Overview

- Alexander the Great was famous for his military power and is a legendary figure in history.
- Much of what we know about Alexander the Great is unreliable and steeped in myth; a lot of these mythologies were used by Alexander's successors.

  In the Kingdom of Thrace, during the reign of Lysimachus—a successor of Alexander the Great who lived from 361 BCE to 281 BCE—an interesting coin was issued. This coin, which featured the head of Alexander the Great with ram's horns on either side of his crown, was issued in the ancient city of Parium, in the northwestern region of modern-day Turkey. The horns were the symbol of the Egyptian god Amun—or Zeus, who is often conflated with Amun—from whom Alexander claimed descent. Flanked with these godlike horns, Alexander attained the status of a deity.

Silver coin; left, front,, head of Alexander the Great wearing the horns of Zeus Ammon; right, back, seated Athena.

Silver coin; left, front,, head of Alexander the Great wearing the horns of Zeus Ammon; right, back, seated Athena. Image credit: British Museum

Surprisingly, Alexander himself did not issue coins with his own image; his successors did. Why would his successors refer back to their deceased predecessor as they established new empires? The reason is that Alexander the Great was—and still is—a powerful symbol of power, military genius, and conquest, whether or not this description of him is

historically accurate. His image, name, and legendary power remained resonant—and politically visible—long after his death.

A history steeped in myth

So how do we tell the history of Alexander, pulling apart the myths and legends and reconstructing an accurate narrative? It's a difficult task, but it's an important one, because the history of Alexander is a history of the Greek empire, which had a massive influence on vast regions stretching across Europe, Asia, and Africa.

We have ancient narratives of Alexander's life, written between 30 BCE and the third century CE—hundreds of years after his death. The earliest known account is by the Greek historian Diodorus, but we also have histories written by other historians, including Roman historians; these writers are called the **Alexander historians**. They interpreted written accounts from shortly after Alexander's death, penned by those who fought alongside Alexander on his campaigns.
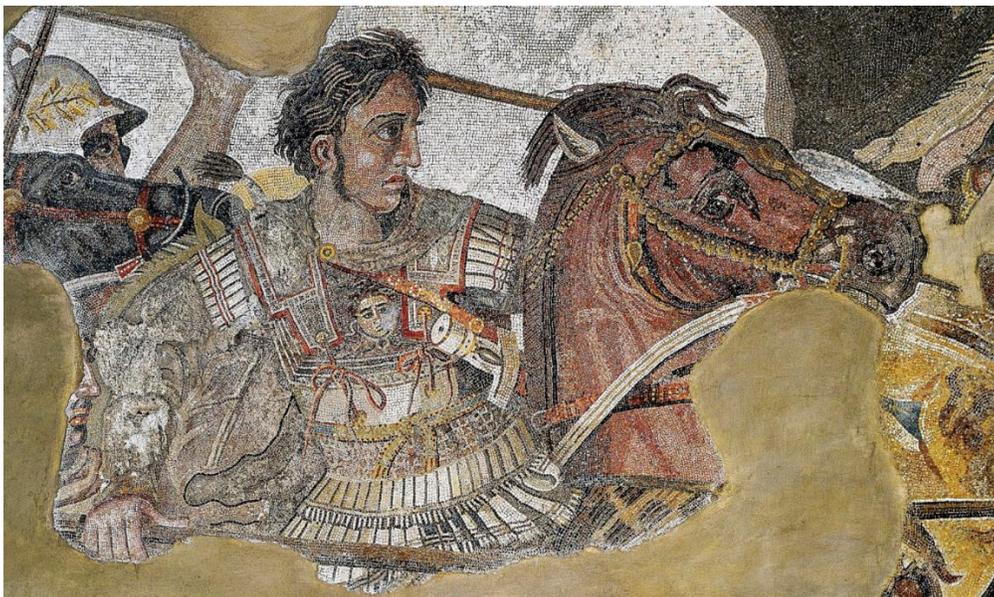
Detail showing Alexander the Great.

It's unclear how reliable these narratives are, however, as they are mingled with the propaganda of various Greek and Roman states, who were ruled by emperors that used Alexander's image to cement their own power. In order to get a fuller picture, historians interpret sources from other regions of Alexander the Great's empire, like Babylon. On one Babylonian tablet, for example, Alexander's death is recorded with an inscription in Akkadian that reads "on the 29th day, the king died."

Clay tablet; fragment of a Babylonian astronomical diary in which astronomical and meteorological phenomena observed during the year 323-322 BC are recorded; in month two, mention is made of the death on the 29th day of the lunar month of Alexander the Great, who is referred to simply as "the king".

Clay tablet; fragment of a Babylonian astronomical diary in which astronomical and meteorological phenomena observed during the year 323-322 BC are recorded; in month two, mention is made of the death on the 29th day of the lunar month of Alexander the Great, who is referred to simply as "the king". Image credit: British Museum

The fact that we can gather evidence about Alexander the Great's life and military campaigns from places so far away from one another paints a picture of an expansive empire. We know that Alexander was a powerful military leader. He led important campaigns and expanded his empire from Greece to Persia, Babylon, Egypt and beyond, taking advantage of local political contexts as he conquered new territory.

Mosaic of Alexander the Great, created for the owner of the House of the Faun in Pompeii; unknown artist; 100 BCE; National Archaeological Museum, Naples.

Mosaic of Alexander the Great, created for the owner of the House of the Faun in Pompeii; unknown artist; 100 BCE; National Archaeological Museum, Naples. Image credit: Wikipedia

It's also important to remember that history is not comprised simply of the stories of great men. Alexander the Great's empire developed not only because of his military prowess but also because of his father's success, which took advantage of an unstable political context in Greece. Alexander's own conquests happened in very specific political contexts as well, which facilitated his ability to expand his empire rapidly and with little resistance.

Ultimately, Alexander's reign was very short—only about a decade. Perhaps the greatest effect of his empire was the spread of Greek culture through the successor empires that long outlasted Alexander's rule.

The rise of an empire

After the Peloponnesian war, the Greek poleis, or city-states, were divided and had exhausted many of their resources. This set the stage for a takeover by their northern neighbors, the Macedonians, whose leaders were gaining strength and consolidating their power. Macedonia was generally regarded by the Greeks as a backwards land, good for little more than timber and pasture for sheep. The Macedonians spoke a Greek dialect and, unlike the separate Greek city-states, were ruled by a monarchy and many semi-autonomous clans. One of the most powerful monarchs was Phillip II of Macedon.

Although he is often only remembered for being the father of Alexander the Great, Philip II of Macedon—who reigned from 359 to 336 BCE—was an accomplished king and military commander in his own right. His accomplishments set the stage for his son's victory over Darius III and the conquest of Persia. Philip inherited a weak, underdeveloped society with an ineffective, undisciplined army and molded them into an efficient military force that eventually subdued the territories around Macedonia and subjugated most of Greece. He used bribery, warfare, and threats to secure his kingdom. Without his insight and determination, history would never have heard of Alexander.
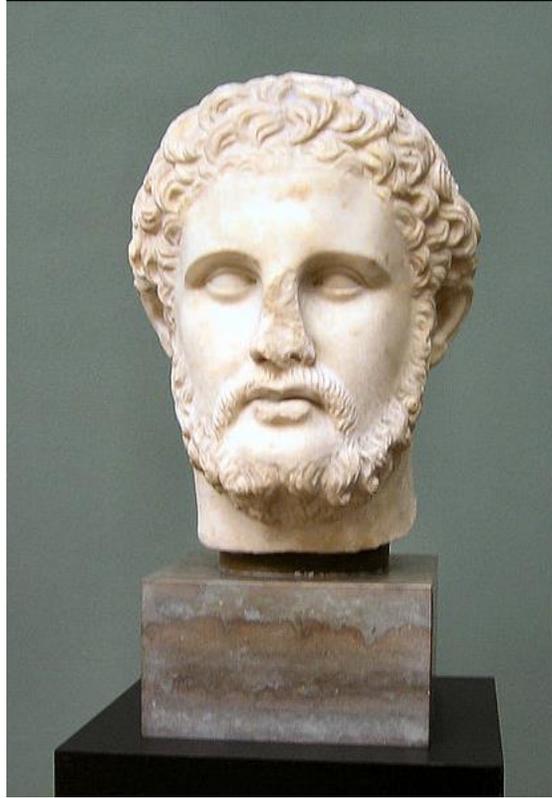
Bust of Philip II of Macedon.

Bust of Philip II of Macedon. Image credit: [Wikimedia](#)

Alexander's reign

In 336 BCE, after Philip was killed, Alexander was quickly crowned as the king. After subduing any serious threats to his rule, and with the Greek city-states now firmly under Macedonian rule following Charonea, Alexander embarked on the great campaign his father had been planning: the conquest of the mighty Persian Empire.

Alexander was able to take advantage of political instability in Persia, and he expanded beyond Persia into Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Bactria. Alexander did not, however, drastically challenge existing administrative systems. Rather, he adapted them for his purposes. Alexander was not interested in imposing his own ideas of truth, religion, or behavior upon conquered populations as long as they willingly kept the supply lines open to feed and equip his troops, which was an important aspect of his ability to rule vast

areas. This does not mean, however, that he did not ruthlessly suppress uprisings or hesitate to viciously annihilate those who opposed him.
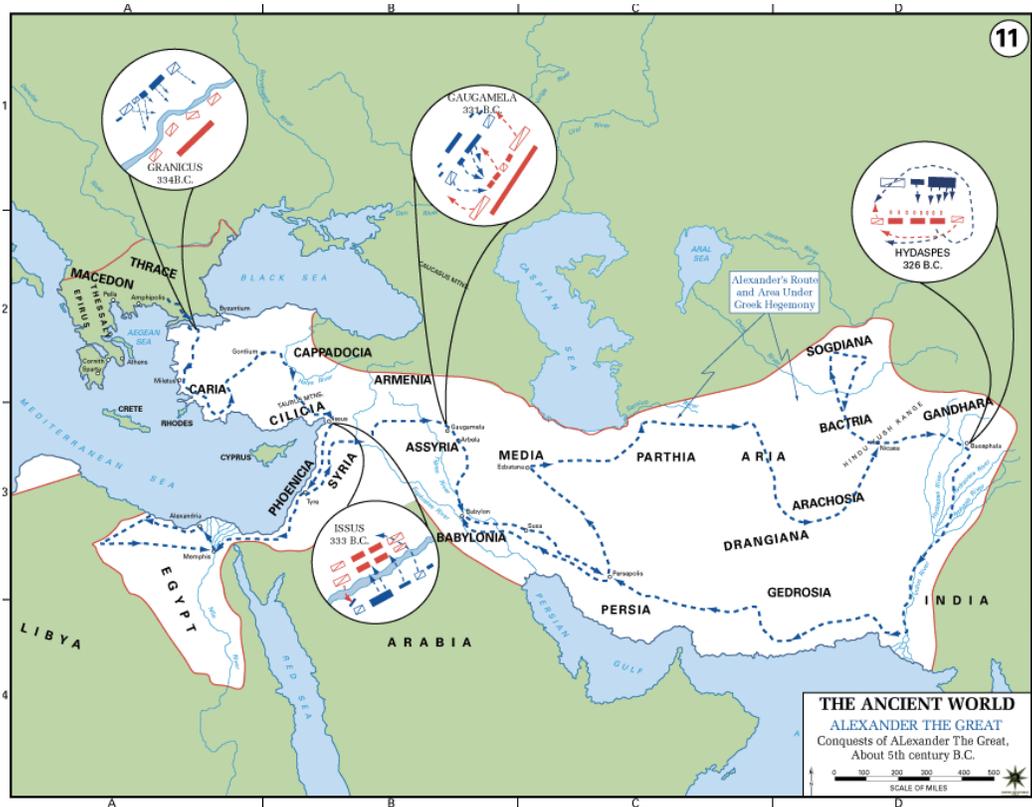
A map showing the route that Alexander the Great took to conquer Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, and Bactria.

Over the course of his conquests, Alexander founded some 20 cities that bore his name, most of them east of the Tigris River. The first, and greatest, was Alexandria in Egypt, which would become an important Mediterranean urban center. The cities' locations reflected trade routes as well as defensive positions. At first, the cities must have been inhospitable and little more than defensive garrisons. Following Alexander's death, many Greeks who had settled in these cities tried to return to Greece. However, a century or so after Alexander's death, many of these communities were still thriving and featured elaborate public buildings and substantial populations that included both Greek and local peoples.

Alexander's cities were most likely intended to be administrative headquarters for his empire, primarily settled by Greeks, many of whom had served in Alexander's military campaigns. The purpose of these administrative centers was to control the newly conquered subject populations. This purpose was not realized during Alexander's life, however. Alexander attempted to create a unified ruling class in conquered territories like Persia, often using marriage ties to intermingle the conquered with conquerors. He also adopted elements of the Persian court culture, implementing his own version of their royal robes and imitating some court ceremonies. Many Macedonians resented these policies, believing hybridization of Greek and foreign cultures to be irreverent. Alexander's attempts at unification also extended to his army. He placed Persian soldiers, some of who had been trained in the Macedonian style, within Macedonian ranks, solving chronic manpower problems.

In 327 BCE, with the Persian Empire firmly under his control, Alexander turned his attention to India. He had some victories before reaching the Ganges river, which he intended to cross in order to conquer more of India. However, his exhausted troops mutinied and refused to go farther. Shortly thereafter, as the troops headed back home, Alexander died in 323 BCE, likely due to disease.

Alexander's death was so sudden that when reports of his death reached Greece, they were not immediately believed. Alexander had no obvious or legitimate heir because his son, Alexander IV, was born after Alexander's death.