Alexander’s Conquests Essay, Research Paper

The Conquests of Alexander the Great

by

Michael Janusa

Mark D. Kuss

Western Civilization Class Rm 16

April 10, 1999

Alexander was the son of King Philip II of Macedonia born approximately on July

20th in 356 BC. His mother was Olympias, a young princess from Epirus. Alexander was

a remarkable person who loved to recite Homeric poetry. At age fourteen his father sent

him to study science, mathematics, and philosophy with Aristotle of Stagira. Alexander

looked up to Aristotle ‘like a father’, and it can later be seen that Aristotle gave

Alexander the knowledge it took to be one of the greatest rulers in history. Alexander was

a man of extremes and contradictions. At times he would have intense spurts of energy

and then long sulks. He showed extreme generosity and at the same time murderous

cruelty against former friends. One would guess given common knowledge that his

insecurities most likely were originated in his childhood; perhaps the relationship with his

father. 1

After the assassination of his father, King Philip II, Alexander was in direct line to

take over as ruler. Alexander was to go down in history as the “father of the Hellenic

world”, “the unopposed leader of the Greek world”, and last but not least “the Great”, a

title given for his numerous victories.

The mobile elite was Alexander’s Companion Cavalry consisting primarily of the

cream of the Macedonian aristocracy. The backbone of the army was the phalanx.2 The

phalanx was six infantry brigades, capable of fighting a compilation of different types of

warfare, but specializing in set-piece battle in an eight-deep hedgehog formation with five

and a half meter-long spears. The phalanx was the main weapon of warfare; yet, there

were also specialist units: skirmishers, archers, and light infantry with mountain training.

There were also units comprised of non-Macedonian Greeks whom, fighting for

Alexander, helped justify Alexander’s claim to be the “General in Chief of the army of

Hellenes”. 3

Alexander’s Army also had very important back-up units. These units carried a

siege train consisting of mobile siege towers, stone-throwing catapults, and javelin

throwers. Also comprised in the back-up units were engineers, bridge-builders, sappers,

and surveyors. To further insure a well developed army there needed to be non-combatant

personnel as well. They comprised of doctors, scientists, botanists, astronomers,

philosophers, seers, and an official historian record all of the conquests. With this unified

and flawless army Alexander would be able to conquer many lands with great speed and

diligence.

In the same aspect that most of our armies of today say prayers for a victory in

battle so was Alexander’s belief that a homage must be paid to a god for good luck. In the

beginning of his journey, Alexander rode up to the city of Troy where he entered the

archaic temple of the goddess Athena. Here he made a promise that if successful, he

would return to little Ilion and build a gigantic temple to Trojan Athene in gratitude for

her help. This visit would give him the additional benefit of the spirits of the Ancients in

his later conquests of Asia.4

Alexander and his army swiftly marched the plains along the Sea of Marmara. At

the same time Darius, the King of Persia, was busily setting traps in plans to stop the

pursuit of Alexander’s army. Darius had a plan to stop them, he would station several

thousand Greek mercenaries near the Dardanelles. The Persian army had vast resources

and great gold reserves to hire army after army to defeat Alexander’s pursuit. The leader

of the Greek mercenaries, Memnon of Rhodes, decided to burn the countryside to cut off

Alexander’s supplies. The Persian leaders decided against this idea and decided to fight

instead.

At dusk, Alexander approached the river in battle formation. On the opposite side

were the Persians lining the bank ten thousand strong. The Persian plan was just to hold

Alexander off and prevent him from crossing the river. Alexander’s senior general

Parmenio counseled Alexander that they should hold off until the time was right.

Alexander refused and within minutes the blaring trumpets roared as they marched on

into battle. Alexander launched a small attack of fifteen-hundred men to make the

Persians believe the real battle had started. They fell for it and soon the Persians had lost

the majority of their men along the banks. Alexander then proceeded in sending in his

elite cavalry squadrons down into the river and across into the face of his enemies.

Several of the Persian officers tried to kill Alexander himself, in the attempt eight were

killed, including Darius’s son-in-law.

The Greek mercenaries, meanwhile, who were among the Persian’s best troops

watched the battle at the river Granicus. The Persian cavalry retreated and among the

midst came Alexander’s companion cavalry heading straight for them. The phalanx was

set up and war against the mercenaries ensued into the night. The mercenaries were cut in

half before finally surrendering. They were then sent in chains to hard labor for life in the

silver mines of Thrace. This was Alexander’s way of sending a grim message to any other

Greeks considering joining the Persians.5

Memnon, now Darius’s commander-in-chief of Western operations, was setting

up once again in anticipation of Alexander’s arrival. With him were the Athenian

mercenary commanders Ephialtes and Thrasybulos, two men who had been on

Alexander’s hit list for quite some time. This time they believed they had the best

defenses to defeat Alexander’s army. Their town was a fortress fortified by a huge wall

winding up into the hills above Boldrum. It had two or three main gates and the low

ground was protected by deep ditches; it also had forts above the harbor and out in the

bay was a fleet of four hundred ships. This place was so fortified that it was almost

impossible to get in. Fortunately Alexander who had just about any type of weapon

imaginable of this period used his siege-technology6 to gain entrance.

Alexander attacked on the flat ground first on the east side of town. His army

attempted to get in through the wall but this soon failed. Alexander then used his siege

technology to wage war and gain entrance. Memnon launched a massive raid at dawn to

overtake Alexander’s army. This was almost a stalemate until Alexander’s reserve army

came in and inflicted heavy losses, and Ephialtes was killed. Memnon realizing his defeat

retreated and evacuated his forces by sea, setting fire to everything they could not take

with them on the ships. Alexander emerges victorious again.

Although Alexander’s troops had suffered severe losses they still pursued on.

They marched on to Lycia and took over thirty cities here. They then moved along the

Anatolian plateau for about a three weeks’ march until they reached the ancient city of

Gordion.

Alexander came here for strategic reasons. Gordion was not only the main

junction to central Anatolia but also the place known for a weird legend. As legend has it

Gordion was originally the city of Midas whose father Gordius was believed to have

migrated from Macedonia to here in a wooden cart. His arrival fulfilled a local prophecy,

and Gordius became the king of this place. As a thanks offering Gordius left the cart in

the temple of Zeus with a leather knot on the end of it made of cornel bark with invisible

ends on it. The legend of the Gordion Knot7 states that whoever undid the knot would

become ruler of Asia. This of course was irresistible to Alexander who had based so

many of his victories on the strengths of the Gods.

Alexander went up to the acropolis and stood silent trying to figure out how to

undo the knot. As history tells us Alexander said ‘It doesn’t matter how the knot is

loosened’8 and at the same instance he drew his sword and hacked up the knot revealing

the ends inside. Alexander left believing that the legend had been fulfilled and that he

would soon be the ruler of Asia.

Throughout all of Alexander’s conquests the fear remained that Memnon might

attack Greece while Alexander was no where near to defend it. His fears became a reality

when Memnon’s forces, traveling by sea after their retreat at the Battle at Bodrun, made

way to Greece and took the cities of Chios and Lesbos. Luckily, for not only Alexander

but for the rest of the Macedonians, Memnon fell ill and died.

Darius, after learning about Memnon’s death, proceeded to search for an equal

replacement but failed to do so. Darius soon realized that he would have to fight his own

battles. Darius the King of Persia was not only a war leader but a semi-divine being in the

minds of the Persians. Divine being or not, Darius was about to get a reality check by

battling Alexander.

Alexander had journeyed down from central Anatolia to Tarsus. At Tarsus he fell

ill from malaria and almost died. Alexander, a true fighter, recovered and moved down

into the narrow gap between the amanus mountains and the sea. He had hoped to lure

Darius into his narrow battlefield yet Darius wasn’t easily fooled. Darius sent troops to

the rear of Alexander’s army and tried to defeat them like this. Alexander, after learning

of this, pursued Darius to the little town of Issus. The Battle of Issus9 took place in

November 333 BC on the Payas river. Darius’s army was huge in comparison to

Alexander’s. This didn’t stop Alexander before nor would it stop him now. Darius’s plan

was to hold Alexander on the river-line and use his best cavalry on the right, along the

seashore, to break through Alexander’s left-wing army. Alexander assessed the situation

from his standard position up on the right wing. He saw that Darius’s cavalry were

concentrated on his left by the sea, and immediately switched his to the left to back up his

army. Once he realized that there was a weak Persian formation of inexperienced archers

against the foothills, Alexander was sure that Darius did not have enough confidence in

his infantry to hold the line on its own. Realizing Darius’s weakness, Alexander led an

attack himself down the river on the right. The Persian archers failed to protect the land

from Alexander’s pursuit. Alexander’s Companion Cavalry marched down across the

river and annihilated the Persian infantry line. Now the path was cleared to reach the

Persian center comprised mainly of Greek mercenaries. The mercenaries held their own

for a short while against Alexander’s phalanx, but soon they would realize they were

being surrounded. The mercenaries realized they lost and retreated. Alexander’s main

focus now was Darius himself.

The main goal of the Battle of Issus was to capture or kill Darius. Alexander got

very close to Darius yet not close enough. Alexander’s army got close enough to where

Darius’s kinsmen were fighting hand-to-hand in order to protect their king. Darius’s

forces were being wounded quickly left and right. His only option was to stay alive, so his

bodyguard took him and fled. Darius left his leaderless army at this point to fend for

themselves. Once again Alexander emerges victorious yet without his goal – Darius.

Through the years Alexander swept the Persians away from the coast of Phoenicia

and in 332 drove them out of Egypt, a land they had held for two centuries. The Egyptians

welcomed him as a liberator and recognized him as their pharaoh. Alexander and his

army marched on to Tyre and met great opposition. The Tyrians fought off Alexander’s

army as long as they could but soon enough they too would surrender their city to

Alexander. One year later Alexander and Darius would meet again.

On October 1st 331 BC , Alexander’s troops pursue Darius into the town of

Gaugamela. The Battle of Gaugamela10 would later be called one of the most decisive in

history. Alexander once again showed great war-skills by luring the Persians into a

premature assault to weaken the backbone of their army. At the same time the Persians

attacked Alexander’s right and made a gap in the phalanx. Through this gap the Persians

swept around Alexander’s army and had a chance at victory. Alexander made quick

decisions and reformed his phalanx and charged at the gap at the Persian front. Darius

once again was exposed and his army was retreating. The battle was lost and with it the

destiny of the Persian monarchy; the greatest empire which had yet existed in history.

The victory at Gaugamela wore out Alexander’s troops so Alexander led them to

Babylon. Here at Babylon, Alexander was greeted with gifts and given the city. His army

rested and recuperated. Alexander’s army marched on Susa on November 25th. His army

was replenished and reinforced to 70,000 strong. Susa had been a war zone since the

beginning of history yet the governor of Susa met Alexander by the Tigris river bearing

gifts. The governor gave Susa to Alexander with no opposition. From here Alexander

marched on to the ancient city of Xerxes and Darius about a month later.

On Alexander’s journey through the outskirts of Susa he met up with natives of the

Afghan-hills. These natives demanded tolls for Alexander to pass like they had done to

previous kings before him. Alexander was not the sort of person to stand for this so he

had them killed. Alexander had his eyes set on a bigger goal – Persopolis.11

Persopolis was the huge Persian palace with royal tombs and shrines. It was the

heart of the Persian empire. This was a trophy to acquire in Alexander’s eyes. He led his

reinforced army of now 80,000 right to the gates of Persopolis. The gates were closed and

there seemed to be no easy way of gaining entrance. Alexander interrogated prisoners in

hopes of finding a way in; this was of no help. A local shepherd told Alexander of an

alternative route to gain entrance through the rear of Persopolis. This route was the only

one known and it was through rocky terrain. Alexander proceeded with 15,000 of his men

through the long valley of Mulla Susan to the back of the pass. Alexander and his fearless

army were ready to conquer. At daybreak, Alexander’s army captured the Persians in a

surprise attack from the rear. The Persians put up a good fight but it was not enough to

save them. This victory has been called ‘one of the most hazardous, audacious, and

certainly the most profitable of mountain campaigns in the annals of history’.

Alexander achieved his goal and captured the great city of Persopolis yet he was

not yet satisfied. He still wanted Darius dead or alive. In July Alexander pursued in a

quest to find Darius. He marched on in the sweltering heat across the Great Salt Desert

towards Afghanistan. Finally after a long an arduous journey, Alexander reached a place

called Thara in which he learned that Darius had been overthrown by his own

commanders the night before. Eager to still pursue Darius, Alexander pressed on through

the Ahuran pass. By the time Alexander caught up with the Persian leaders, they were

already fleeing. At the same time they stabbed Darius and left him there for dead. One of

Alexander’s soldiers met up with him and gave him some water. Darius conveyed a

message to Alexander thanking him for his honorable treatment of his mother and family

throughout all this. Darius was dead by the time Alexander got there. Alexander covered

the body with his cloak and was shocked by the premature death of the King of the

World.

Alexander would go on through many different cities conquering anything in his

way for the next three years. In the spring of 327 BC Alexander and his troops invaded

India.12 They first went to Taxila and met some opposition; but in a few minutes King

Ambi of Taxila welcomed Alexander to his new conquest. Alexander stayed here shortly

and then pressed on to the Battle on the Jhelum River. The opposition was the Indian

army led by Rajah Porus consisting of 30,000 men. Alexander’s army pressed on across

the river Jhelum and soon through a tough battle defeated Porus’s army. The most

personal loss of this war was Alexander’s beloved horse Bucephalus who died from

wounds in battle. It was here that Alexander named the town after his war-horse.

The majority of Alexander’s army, tired from battles and homesick, decided they

would not push any further into the rest of India or in their time the ends of the Earth as

they knew it. Alexander, after giving the idea serious thought, decided that he needed to

take over the rest of India before heading home to Macedonia. The army agreed and they

moved out plowing through city by city until they made their way back to Susa in 324

BC. In the journey from Susa to Babylon Alexander met with some Chaldean wise men

who told him that their god Bel had told them that for the king to enter the city at this

time would be fatal to him. They urged him not to go westward now but to go eastward

instead. Alexander bypassed Babylon for a while but the sceptic Anaxagoras told the king

to disregard the curse and press through in despite the curse. Anaxagoras was soon put to

death after Alexander learned of his plot to get him to enter Babylon and be killed. While

in Babylon, Alexander developed a strong distrust with his friends and he started drinking

very heavily. Alexander drank to forget himself for two days and then he developed a

raging fever. With this fever he became delirious and thirsty, so he drank more. In the end

he died from this ravaging fever on June 10th 323 BC at the age of thirty-two. The fever

most likely was brought about by strychnine poisoning in the unmixed wine or possibly

by liver failure due to extreme drinking. Nevertheless a great man had died and with him

a legacy for all the world to remember: Alexander the Great – King of the World.13

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bamm, Peter. Alexander the Great: Power as Destiny

New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1968

Chambers, Mortimer. The Western Experience

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1974

Dupuy, Trevor Nevitt. The Military Life of Alexander the Great of Macedon

New York: Franklin Watts, Inc., 1969

Fox, Robin Lane. Alexander the Great

Penguin Publishing, USA., 1994

Green, Peter. Alexander of Macedon 356-323 B.C.: A Historical Biography

University of California Press, 1992

Hammond, N.G.L. The Genius of Alexander the Great

University of North Carolina Press, 1997

Higgins, Andrew. “To Buoy Itself Up, Besieged Macedonia Is Grasping at History”

Wall Street Journal: Friday, April 9, 1999; front page

Mercer, Charles. Alexander the Great

New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1962

Rice, E. E. Alexander the Great

Sutton Publishing, Inc., 1997

Wood, Michael. In The Footsteps of Alexander the Great

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997