

Since the beginning of time, ambitious military commanders were never in short supply. Some of them focused on gaining control inside their own kingdoms. Others set their goals higher. Alexander the Great -- or Alexander III -- belonged to the second group. During his short reign of thirteen years, he defeated several regional powerhouses. By the time he died in 323 B.C., he had done the unthinkable and built a kingdom with lands stretching across three continents -- Europe, Asia, and Africa. After him, only a handful of generals could duplicate or even surpass his success. For more than 2,000 years, Alexander the Great has been recognized universally as the world's first greatest military commander.

Alexander the Great was born on July 20 or 26, 356 B.C. His father, Philip II, was the king of Macedonia (or Macedon), and his mother, Olympias, was the princess of Epirus. At the time of his birth, Macedonia was still a backwater country lying north of Greece, but that was about to change. Using a combination of alliances and warfare, Philip started to push his nation's boundary southward. His goal was to rule all of Greece one day. After years of planning and strategizing, he finally realized his dream in 338 B.C. That year, the Macedonians defeated Athens and Thebes, the two strongest Greek city-states, at the Battle of Chaeronea. Alexander, a mere teenager then, led a cavalry and fought fearlessly against the famed Sacred Band of Thebes. In the end, he emerged as the victor and killed the elite Theban force that was once believed invincible!

Not long after this great success, Philip cast his eyes on the Persian Empire. Hoping to expand his nation even farther than it already was, he began to prepare his armies for an invasion. Unfortunately, he never got to carry out this grand military plan of his, for he was assassinated in 336 B.C.

Upon Philip's untimely death, his loyal troops hailed Alexander as their new king, but not everybody in Macedonia welcomed this young ruler who just turned twenty years of age. Having been recently conquered, both the Athenians and the Thebans wanted their independence back, so they began to plot against Alexander. When Alexander got wind of this, he and his soldiers moved swiftly. In two weeks, they covered 240 miles and quickly took Thebes under siege. The Thebans' refusal to surrender turned out to be a very costly mistake. As soon as Alexander subdued Thebes, he allowed his men to plunder the entire city and kill anybody in sight! Whoever survived the attack was sold into slavery. Alexander's intention was clear. He wanted to make an example out of Thebes for the rest of Greece to see. His warning worked! Athens immediately changed its mind and swore allegiance to Macedonia. Now, with all the domestic troubles being taken care of, Alexander could finally continue his father's unfulfilled dream -- conquering the Persian Empire.

In the spring of 334 B.C., Alexander crossed the Strait of Dardanelles (formerly known as the Hellespont) and brought his force to Asia Minor (modern day's Turkey). He had close to 30,000 infantry and 5,000 cavalry with him at the time. Though the size of his armies was not very impressive, he devised a smart strategy and tackled the coastal cities first. By gaining control of the ports, he successfully blocked the Persian navy from making landfall. After securing the coastline, Alexander directed his soldiers to travel inland and reach Gordium, capital of Phrygia. According to legend, this city-state's founder, Gordius, had tied an intricate knot in his chariot a long time ago. He proclaimed that only the future conqueror of Asia could untie the knot. When the chariot was presented to Alexander upon his arrival, he boldly sliced

through the knot with his sword. With a quick move of his arm, he made it clear that he would be the conqueror of Asia!

In the autumn of 333 B.C., Alexander encountered Darius III, the Persian king, himself. At the decisive Battle of Issus, Darius saw his force being crushed and fled before the war even ended. In haste, he never bothered to take along his family members. All he cared about was saving his own skin. After claiming victory, Alexander rounded up Darius' mother, wife, and children. He assured them of their safety and treated them kindly. He even went on to marry Darius' eldest daughter as one of his many wives several years later. Though Darius was fortunate to escape Issus, he had to be on the run all the time. He tried to negotiate peace with Alexander by offering him lots of land and money, but to no avail. Alexander did not want a portion of the Persian Empire. He wanted the whole thing! To get that, he led his men to advance across Syria and Phoenicia in hot pursuit of Darius. While most of the cities in that region hardly put up a fight, Tyre and Gaza were two exceptions, but even their resistance turned out to be fruitless. They all fell eventually. After taking down Gaza and allegedly a brief visit to Jerusalem, Alexander reached Egypt in November 332 B.C. The Egyptians received Alexander warmly as they welcomed the chance to be liberated from the Persians. Later that month, they crowned Alexander in Memphis to be their pharaoh. Alexander stayed in Egypt for several months. During his time there, he commissioned a city to be built at the mouth of the Nile River. He called the city Alexandria, after himself.

In the spring of 331 B.C., Alexander left Egypt to invade Mesopotamia and had another showdown with Darius. At this final face-off, Darius lost and fled again. Though he might have considered himself extremely lucky, his days were numbered. En route to capture Darius,

Alexander attacked Babylon and Persepolis. The latter was the capital and crown jewel of the Persian Empire. Alexander broke through Persepolis' defense in late January 330 B.C. and moved in with his troops. Just as in Thebes, he showed absolutely no mercy this time around either. Before burning down the palaces, he allowed his men to loot the city and to kill the Persian nobles. When he was at last satisfied with the destruction, Persepolis was like a ghost town. It would never reclaim its glory!

After the sacking, Alexander directed his formidable troops to be on Darius' trail again. His chase drove this once powerful king to take shelter in Bactria. In July 330 B.C., Bessus, the governor of Bactria, killed Darius and proclaimed himself the new ruler of the Persian Empire. When Alexander captured Bactria the following year, he accused Bessus of committing regicide (the killing of a king) and executed him promptly.

Merely six years after ascending the throne, Alexander had managed to amass a vast kingdom. As his power went unchallenged and his military undefeated, he decided to push his empire even farther east. In the early summer of 327 B.C., Alexander led a large army and advanced toward the Punjab region in modern day Pakistan and India. They crossed the Hindu Kush Mountain and arrived at Taxila the following spring. Taxila's ruler, King Ambhi or Taxiles, chose not to fight and accepted the supremacy of Alexander. His neighbor, King Porus, however, had a different idea. He resisted Alexander fiercely. Though King Porus lost, Alexander admired his spirit and allowed him to continue ruling his kingdom.

After capturing the Punjab region, Alexander urged his men to press on. But his soldiers openly rebelled and refused to go any farther. Upon consulting with his trusted general, Coenus,

on the subject and hearing what he had to say, Alexander decided to abort the expedition. His retreat spared India and the countries lying beyond it.

Alexander died mysteriously around June 10, 323 B.C. Of the scant information we know, he fell ill after going to a banquet in late May and passed away not long afterwards. Some historians believed that he got poisoned at the party. But others disagreed. They pointed out that overdrinking, malaria, or typhoid fever could also be the likely cause of death. While we might never find out what actually killed Alexander, we know precisely what happened to his empire. As Alexander was lying on his deathbed, his generals surrounded him and asked him who would inherit the throne. Alexander replied that he would give it to "the strongest." Though those generals later supported Philip Arrhidaeus (Alexander's half-brother) and Alexander IV (Alexander's own son) as the co-rulers of Macedonia, they never offered either any actual power. Instead, they fought among themselves relentlessly and eventually broke the empire into pieces.

Even though his empire did not last after his death, Alexander would forever be remembered as one of the world's greatest leaders. His strength reflected not only in his ability to command troops, but also in his ability to govern. Through his conquests, Alexander exported all things Hellenistic (Greek) - such as philosophy, law, literature, religion, and art - to every corner of his empire, and imported other cultures. While he led a relatively short life on Earth, his legacy has certainly lived on and will continue to inspire people everywhere for centuries to come!