

Alexander the III of Macedon
(b. July 356 and d. June 323 B.C.)

Alexander's Birth and Early Years (356-340 BC)

Alexander is commonly known as Alexander the Great. He was born in July 356 BC. The Grecian calendar then was different to our calendar today, so it's hard to pinpoint the actual day. Several legends surround Alexander's birth and childhood. According to Plutarch, King Philip of Macedon (Alexander's father) had several wives, including Olympias. On the eve of the King's union with his new Olympias, she dreamed a lightning bolt struck her womb. She raised Alexander to believe that he was the son of Zeus. On the day Alexander was born, the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, burned to the ground. Ancient Greek historians wrote that Artemis was away from Ephesus tending to the birth of Alexander. As a boy, Alexander was tutored like all Grecian noble sons. Philip chose Aristotle as the Alexander's tutor, promising to rebuild Aristotle's hometown (Stageira) for payment. When Alexander was ten years old, a horse trader from Thessaly brought Philip a horse, but it refused to be mounted. Young Alexander, seeing the horse was fearful of its own shadow, tamed it, mounted it, and named it Bucephala. This horse would carry Alexander on his conquests as far as India, where Bucephala would die of old age. Alexander named the city of Bucephala (N. India) for his horse.

Alexander's Ascension to the Greek Throne (340-336 BC)

At the age of sixteen, Alexander began traveling as a soldier in his father's army, helping Macedon to conquer other Greek cities (Thessaly, Elatea, Corinth, etc.). After Corinth (337 BC), Philip established the Hellenic Alliance, which included an alliance of all Greek city-states except Sparta. Phillip was named Hegemon (Supreme Commander) of this League of Corinth and announced his plans to attack the Persian Empire. Alexander and all Greek nobleman hated the Persians for burning Athens to the ground in 480 BC. Upon returning to Macedon, Philip took a Macedonian as his wife (Cleopatra Eurydice), threatening the inheritance of Alexander, whose mother Olympias was not Macedonian. Cleopatra's uncle offered a toast to the gods, asking for a "legitimate heir." Plutarch describes what happened next:

This so irritated Alexander, that throwing one of the cups at his head, "You villain," said he, "what, am I then a bastard?" Then Philip, taking Attalus's part, rose up and would have run his son through; but by good fortune for them both, either his over-hasty rage, or the wine he had drunk, made his foot slip, so that he fell down on the floor. At which Alexander reproachfully insulted over him: "See there," said he, "the man who makes preparations to pass out of Europe into Asia, overturned in passing from one seat to another." (Plutarch 1919, IX 1)

Alexander and Olympias fled Macedon, only to return six months later after mediation from Demaratus, a family friend. In the summer of 336 BC, Philip was assassinated by Pausanias, one of Philip's bodyguards, who himself was killed while running away from the assassination by two of Alexander's friends. Alexander was named head of the Corinthian League on the spot. Many have speculated that Alexander killed his own father in order to obtain the title of Supreme Commander. He had just turned 20 years old. Alexander moved north and then east to Persia to take retribution on the Persian Empire.

Alexander's Drive to Conquer the Persians and the World (336-323 BC)

For several months, Alexander developed and trained an army, placing four trusted childhood friends as his generals. In 335 BC, Alexander left on his conquering campaign and would never return to Greece.

He crossed the Dardanelles with his army and conquered all of Asia Minor (Turkey) from the Persians. Then he moved south and conquered Syria. Then further south to Judea (a Persian province of Jews). The Jewish Encyclopedia quotes Josephus (Jewish Antiquities, 11.317-345) for what happens in 332 BC:

“Alexander went to Jerusalem after having taken Gaza. Jaddua, the high priest, had a warning from God received in a dream, in which he saw himself vested in a purple robe, with his miter—that had the golden plate on which the name of God was engraved—on his head. Accordingly he went to meet Alexander at Sapha ("View" [of the Temple]). Followed by the priests, all clothed in fine linen, and by a multitude of citizens, Jaddua awaited the coming of the king. When Alexander saw the high priest, he revered God (Lev. R. xiii., end), and saluted Jaddua; while the Jews with one voice greeted Alexander. When Parmenio, the general, gave expression to the army's surprise at Alexander's extraordinary act—that one who ought to be adored by all as king should adore the high priest of the Jews—Alexander replied: "I did not adore him, but the God who hath honored him with this high-priesthood; for I saw this very person in a dream, in this very habit, when I was at Dios in Macedonia, who, when I was considering with myself how I might obtain dominion of Asia, exhorted me to make no delay, but boldly to pass over the sea, promising that he would conduct my army, and would give me the dominion over the Persians." Alexander then gave the high priest his right hand, and went into the Temple and "offered sacrifice to God according to the high priest's direction," treating the whole priesthood magnificently. "And when the Book of Daniel was shown him [see Dan. vii. 6, viii. 5-8, 20-22, xi. 3-4], where Daniel wrote one of Greeks should destroy Persia. That Greek was Alexander.”

According to Josephus, Alexander was so grateful to the God of the Jews, he exempted Jews from tax. Alexander went to Egypt where he was received as a “liberator,” for he restored the worship of Amun, tearing down statues to the Persian gods. Alexander founded the city of Alexandria (331 BC) and for the next millennium this city played the key role in making the world “Hellenistic” (Greek) in customs, language, and learning. The known world was prepared for the coming of a Messiah. Alexander then moved back north from Egypt to Babylon, where he first met Darius III, King of the Persians, at the battle of Arbela. He routed the Persians who fled the battlefield east. Alexander then chased Darius east through Media and Parthia. As he closed in on Darius, the Persian king's own men killed him, and one of the assassins declared himself Artaxerxes V. This man was not a Persian Royal, but for 18 months, he continued to run with the Persian army from Alexander – this is why the “end” of the Persian Empire is dated from either 333 BC (Alexander conquering Persian held Asia Minor), or 331 BC (the death of Darius III) or 329 BC at the death of the imposter Artaxerxes V and actual peace. Alexander continued east, and eventually crossed the Indus river (326 BC), but the Grecian soldiers revolted from going any further. They wanted to go home and see their wives and children. Alexander relented and the Greeks turned back from India to Persia, taking the difficult southern route (losing many men). Alexander reached Susa in 324 BC. He in Persia, wintering in Susa and living in Babylon until his death.

The Death of Alexander (June 323 BC)

Alexander died one month before his 33rd birthday at Nebuchadnezzar's palace in Babylon. Plutarch suggests he was poisoned. Others say he died of venereal disease. His generals divided the Empire.