

WORLDS TO CONQUER

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

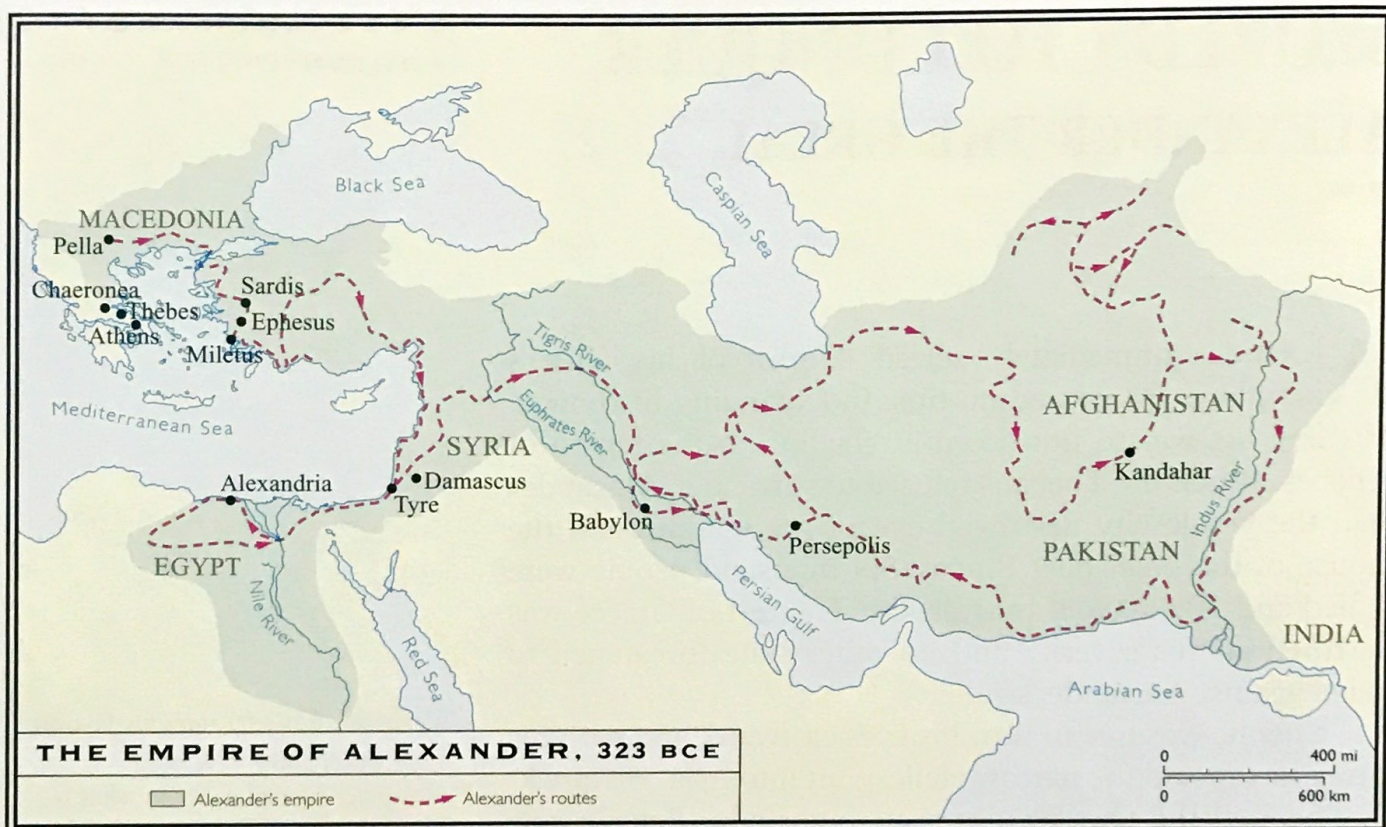
66 PLUTARCH AND
ARRIAN

Alexander immediately seized control of his father's kingdom. He wasted no time in expanding his power. His first act was to put down a rebellion in the region of Thebes. When the Thebans refused to surrender, Alexander had the whole city destroyed except the temples and the house of the great poet Pindar. Six thousand people were killed and 30,000 sold into slavery. The rest of Greece was terrified at this severity and no other state threatened to rebel against Alexander's rule.

Now he was free to turn his eyes eastward, and with his army he crossed the narrow Hellespont into Asia. He quickly liberated the Greek cities that were under Persian rule there. The Persian King Darius III tried to make peace with

Alexander (far left) rides his favorite horse Bucephalus in a battle. Alexander named a city in what is now Pakistan "Bucephala" after his horse died there.





66 Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, about 100 CE

Alexander. He offered the Macedonian all the land west of the Euphrates River, a large sum of money, and his own daughter's hand in marriage. Alexander's general Parmenio said, "If I were you I would accept this offer."

Alexander replied, "So would I, if I were you!" But he was Alexander, not Parmenio, and he rejected the Persian offer, continuing his conquest of Persia. After Darius was murdered, Alexander took over his throne. He was so accustomed to living the hard life of a soldier that when he saw Darius's luxurious quarters, he supposedly said, "So this is what it means to be a king!"

Alexander told the Persians to worship him as a god. This scandalized the Greeks, who had heard many stories of disastrous vengeance by the gods on anyone who dared to compare himself with them. But Alexander said that his mother had told him that his father was really the god Apollo and not Philip of Macedon. He later said that his father was Zeus, or perhaps Amon, an Egyptian god. He also liked to compare himself with Achilles, the Greek hero

of the Trojan War, and when he went to Troy he laid a wreath on the warrior's grave.

It seemed as though Alexander, even if he wasn't a god, was invincible. He was often in the front lines of an attack and, although he was wounded again and again (in his head, neck, and thigh; he also broke his leg, and his lung was once pierced by an arrow), he would heal quickly and return to fighting.

Alexander never lost a battle. He had no patience for **diplomacy**, preferring to be direct. When he arrived at the city of Gordium, he was shown a rope tied in a complicated knot. The Gordians informed him that an oracle had said that whoever untied the knot would become the ruler of all of Asia. There are two versions of what happened next. The biographer Plutarch wrote,

Alexander, unable to figure out how to untie the knot but finding the idea of leaving it tied unbearable . . . drove his sword into it and cut the knot, exclaiming "I have undone the knot!"—at least that's what some people say. Aristobulus, though, says that he undid the knot by taking out the big pole around which it was tied.

In either case, whether he sliced the knot with his sword or pulled out the stick that it was tied on, Alexander showed he would do things his own way.

His soldiers adored him. He never asked them to do anything that he didn't do himself and was more than once the first attacker over an enemy's city wall. Once, in the desert, the soldiers were all suffering from dreadful thirst. Someone gave Alexander a helmet full of water. But he poured it out into the sand, showing them that he would not accept any special treatment.

He even looked like the Greek idea of a leader. He was handsome, with thick, curly blond hair. His eyes were interesting: one was blue-gray and the other dark brown.

Alexander moved down through modern-day Syria and invaded Egypt, where he founded the great city of Alexandria. He invaded Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan (the

"Diplomacy" comes from *diploma*, which means "a folded paper." People with important government posts would use such papers as proof of their status. Diplomacy now means the art of dealing with people, usually representatives of another government.

66 Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, about 100 CE

Alexander's brother, also named Philip, decorated the exterior of the shrine Alexander had built at Karnak, Egypt, with an image of himself dressed as a pharaoh bringing a cup of drink to the Egyptian god Amon.



SOME PEOPLE ARE NEVER SATISFIED

When Alexander crossed the Indus River, his soldiers refused to go any further. Alexander sat down and wept because there were no more worlds to conquer.

Or did he? The first time anyone mentions this story was hundreds of years after Alexander's death. Perhaps it was made up to show how ambitious he had been to rule the world.

name of the Afghan city of Kandahar is a version of "Alexander") and took over much of what is now Pakistan.

But at this point, even Alexander's loyal soldiers decided that they'd had enough. They had been traveling and fighting for ten years and now they refused to go any further. This had happened before, and Alexander had always been able to convince them to go on. But this time the soldiers were fed up. Reluctantly, Alexander agreed to return home.

But Alexander never saw his home again. On the way, he got sick in the city of Babylon after a long banquet and lots of drinking. Compared to his many injuries, this did not seem severe, but he lay ill for days. It soon became obvious that he was dying.

His followers asked him to whom he would leave his kingdom. He said, "To the strongest." This didn't give them much guidance and after he died, his empire fell apart.

Did Alexander the Great drink himself to death? Was he poisoned? Or did he contract some kind of illness? Many people adored him, but many hated him. He had great

numbers of his enemies executed and shocked many Greeks by having himself worshiped as a god. Surely there were people who would have wanted to see him dead.

The people with him found it so hard to believe that he was not invincible that it took them several days to declare him dead. This must have been unpleasant in the heat of Babylon.

Alexander was buried in a solid gold coffin. His tomb was looted long ago and he was re-buried in a glass coffin. Today, no one even knows where his mummified body finally wound up. What an end for a man of whom a later Greek historian wrote, “there was no race of mankind, no city, no individual, to which his name had not reached.”

“ Arrian, *The Campaigns of Alexander*, second century CE



Alexander's gold coffin was once placed inside this sarcophagus decorated with scenes that show Alexander hunting and in battle.

{ sarco + phagos =
“flesh” + “eating”
A sarcophagus is a
stone coffin.