

The Macedonian Empire

By Bennett Sherry

Alexander the Great conquered a vast empire that crumbled after his death. Though short-lived, his conquests shaped culture, trade, and politics across Asia and the Mediterranean for centuries.

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Background

Many of us set goals when we're young. We list future accomplishments we will achieve by the age of 18, 20, our mid-30s—a degree, a job, a great place to live. Goals are great, but for your own sanity, please do not compare yourself to Alexander III of Macedon.

Tutored by Aristotle as a teenager, this guy had ended rebellions and won battles before turning 18. By 20, he was crowned king of Macedon and ruled over the Greek peninsula. At 24, he was proclaimed the pharaoh of Egypt. By the time he died at the ripe old age of 32, Alexander had founded 70 cities and towns, destroyed the mighty Persian Empire, and conquered all the lands between Egypt and India. He never lost a battle. Maybe his name could have been Alexander the Overachiever, but history remembers him as Alexander the Great.



A mosaic portraying Alexander the Great. Public domain.

Formation

For centuries, the Greek city-states had clashed with the Persian Empire to its east. The Persian Empire was a massive superpower of the ancient world. Ruled by the Persian Achaemenid dynasty, the empire covered an area from the Nile River in the west to the Indus River in the east. Its wealth and power were as vast as its territory. The Greeks, on the other hand, had always been a divided people, living in separate city-states and constantly competing for power.

Alexander the Great inherited a kingdom from his father, Phillip II of Macedon. Phillip conquered the divided city-states and united them under Macedonian rule. By attacking Persia—the old enemy of the Greek city-states—Alexander united the city-states to a common cause: Greeks against Persia.

Alexander's empire grew like wildfire and was snuffed out like a candle flame. In 12 years (334–323 BCE), Alexander conquered everything from the Mediterranean to India. It crumbled to pieces soon after his death, making it pretty short-lived, as empires go. Still, the effects of his conquests lasted for centuries. Hellenistic (ancient Greek) culture spread and was incorporated into local traditions in every corner of the lands he had conquered. Several of his generals established their own empires. The Ptolemies in Egypt and the Seleucids in Persia and Mesopotamia were particularly powerful.



A map showing the extent of Alexander's conquests. By Thomas Lessman, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Administration

Historians generally name empires after a group of people, a place or a dynasty. Empires are usually big, multi-generational projects built by many hands. It's rare that empires are named after an individual. Historians sometimes call this the "Macedonian Empire," but don't be surprised if you hear it called by another name. From the moment he began his conquests to the fallout of his death, this was "Alexander's Empire." The empire of Alexander the Great was held together by the personality, legend, and military victories of one man. *This was not a good thing.* Alexander's power and the authority of his government depended on his continued success. Whenever that faltered, the foundations of the empire crumbled.

His enemy, the Persians, ruled a huge and unified empire with vast networks of roads linking its cities and far-flung provinces. Ironically, it was the unity of his opponents that became Alexander's greatest administrative advantage in conquering them. Alexander's armies used the Persians' roads to resupply and communicate with their own forces. In his push for the integration of Greek and Persian culture and populations, he encouraged his soldiers to marry Persian women. He himself married three women connected with the fallen Persian dynasty.

While his reputation as a conqueror might make us imagine he destroyed one empire to make room for his own, he was actually careful to keep the structures of Persian government in place. Generally, the new masters from Macedonia changed little about the organization of Persia's government. Greeks made up a minority in the lands they conquered, and Alexander kept Persian elites in positions of power to help smooth the transition.



The ruins of Persepolis, the seat of the Persian emperors. Alexander's army captured and burned the city. By Diego Delso, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Religion and culture

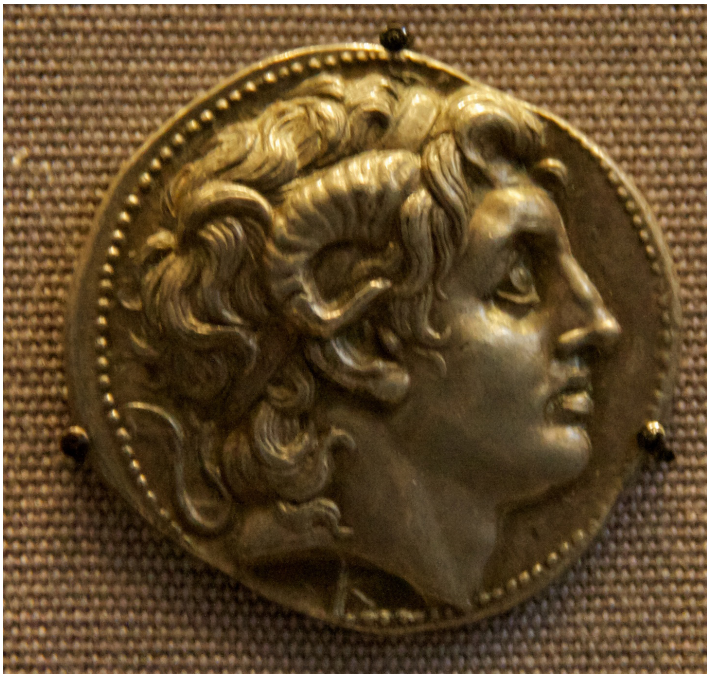
While Alexander kept the Persian infrastructure, he did seek to spread Greek culture across the world. But the Macedonian ruler and his officials were also remarkably tolerant of local religions and customs. Alexander supported Persian and Egyptian priests and sponsored the building of temples. But he also built new cities with Hellenistic architecture and sought to spread Greek ideas through new educational institutions. Greek became the common language of elite culture and diplomacy in Western Asia. Greeks also integrated the culture and traditions of those they conquered. Some, in the eastern part of the empire, converted to Buddhism. Over in India, Greeks became a part of the caste system. Though Alexander's empire did not outlast him, the effects of Hellenistic religion and culture on local traditions endured for centuries.



An example of Greco-Buddhist art from the first to second century CE, almost 500 years after Alexander's death. This frieze in Hellenistic style is from the Gandhara kingdom in what is today Pakistan. By World Imaging, public domain.

Trade

The cities that Alexander founded became important intersections of new and old trade networks connecting Asia to the Mediterranean. Alexander's architect, Dinocrates, was responsible for planning the city of Alexandria in Egypt. This city became an important trade center connecting networks that extended from the Mediterranean through the Middle East and into India. Exports from Egypt to other areas of the empire included grains, cotton, perfumes, and fruits and vegetables. From the eastern section of the empire goods such as metals, spices, and animals were traded with the lands that extended to the west.



A coin featuring Alexander the Great. Minted after his death, the coin portrays him as a god with ram horns. The memory of Alexander remained a powerful political tool for generations after his death. By Mike Peel, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Alexander's conquest of Persia opened the floodgates for the expansion of trade. For centuries, Persia had hoarded gold from its conquered lands. Alexander, however, turned the gold and silver into coinage and spent it lavishly. This spending pumped huge amounts of money into the economy, making some elites very rich and stimulating trade. Some historians and economists have argued that the world did not see another injection of so much new wealth into the economy until nearly 2,000 years later when the Spanish began plundering the Americas. Historian Frank Lee Holt notes that Alexander's lavish spending of Persian gold "served as the mainspring \[driving force\] of ancient economic progress." Holt says that Alexander's military "dominated the Near East for years, but his money dominated Eurasia for centuries." But it wasn't just men who benefited from the new wealth generated in the Macedonian Empire. Some women became powerful in their own right.

Women in society

Women in the Hellenistic world experienced an increase in their power and influence, especially when compared with women's opportunities in Classical city-states such as Athens. However, the valued roles for women were generally still limited to marriage, motherhood, and virtue.

Public records show that some Hellenistic women were gaining economic power and acquiring a great deal of wealth. This allowed privileged women to participate in local politics as magistrates (government officials) since their wealth meant that they would contribute to financing public works. Due to the cosmopolitan (multicultural/multiethnic) nature of the Hellenistic world, non-Greek women seemed to have more freedoms than those who came from more restricted city-states. Women were active in contracts and business negotiations, but not equally.

For example, if you were a Greek woman you needed a guardian present when doing official business, while other women, such as Egyptians, did not. In addition, educational opportunities expanded for women during this era, with many contracts and public records being signed by women. The most educated, however, remained those of the upper classes as well as courtesans (female companions/prostitutes).

Decline and fall

The successes of Alexander's rapid conquests would also be his downfall. With the Persian Empire conquered and humbled, many of his soldiers started to question why they needed to keep fighting. Alexander loved adopting local customs, but the soldiers were less enthusiastic. His foreign wives, Persian fashion choices, and willingness to keep Persian elites in power made his soldiers suspicious that he was forgetting his Macedonian roots. They followed him to India, where Alexander continued to display military brilliance. However, they did not share Alexander's lust for conquest. In India, they refused to travel any farther and forced him to turn around.

Without new conquests to keep him busy, Alexander reluctantly turned his attention to making his diverse and widespread empire stronger and more stable. But further improvements were cut short in 323 BCE when he died of a sudden illness. The effects of Alexander's death were immediate. His generals and governors began fighting over the empire, and with no clear heir in place, it split into rival factions. The successor kingdoms ruled by Alexander's generals ensured that Alexander's influence outlasted his life. They continued to spread Greek culture and religion across Asia. And even after those empires fell, the Roman Empire continued the spread of ideas, religion, and culture that had distinctly Greek roots.

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A coin featuring Alexander the Great. Minted after his death, the coin portrays him as a god with ram horns. The memory of Alexander remained a powerful political tool for generations after his death. By Mike Peel, CC BY-SA 4.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alexander_coin,_British_Museum.jpg#/media/File:Alexander_coin,_British_Museum.jpg

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