

Will the Real Alexander the Great Please Step Forward?

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The ancient world was fascinated by Alexander the Great. From South Africa to the Far East legends of his conquests abound. Despite his universal appeal, however, Alexander is a mystery and an enigma to historians for none of the contemporary biographies survive, and of those ancient works that do, contradictions abound.

In some sense there are primarily two Alexanders. The first is the man of legend. He is the strong willed Macedonian prince who by sheer force of personality overcomes all other contenders to the throne to win the crown of Macedonia and lordship over all of Greece. He is the skilled general that leads his forces to victory at Granicus and finally Gaugamela to win the Persian empire and vanquish the ancient foe of Hellas. He is the nearly mythic conquerer who traverses the Hindu Kush and through bloody battle after battle establishes an empire that stretches from the Adriatic to the Indus valley (*Hollister pp. 136-138*). He is the philosopher king who, through marriage, appointment, and decree abandons the Aristotlean ethic and seeks to make the stoic brotherhood of man a reality (*Roisman p. 210-214*).

The second Alexander emerges upon further examination. He is the troubled progeny of a spurned and overbearing mother (*Roisman pp. 38-40*) and a father perhaps deluded by his successes (*Roisman pp. 27-37*). He is the boy general who capitalizes on his father's careful planning to stumble into victories in an aging Persian empire ready for the taking (*Hollister p. 57*). He is the propagandist who feigns liberating the Ionian city states only to take away their democracy (*Roisman pp. 61-66*). He is the religious zealot who is so afraid of death that he seeks divinity and the idealistic king who fails to achieve his lofty goals (*Roisman pp 84-87*).

Will the real Alexander the Great please step forward? Both of these Alexanders of

course may indeed offer glimpses of the real Alexander. As with modern figures, human beings are complex, driven by more than one motivation and rarely steady in their pursuit of any one goal.

Alexander was born in 356 BC. His mother was Olympias, the first wife of Philip II of Macedon. Macedon, long considered a backwards, barbarous hinterland by the Greek city states to the south, had long been ruled by tribal chiefs who constantly warred with each other. It had no great urban metropolis and no major ports, yet Philip had succeeded in unifying it and directing Macedonian aggression outward rather than inward (*Roisman pp. 27-33*). In the lengthy power vacuum that followed the Peloponessian war, Philip carefully asserted himself as hegemon over nearly all of the Greek peninsula with the creation of the League of Corinth in 337 BC. His greater designs were on Persia, however, the arch-nemesis of Greece since the reign of Xerxes.

Alexander meanwhile was never assured his father's throne (*Roisman pp. 45-51*). His mother, Olympias, a princess of Epiros, a small kingdom to the northwest of Greece, was seen by many as a barbarian and in 338 BC Philip married Kleopatra Eurydice, the niece of Attalus, a powerful ally of Philip's in his rise to supremacy over the south. In doing so he hoped to cement bonds of alliance and be seen as more legitimately Greek. Philip intended to displace Olympias as the queen mother and replace her with a "legitimate" (ie. pureblooded Greek) queen. Any resulting sons would have left Alexander out of the line of succession.

Philip was assassinated in 336 BC, shortly after Kleopatra Eurydice bore a son. Alexander and Olympias have been implicated in the assassination plot, although the actual murder was carried out by one of Philip's bodyguards. Nonetheless Philip's death all but assured Alexander's ascension.

Alexander's early education was under the tutelage of Aristotle (*Hollister p. 116*) He was versed in the Homeric epics and the Olympian pantheon. His mother was known to have been a worshipper of both Dionysus as well as the Egyptian deity Ammon

(otherwise known as Ra and Zeus). Sources suggest that Alexander believed that he was descended from Ammon, the hero Achilles, and Heracles, who was worshipped as a god due to his heroic exploits (*Roisman pp. 173-184*).

After he became the Macedonian King he quickly established his rule over the Greek peninsula by harshly and decisively putting down a democratic revolt by Thebes. In 334 BC he launched his attack on Persia. The plan was his father's. One of his stated rationales for the invasion was the "liberation" of the Ionian Greek cities. This may have helped to rally the Greeks to his cause, but was not entirely welcome by the Ionian cities themselves. For decades the Ionian Greeks had come to terms with their Persian overlords and won a series of concessions including virtual home-rule. Alexander's "liberation" resulted in the imposition of his own hand picked government on the cities. The language of liberation was merely propaganda.

At the battle of Granicus River, his first encounter with Persian forces, Alexander's luck nearly expired. Some sources suggest that his initial attack on the Persian forces was disastrous and only his second attack, as suggested by his second in command, was successful (*Worthington*). During the battle he was thrown and nearly killed. Moving east, the Macedonians discovered that they were trapped near Issus by a much larger army under the command of Darius III. Forced into a major battle, Alexander proved his daring and strategic cunning when drove his cavalry to the Macedonian right and he forced part of the Persian Army to counter, leaving a gap which Alexander exploited to make a frontal attack on the Persian center and Darius himself. This highly innovative tactic succeeded in breaking the Persian formation and causing Darius to retreat from the battlefield, demoralizing his troops and encouraging the Macedonians. In the aftermath of the battle, one of Alexander's generals rushed south to Damascus where he captured Darius' treasure of gold and silver, as well as an impressive number of servants and women of the court, including Darius' mother, wife and daughters (*Roisman pp. 102-121*).

From Issus, Alexander marched south capturing Phoenicia including Byblus, Beirut,

Sidon, and (with greater effort), Tyre. He continued his conquests as far as Egypt where the complexities of his religious life took some new twists. As liberator of Upper and Lower Egypt, Alexander was proclaimed the son of Ra in the pharonic tradition, he furthermore visited an oracle at the religious oasis of Siwa where tradition contends that his belief in his descent from Ammon, Achilles, and Hercules was confirmed (*Roisman pp. 165-167*). Perhaps Alexander's most important achievement in Egypt was the founding of Alexandria in 331 BC which was to become an important seaport and center of learning during the Hellenistic Age.

Alexander now turned northeast towards Babylon. Babylon was the richest city in the Persian Empire and its cultural center. Meanwhile Darius had assembled a massive force to stop the Macedonians at the location of his choosing, Gaugamela. Unfortunately a variety of bad omens, astrological signs, and an eclipse of the moon shook the confidence of his troops. In addition, fearing a night attack, they were weary from constant vigil. In any event, though the sources are unclear, it seems that the Persian forces abandoned Darius during the battle when the Macedonians finally attacked in the early morning of October 1, 331 BC. Alexander's greatest victory may in fact have simply been Darius' greatest defeat (*Worthington*).

At Babylon Alexander was proclaimed "king of the world". From this point on his campaigns against the traditional capitals of the Persian Empire, Susa and Persepolis, were merely "mop-up" campaigns. His conquest of the lands held by Darius was complete. But his warfare was not yet over. He pressed his men northward into Bactria, where the fleeing Darius was killed by one of his own men, across the Hindu Kush and east into India conquering lands that had once been part of the Persian Empire in the distant past and even lands that had never been dominated before. His motivation seems to have been the reenactment of the exploits of Hercules and the revelation of his own surpassing divinity. His campaigns were bloody, civilian populations were massacred, and, when he pressed his Macedonians through steaming jungles, mudsoaked swamps, and across burning deserts for no apparent reason, they mutinied in the summer of 326 BC at the Hyphasis River.

Alexander must have been stunned. Throughout his campaigns in Asia he had always been able to motivate his men and spur them on to victory. But his motivational tactics had begun to degrade as his tendency to think of himself as a great king and god enhanced. He decided to return to the west, but crossing the Gedrosian Desert he lost many of his men to fatigue and dehydration.

As a conquerer Alexander had been enormously successful. But in two years he would be dead. During his brief rule two themes crystallize, that of his own perception of his divinity and his attempts to unify his empire culturally.

In 324 he demanded the Greek cities vote him a god and he expected his subjects to prostrate themselves before him and worship him as a god (proskynesis) in the Persian fashion. Callisthenes, one of Alexander's court philosophers objected to this, as did others, in some cases mocking him behind his back, but it seems he was serious, and one of his most loyal followers, Anaxarchus argued in favor of doing Alexander this honor (*Roisman pp. 168-172, 185-187*). His demand of the Greek cities regarding his godhood, an order to allow the return of all exiles, and plans for expansive new campaigns in the west only alienated Greece (*Roisman pp. 197-201*).

His own troops became less enamored with him after he seemed to discard Macedonian tradition and Greek culture and adopt the ways of an eastern despot. He appointed Persians to his inner circle of "companions", began a military training program in the Greek style to replace his Macedonian veterans with Asians, and, at Susa in 324, he orchestrated mass marriage of Greeks to Persian women of noble blood. During this ceremony he married Darius' daughter Stateira, further legitimizing himself as the Persian king (*Roisman pp. 203-210*). Various authors debate whether all of this was part of a great master plan to integrate the world as one culture or clever politics, in any case it has served to bolster the myth of Alexander, but further alienated his followers, including Philotas and Parmenio, who were executed on charges of conspiracy (*Roisman pp. 123-154,)*

Also in 324 his friend and presumed lover Haphaestion died. Alexander was inconsolable. There is evidence that over the course of the next few months he sank into depression, and on June 12, 323, he died. Some have postulated intentional poisoning, not an unlikely scenario given the state of his inner circle at the time, while others have suggested his death was due to over consumption of alcohol. In any case, without a clear successor, his empire was divided amongst his generals and his presumed dream of a cross cultural brotherhood of man ended. Over the next few centuries the Hellenistic Greeks ruled the newly conquered lands as overlords.

Alexander was a complicated blend of belief and action. Driven by strength of will and a vision grander than most of his contemporaries, Alexander did what no one before him had done. In this sense he was “Great”. But he seems a tragic figure as well. Did he do what he did in a vain attempt to become an immortal? Were his last days filled with loneliness and drunkenness? Was his boundless energy the fuel that caused his flame to blaze brightly, but briefly, having given his life in the pursuit of futility? This too is the Alexander that we are bequeathed.

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