

The Age of Alexander

Academus Easter Crash Course 2021

The Greek World in the 4th Century BCE



Remains of the Athenian Acropolis

The [Peloponnesian War](#) had effectively brought the once great [Athenian Empire](#) to its knees. [Athens'](#) defences were destroyed, her territories stripped, and tyrants installed in the city.

Although the rule of [the 30 Tyrants](#) was bloody and violent, it lasted for only a year until they were removed, and democracy was installed once again.

[Sparta](#), who had been backed by the [Persian Empire](#), looked set to be the most powerful force in the Greek world by the dawn of the 4th century BCE. However, this state of affairs was only temporary.

Early Spartan Aggression



LYSANDER HAS THE WALLS OF ATHENS DEMOLISHED.

Spartans destroying the Long Walls, in The Illustrated History of the World (1881-4)

[Lysander](#), a prominent [Spartan](#) general who had been instrumental to their victory, was keen to capitalise on [Sparta's](#) triumph. In addition to the [30 Tyrants](#), Lysander had installed dearchies to rule over city states that had aided Athens.

However, this move was controversial within Sparta, and King [Pausanias](#) removed these dearchies within a year. Imperial ambitions were at odds with the Spartan personality, as [Sparta's](#) foreign policy was notoriously isolationist.

In 402 – 400 BCE [Sparta](#) engaged in a number of conflicts that settled old grudges, such as their war on the city of [Ellis](#) in revenge for them banning Sparta from the [Sacred Games](#) in 420BCE.

Breakdown of Relationship with Persia



Meeting between Cyrus the Younger and Lysander, by Francesco Antonio Grue (1618–1673)

In 401 BCE a revolution in [Persia](#) resulted in the death of [Cyrus the Younger](#), who had been an ally to Sparta at the end of the [Peloponnesian War](#). As a result, the [Persian Empire](#) began to attack Greek cities in [Asia Minor](#). Sparta, as most prominent Greek City state, took on the role of ‘protector’ and began attacking in return.

Initially these battles were successful. In 396 BCE the Spartan King [Agesilaus](#), with the backing of [Lysander](#), organised a ritual sacrifice at [Aulis](#) to mark the beginning of a campaign against Persia. However, the [Thebans](#), fearing Sparta’s growing power, deliberately disrupted the ritual.

Tensions between [Thebes](#) and [Sparta](#) grew and culminated in the [Battle of Haliartus](#), in which [Lysander](#) was killed.

The Corinthian War



Grave Stele of Dexileos, an Athenian cavalryman. 394–393 BCE

Sparta's defeat at the [Battle of Haliartus](#) marked the beginning of the [Corinthian War](#). This was fought between [Sparta](#) and a formidable force of a [Quadruple Alliance](#) between [Thebes](#), [Corinth](#), [Athens](#), and [Argos](#) who all feared Sparta's growing taste for imperialism. The war lasted from 395 – 387BCE, with the [Quadruple Alliance](#) initially backed by none other than the [Persian Empire](#), who had turned their back on their previous allies, the [Spartans](#).

The initial early successes of the [Quadruple Alliance](#) allowed [Athens](#) to recover from their loss in the [Peloponnesian War](#). Athens' once great navy was bolstered by the [Persian Empire](#) while Sparta's navy declined without Persian backing. As part of the Corinthian War, Athens was able to re-expand her territories and claim back some of the islands that had been under Athenian control as part of the [Delian League](#).

The King's Peace

Relief depicting Artaxerxes II from his tomb in Persepolis.



In 392BCE the [Spartans](#) had appealed to [Persia](#) for its backing once again and had been refused. By 387BCE however, the Persians feared that Athens' return to power could lead to a threat against them and so they allied themselves with Sparta once again.

[The King's Peace](#), also known as [The Peace of Antalcidas](#) after the Spartan diplomat who negotiated it, was signed in 387BCE by Persian [King Artaxerxes II](#). This treaty ended the Corinthian War but enforced certain conditions. The Persians took control of certain territories in Asia Minor, taking control of Ionian Greeks once again. Leagues and Alliances were effectively disbanded, weakening the combined power of Athens and her Allies.

[Sparta](#) were considered the enforcers of this treaty, making them the most powerful city state with the backing of the Great King.

The Second Athenian Confederation



Silver stater of Thebes, c. 405 – 395 BCE, depicting a Boeotian style shield used by the Theban military.

Knowing that they had the backing of the might of the [Persian Empire](#), [Spartan](#) aggression in the Greek world continued throughout the 380's and 370's BCE. [Thebes](#) was a particular target of [Sparta](#) and in 382BCE the city was seized, and a garrison put in place. The exiles who left [Thebes](#) were taken in by [Athens](#), and within a few years by 378BCE the Thebans, with the support of Athens, returned to their city and forcefully overturned the garrison. Between the years 377 and 371BCE the [Second Athenian Confederation](#) was created, led by Athens and Thebes but eventually joined by as many as 70 city states.

In 371BCE this conflict came to a head at the [Battle of Leuctra](#). Thebes had been improving their military tactics, employing a stacked phalanx technique and the renowned [Sacred Band](#). Sparta was decisively defeated and suffered huge losses, ending their control of the Greek world.

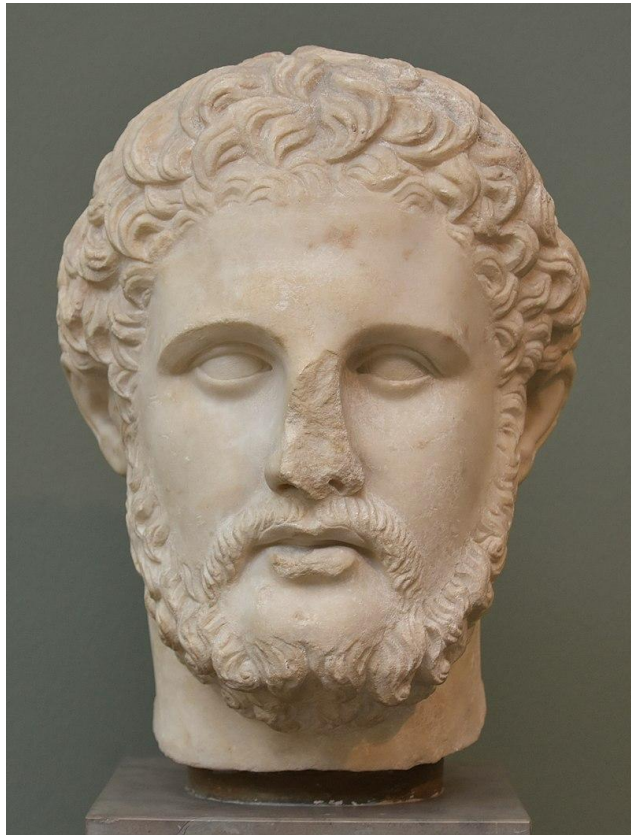
The Rise of Macedon



Prior to the 4th century BCE, [Macedon](#) had been a fairly small and underdeveloped state to the north of Greece. While [Athens](#) and [Sparta](#) had been fighting against the [Persian Empire](#) during the [Persian Wars](#) of the 5th century BCE, [Macedon](#) had been subjugated by the Persians and supplied soldiers to their army.

Macedon was ruled by a king, initially the [Argead](#) dynasty, a royal family who traced their ancestry back to the great Greek hero [Heracles](#). Over the course of the 4th century Macedon rose from relative obscurity to exercising control over the entire Greek mainland.

Philip II



Presumed Hellenistic bust of Philip II.

Macedon's change of fortune's was primarily due to king [Philip II](#), who ruled between 359–336 BCE. Philip was responsible for many of the military innovations and political successes that allowed [Macedon](#) to subjugate the Greek mainland and eventually allowed his son, [Alexander III](#), often called 'the Great,' to successfully invade the [Persian Empire](#).

As a youth in the 360's BCE Philip was held hostage in [Thebes](#), the leading city state in Greece at the time. While there [Philip](#) received a military and political education. Philip returned to [Macedon](#) in 364BCE and only after the death of his older brother's and infant nephew did he become King of [Macedon](#) in 359BCE. Philip soon set his sights on military expansion and engaged in a successful campaign against hostile neighbours, the [Paeonians](#) and the [Thracians](#).

Military and Diplomatic Success



Gold coin of Philip II, depicting the head of Apollo.

[Philip](#) was known not only for his famed military might but also for his success in diplomacy. Through a series of tactical marriages and alliances [Philip](#) gained enough power to conquer a number of significant cities in his early reign, including the town of [Crenides](#), an important gold mine which helped fund much of his later campaigning.

While sieging the city of [Methone](#) in 355/4BCE Philip was wounded and lost his right eye, however he remained militarily active, involving himself and the [Macedonians](#) in a number of conflicts with the Greek world including the [Third Sacred War](#), which earned him high prestige.

Philip systematically sieged strategically important Greek cities and was almost universally successful. Although [Philip](#) did not challenge [Sparta](#) directly, Sparta was still too weak from its defeat at Leuctra to offer any resistance to Philip's ambitions and was effectively subjugated too.

Ending the Opposition

The Lion of Chaeronea, a monument dedicated to the fallen Sacred Band of Thebes.



[Athens](#) and [Thebes](#) had been painfully aware of Philip's military ambitions and his conquering of the Greek mainland but failed to mount an effective resistance. In 338BCE an alliance of [Thebes](#) and [Athens](#) fought Philip and his Macedonians at the [Battle of Chaeronea](#), intending to end his control of the Greek mainland.

Instead, the [Athenians](#) and [Thebans](#) were decisively defeated by Philip's Macedonians, the left cavalry also being commanded by Philip's then 18 year old son, [Alexander](#). The [Sacred Band of Thebes](#), who had dominated the Greek military world for decades and were admired even by Philip and Alexander themselves, were entirely wiped out.

The League of Corinth and Hegemony



After his victory at [Chaeronea](#), Philip was left unchallenged for control of the Greek mainland. In the winter of 338/7 BCE Philip created the [League of Corinth](#), a coalition of all the Greek city states he had conquered. This was the first time in Greek history that all the city states (with the tentative exception of Sparta) had been unified, with [Philip](#) as their leader, or 'hegemon.'

Using this position as leader of all the Greeks, Philip turned his attention East to a new target. [The Persian Empire](#).

His ambitions would not be realised, however, as he was assassinated in 336 BCE.

Alexander the Great



The Rondanini Alexander, commissioned to celebrate the victory at Chaeronea.

[Alexander III of Macedon](#), born in Pella in 356BCE, was the son of [Philip II](#) and one of his wives, a princess of Epirus named [Olympias](#). Alexander had an extensive military and philosophical training, famously being tutored by [Aristotle](#). Under Aristotle, Alexander was given an intensive training in the art of heroism, using the work of [Homer](#) as an exemplar. [Alexander](#) had a lifelong fascination with heroes, particularly [Herakles](#) and [Achilles](#), two figures of special significance as Alexander could claim descent from both of them.

With the sudden death of his father in 336BCE, Alexander inherited not only the kingdom of [Macedon](#) but also Philip's role as [hegemon](#) and commander of a coalition of Greek city states. Alexander also inherited his father's ambitions for an invasion of the [Persian Empire](#), which he put in motion soon after his own coronation.

Alexander's Early Actions



2nd century BC bust of Alexander, from Alexandria.

After news reached the Greek world of [Philip II](#)'s death, several city states saw this as an opportunity to rid themselves of [Macedonian](#) rule. Many believed that they might be able to capitalise on the instability caused by [Philip](#)'s sudden death. Several cities, including [Athens](#), [Thebes](#), and [Thessaly](#), quickly revolted.

Alexander reacted swiftly and violently; these rebellions were soon crushed. [Alexander](#) went as far as to destroy [Thebes](#) completely, burning the city to the ground and enslaving the entire population. The city never recovered, and it was enough of a warning to reduce any larger revolts.

After securing Macedon's northern borders, by 334 BCE Alexander and his [Greco-Macedonians](#) were primed to invade the [Persian Empire](#).

Successful Invasion



Detail from the Alexander Mosaic, House of the Faun, Pompeii. 1st century CE.

In 334 BCE [Alexander](#) crossed the [Hellespont](#) with a strong combined Greco-Macedonian army of approx. 48,000 soldiers, 6,100 cavalry, and a fleet of 120 ships. Alexander was a skilled general and military man, commanding an elite force of soldiers, known as the companion cavalry, himself.

Alexander's initial invasion of [Asia Minor](#) was wildly successful, quickly winning a victory against the Persian army in May 334 BCE at the [Battle of Granicus](#). After this battle Alexander took control of Sardis, one of the Persian capitals, and continued to conquer or siege many cities along the Ionian coast.

In 333 BCE Alexander won a significant victory at the [Battle of Issus](#). The Persian King [Darius III](#) had been present himself at this battle but had fled, leaving behind the royal treasury and the royal family, his own wife, mother, and daughters. Alexander took control of both.

Alexander in Egypt



Coin type minted in the Hellenistic age, depicting Alexander with horns attributed to Zeus-Ammon.

After a series of significant victories, including the violent sieges of [Tyre and Gaza](#) in 332BCE, [Alexander](#) and his troops entered [Egypt](#). An already ancient and revered place, Egypt was a great prize for any conqueror and had been under Persian control for several centuries. Alexander and his troops were welcomed into Egypt without the need for force as he was seen as a liberator.

[Alexander](#) undertook a personal mission while in [Egypt](#) and travelled to seek the famed [Oracle at Siwah](#) dedicated to the deity [Zeus-Ammon](#). Here Alexander was welcomed as the 'Son of God', an incident that had a profound impact on Alexander and his self image for the rest of his life.

[Alexander](#) also founded the city of [Alexandria](#), which would become a major hub of culture and commerce in the following centuries.

Defeat of the Persian Empire



Roman bust of Alexander, copy of a 3rd century BCE original.

By the time [Alexander](#) left [Egypt](#) in 331 BCE, the Persian Empire was already in a precarious place with many prominent members of the court losing faith in [Darius III](#).

Alexander defeated the Persian army a final time at the [Battle of Gaugamela](#) in 331 BCE, a battle of epic proportions which resulted in a significant victory. [Darius](#) again fled the battlefield and although [Alexander](#) pursued him, he was killed by his own men before he could be caught.

With the Persian army defeated and the king dead, Alexander was now unchallenged as he and his army took control of the Persian heartland. This marked the end of the first stage of [Alexander's](#) campaign, although many anticipated that this would be the final stage as Alexander completed the initial objective of defeating the Persians and achieving retribution for the Greeks.

Decline and Death



Mural depicting the marriage of Alexander and Stateira, Pompeii

After two mutinies, at [Hyphasis](#) in 326BCE and [Opis](#) in 324BCE, Alexander's troops refused to travel further, and they returned westwards. Alexander's policy of fusion, integrating Persian youths into the army and adopting Persian style clothing and royal customs, remained deeply unpopular.

In 324 BCE Alexander oversaw a series of mass marriages between his Macedonian generals and Persian noblewomen, [Alexander](#) himself taking two more wives, the [daughters of Darius III](#), in addition to the Bactrian princess he had married in 327BCE. This was another deeply unpopular move, and most of the marriages between Alexander's men and their Persian brides did not last.

[Alexander](#) experienced a period of decline in his final year. His closest companion [Hephaestion](#) died of a short illness in autumn 324BCE and in summer 323 BCE [Alexander](#) himself died in [Babylon](#), leaving no clear heir or plan for succession.