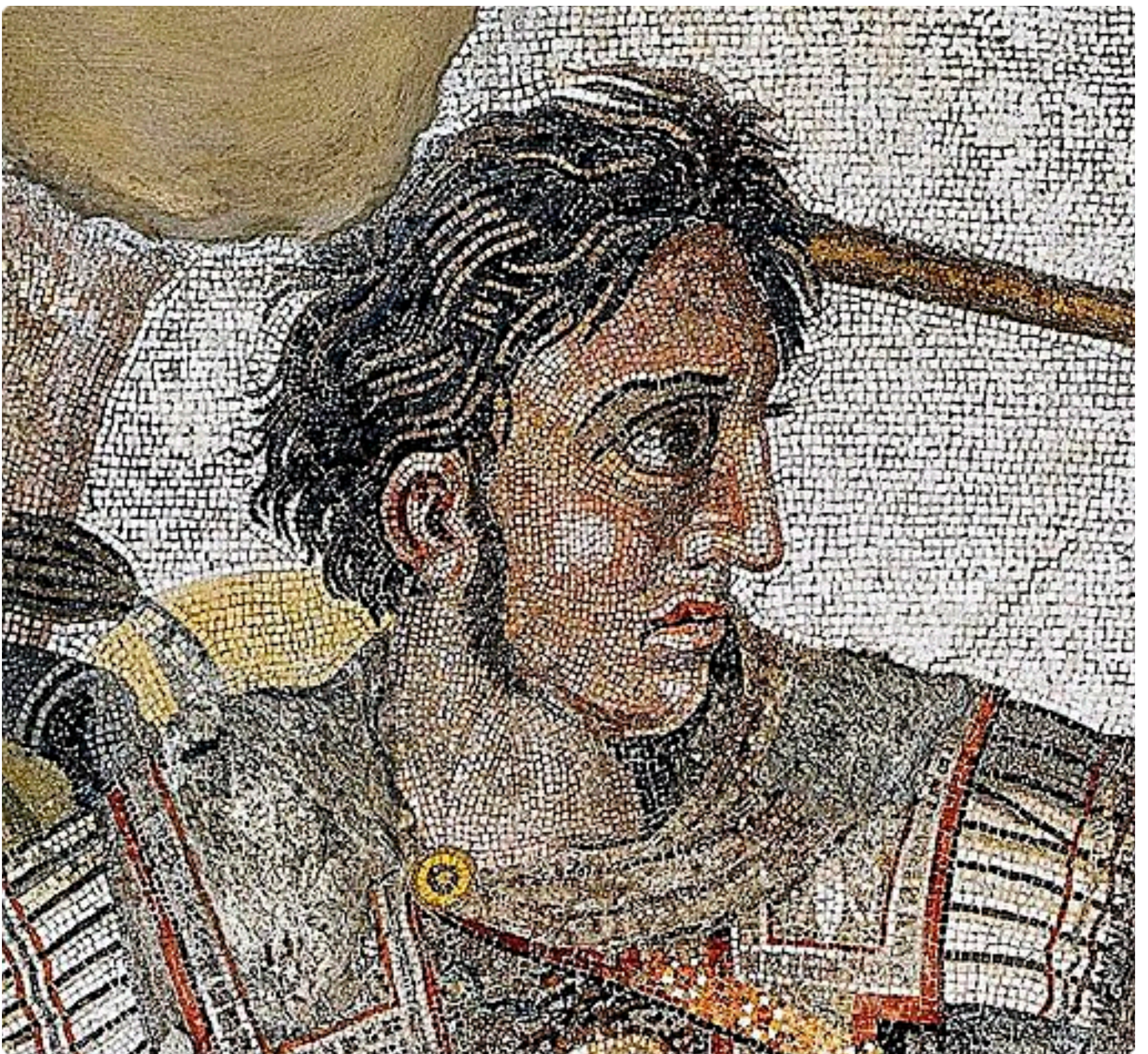


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Alexander III of Macedon (Alexander the Great)



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Images:

- Bust of Alexander the Great, Marble, Hellenistic artwork, 2nd-1st century BC. Said to be from Alexandria, Egypt. (British Museum, Main floor, Room 22, Alexander the Great & the Hellenistic world, GR 1872.5-15.1 (Cat. Sculpture 1857) via [Wikimedia Commons](#))
- Alexander at Issus; Detail of the Alexander Mosaic, representing Alexander the Great on his horse. The man's head in Alexander's armour is a representation of Medusa. (House of the Faun, Pompeii, c. 100 AD; Ruthven, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#))
- Extent of Alexander the Great's empire (Generic Mapping Tools, [CC BY-SA 3.0](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Alexander of Macedon (356-323 BCE)



Over a thirteen-year campaign that covered 32,000 kilometres, Alexander The Great (356-323 BCE) established an empire that stretched from the Mediterranean to the Himalayas and the Indus River, including lands previously unknown in Europe.

Aristobulus, Onescritus and Callimachus recorded his campaigns; Arrian and Curtius described them.

His significant achievement was to open up courses along which Greek influence spread through western Asia.

First named Alexander the Great by the Romans, he became a hero for medieval romance writers and a saint in the Coptic Church of Egypt. At the end of the 19th century, tribal leaders in the Badakshan Mountains still claimed to be his descendants.

Alexander was born at Pella, son of Philip II and Olympias, daughter of the king of Epirus. As a boy, he impressed his elders when he tamed a horse no one else could approach. Alexander was trained as a soldier, tutored by the best teachers, and surrounded by the brightest students. His teachers included Aristotle.

Alexander learnt the importance of scientific observation and the Homeric legends and studied ethics, politics, botany, zoology, geography, and medicine. He learned that the Earth was round, that a sea (Ocean) encircled the world, and that most rivers except the Nile flowed from north to south. His primary interest was the military strategy he learned from his father.

At 16, Alexander governed the kingdom while Philip fought Byzantium (340BC).

At the battle of Chaeronea in 338 B.C., the Macedonians defeated the Athenians. The victory brought all the Greek city-states except Sparta under Macedonian leadership. Alexander commanded the left wing, which annihilated the Sacred Band of the Thebans in the battle.

Philip was preparing to invade Persia when Pausanias assassinated him (336). He had married a Macedonian noblewoman the year before. Olympias was probably involved in the death plot, and Alexander may have been involved.

Philip's death left Alexander as the heir to an empire extending from the Danube and the coast of Dalmatia to the Aegean.

Alexander lost no time consolidating his power and impressing his authority on the city-states his father had subdued.

He had Pausanias executed and moved into Thessaly. Rather than risk marching through a narrow pass, Alexander led his forces over the mountains, employing the element of surprise that became his trademark. Accepted as ruler of Thessaly, he moved through Thermopylae and won the support of the League of Corinth. The League then elected him the leader of the expedition to Persia.

In 335 BCE, he secured Macedonia's northern frontier and subjugated the Trilbians around the Danube. After rumours of his death, a revolt broke out, and Alexander marched south, covering 386 kilometres in a fortnight.

When the rebellion continued, he spared Athens, but burned Thebes to the ground, killed six thousand people and enslaved the survivors. He subsequently believed the act earned him the curse of the god Dionysus. However, he spared the temples and the poet Pindar's house.

He left enough troops behind to control Greece and turned his attention to his father's plan to invade Persia. He needed the riches of Persia to pay the army.



Alexander crossed the Hellespont with 30,000 infantry and 5,000 horse in the spring of 334 BC. His expedition began with a pilgrimage to Troy to pay homage to the heroes of the Iliad. Alexander kept a copy of the book under his pillow and modelled himself on Achilles.

After visiting Troy, Alexander defeated a Persian army on the Granicus River (May 334). He then marched along the coast, freeing Greek cities from Persian rule.

Alexander's army met the Persians again near Issus in October 333. After a battle in which over 100,000 Persians may have died, their king, Darius, fled.

From Issus, Alexander turned south towards Egypt to capture the ports which supplied the Persian fleet. Byblos and Sidon surrendered at once. In January 332, Alexander besieged Tyre, which held out for seven months. Alexander built a causeway, battered down the walls, massacred many inhabitants, and sold the women and children into slavery. Moving south through Palestine, he met no resistance except at Gaza.



In Egypt, the people welcomed him as a liberator from Persian rule and crowned him Pharaoh at Memphis. He remained there from October 332 to April 331 and made sacrifices to Egyptian gods.

In the spring of 331, near the mouth of the Nile, he founded Alexandria, then travelled to the shrine of Zeus Ammon in the Libyan desert, which he reached despite dust storms and a shortage of water.

What the Oracle told him was not revealed. However, he claimed he had "been told what his heart desired". His ability to survive the journey was seen as god-like invincibility.

Leaving Egypt in the spring of 331 B.C., Alexander set off in search of Darius. In September, the two met on a plain near Gaugamela on the upper Tigris. Darius had gathered all his strength.

Despite having fewer men, Alexander led his cavalry straight toward Darius. Darius escaped, but the cities of Persia lay open. Babylon welcomed Alexander, who made sacrifices to their god Marduk, then continued to Susa. He was proclaimed king of Asia and gained a massive treasure hoard.

In January 330, he reached Persepolis. A drunken celebration might have produced the fire that burned down Xerxes' palace. If not, the fire may have been retribution for Persian atrocities in Greece or indicated that his war with Persia was over.

In March 330, he left Persepolis in pursuit of Darius, marching towards Ecbatana (Hamadan). By the time Alexander reached there, Darius had fled to the Caspian Gates.

Alexander sent Parmenio to subdue Cadusia while he chased Darius. In July, he caught up with Darius but found him dying from wounds inflicted by Bessus, who was claiming the throne. Dressed by how Darius had died, Alexander sent his body to Persepolis for burial in the royal tombs.

As Alexander worked his way east, his men still believed they were at war with Persia. Once Darius died, they began to wonder what drove them on.

There was talk of Alexander's desire to rule the whole world.

They reached the Caspian Sea and explored its shores, disproving the theory that it formed the southernmost tip of a bay extending from the Ocean to the north. Craterus discovered that seals lived in it, and that seemed to prove that it must once have been part of the Ocean.

Learning that Bessus had retreated towards Bactria, Alexander marched through Bactria and Sogdiana, founding a chain of cities.

At the head of the Kabul valley, he founded Alexandria ad Caucasum, then moved on to subdue native tribes. Skirting the steppes to the north, followed the watercourses and caravan trails through Kandahar to pursue Bessus.

In 329, he moved up the Panjshir Valley and crossed the Hindu Kush by the 3475-metre Khawak Pass. After 17 days, up to their waists in snow, suffering from frostbite, altitude sickness, and lack of food, the army descended into Bactria to find Bessus had fled north beyond the Oxus River.

Reaching the Oxus, they found the river was a kilometre wide and impossible to bridge. They crossed on rafts made from leather tent covers stuffed with hay.

On the far side of the river, he finally captured Bessus. After the prisoner was flogged, they cut off his nose and the tops of his ears. He was then taken to Ecbatana and executed.

Alexander had accomplished his first goals. The Persian Empire was his, and Bessus had been captured and punished - but he was unwilling to abandon his expedition.

From the Oxus, Alexander followed the Silk Road to the Jaxartes River, where a series of garrisons protected the northeastern border of the Persian Empire. He founded another city and crossed the Jaxartes (Syr Darya) to attack the Scythians, contracting gastroenteritis in the process.

The army spent the winter of 329-328 at Bactra and most of 328 campaigning against Spitamenes.

On an expedition near the Oxus, they discovered an oil well while digging the foundations for Alexander's tent. He reached Bukhara and in 328-27 subdued Sogdiana.

In January 327, campaigning north of the Hindu Kush and west of the Pamirs, two thousand of his men froze to death.

His troops scaled the crag on which the Sogdian ruler, Oxyartes, had his stronghold. Among the prisoners was Oxyartes' daughter Roxana, whom Alexander married.

In the spring, he recrossed the Hindu Kush through the 4370-metre Kaoshan Pass, arriving in Alexandria ad Caucasum. He spent the winter of 327-326 there as he prepared to attack India.

Early in 326, Alexander sent Hephaestion through the Khyber Pass to secure the Indus crossing. He set off with a lighter force via the Kabul River and the Kunar and Swat valleys. He captured the Rock of Aornos on the Pir-Sar Ridge after constructing a causeway to bring his siege engines within range.

Alexander increasingly thought of himself as an Asian prince as his empire spread. He had begun to assume Persian dress and manners, alienating much of his Macedonian army, and relations with his followers became difficult. The more dead ends Alexander led them into, the more they grumbled.

In 330, he executed Philotas and his father, Parmenion.

A drinking session in 328 ended in the murder of Cleitus, who had saved his life five years earlier. Angered by taunts that he had forgotten his origins, Alexander hurled a spear at his friend, killing him. The court historian Callisthenes fell out of favour (327) and may have been executed.

His men wanted to return home, but Alexander was determined to reach the eastern edge of the world, which he believed lay just beyond the Indus. Crossing the Indus using a boat bridge, Alexander continued into the Punjab.

In April, the region's principal city surrendered on the condition that Alexander would destroy Porus, the country beyond the Jhelum's ruler. Alexander allowed his army to remain at Taxila until the monsoon broke. The Jhelum was in flood, more than five hundred metres wide.

On the far bank, Porus awaited Alexander with his army, which included chariots and elephants.

Alexander crossed upstream during an electric storm with fifteen thousand men, including Scythian horse-archers and cavalry from Bactria and Turkestan. Alexander defeated Porus, who became his ally.

After the battle, Alexander's warhorse, Bucephalus, died of wounds and old age and gave his name to a city that rose near the site of the action.

At the foot of the Himalayas, Alexander announced that he planned to cross the Hyphasis (Sutlej), march to the Ganges, 500 km away, and sail down to Ocean, but the army refused to go farther.

Some of them had been away from home for eight years and were anxious to return to their families.

Alexander reluctantly turned back. He assembled two thousand boats on the Jhelum, built by Egyptian, Cypriot and Phoenician sailors. The new fleet took Alexander downriver from the Hydaspes into the Chenab and finally into the Indus, reaching the delta in 325.

Alexander believed that the Indus was the source of the Nile and sailed down the river to test his theory.

On the way, he saw crocodiles and a bean which reminded him of one he had seen growing in Egypt, reinforcing his belief that he was on the Nile.

Exploring the eastern arm to its mouth in the marshes of the Rann of Kutch and sailing out to sea established that the Indus and the Nile were not connected.

At the mouth, a tidal bore left the ships aground on the ebb tide; the rising tide refloated them, a marvel to sailors from the nearly tideless Mediterranean.

According to Arrian, Alexander slaughtered bulls as a sacrifice to Poseidon. He flung their bodies overboard, poured a libation from a golden cup, and then threw the cup into the water. He hoped the offering would prompt Poseidon to grant safe conduct to the fleet to the Persian Gulf and the Euphrates.

Alexander's army was now in three parts.

Before the expedition reached the mouth of the Indus, Alexander sent Craterus back to Persia with the sick, wounded and the elephants. They travelled by way of Baluchistan, Arachosia and Carmania to Salmous.

Alexander instructed the Cretan Nearchus to take the fleet and the bulk of the remaining troops to Babylon by sea.

Nearchus would follow the coast, survey it and find watering points for a shipping route from the Euphrates to the Indus.

The third section, led by Alexander, would take the overland route along the coast through Gedrosia (Makran). This section, which included the women and children, was to establish supply depots for the fleet.

The land march was a disaster.

Alexander began his trek through the deserts along the coast in September but was forced inland by a mountain range. Experiencing thirst, sandstorms and quicksands in the desert,

marching at night to avoid the heat, they killed their animals and burned their wagons for fuel.

Reaching the sea, they found water by digging wells in the gravel. After following the coast for a week, they struck inland to Pura, the capital of Gedrosia. They were safe, but the journey cost the lives of 60,000 people and all the baggage animals.

They set off again on a march to Salmous, where Craterus joined them towards the end of 325 BC.

Alexander's failure to supply the fleet from the shore caused the sailors nearly as much hardship. Nearchus had to wait for the northeast monsoon and sailed in October or November 325. Following the same route as Scylax, he sailed along the shores of Gedrosia (Baluchistan), through the Strait of Hormuz and into the Persian Gulf.

His crews were forced to land and fight for food along the way. However, conditions on the ships became so bad that Nearchus was afraid to land in case his men deserted.

On the coast, they saw the "fish-eaters", who made flour from fish meal, fed their flocks on dried fish and lived in huts made from the bones of whales.

Entering the Strait of Hormuz, they came to the mouth of the Anamis River, where they met a search party sent out by Alexander. The voyage had lasted five months. According to Nearchus's log, he observed the coastline, made notes on the inhabitants and gave Alexander a detailed report.

When he reached Susa in the spring of 324 BC, Alexander found a state of corruption. After a punishment campaign, he launched a scheme to settle Greeks and Macedonians in Asia and Asians in Europe to merge the two regions.

At Susa, Alexander and his closest friend Hephæstion married the daughters of Darius. Meanwhile, eighty Macedonian officers married women from the Persian aristocracy.

Alexander planned to rebuild Babylon, make it into a port, and deepen the Euphrates. His interest turned increasingly to exploration.

Heraclides explored the Caspian Sea and established whether it connected to the Ocean.

Alexander also sent ships to develop a sea link between India and the Red Sea. His plan to colonise the Arabian coast would have assured him control of trade with India.

He also talked of sailing down the Euphrates, around Arabia and Africa and into the Mediterranean from the west.

In 325, Archias of Pella, Androstenes of Thasos and Hieron sailed down the western shores of the Persian Gulf. Archias advanced as far as Bahrain, and Hieron did not complete his voyage around Arabia.

According to Arrian, Plutarch, and Diodorus Siculus, Alexander planned expeditions to the western Mediterranean towards Carthage and Italy but did not have time to realise his plans.

The last year of his life climaxed with the demand that his subjects should recognise him as a god.

The Macedonians and Greeks believed he intended to transfer the capital of his empire to Asia. His unpopularity increased.

Back in Susa, Alexander retreated further and further into isolation, grieving after the death of his companion, Hephaestion. He approached Babylon, depressed and drinking heavily, knowing that astrologers had predicted he would face disaster.

He died in Babylon aged 32, weakened by war wounds and drinking. He was taken ill after a banquet, contracted a fever, and died eleven days later, on 10 June 323.

The story that Aristotle poisoned him is less likely than the suggestion that he died from illness aggravated by wounds and fatigue. His body was taken to Egypt and placed in a tomb in Alexandria.

Alexander's death left his generals without a plan to administer the empire. Some wanted to preserve the empire, and others hoped to assume the titles of kings in their own right.

After forty years of warfare, three dynasties emerged. The Ptolemies in Egypt, the Seleucids in Asia and Palestine, and the Antigonids in Macedonia and Greece got their names from three generals - Ptolemy, Seleucus, and Antigonus.

Egypt reached its height under Ptolemy II Philadelphus, who ruled from 285 to 246. After his death, the kingdom entered a period of internal strife until Egypt became a Roman province in 30 B.C.

While the Seleucid Empire was the largest of the three and established Greek settlements throughout its territory, the empire shrank due to war and rebellion. Eventually, reduced to Palestine, Syria, and Mesopotamia, Rome annexed it in 64 B.C.

The Antigonid Kingdom was incorporated into the Roman Empire in 168 BC.

Alexander never managed to compile his thoughts about what he had seen. It is impossible to guess how he would have ruled his empire and whether he could have held it together. Arrian concluded that Alexander would never have chosen to retire from exploration.

He may have been the greatest conqueror of all, and his military conquests "transformed the Greek world from a group of small, insular Greek city-states into a series of imperial dynasties spread across the Mediterranean and Asia." ¹

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¹ Jerry Brotton, **A History of the World in Twelve Maps**, p. 17