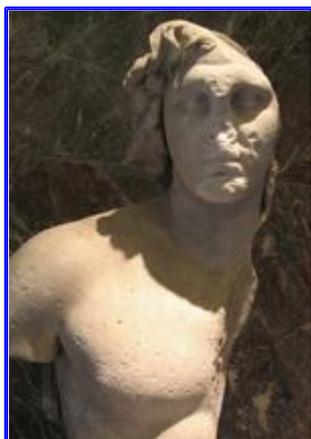


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Alexander the Great



Alexander, bust from Delos
([Louvre](#))

Alexander the Great (*356; r. 336-323): the [Macedonian](#) king who defeated his Persian colleague [Darius III Codomannus](#) and conquered the [Achaemenid Empire](#). There is much to be said about Alexander's career; this website offers a [biography](#) in eighteen parts and more than seventy [translated sources](#). On this page, you can find a brief first introduction.

Alexander's father [Philip](#) had been king of [Macedonia](#) and had changed this backward kingdom in a strong state with a powerful army. In order to achieve this aim, he had embarked on an expansionist policy: every year, he waged war, and the Macedonian aristocrats benefited. To keep his monarchy intact, Philip had to continue his conquests; if he stopped, the noblemen would start to ask questions.

At the end of his life, Philip had contemplated a war against the nearby Persian empire, which was weakened after the death of king [Artaxerxes III Ochus](#), but Philip had been murdered before he could leave (336).

With help of two powerful courtiers, [Antipater](#) and [Parmenion](#), Alexander succeeded his father and inherited the Persian war. He needed the first year of his reign to organize his kingdom, and left Antipater as his viceroy.



The Granicus

In the spring of 334, Alexander and Parmenion crossed the [Hellespont](#) and attacked the local Persian army, which was defeated near the river [Granicus](#) in the northwest of what is now called Turkey. After their first victory, the Macedonians went to the south, where the Persian bulwark [Sardes](#) surrendered and the Macedonians could occupy Greek cities like [Ephesus](#), [Priene](#), and [Miletus](#). Their advance was halted when they reached [Halicarnassus](#), the capital of [Caria](#), which was defended by a Greek commander in Persian service, [Memnon of Rhodes](#). The siege lasted long and although a large part of Halicarnassus was finally captured, its citadel, situated on an island, was not. The Macedonians lost precious time and the new Persian king, [Darius III Codomannus](#), was able to build up a large army.



The 'Alexander mosaic',
discovered in Pompeii (Museo
archeologico nazionale,
Napoli; [@!!!](#))

In 333, the troops of Alexander and Parmenion advanced through what is now called Turkey, and in November, they met the army of Darius at [Issus](#). Battle was joined on a narrow strip of land, where the Persians were unable to benefit of their numbers. They were defeated for the second time, and Alexander could proceed to the south, where he besieged and captured Tyre and Gaza. Early in 331, he added Egypt to his conquests. From now on, the Persian empire had no ports anymore, and Macedonia was safe. Yet, Alexander decided to continue the war.

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In the meantime, something had changed. He had always been the leader of the Macedonians and something like an ordinary nobleman. After Issus, however, he claimed to be a real king, and after his visit to Egypt, he believed that he was the son of the supreme god Zeus, in his manifestation as the Egyptian [Ammon](#). Not everyone accepted this, and we sometimes hear about complaining courtiers; from his side, Alexander started to spy upon Parmenion's son [Philotas](#).



Astronomical diary describing the battle of Gaugamela (British Museum)

In the summer of 331, the Macedonians crossed the [Euphrates](#) and wanted to proceed to [Babylon](#), but the Persian commander [Mazaesus](#) forced them to a more northern route, which brought them to the plain east of the [Tigris](#). At Gaugamela, Darius waited for Alexander. Unfortunately for him, there was a lunar eclipse, and the omens were extremely unfavorable: the precise circumstances predicted a defeat for the ruler of [Babylonia](#) and Persia, and a successful, eight-year reign for an intruder from the west. The only contemporary source we have, the Babylonian [Astronomical Diary](#), mentions how Darius was deserted by his own soldiers.

In the autumn, Alexander reached Babylon and Susa, and in January the Macedonians fought their way through the [Persian gate](#), a mountain pass in the [Zagros](#). They spent the winter of 330 in the Persian capital [Persepolis](#), which they sacked in the spring.



The Dasht-e-kavir desert where Darius was killed

Meanwhile, Darius was building a third army in [Ecbatana](#), but some of his reinforcements never arrived, and ultimately, the great king decided to go to the east, where he would find new troops. Alexander followed him at lightning speed and intercepted his opponent, who was murdered near a town called [Choara](#). According to the Macedonian propaganda, the assassins were Persian noblemen, and Alexander announced that he would punish them. After all, he had conquered a substantial part of Asia by now, and if he wanted to rule it, he needed help from the Persian aristocrats. Punishing the murderers was one way to obtain their support.



The Hindu Kush (©!!!)

His soldiers did not like this. There was attempt to kill the king and it turned out that Parmenion's son Philotas had known of the conspiracy. He had not reported it and was therefore executed. His father was killed too. From now on, Alexander relied on "new men" like [Craterus](#). Unhappy soldiers were placed in a punitive battalion. For two years, there was no opposition left.

Meanwhile, the last Persians had found a new leader, [Bessus](#), who is also mentioned -perhaps correctly- as Darius' murderer. He was powerful in what is now Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, and Alexander ordered his soldiers to march across the Hindu Kush. It was a detour, but the stratagem was successful: Bessus was surprised and was arrested by his own men, who surrendered him to Alexander's friend [Ptolemy](#).

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A mounted archer (British Museum, London; ©**)

Alexander now advanced to the northeastern part of the Persian empire. Five years after he had crossed to Asia, he had conquered a large part of it and rooted out all opposition. But at this very moment of triumph, things started to go wrong. There was an insurrection among the Sogdians, which was led by a man named [Spitamenes](#), who may have been an influential man in the [Zoroastrian](#) religious community. He started a guerilla, using fast horsemen to attack everywhere; when the Macedonians were ready to strike back, he had already disappeared. Alexander needed local supporters and hired the [Dahae](#), who turned out to be loyal. He also married a local princess, [Roxane](#), to win additional local support. But even after these diplomatic moves, the counter-guerrilla continued. Eventually, Alexander ordered mass deportations to become master of the situation. In the winter of 328/327, Spitamenes was killed.



Proskynesis; original relief of the northern stairs of the Apadana at Persepolis (National Archaeological Museum, Tehran)

Alexander had needed reinforcements and had hired many Greek mercenaries. At the same time, the "king of Asia" was increasingly relying upon eastern troops. His army was slowly becoming less Macedonian, and he had to adopt a new court ceremonial to become acceptable to his Asian courtiers and soldiers. Earlier attempts to win their hearts by accepting Persian royal garments had been acceptable to the Macedonians, and Alexander expected that they would also accept the introduction of [proskynesis](#), the Persian court ritual. However, the Macedonians flatly refused because the gestures involved in proskynesis (bowing, prostrating, kissing) were associated with the cult of the gods. If Alexander needed one court ritual, he needed to become a god.

During a drinking party, something terrible happened: Alexander killed a nobleman named [Clitus](#). It was an accident, but deep in his heart, the king wanted to strike at the Macedonian nobility anyhow, because it had been against proskynesis. Yet, the king felt guilty, until the philosopher Anaxarchus convinced him that as a king, he was "a god among men" and therefore beyond good and evil. This was the next step towards deification.



Indus and Aornus

Late in 327, the Macedonians crossed the Hindu Kush again, and invaded the valleys of the [Kabul](#) and [Swat](#). In fact, there was no justification for this attack, but Alexander's courtiers no longer asked questions. Many Indians seemed to identify the conqueror with an avatar of a local deity, who was identified by the Macedonians with their god Dionysus. Fighting was hard and merciless; on more than one occasion, Alexander massacred people who had already surrendered. In the spring of 326, he reached the mighty [Indus](#), where he attacked a group of refugees on a mountain citadel called [Aornus](#). The only reason seems to have been that there was a local myth that the god Krishna had been unable to capture this mountain, a challenge that Alexander could not leave unanswered.

He now proceeded along the [Uttarāpatha](#) (the modern Grand Trunk

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The Hydaspes battlefield?

Road) to the east, and reached [Taxila](#). Its ruler Omphis surrendered and invited Alexander to attack the king of the next Indian state, [Porus](#). This man waited for the invaders on the bank of the river [Jhelum](#), which he believed to be unpassable. However, during a stormy night full of rain, the Macedonians were able to cross the stream, and Porus was defeated because his chariots were unable to proceed in the mud. It was not a big battle -only a sixth of Alexander's army was employed- but it was celebrated as a victory of the greatest importance. The king of Asia minted coins on which he was shown with a thunderbolt, claiming that he had caused the rainfall. Again, Alexander claimed divinity.

He wanted to advance to the east, and indeed crossed two rivers, but then, his soldiers refused to go on. Alexander was furious. He must have imagined a different way to celebrate his thirtieth birthday. But he finally allowed himself to be persuaded by [Coenus](#), one of the heroes of the battle at the Jhelum, and by the gods, who sent evil omens. This was important. To the king, it was imperative to stress that the gods, and not the soldiers, had forced him to return; had it been otherwise, he would have lost his authority.



The ancient walls of Multan

Now, the return voyage started: with a large fleet, the Macedonians sailed to the south. Alexander used his normal strategy, attacking refugees and non-combatants first, in order to terrorize the soldiers. Especially the Mallians, who gave their name to modern [Multan](#), suffered heavily. Alexander was severely wounded but recovered and continued to the south, until he reached the Indian Ocean.

He divided his army. Craterus commanded one division, [Nearchus](#) was to lead a naval expedition, and a third division was to proceed through the [Gedrosian](#) desert, commanded by the son of Zeus in person. This was to be the greatest mistake of Alexander's career: he lost many people in the hot and waterless area. Yet, there were survivors, who recognized Alexander as their god during a drinking party in Carmania, where their king presented himself as if he were the god Dionysus.

Alexander now ordered the executions of several governors whom he suspected of treason. Probably correctly: in Sogdia, the Punjab and the Indus valley, there were large insurrections, which Alexander was no longer able to suppress. Modern scholars have called these executions the "reign of terror" and our main source, the Greek historian [Arrian of Nicomedia](#), writes that Alexander's rule now became 'harsher' (*oxyteros*).



Gold coin of Alexander struck in Babylon, showing the war goddess Athena and Nikê (victory) (©!!)

Early in 324, he returned to Persepolis and Susa, where he ordered his officers to marry Iranian ladies. During this mass wedding, the king married to two princesses. Alexander was now planning to conquer [Arabia](#) and proceed to the western Mediterranean, and started to reorganize the eastern part of his empire. Everywhere, he appointed Europeans as [satraps](#) (governors) and at the same time, he recruited young Asians to serve in his army. The Macedonians were allowed to go

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home, but they refused. They had conquered the east, but now they saw that the conquered nations were taking over the army. Yet, Alexander overcame their complaints and ordered Craterus to bring back the veterans to Europe.

In October, Alexander's lover [Hephaestion](#) died in Ecbatana. The king was shocked, and as a consolation, he massacred the [Cossaeans](#), a mountain tribe in the Zagros, who were forced to give up their nomad lives and settle in towns. The king also ordered his subjects to sacrifice to Hephaestion as if he were a demigod. The implication was, of course, that he himself -as the greatest of the two lovers- was a god. Indeed, several Greek cities ordered that Alexander should be venerated as the "invincible god".



Alexander as Helios (Museum of Rhodes)

In the spring of 323, Alexander wanted to return to Babylon, where his fleet and army were gathering for the Arabian expedition. However, the Babylonian astronomers, the [Chaldaeans](#), warned him not to enter the city, because he would die. After all, the omen of the battle of Gaugamela had predicted an eight-year rule. Alexander ignored the warning. At the end of May, he fell ill, and on 11 June, he died.

Alexander was succeeded by his brother [Arridaeus](#). A few weeks later, Roxane gave birth to a son, who was called Alexander. By then, the Greeks had already revolted and civil war between Alexander's officers was about to begin.

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source:

<http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander00c.html>