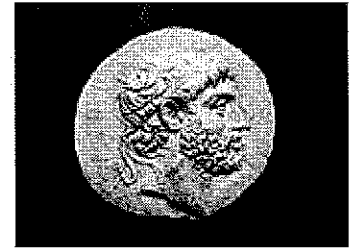


Alexander's Legacy (Overview)

Alexander the Great is one of the most famous conquerors in history. To historians, he is significant not simply because of the quality of his military leadership or because he was able to conquer such a vast territory. In fact, his empire dissolved as soon as he died. What makes his career so important is that his conquests spread Greek ideas and culture throughout the Mediterranean and the Near East.

Conquests of Alexander

Part of Alexander's fame rests on his success as a military commander. When his father, Philip II of Macedon, died in 336 BC, Alexander succeeded to the throne of Greek Macedonia at about the age of 20. Over the next 13 years, he conquered a vast area, including most of Asia Minor, Egypt, and areas corresponding to modern-day Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. His empire encompassed all the territories of the former Persian Empire, an ancient rival of Greece, and beyond. That set of conquests set the stage for a massive sharing of Greek culture across all Alexander's conquered lands.



The Spread of Greek Culture

The kingdom of Macedonia, Alexander's native country and the center of his power, lay north of the region of the classical Greek city-states. The Macedonians spoke Greek, however, and considered themselves to be a part of Greek civilization. From early in Alexander's reign, it became clear that part of his goal in conquering foreign lands was to spread the influence of Greek culture.

One of Alexander's major initiatives was the founding of Greek cities throughout the territories he conquered. According to tradition, he founded more than 70 of those cities—many of which were named Alexandria in his honor. The cities were intended to be administrative and cultural centers for Alexander's new empire and to be inhabited primarily by transplanted Greeks and Macedonians. Perhaps the most famous city was Alexandria in Egypt. An important center of Greek culture for centuries to come, Alexandria was also home to the famous Library of Alexandria, reputed to be the largest library of the ancient world.

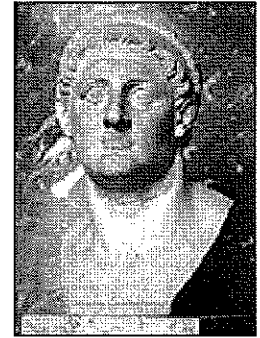
Alexander also devised a goal of uniting the Greeks and Macedonians with the Persians. In 324 BC, at the city of Susa (the old administrative capital of the Persian Empire), he and approximately 80 of his officers married Persian wives, and 10,000 of his soldiers with native wives were granted gifts. Alexander also planned to bring Persians into the army and into the administration of his empire on a largely equal basis. That goal, however, was highly unpopular with Alexander's Macedonian followers and had only limited success even during Alexander's lifetime.

Successors to Alexander

Alexander's death left no strong heir who could hold his empire together. Instead, his generals fought among themselves over who would control the various territories of the empire. Ultimately, several of them founded their own dynasties, though the territories ruled by each dynasty and by the smaller states that surrounded them constantly changed. That period is known as the Hellenistic Age, which lasted from the death of Alexander in 323 to about 30 BC.

In Egypt, the Macedonian general Ptolemy I Soter seized control and founded the Ptolemaic dynasty, which

remained in control of Egypt until its takeover by the Romans in 30 BC. In fact, the famous Egyptian queen Cleopatra VII Thea Philopator, who had affairs with the powerful Romans Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, was one of the Ptolemies. Ptolemaic Egypt proved to be the longest lasting of the Hellenistic states.



In the Near East, Seleucus I Nicator, another of Alexander's generals, gained the governorship of Babylon shortly after Alexander's death. Over the next two decades, he extended his control to Syria and much of Asia Minor, including the Greek cities along the Mediterranean coast, and east as far as the Indus River valley in present-day Pakistan. The large Seleucid Empire became a major center of Greek culture. Over time, however, most of its territories were lost to various Greek and non-Greek states around the edges of the kingdom. The Roman Republic conquered the last remnants of the Seleucid Empire in 64 BC.

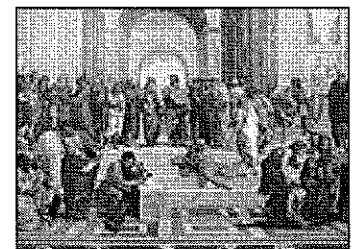
Antigonus I Monophthalmus had been governor of Phrygia (part of central Asia Minor) for about 10 years when Alexander died. Over the next 20 years, he assumed control of Greece and most of the Near East. However, the Seleucids and others contested the control of the Antigonids over those regions, and for most of the duration of the Antigonid dynasty, its power was centered in Macedonia, the homeland of Alexander. The Antigonid dynasty came to an end in 168 BC in a war against the expanding Roman Republic. From that time on, the influence of Rome was predominant throughout Greece.

The Hellenistic Legacy

Under the Hellenistic rulers, the administration of the various states that had been part of Alexander's empire remained largely Greek in language, culture, customs, and personnel. Alexander's vision of a united Greek-Persian ruling class died with him. Instead, Greek immigrants and their descendants administered the Hellenistic states from Greek cities that were largely isolated from the cultures of the areas they ruled.

One result of that isolation was that the impact of Greek culture, while broad, was never terribly deep in those areas. Outside the class of Greek administrators and intellectuals, the native cultures of the Hellenistic states retained their own languages and traditions.

Nevertheless, throughout the eastern Mediterranean and in much of the Near East, Greek intellectual culture outlasted the fall of the Hellenistic states to become the dominant cultural influence on the Eastern Roman Empire. The Greek language became a universal language for discussing philosophy, science, and religion. Greek philosophy also influenced the development of early Christianity, particularly its theology.



Finally, the spread of Greek ideas throughout the Hellenistic world proved important for the later development of Western culture. After the barbarian invasions at the end of the Roman Empire, many important Greek texts no longer existed in Europe. However, copies of those texts survived in eastern territories that had come under Arab control. From the Arabs, those texts made their way back to Western Europe, where they helped to set the stage for the European Renaissance.

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