

ANCIENT HISTORY: ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Speech on Alexander the Great Military Achievements

To say that Alexander the Great is well regarded for his military achievements would be an understatement: Alexander is viewed as a classical hero – modern military academies today teach his tactics and he lauded for his genius. By the time he was thirty, with the Macedonian army which he had virtually inherited from his father, he had formed an enormous empire, spanning from the Himalayas to the Ionian Sea. He was never beaten in battle and is regarded as one of the greatest commanders of all time. He is also recognized for the impact his military achievements had on development of the eastern and western worlds – the cultural diffusion caused by his empire's expansion. He succeeded in his military conquests through his brilliant tactics and strong army in battles such as Granicus, Issus, Gaugamela and Hydaspes, among others.

Alexander's military achievements and campaigns increased contact and trade between East and the West, and he spread Macedonian and Greek civilisation through many parts of Asia. Although the empire which Alexander created collapsed, with the eastern borders of his empire falling apart in his lifetime, Alexander's achievements prompted the Hellenistic period, during which the Greeks progressed in many fields – the arts, literature, sculpture, theatre and science to name a few. Many of the cities he founded thrived.

Philip II, Alexander's father, was also a fantastic military mind. His legacy was however, overshadowed by Alexander's. Phillip, in his lifetime, transformed Macedon from a state that was soon to be overrun by foreign enemies, into a powerful state, with a powerful army. Alexander received a first rate military education from his father, as can be seen at the battle of Chaeronea, which was fought while his father Philip II was still in control of the Macedonian forces. It was fought against an alliance of Greek city states. The tactics used by Philip doubtless had an effect on Alexander's own military tactics and his achievements. Alexander had command of the left wing. Philip's army feigned retreat. The untrained Athenians faltered forwards, separating themselves from allies. They were taken by surprise when Philip's army went from retreat to attack. Alexander and his command played a key role in this battle, as he led his left wing to flank the Macedonians and thus won. This early battle has parallels to Alexander's own tactical deceptions.

Alexander benefited enormously from the foundations his father left him. Alexander inherited a powerful army from his father. The army was expertly trained. Alexander developed a variety of units that retained flexibility, while excelling at specific tasks. The army was thus made of interlocking parts that functioned fabulously as a whole. For instance, the hypaspists' (infantry's) job was to function as a solid link with the cavalry. Had this aspect of the army fallen apart- a hole would have opened up, leaving the Macedonians exposed. The infantry could operate together, or as separate battalions. When this extremely well trained army, with each element supporting each other, was combined with Alexander's military genius, Alexander's military achievements were all but inevitable. Without Phillip's influence, it would have taken far longer for Alexander to prepare his force to invade the Persian world, as Alexander would have had to train them from scratch. In this way, Phillip had quite an impact on his son's own military achievements

Alexander the Great succeeded Philip II to the throne of Macedon in 336BC. Alexander strived to continue his father's plans of invasion against the Persians. Unrest in Greece following his father's death was suppressed with Alexander's swift march through the centre of Greece on the Balkan campaign in 350 BC. During this campaign, the Macedonians were held up by the Triballians at a pass. The Triballians, who held the heights, let loose wagons and boulders to throw the Macedonians off the track. Alexander ordered his front ranks to lie down and lock their shields over themselves. The other ranks avoided and dodged the wagons. Most of the projectiles harmlessly flew past. The instant the projectiles had passed, the Macedonians rushed the Triballians, who fled. Rebellious tribes Thrace and Illyria were subdued quickly, and their forces joined Alexander's. Alexander achieved this partly through psychologically besting his enemy. The Illyrians initially

surrounded the 12,000 or so members of Alexander's army. Alexander ordered his men to march straight towards the surrounding soldiers. The Illyrians lost their nerve and fled in the face of the discipline of the Macedonians.

A component of Alexander's success can be attributed to his fast marching soldiers- exceeding a 30km more day march speed which they could keep up for several days. They could thus arrive at battlefields swiftly, catching their enemy on the back foot, contributing to military victory. This can be seen when Thebes rebelled. Alexander heard the news when he was in the Balkan region. His army marched 390 km in 13 days and attacked Thebes before it had the chance to properly mount a defence. They were thus razed to the ground. By this point, the other city states who had banded together in the Corinthian League backed down. The League confirmed Alexander as their leader.

In 334BC, Alexander's army crossed the Hellespont with a fleet of 120 ships. According to Plutarch, "Alexander was obliged to fight at the very gates of Asia, if he was to enter and conquer it." The Persians waited on the far side of the River Granicus and Alexander's army was forced to cross the deep, fast moving waters through hails of spears and other projectiles. Alexander's generals suggested that they wait to attack until the Persians withdrew. Alexander however, said - "We are fighting men and to hesitate now would be unworthy of us." Alexander's force thus pushed through the river. The Persians made a tactical blunder in this battle, by placing the cavalry so close to the steep riverbank, the Persians deprived themselves of the opportunity to charge; and the infantry, in the rear of the cavalry, became mere observers of a struggle in which they could offer little assistance. At the last moment Alexander switched the attack, so that rather than focusing on the right, the first cavalry came diagonally from the left. This outsmarted the Persians. Once the Persian centre broke due to the Macedonian's powerful cavalry, the Persian wings quickly folded. This victory can be attributed to Alexander's well trained army, whom Alexander virtually inherited from his father, Alexander's own tactics, and the Persian blunders.

Following this battle, Alexander disbanded his fleet due to a lack of funds and the knowledge that his fleet was no match for the Persian's. Alexander also understood that by taking the coastal towns, the Persian navy would become all but useless to them. Thus, it was not only through Alexander's military might but his own understanding of economy that enabled Alexander to achieve victories.

Alexander's next major victory was in Syria, at the battle of Issus, 333 BC. This successful conquest was due in large part to the terrain. As Plutarch says "Fortune...presented Alexander with the ideal terrain for...battle." Darius, the Persian king, and his army were caught by Alexander's forces between the mountain and the sea, divided by the Pinarus River. This erased the advantage of the Persian's larger force. Alexander led a flank attack and cut through their forces. The Macedonians timed their attack so that the Cavalry reached the flank of the enemy concurrently with his straight-on military charge. This simultaneous charge was very effective. Alexander's left wing held up until the Persians fled. Darius himself broke and ran in this battle. Thus, it can be seen that Alexander's military achievements were also due to the tactical use of land and terrain, in combination with the strength of his army.

In 332 BC, after besieging Tyre for seven months, it was taken. That same year, Gaza met a similar fate. Both cities were re-colonized.

At the battle of Gaugamela in Egypt in 331BC, Darius was again defeated, though he had amassed a stronger force than at Issus, with 200 scythe bearing chariots and elephants. Alexander's success in this battle can be attributed in part to his great tactical ability, as well as his choice of soldiers: Darius's chariots were of no real use because of the skill of Alexander's phalanx, who were trained to open up and allow the chariots through, making them ineffective. Between the crush of the phalanx, and Alexander's cavalry's charge, the Persian centre collapsed. Darius fled and was later killed in Bactria by his own satrap. Alexander took control of Persia.

From 330-328 BC, Alexander engaged in a conquest of the north east provinces. He was met by an army led by King Porus at the Hydaspes. Alexander couldn't cross the swollen river directly, as Porus's elephants caused Alexander's horses to become uncontrollable with terror. Alexander feigned crossing the river, creating multiple false alarms until Porus's forces felt secure. Alexander led a force on floats across the river upstream from Porus's force. This took Porus by surprise. He sent a force to intercept Alexander's and the battle resulted in heavy Indian losses, with the Macedonians emerging victorious.

The Macedonian army refused to move further East, and thus Alexander's ambition to conquer further came to an end.

As Burn says "No soldier in history is more indisputably "great" than Alexander. His achievements can be attributed to his tactical insight and planning, his strong leadership, and his powerful army."

Alexander achieved his military victories through his relentlessness. He never let any obstacle prevent him from his goals. For instance, when faced with Tyre, although he did not possess any significant navy- having disbanded it earlier, he built a mole that connected the island to the land, thus allowing his soldiers access from the Phoenician shore. This was combined with utilizing siege machine catapults and battering rams. Alexander attacked from the Macedonian constructed bridge, as well as using artillery, battering rams and ladders from multiple directions. This was a frequently used strategy of his- attacking simultaneously from multiple angles, and aided him in his military achievements.

In regard to his tactical insight, he constantly modified his tactics, never relying on a single static strategy. Depending on his enemy, he varied the deployment of his troops, for example: in the Battle of Granicus, he used mostly cavalry; aware of the danger of encirclement. At the battle of Gaugamela, he deployed a larger force; and against Porus, he used his infantry, as his cavalry were intimidated by the elephants. He trained his Phalanx to be mobile, to open its ranks and to charge.

Alexander tailored his siege operations to circumstance, with the siege operations at Tyre and Aornus being totally different. He surprised frequently, forcing the enemy to change plans. He used deception, and split up his forces, using the principle "march divided, fight united". He also ensured he possessed strong lines of communication, so that reinforcements were always at hand.

Alexander also strived to maintain a good relationship with his soldiers- he made a point of remembering certain soldier's names, and making sure to comment on particular soldier's achievements. He led an army from the Balkans to the heart of India without any discontent. He also ensured to face any dangers that he was to put his men through- he is alleged to have been the first over the wall at the siege of Mallians- contributing to his ability to succeed in military.

In conclusion, Alexander's military achievements can be attributed to Alexander's own ingeniousness, as well as the strong army which he inherited from his father. Alexander's military achievements had an enormous impact on the spread and development of Greek culture. Alexander's military achievements were possible because of his tactical brilliance, his father strengthening of the Macedonians, and his powerful army. Alexander the Great is not only remembered for his military achievements, but also the effect his achievements had on the diffusion of Greek culture. Alexander the Great was truly an amazing tactician and commander- a genius, in fact, and his military achievements will no doubt be analysed for years to come.