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## **Is Alexander the Great Deserving of his Title and Exalted Reputation?**

*Adapted from How 'Great' Was Alexander? Ian Worthington The Ancient History Bulletin 13.2 (1999) 39-55*

Why was Alexander III of Macedon called 'Great'? The answer seems relatively straightforward: from an early age he was an achiever, he conquered territories on a superhuman scale, he established an empire until his times unrivalled, and he died young, at the height of his power. Thus, at the youthful age of 20, in 336, he inherited the powerful empire of Macedon, which by then controlled Greece and had already started to make inroads into Asia. In 334 he invaded Persia, and within a decade he had defeated the Persians, subdued Egypt, and pushed on to Iran, Afghanistan and even India. As well as his vast conquests Alexander is credited with the spread of Greek culture and education in his empire, not to mention being responsible for the physical and cultural formation of the Hellenistic kingdoms — some would argue that the Hellenistic world was Alexander's legacy. He has also been viewed as a philosophical idealist, striving to create a unity of mankind by his so-called fusion of the races policy, in which he attempted to integrate Persians and Asians into his administration and army. Thus, within a dozen years Alexander's empire stretched from Greece in the west to India in the Far East, and he was even worshipped as a god by many of his subjects while still alive. On the basis of his military conquests contemporary historians, and especially those writing in Roman times who measured success by the number of body-bags used, deemed him great.

However, does a man deserve to be called 'The Great' who was responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of his own men and for the unnecessary wholesale slaughter of native peoples? How 'great' is a king who prefers constant warfare over consolidating conquered territories and long-term administration? Or who, through his own recklessness, often endangered his own life and the lives of his men? Or whose violent temper on occasion led him to murder his friends and who towards the end of his life was an alcoholic, paranoid, megalomaniac, who believed in his own divinity? These are questions posed by our standards of today of course, but nevertheless they are legitimate questions given the influence which Alexander has exerted throughout history — an influence which will no doubt continue.

There is no question that Alexander was the most powerful individual of his time, and we must recognize that. For sheer distance covered, places subdued, battle strategy, and breadth of vision he deserves praise. In just a decade he conquered the vast Persian Empire that had been around for two centuries, and he amassed a fortune so vast that it is virtually impossible to comprehend. Alexander also improved the economy of his state (to an extent) and encouraged trade and commerce, especially by breaking down previously existing frontiers (of major importance in the Hellenistic period), and an offshoot of his conquests was the gathering of information on the topography and geography of the regions to which he went, as well as new and exotic flora and fauna. However, at what cost? Was the wastage in human lives, the incalculable damage to foreign peoples, institutions, livelihoods, and lands, not to mention the continuation of the dynasty at home, the security of Macedon, the future of the empire, and the loyalty of the army worth it?

*Adapted from Alexander the Great, E.E. Rice*

What is the basis of Alexander's glowing historical reputation? Obviously, his conquests form its essence - but it is based on more than territorial accumulation. It is the story of the "philosopher-king," the cultured leader who attempted to create a cultural synthesis by fusing the best of the East and the West. It is the saga of an attempt by a man to create a "one world" ideal, a man trying to achieve the "impossible dream" and coming close to it...

In eleven years Alexander made himself master of the immense stretch of land from the Adriatic into India and across the Indus; almost as big as the Roman Empire at its height after a thousand years of fighting...

He was not a thinker; he was a passionate lover of action; preferably violent action, happiest in battle, glorying in danger, an adventurer in every sense of the word. He made his army follow him on perilous adventures and terrifying marches into the unknown by making them feel that he was one with them, sharing their hardships and dangers, literally leading them, always foremost in the battle...

During the long march from Greece to Babylon Alexander brought Greek ways to Persia. As he advanced he planned Greek towns along the line of march, each complete with Greek columns and Greek names (usually Alexandria). In all of them Greeks were to be the authority and Greek the official language, but Greek freedom was not part of their equipment.

A particularly fierce campaign was waged in 326 BC against the Mallian people, a self-governing Indian tribe living on the east bank of the Indus. Numerous cities of the Malli were captured with great savagery...In the end the attacking Macedonians led by Alexander broke through the wall and massacred every inhabitant they could find, including women and children.

A vast conquered empire, the focus of which had been the personality of Alexander himself was unexpectedly left leaderless after his death. Constant warfare and the violent deaths of various contenders ensued before three separate kingdoms emerged.

### **QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:**

- 1) What evidence do Ian Worthington and E.E. White cite to prove that Alexander is deserving of his title?
- 2) What do Worthington and White cite as evidence that Alexander was not as 'Great' as some would state?
- 3) Is Alexander the Great deserving of his title and exalted reputation? EXPLAIN
- 4) What criteria did you use to come to this decision?
- 5) Would Alexander have been as great in peace as he was in war? EXPLAIN