders won out. Antigonus (an•TIG•uh•nuhs) became king of Macedonia and took control of the Greek city-states. Ptolemy (TAHL•uh•mee) seized Egypt, took the title of pharaoh, and established a dynasty. Seleucus (sih•LOO•kuhs) took most of the old Persian Empire, which became known as the Seleucid kingdom. Ignoring the democratic traditions of the Greek polis, these rulers and their descendants governed with complete power over their subjects.

Alexander's conquests had an interesting cultural impact. Alexander himself adopted Persian dress and customs and married a Persian woman. He included Persians and people from other lands in his army. As time passed, Greek settlers throughout the empire also adopted new ways. A vibrant new culture emerged from the blend of Greek and Eastern customs.

The Persian Empire

The rest of the world paid little attention to the Persians until 550 B.C. In that year, Cyrus (SY•ruhs), Persia's king, began to conquer several neighboring kingdoms. Cyrus was a military genius, leading his army from victory to victory between 550 and 539 B.C. In time, Cyrus controlled an empire that spanned 2,000 miles, from the Indus River in the east to Anatolia in the west.

Even more than his military genius, though, Cyrus's most enduring legacy was his method of governing. His kindness toward conquered peoples revealed a wise and tolerant view of empire. For example, when Cyrus's army marched into a city, his generals prevented Persian soldiers from looting and burning. Unlike other conquerors, Cyrus believed in honoring local customs and religions. Instead of destroying the local temple, Cyrus would kneel there to pray.

Cyrus also allowed the Jews, who had been driven from their homeland by the Babylonians, to return to Jerusalem in 538 B.C. Under Persian rule, the Jews rebuilt their city and temple. The Jews were forever grateful to Cyrus, whom they considered one of God's anointed ones.

The task of unifying conquered territories fell to rulers who followed Cyrus. They succeeded by combining Persian control with local self-government. Cyrus died in 530 B.C. His son Cambyses (kam•BY•seez), named after Cyrus's father, expanded the Persian Empire by conquering Egypt. However, the son neglected to follow his father's wise example. Cambyses scorned the Egyptian religion. He ordered the images of Egyptian gods to be burned. After ruling for only eight years, Cambyses died. Immediately, widespread rebellions broke out across the empire. Persian control had seemed strong a decade earlier. It now seemed surprisingly fragile.

Cambyes's successor, Darius (duh•RY•uhs), a noble of the ruling dynasty, had begun his career as a member of the king's bodyguard. An elite group of Persian soldiers, the Ten Thousand Immortals, helped Darius seize the throne around 522 B.C. Darius spent the first three years of his reign putting down revolts. He spent the next few years establishing a well-organized and efficient administration.

Having brought peace and stability to the empire, Darius turned his attention to conquest. He led his armies eastward into the mountains of present-day Afghanistan and then down into the river valleys of India. The immense Persian Empire now extended over 2,500 miles, embracing Egypt and Anatolia in the west, part of India in the east, and the Fertile Crescent in the center. Darius's only failure was his inability to conquer Greece.

Although Darius was a great warrior, his real genius lay in administration. To govern his sprawling empire, Darius divided it into 20 provinces. These provinces were roughly similar to the homelands of the different groups of people who lived within the Persian Empire. Under Persian rule, the people of each province still practiced their own religion. They also spoke their own language and followed many of their own laws. This administrative policy of many groups—sometimes called “nationalities”—living by their own laws within one empire was repeatedly practiced in Southwest Asia.

Although tolerant of the many groups within his empire, Darius still ruled with absolute power. In each province, Darius installed a governor called a satrap (SAY•TRAP), who ruled locally. Darius also appointed a military leader and a tax collector for each province. To ensure the loyalty of these officials, Darius sent out inspectors known as the “King's Eyes and Ears.”

Two other tools helped Darius hold together his empire. An excellent system of roads allowed Darius to communicate quickly with the most distant parts of the empire. The famous Royal Road, for example, ran from Susa in Persia to Sardis in Anatolia, a distance of 1,677 miles. Darius borrowed the second tool, manufacturing metal coins, from the Lydians of Asia Minor. For the first time, coins of a standard value circulated throughout an extended empire. People no longer had to weigh and measure odd pieces of gold or silver to pay for what they bought. The network roads and the wide use of standardized coins promoted trade. Trade, in turn, helped to hold together the empire.

By the time of Darius's rule, about 2,500 years had passed since the first Sumerian city-states had been built. During those years, people of the Fertile Crescent had endured war, conquest, and famine. These events gave rise to a basic question: Why should so much suffering and chaos exist in the world? A Persian prophet named Zoroaster (ZAWR•oh•AS•tuhr), who lived around 600 B.C., offered an answer.

Zoroaster's Teachings Zoroaster taught that the earth is a battleground where a great struggle is fought between the spirit of good and the spirit of evil. Each person, Zoroaster preached, is expected to take part in this struggle. The Zoroastrian religion teaches a belief in one god, Ahura Mazda (ah•HUR•uh MAZ•duh). At the end of time, Ahura Mazda will judge everyone according to how well he or she fought the battle for good. Traces of Zoroastrianism—such as the concept of Satan and a belief in angels—can be found in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

After the Muslim conquest of Persia in the A.D. 600s, the Zoroastrian religion declined. Some groups carried the faith eastward to India. Zoroastrianism also was an important influence in the development of Manichaeism (MAN•ih•KEE•IHZ•uhm), a religious system that competed with early Christianity for believers. The followers of Mithra, a Zoroastrian god, spread westward to become a popular religion among the military legions in the Roman Empire. Today, modern Zoroastrians continue to observe the religion's traditions in several countries including Iran and India, where its followers are called Parsis.

Political Order Through their tolerance and good government, the Persians brought political order to Southwest Asia. They preserved ideas from earlier civilizations and found new ways to live and rule. Their respect for other cultures helped to preserve those cultures for the future. The powerful dynasty Cyrus established in Persia lasted 200 years and grew into a huge empire.