
How Great Was Alexander the Great?



CV

A mosaic depicting Alexander at the Battle of Issus, 333 BCE.

Overview: Alexander III of Macedonia streaked like a meteor across the ancient world. When he was only 20, he inherited an empire that included the kingdom of Macedonia and the city-states of Greece. Almost immediately, Alexander set out to conquer the Persian Empire, which stretched from Egypt to India. He achieved his dream by the time he was 30, but he died just a few years later. In recent times, historians have debated Alexander's character and accomplishments. This Mini-Q asks you to decide whether he deserves to be called "Alexander the Great."

The Documents:

- Document A: Alexander's Empire (map)
- Document B: Alexander's Battle Against Porus
- Document C: The Destruction of Tyre
- Document D: Legends of the Helmet and the Hat Band
- Document E: Alexander's Legacy (chart)
- Document F: Alexander and Modern-Day Asia

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

How Great Was Alexander the Great?

CV

When we study the life of Alexander of Macedonia, we begin with a truth and a problem. The truth is that Alexander is one of the most famous people in history. The problem is that what we know about him is a mixture of fact and **legend**. We do know that he was born in 356 BCE, more than 300 years before Jesus of Nazareth, in a kingdom on the edge of northern Greece called **Macedonia**. His father, King Philip of Macedonia, and his mother, Olympia, prepared Alexander for kingship by hiring the philosopher Aristotle to teach him academic subjects, politics, sports, and warfare. With a start like this, Alexander developed a rather high opinion of himself, including the growing belief that he himself was a god.

During Alexander's boyhood, his father built the Macedonian army into a deadly fighting machine. First, Philip used his army and the frightening Macedonian **phalanx** ("fay-lanks") to conquer nearby Greek city-states. Next, Philip planned to attack the huge Persian Empire.

Alexander was eager to lead the attack himself. He would soon get his chance. Philip was assassinated in 336 BCE and, at the age of 20, Alexander inherited his father's kingdom and set out with the army to conquer Persia.

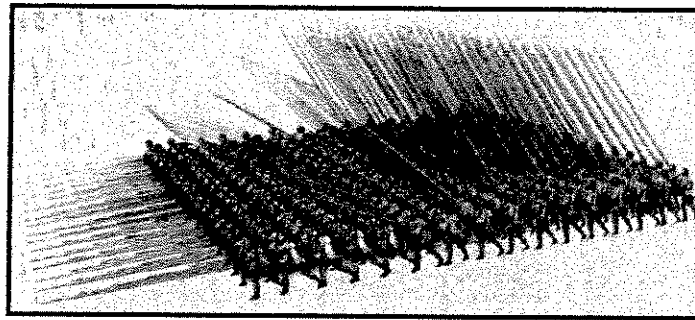
At the time, Persia was probably the most powerful kingdom in the world. This mattered little to Alexander. Using his disciplined cavalry and infantry in bold ways, Alexander fought his way through lands controlled by Persia – across **Asia Minor**, down the Mediterranean coast, into Egypt and then east to Mesopotamia. There he defeated a huge Persian army at Gaugamela ("go-ga-mill-a"). The Persian king, Darius, was killed in the aftermath and Alexander replaced him on the throne.

Instead of being satisfied with his expanded empire, Alexander pushed further eastward into lands no Greek had ever seen. He led his troops across Central Asia, fighting battles and establishing **garrison towns** along the way. More than once, Alexander was at the front of an attack. Finally, at the Indus River in western India, Alexander was stopped – not by any enemy, but by his own army, which refused to go further. After eight years of combat and conquest, Alexander reluctantly turned back.

Alexander returned to the Persian city of Susa, where he tried to unify his huge empire by taking Darius's daughter as his second wife and ordering his officers to marry Persian women.

Many Macedonians resented Alexander's attempts to join the two races.

Alexander's push to expand his empire took its toll. Over the years, he had suffered severe wounds that weak-



The Macedonian phalanx, with their extra-long spears.

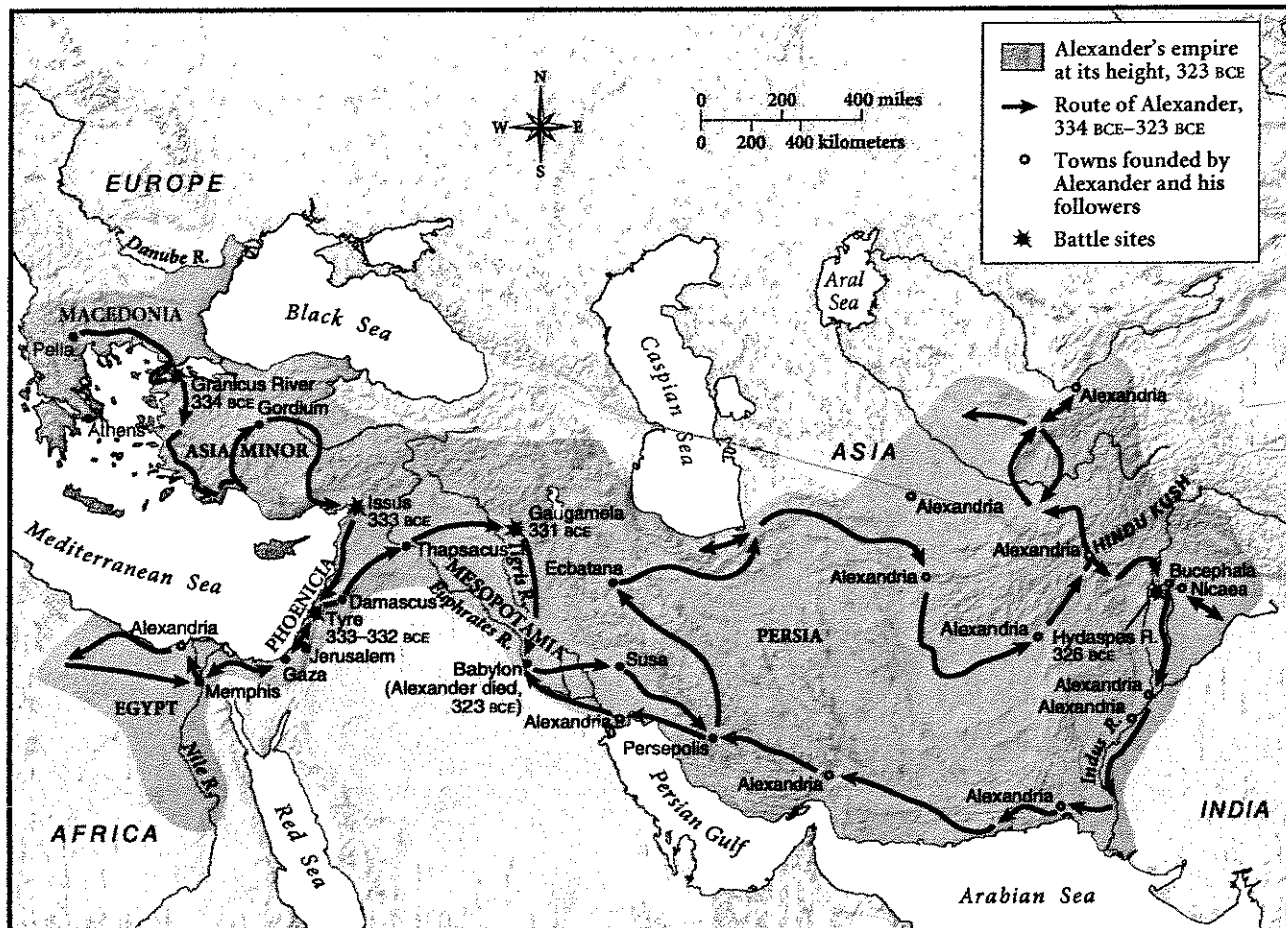
ened his health. In June of 323 BCE, after a bout of heavy feasting and celebrating, Alexander became ill; ten days later, he was dead. For reasons that are unclear, he had not named an heir. After much fighting, Alexander's generals split up the land. More quickly than it took to build the empire, it began to fall into pieces.

Flash forward three centuries. A Roman military commander named Julius Caesar is on campaign in Spain. There he encounters a statue of Alexander and is said to have wept. Caesar was reportedly overcome by the thought that Alexander had achieved so much at such a young age. But did Alexander deserve Caesar's tears and respect? Examine the following documents and answer the question: *How great was Alexander the Great?*

Document A

Source: Map created from various sources.

Alexander's Empire



EV

Note: In 334 BCE, Alexander crossed from Macedonia to Asia with an army of about 40,000. Most were Macedonians; others were Greeks and mercenaries (hired fighters).

Document Analysis

1. When Alexander and his army invaded Asia in 334 BCE, where did they first meet serious Persian resistance? (Hint: Look for the first battle site.)
2. How many times does the city name "Alexandria" appear on the map? What conclusions can you draw from this?
3. As Alexander's foot soldiers marched, approximately how many miles was it from Pella, the capital of Macedonia, to Egypt to the Hydaspes ("hay-das-pees") River in India? (Follow the arrows.)
4. How can you use the map to argue that Alexander was great?
5. How can you use the map to argue that Alexander was not great?

Document B

Source: Lucius Flavius Arrianus, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, circa 130 CE.

Note: Lucius Flavius Arrianus, known as Arrian, was a Greek philosopher and historian who lived some 400 years after the time of Alexander. His book is considered the best account of Alexander's reign. In this excerpt, Arrian describes Alexander's last major battle, fought against a prince named Porus on the eastern bank of the Hydaspes River in India. Because he was so impressed with Porus's bravery, Alexander allowed him to retain administrative rule after the Indians' defeat.

EV

Alexander pitched camp on the bank of the Hydaspes ("hay-das-pees"), and Porus was to be seen on the other bank with his whole army and his force of elephants. He realized that he could not cross at the point where Porus was encamped – his elephants were too numerous.... When Alexander saw this, he [decided to] move his troops in all different directions so that Porus would keep puzzled.... At night he would take most of his cavalry to various points along the river bank where he would create a clamour, raise the war cry and produce all other such noises as would come from men preparing to cross the river. Porus would actually parallel his movements on the other side, leading his elephants toward the shouting, and Alexander got him into the habit of making these corresponding movements. This actually went on for quite a long time [until] Porus no longer reacted.

Editor's Note: *Arrian then writes that Alexander, leaving 5,000 armed men in full view opposite Porus's camp, led a force exceeding 10,000 foot soldiers, archers, and cavalry and crossed the river about ten miles upstream. Rafts for ferrying the men were made from hides wrapped around hay and sewn watertight. The crossing was further hidden by a midnight thunderstorm. Too late to stop the crossing, Porus arranged his army on a nearby plain and prepared for battle. The narrative continues:*

The engagement was ... unlike any other previous battles.... [Porus's] elephants were now boxed in, and the damage inflicted by them fell on friend no less than foe, with men trampled under as the beasts twisted and turned.... Most of the drivers of the elephants, too, had been brought down by spears.... Eventually the animals grew tired and their charges lost vigor.... Alexander then threw his cavalry in a circle around the entire force, and ordered the infantry to lock shields, to group tightly and to advance as a phalanx.... At this juncture, ... the Indians all took to flight.

Document Analysis

1. Where is the Hydaspes River?
2. Explain how Alexander's army was able to cross the Hydaspes before Porus was able to react.
3. How was Alexander able to turn Porus's elephants into a kind of weapon?
4. How can you use this document to argue that Alexander was great?
5. How can you use this document to argue that Alexander was not great?

Document C

Source: Peter Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, University of California Press, 1991.

Note: During Alexander's march down the Mediterranean coast, many cities surrendered without a fight. Some were happy to have the Persians removed. Alexander treated these cities rather kindly. Tyre ("tīre") was another matter. Its citizens refused to surrender. They believed their city was unconquerable because it was built on an island and protected by high walls. Alexander proceeded to build a causeway, or land bridge, of timber and rubble so his soldiers could cross from the mainland to the island. The city held out for seven months and Tyrian counterattacks caused Alexander to lose many men. In the end, however, the causeway was completed and Alexander's army smashed into the city.

EV

When the last organized resistance was broken, Alexander's [soldiers] ranged through the city on a ferocious manhunt. . . . Alexander had ordered that all [except] those who sought sanctuary [safety in the temple] were to be slain, and his commands were executed with savage relish. The air grew thick with smoke from burning buildings. Seven thousand Tyrians died . . . and the number would have been far higher had it not been for the men of Sidon, who entered the city alongside Alexander's troops. Even though Tyre had been Sidon's rival for centuries, these neighbors of the victims, horrified by what they now witnessed, managed to smuggle some 15,000 of them to safety.

The great city . . . was now utterly destroyed. Her king, Azimilik, and various other notables, including envoys from Carthage, had taken refuge in the temple of Melkart, and Alexander spared their lives. The remaining survivors, some 30,000 in number, he sold into slavery. Two thousand men of military age were crucified.

Document Analysis

1. How did Alexander feel about Tyre's ability to hold him off for seven months? How do you know?
2. How might you explain Alexander's decision not to kill anyone who took sanctuary in the temple?
3. What do you learn about Alexander from his decision to crucify 2,000 men?
4. Can you think of military reasons for the severe treatment of Tyrian survivors?
5. How can you use this document to argue that Alexander was great?
6. How can you use this document to argue that Alexander was not great?

Document D

Source: Lucius Flavius Arrianus, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, circa 130 CE.

Note: Ancient biographers of Alexander told these stories. They are retold here by Arrian and a modern-day historian. True or not in their detail, the stories reveal two sides of Alexander that were probably accurate.

The Legend of the Helmet

The army was crossing a desert of sand; the sun was already blazing down upon them, but they were struggling on under the necessity of reaching water, which was still far away. Alexander, like everyone else, was tormented by thirst, but he was nonetheless marching on foot at the head of his men. It was all he could do to keep going, but he did so, and the result (as always) was that the men were the better able to endure their misery when they saw that it was equally shared. As they toiled on, a party of light infantry which had gone off looking for water found some—just a wretched little trickle collected in a shallow gully. They scooped up with difficulty what they could and hurried back ... to Alexander; then, just before they reached him, they tipped the water into a helmet and gave it to him. Alexander, with a word of thanks for the gift, took the helmet and, in full view of his troops, poured the water on the ground. So extraordinary was the effect of this action that the water wasted by Alexander was as good as a drink for every man in the army.

EV

Source: Ian Worthington, *Alexander the Great: Man and God*, Longman, 2004.

The Legend of the Hat Band

Alexander was himself steering the trireme [a warship with oars], when a strong gust of wind fell on his broad-brimmed Macedonian hat, and the band that encircled it. The hat, being rather heavy, fell into the water. However, the band was carried along by the wind, and was caught by one of the reeds growing near the tomb of one of the ancient kings... [O]ne of the sailors swam off towards the band and snatched it from the reed. But he did not carry it in his hands because it would get wet while he was swimming. He therefore put it around his own head and brought it to the king. Most of the biographers of Alexander say that the king gave him a talent* as a reward for his zeal. Then he ordered his head to be cut off [because] the prophets had explained that ... he should not allow the head that had worn the royal head band to be safe.

* More than \$10,000

Document Analysis

1. In the first story, why did Alexander pour the water on the ground?
2. In the second story, why did Alexander give the soldier who saved the hat band a reward? Why did he then order the man's head cut off?
3. How can you use these legends to argue that Alexander was great?
4. How can you use these legends to argue that Alexander was not great?

Document E

Source: Chart compiled from various sources.

Note: "Hellenes" is what ancient Greeks called themselves. The term "Hellenistic" was first used in the 19th century by historians to describe the period following Alexander when Greek ideas and culture spread.

EV

Alexander's Legacy (selected items)	
Size of Alexander's empire at his death (sq. miles)	2,000,000
Size of Roman Empire at its greatest (sq. miles)	2,200,000
Years that it took Alexander to build his empire	11
Years that Alexander's empire held together after his death	10
Length of Hellenistic period in Middle East and western Asia (years)	300
Number of cities founded by Alexander	70
Estimated enemy soldiers and civilians killed in four major battles	100,000
Religion most directly influenced by Greek art and ritual	Buddhism in India
Number of years after Alexander that Roman Emperor Marcus Macrinus had images of Alexander sewn into his clothing	540
Number of years after Alexander that Greek literature and theater remained strong cultural influences in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East	About 900
Number of years Greek remained official language of Jordan	1,000

Document Analysis

1. What is the meaning of the term "Hellenistic Age"?
2. When we ask, "What was Alexander's legacy?," what are we asking?
3. How can this document be used to argue that Alexander's legacy extended from Italy to India? Explain, using two specific examples.
4. How can you use this document to argue that Alexander was great?
5. How can you use this document to argue that Alexander was not great?

Document F

Source: Kasi Khushnawaz, a native of northern Pakistan, as quoted in *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great* by Michael Wood, University of California Press, 1997.

Long ago, before the days of Islam, Sikaner e Aazem came to India. The Two Horned one whom you British people call Alexander the Great. He conquered the world, and was a very great man, brave and dauntless and generous to his followers. When he left to go back to Greece, some of his men did not wish to go with him but preferred to stay here. [Some officers] and men came to these valleys and they settled here and took local women, and here they stayed. We . . . of the Hindu Kush, are the descendents of their children. Still some of our [Kalish] words are the same as theirs, our music and our dances too; we worship the same gods. This is why we believe the Greeks are our first ancestors.

EV

Document Analysis

1. Who is the speaker in this document and when is he speaking?
2. Where does he live?
3. Who was Sikaner e Aazem?
4. What is the connection between Alexander and Greek words in the Kalish language today?
5. How can this document be used to argue that Alexander was great?
6. Can this document be used to argue that Alexander was not great? Explain.