

# Alexander the Great's Journey Through the Persian Empire

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## Introduction

In the year 334 BC, Alexander the Great and his army of over 40,000 men left the Macedonian Empire and set out on their two-year quest to conquer the Persian Empire. Motivated by both a desire to capture the Persian Emperor Darius III and Alexander's wish to travel to the Far East, their journey took them all the way from present-day Greece to India. While chasing Darius they sacked, burned, and looted many key Persian cities, including Susa and the Persian capital, Persepolis. The segment we studied begins in 331 BC, as Alexander arrived in Babylon after defeating Darius's forces in the Battle of Gaugamela.

Alexander headed to Babylon with aspirations of taking control of the prospering intellectual and commercial center, and this is exactly what he did. He took control of the city but left the inhabitants unharmed, and quickly left to sack Susa while leaving some of his generals in charge of Babylon. Upon arrival in Susa, Alexander and his men quickly looted the treasury and left the city, sending the majority of his men to Persepolis along the Persian highway known as the Royal Road. Alexander, on the other hand, wanted to take a more direct route to the capital, and thus took a select group of men through the desert and across the Zagros Mountains. They arrived at a pass known as the Persian Gates, where a Persian Army ambushed them. The Persians lined the hills surrounding the narrow pass and bombarded Alexander's men with stones and arrows as they tried to pass through. After a month of heavy casualties and no success crossing the pass, Alexander decided to retreat and devise a new plan. He and some of his men went through a nearby pass and were able to sneak up behind the Persian

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army without alerting them, enabling them to finally travel through the pass safely.

Once through the Zagros Mountains, Alexander and his men quickly advanced to Persepolis so that they could loot its treasury before the Persians emptied it. One evening in Persepolis, a fire broke out in the palace where Alexander was staying, a fire that eventually spread and engulfed the entire city. Some historians believe the fire was an accident, whereas others suggest it was Alexander's revenge for the Persians' having burnt the Athenian Acropolis in 480 BC. Alexander then continued his pursuit of the Persian king. Unfortunately he was unable to capture him alive, as Darius was killed by his own men and left on the side of the road. Alexander found Darius's corpse and was enraged that a man of such power and nobility had been killed with such disrespect. He eventually sent Darius's body back to Persepolis, where he was given a royal funeral and buried alongside his predecessors.

### Researching Alexander's Route on Google Earth

Trying to track the path that Alexander took through present-day Iraq and Iran is difficult because of the great geographical challenges that he faced on his journey. One of the biggest challenges was the mountain ranges in Iran. For example, the Zagros Mountains appear to have affected his choice of path because it looks as though he had to go all the way around them instead of taking a more direct route. Granted, he was following Darius for most of this segment of his conquest, so he might have been just following him through the mountains. Unless he was able to scale some of the mountains, however, there are only a few possible routes he could have taken to get from one city to another, all of which are very narrow. Although these narrow passes might have hindered his own progress, they could also have been helpful in diminishing the strength of the armies he faced along the way. Alexander was often outnumbered, and the narrow pathways could have helped him "even out" the battle, as his enemies could only deploy a relatively small part of their forces along the front line at any given time. On the other hand, the Persians should have known the land better (as it was part of the Persian Empire, and Alexander took mapmakers to chart

the terrain), so they should have been able to predict his movements and bottle up his army, as they did at the Persian Gates. Even in this difficult and unfamiliar terrain, Alexander was able to direct his troops to victory in many battles. Something that might have helped him maneuver as successfully as he did is that there appear to have been many rivers (some now dried up and some still present) along the routes he had to travel. Even if he was unfamiliar with the geography, he could just follow the rivers from place to place. But his pathway does not follow any single riverbed, so he may have had to do a fair number of river crossings and portages to keep his army moving.

### **Relevance of This Region's Geography to Current Events**

After looking at the geography that Alexander the Great had to negotiate in present-day Iraq and Iran, you can really appreciate the difficulties facing the U.S. troops in the wars in that area today. Because the area is so mountainous, it must be very difficult to mobilize any force, and what is even more challenging is that the enemy the troops are trying to follow and fight has a significant "home-field advantage" of knowing the local geography and the best ways to move and fight in it. Being foreign to this land must hinder any progress that the troops want to make because there is no easy way to travel.

Domestic life is also probably affected by the geography of Iran and Iraq. The mountains split through the land, leaving many towns and villages isolated. Travel seems to be difficult between these communities, although in a few cases there are now highways that could ease travel. Any big cities we found were built in the plains where many buildings can be built and many people can live.

### **Conclusion**

On his great conquest of the present-day Middle East and into Asia, Alexander would have had to face great geographical challenges. This makes his conquest of the area even more impressive because of all of the feats he had to accomplish, both in terms of sheer mileage he and his troops traveled and in terms of navigating through the terrain.

Today the geography still affects life in the area and the way that people live their lives. Through this project we learned that geography affects all kinds of travel and political events, past and present, and has a huge influence on the course of history. ●

To view the full Google Earth project, including a video with author commentary, go to <http://roundtable.menloschool.org/issue6.html>.

