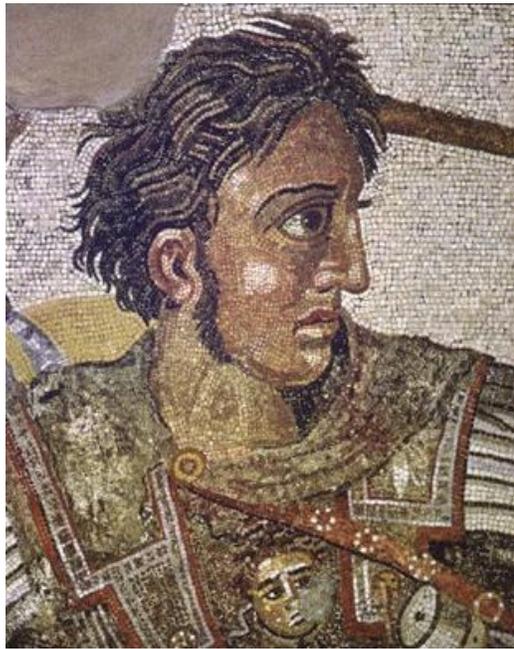


## Did Alexander the Great deserve the distinction of being called "Great"?

[http://www.helium.com/debates/239609-alexander-the-great-military-genius-or-murderous-madman/side\\_by\\_side?page=1](http://www.helium.com/debates/239609-alexander-the-great-military-genius-or-murderous-madman/side_by_side?page=1)

Why is the Macedonian General and King, Alexander the Great, so great? An intriguing question to say the least and one that can be answered by his sheer military genius. He alone pulled all of the Greek man power he could and single handedly conquered the Persian Empire, the Egyptians, and formed the largest empire the world had ever seen connecting the Greeks to the people of India. For his entire life he was bred to fight as a son of the King of Macedonia, who was King Philip II.



His childhood was one of being bred for war and basking in the glory of a great King, which he was to become. His many teachers taught him Greek philosophy as well as literature and military tactics. One of these teachers was none other than Aristotle. His father furthered his knowledge in the areas of warfare and politics. His mother, who was Olympias of Epirus, bred him psychologically to believe that he was not the son of Philip but a demi-god and that of Zeus' bloodline. In 337 BC Phillip was elected the leader of the Greek invasion force that was to attack the Persian Empire the next year.

After the assassination of his father in 336 BC at his daughter's wedding, Alexander acquired the throne and set plans to take revenge for his father's death. His father's death left him with a goal that set his sights on a glory never achieved in ancient times. He set his sights on the conquest of the enemies of the Greeks, the Persians. He spent two years planning and gathering soldiers for his grand scheme and set out for the first battle in 334 BC. The most peculiar thing though that still has historians wondering is if he planned for a grander scheme then just conquering the largest empire in the ancient world.

With the army he took along botanists, architects, engineers, as well as artists and historians. His first stop in the Persian Empire was that of the coast of Ionia, which is the western coast of modern day Turkey. He took his army to the site of the City of Troy as propaganda, because the Greeks defeated the Asian Trojans in the Trojan War, so as to say that the Greeks are here and ready to take more. His first major battle against the Persian in Asia was at the river Granicus which ended in the victory of Alexander. He then led his men swiftly through Asia Minor and took the eastern coastal cities of Ionia.

After the long and grueling campaign he turned his sights onto Gordian and attempted a try at the fabled Gordian knot. The legend behind the knot was if a man could untie it he would conquer all of Asia. When he cut the rope instead of untying it, he gained public appeal that gave him many new recruits from the conquered cities now under his control. The next time he fought a Persian army was in the mountain pass at Issus in Northwestern Syria. The Persian King, King Darius III, personally lead the army of about 600,000 men easily outnumbering Alexander and the Macedonians.

Alexander and the Macedonians won through a well devised plan and Darius fled the field leaving his mother, wife, and children behind to be slaughtered. Alexander allowed them to live out of respect of their royalty. He then swept into the eastern edge of the Mediterranean coastline and absorbed all major cities except for the island city of Tyre. He then set siege to the city and conquered it several months later. He then swept farther down and took the city of Gaza after a two months siege.

As Alexander marched his army into Egypt he was seen as a liberator by the Egyptians and met hardly any resistance. The Egyptians began to call him a god and he turned this and asked them not to call him that. So instead they called him Alexander the Great and worshipped him. After solidifying his hold on his newly

conquered lands he set his sights on Babylon, the capital of the Persian Empire. He led his army to the plains of Gaugamela, in modern day Iraq.

Darius had his army lead a spear attack and divided the Macedonians and their allies into two and tried to destroy one wing at a time. Alexander led his cavalry to the aid of the other wing when under general Permenio when Darius was pressing on that side. Alexander thus won the battle by driving Darius away yet again after Darius separated the Macedonian wings. He then rode on towards and occupied the city of Babylon and then took the capital of the Persians, Persepolis.

To solidify the power he had now acquired Alexander then married a Persian noble woman which politically made him part of Persia. He then marched into India and fought against the natives of India. Alexander left the world at the age of 33 from a severe fever in the year of 323 BC. Alexander left us with a genuine style of military campaigning that was admired by great military minds later after his death such as Julius Caesar and Hannibal. He also left the ancient world with an outbreak of Greek architecture and philosophy that further developed the nations of the Middle East today.



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Reading with interest the biography of Alexander the Great, I realize that, first of all, he wasn't a military genius and that he had committed various crimes in war and even against his best friends and co-workers, during his incredible conquest of the whole Middle East that features the largest part of his short reign. His many biographers and admirers were often impressed by his great, inexhaustible energy and courage, when he defeated the Persian army that counted 1 million soldiers with not more than 25-30,000 Macedonian and Greek soldiers, but I think they underrated his many weak points at the base of the fast dissolution of his empire after his death.



He was an exceptional commander with a magnetic appeal on his men, but his strong determination in conquering the Persian Empire as a revenge for its attempted invasion of Greece during the previous century and the whole Asia wasn't a strategic

and rational plan; most likely, in fact, he would have never begun such enterprise if he had known how large and hostile was Asia. He followed only a great, crazy dream of glory and ambition to accomplish what his father, Philip II, had only projected until the day of his assassination, in 336 B.C..

However, the most important reason for which Alexander wasn't a military genius is that his invincible army had already been created by his father Philip II with the invention of the phalanx. With this massive attack front-line, Philip could easily defeat the coalition of the Greek towns at Chaeronea (338 B.C.) and expand the reign of Macedonia northward, until the

Danube. Alexander never changed this model, but he transformed it in a legendary invincible army thanks to his courage at the limits of madness. He was proud of his glory, but he had a deep inferiority complex toward his father, whom he had to

overcome at any cost. For this reason, he frequently claimed that his achievements were much greater than his father's ones and he didn't tolerate critiques on this argument, as better shown below.

One day, in fact, at a banquet in which (as usual during his last years) Alexander and most of his court were drunk, his faithful lieutenant Cleitos (who had saved Alexander's life in the Battle of the Granicus, in 334 B.C. and was one of his best friends) quarreled with Alexander because the latter intended to send him to fight the nomads in the desolate steeps of Russia, where he would have been forgotten while Alexander got the best of glory.

Cleitus tried to oppose this decision and Alexander answered with arrogance that his decision was right because the glory he had just conquered was much more than that of his father. At this point, Cleitus lost his temper and said that Alexander wasn't a legitimate king and that the force of his army was due to his father. At that point, Alexander, drunk and furious (alcohol reduces most inhibitions and eases violent reactions), killed Cleitus on the spot with a sword.

Alexander also executed Parmenius, the general he appreciated the best and his son Philotas, suspecting them of a plot against him.

He killed Callistenes (a writer who was Aristotles' nephew) who said that Alexander would have become famous only after the same Callistenes will have written his

history. Moreover, Alexander had killed the doctor who couldn't avoid the death of his lover, a boy named Hephestion and he appeared devastated by this loss.

In war, Alexander alternated clemency with great cruelty; he had just taken the throne, which he repressed a riot of the Greek towns deleting totally Thebes, but he saved Athens, for which he had a great respect due to the great culture of this town (another inferiority complex). Moreover, he totally destroyed Persepolis the capital of the Persian Empire, already conquered, due to his rage for having discovered in this town some Greek prisoners taken by the Persians with their hands cut.

His decision to proceed against India, with the same little and tired army he had with him, was something similar to a delirium of omnipotence, so that his soldiers, although they had always loved him, refused to proceed further and Alexander had to get back across the desert in a dramatic retreat, losing thousands of soldiers.

At the end of his conquest, when he came back in Babylon, he proclaimed to be a god (it was the first time for a Greek king!), son of Zeus and Amon, arousing the surprise of his soldiers and he celebrated a lot of marriages between his generals and as many Persian princesses, in the illusion of unifying better his new empire.

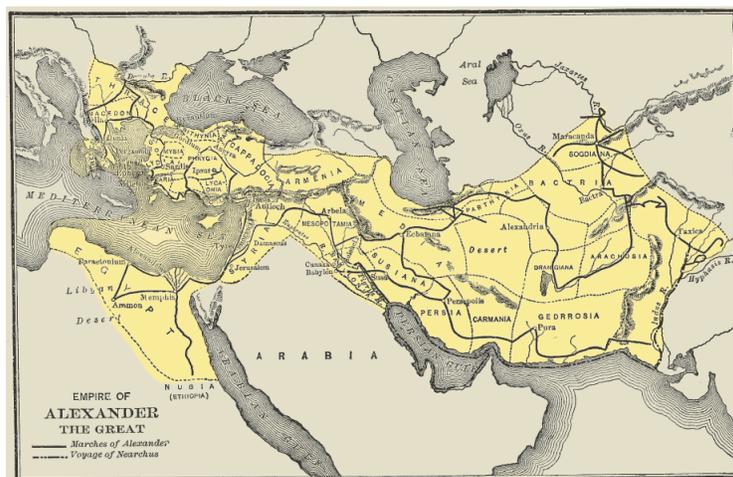
As we can see, from these episodes, Alexander followed a dream at the

limits of madness or even beyond. He was extremely emotive, inconstant and superstitious, (always consulting fortune tellers before taking his decisions) and he followed more his instinct than a rational strategy, as Julius Caesar or Hannibal would have done. What worsened his violent reactions was the huge intake of alcohol; he drank more and more frequently at his banquets. On these occasions, he made real drinking competitions with his generals that he wanted to win at every cost because he wanted to be always the winner. This was one of his obsessions.

Just the physical weakening caused by alcohol and insomnia could explain the disease which lead him to death in 323 B.C., although some historians suspect a murder.

For all these facts and considering that every king of that time had an absolute power and could decide what he wanted, I think Alexander was an extremely courageous leader and military commander, but not a military genius and that his mind mustn't have been totally healthy because he didn't know what moderation and prudence were, obsessed by his pride and need of glory at any cost, ready to kill even his best friends if they dared criticize him.

Not by chance, his empire, conquered following his crazy glory dreams, dissolved immediately after his death, divided between his generals. Alexander had not the least spark of wisdom to designate his successor.



# JUDGES

## Did Alexander the Great deserve the distinction of being called "Great"?

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/greeks/alexander\\_the\\_great\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/greeks/alexander_the_great_01.shtml)

### Many-sided hero

It seems there have been many Alexander the Greats - as many as there have been serious students of him as man, hero and/or god. There are two main reasons for this multiplicity and plasticity. First, and more poetically, the great leader's achievements - both in his lifetime and posthumously (the Alexander myth or legend) - are simply staggering. Second, the original narrative sources that survive for Alexander are mostly either very non-contemporary (eg Plutarch's biography of c.100 AD, and Arrian's narrative history of a little later in the second century AD), or very skewed by partisanship - pro or con, or both.

In the past there have been those who saw him as essentially reasonable and gentlemanly, or dynamic and titanic, or Homerically heroic. But the recent trend has been decidedly negative, emphasising variously his conquering bloodlust, his megalomania, or alleged alcoholism.

Here I hope not to err on the side of gratuitous mudslinging, in my search for clues to the mainsprings of Alexander's character. But I do lay stress on his grand passion for

hunting game - human as well as animal, and the bigger and more dangerous the better. Such macho feats offered him the chance to enhance his standing in the eyes of his subjects, as well as to ensure an impressive reputation into posterity.

### Image of the hunt

One of the earliest clues to this aspect of his character is an image - thought to be probably of Alexander - painted in fresco above the front entrance to what we usually call the 'Tomb of Philip' (whether or not we believe it to be actually the tomb of Alexander's father, King Philip II). This monumental tomb was erected at the ancient Macedonian ceremonial capital of Aegae (modern Vergina), some time within the last third or so of the fourth century BC.

The fresco depicts hunting scenes, and it is natural to identify the central figure as a young Alexander engaged, with his father, in what we know to have been one of Alexander's favourite pastimes. Except that to call it a 'pastime' may give a misleading impression, since hunting in Macedon - as in some other ancient societies, such as Sparta - was actually an important

culturally coded marker of social and political status.

### **Testing manhood**

In Macedon, you did not become fully a man until you had passed the key manhood test of hunting and killing, without a net, one of the ferocious wild boar that roamed the heights of upper (western) Macedonia. Only then could you recline - as opposed to sit - when participating in the daily ritual of the symposium. This was the regular evening drinking party, at which and through which the Macedonian elite celebrated together and mutually confirmed their elevated social and political status.

Another kind of hunting - the killing of an enemy in battle - entitled a Macedonian to wear a special kind of belt, as a visual reminder of his attainment. Alexander had passed both those tests triumphantly by the age of 16 (in 340 BC), when his father thought him already sufficiently mature to act as regent of Macedon.

### **Campaigner and hunter.**

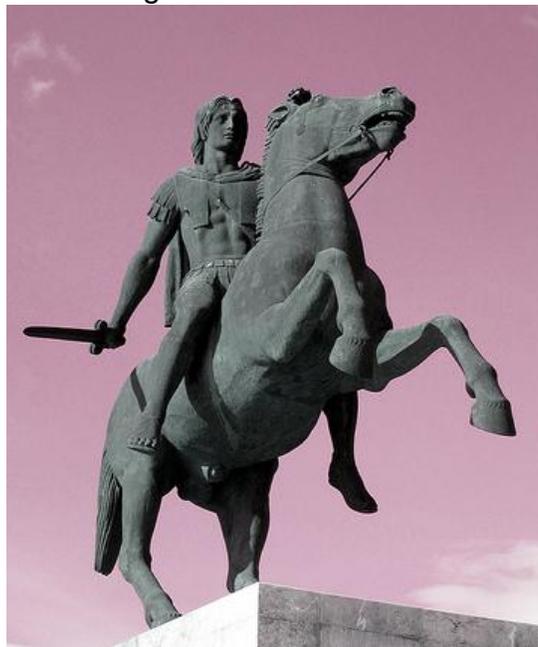
In 336 Alexander became king not only of Macedon, but also of most of mainland Greece. He inherited the mantle of his late father, as leader of a pan-hellenic expedition of holy revenge and liberation against the once mighty

Persian empire. During the 11 years of his almost non-stop campaigning in Asia (334-323), periods of rest and recreation were infrequent as he strove to achieve his ambitious aims, to the undoubted chagrin of his officers and troops; but one of his favourite means of relaxation was hunting.

As his biographer Plutarch put it, 'When he had time on his hands, he would get up and sacrifice to the gods ... then he would go on to spend the day hunting ...'. For example, in a safari park near Maracanda (Samarkand in Uzbekistan) in the early 320s, a bag of no fewer than 4,000 wild game, including lions, is reported. That was the reward for the capture of the fearsome Sogdian Rock.

To illustrate this, at the Pella Archaeological Museum in Macedonia there is a beautiful pebble mosaic, which is thought to depict Alexander in pursuit of danger and excitement - a mosaic that originally adorned a floor in a luxurious Hellenistic-period house, the so-called

House of Dionysus. According to the favoured interpretation, this may well be modelled on a bronze statue-group in the round executed by Alexander's court sculptor, Lysippus, and shows his leading companion, Craterus, famously supporting



Alexander as he hunted lions in a game park in Syria.

Sometimes, though, it was not only wild game that was the object of Alexander's hotheaded attention. More than once, a leading Macedonian made the mistake of intercepting the major quarry and robbing Alexander of the pleasure and pride of making the kill.

In one of these incidents, the offender was a member of Alexander's own royal retinue, one Dimnus, who received humiliating punishment for his supposed presumptuousness. It has been said that there was a direct connection between this punishment and Dimnus's alleged plotting against Alexander's life in 327 BC.

### **Public image**

Throughout his life Alexander was exceptionally preoccupied with his image, both literally and metaphorically. One of his non-Greek protégés appreciated this very well and had himself buried in a stone coffin, now in the Archaeological Museum, Istanbul, adorned with images showing Alexander hunting either a human or animal prey.

The strikingly well preserved artefact is known as the 'Alexander Sarcophagus', for the good reason that on one long side a figure unambiguously meant to be Alexander is depicted on horseback, in vigorous and deadly combat against a Persian.

The horse in question was Bucephalus (the name means Ox-Head), a magnificent - and prodigiously expensive - Thessalian stallion, probably named for the shape of the white blaze on his

muzzle. It was alleged that only Alexander had been able to break the horse in, and he became so attached to the animal over the next two decades or so that he actually named a city - Bucephala - after him, in an area now part of modern Pakistan (site unidentified).

The scenes on the short sides of the Alexander Sarcophagus depict the hunting of lions and panthers. Traditionally, the coffin has been attributed to Abdalonymus, king of Sidon, and the sources record that Abdalonymus received his appointment from Alexander through the good offices of another of Alexander's most devoted companions, his friend from boyhood and alter-ego, Hephaestion. But an alternative interpretation attributes the sarcophagus rather to the much more important Mazaeus.

This man was a noble Persian, whom Alexander appointed to govern Babylon after he had transferred his allegiance from the defeated Persian great king Darius III, following the decisive battle of Gaugamela (331 BC). Whichever interpretation is correct, the relatives and friends of the dead occupant knew well how best to honour a close lifetime association with the Nimrod of ancient Greece, the mighty hunter Alexander.

### **The Alexander Romance**

Alexander himself died at Babylon in June 323 BC, at the age of only 32. The circumstances of his death are almost as unclear as those of his father, though it probably smacks too much of the historical novel to suggest that Alexander was assassinated, possibly by poison. Rather, he is most likely to have

caught a deadly fever, probably malarial, after years of pushing himself beyond reasonable limits.

His passing was greeted very differently in different parts of his vastly enlarged empire. The traditional enemies of Macedon in Greece were thrilled to bits, whereas those Greeks and non-Greeks who had gladly worshipped him as a living god felt genuinely bereft. Whatever is thought of his lifetime achievements, there is no questioning the impact of his posthumous fame.

Thanks above all to the literary text known as the Alexander Romance, created originally at the great leader's most famous foundation - the city of Alexandria, in Egypt - Alexander has featured internationally as a hero, a quasi-holy man, a Christian saint, a new Achilles, a philosopher, a scientist, a prophet, and a visionary. The more earthy musings of the hero of Shakespeare's Hamlet, in the graveyard scene, are just one

chauvinistic illustration of the fact that Alexander has featured in the literature of some 80 countries, stretching from our own Britannic islands (as Arrian, called them) to the Malay peninsula - by way of Kazakhstan.

That is another way of saying that Alexander is probably the most famous of the few individuals in human history whose bright light has shot across the firmament to mark the end of one era and the beginning of another.

One of our best sources on Alexander, Arrian, focused on one particular quality of Alexander, his pothos or overmastering desire to achieve or experience the humanly - and divinely - unprecedented. Alexander's hunt for what was in the end unattainable by him in his lifetime provides us with the chance, and the motive, to conduct a new hunt to try to capture the daunting immensity of his achievement.

