

## How Great Was Alexander the Great?

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.

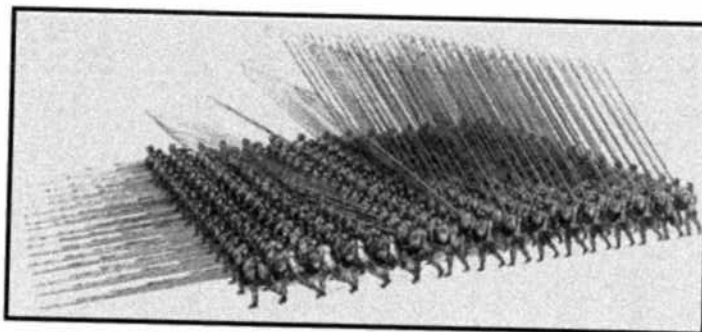
Alexander returned to the Persian city of Susa, where he tried to unify his huge empire by taking Darius's daughter as his second wife and ordering his officers to marry Persian women.

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-

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?*



The Macedonian phalanx, with their extra-long spears.

## Background Essay Questions

1. Would Alexander have heard of Jesus? Explain.
2. How old was Alexander when he launched his invasion of the Persian Empire?
3. Why was the death of Darius important to Alexander's conquest of Persia?
4. After eight years on the march, what caused Alexander to turn back?
5. What is the problem of a king not leaving an heir?
6. Why, 300 years after Alexander's death, was Julius Caesar in tears?
7. Define these terms:

legend

Macedonia

phalanx

Asia Minor

garrison towns

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- 449 BCE** – A 43-year war between Persia and the Greek city-states ends.
- 359 BCE** – Philip II becomes king of Macedonia.
- 336 BCE** – Philip II of Macedonia is assassinated. His son Alexander inherits the throne.
- 336 BCE** – Darius III becomes Great King of Persia.
- 331 BCE** – Alexander defeats the Persian army at Gaugamela.
- 329 BCE** – Alexander and his army reach western India.
- 323 BCE** – Alexander dies in Babylon.
- 301 BCE** – At the Battle of Ipsus, Alexander's generals fight to divide his empire.