

2017

The Military Genius of Philip II of Macedon

Nathaniel Thomas
Parkland College

Recommended Citation

Thomas, Nathaniel, "The Military Genius of Philip II of Macedon" (2017). *A with Honors Projects*. 217.
<https://spark.parkland.edu/ah/217>

Open access to this Article is brought to you by Parkland College's institutional repository, [SPARK: Scholarship at Parkland](#). For more information, please contact spark@parkland.edu.

Nathaniel Thomas

History 101

Honors Paper

The Military Genius of Philip II of Macedon

The great achievements of Philip II of Macedon are often overshadowed by the accomplishments of his son Alexander the Great. In this paper, I intend to show why Philip deserves more recognition for his many outstanding achievements, and how his accomplishments were important in paving the way for Alexander's success.

Philip II was born around 382 BCE and was the youngest of three brothers. He was the son of King Amyntas III, King of Macedon at the time, and Amyntas's wife Eurydice. (Bibliography.com, paragraph 3) His family was part of the Agread dynasty, who could supposedly trace their lineage back to Heracles. After his father died his oldest brother Alexander II took the throne and continued an unsuccessful campaign against Macedonia's enemies. Macedonia at the time suffered from continuous attacks by its neighbors Thrace, Illyria, and various Greek city-states. The Greek city-state of Thebes was even known to meddle with Macedonian politics. When Philip's brother Alexander II became king, Philip was sent to Thebes as a hostage. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 1)

Philip spent three years, 368 to 365 BCE, as a hostage in Thebes, but he didn't let his time there be wasted. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 2) Philip lived with Pammenes, who was a skilled military general. Pammenes was also a friend of Epaminondas, who was the greatest military tactician in Greece at the time. Philip spent his time watching the Theban army train and also studied military strategy. He was also interested in the Theban

general Pelopidas, who was the commander of the Sacred Band. The Sacred Band was an elite force of around 300 handpicked hoplites. After the death of Alexander II, Philip's other older brother Perdiccas III took the throne. (Gabriel, Richard A., page 40)

Perdiccas III recalled Philip from Thebes and made him a provincial governor. Philip spent the next five years trying to reorganize the Macedonian army. He experimented with troop formations and studied tactical doctrines. Perdiccas, in 359, marched against the Illyrians and was killed during the battle that followed. Perdiccas had left Philip behind to act as regent while he was gone. So, with his second brothers' death, Philip, now 23 years old, became king of a crumbling Macedonia. (Gabriel, Richard A., page 40)

Philip, now king of Macedon, was faced with many challenges that required him to act quickly and decisively. Not only was Macedon still threatened by their neighboring enemies, but Philip had to also deal with usurpers who were trying to take the throne from him. He used gifts to bribe the Thracian king to put to death one of the Macedonian usurpers who was taking refuge in the Thracian court. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 4) He defeated another pretender to the throne in battle. This usurper had the support of Athens however and so to make sure he didn't upset the Athenians he offered them a treaty and the coastal Macedonian city of Amphipolis which they accepted. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 4) There was a total of five usurpers fighting Philip for the throne and, within a year, three were dead and the other two were forced into exile. They were later captured and killed. (Gabriel, Richard A., page 40)

With the internal power struggle dealt with for the time, Philip quickly switched his focus to the Macedonian borders. In 358, Philip battled against Illyrian forces to recapture the north-western regions of Macedonia that was under Illyrian control. Philip crushed the Illyrians with

his reorganized Macedonian phalanx, killing around 7,000 while the rest fled. (Gabriel, Richard A., page 40) This crushing victory freed Macedonian regions that were previously controlled by Illyria and, with his north-western border secure, Philip launched an invasion of Illyria itself. Philip conquered all the Illyrian tribes all the way to the Adriatic coast. Philip eventually married Audata, an Illyrian princess, to seal an alliance with the Illyrians. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 5)

With Macedonia secure for the time being, Philip again shifted his focus, this time to rebuilding the Macedonian army. Philip designed and tested new tactics, maneuvers, and formations that changed the Macedonian military. One of the most important changes he made was to turn the Macedonian force into a professional army. Before, the army was made up of “part time” soldiers that would only join when they weren’t needed in the fields. Philip changed the military to a professional occupation and payed his troops well enough that they could afford to remain in the army year around. (Gabriel, Richard A., page 40) This increase in pay also increased loyalty and the change to a professional army gave his troops a sense of pride. Changing to a professional army allowed Philip to have a standing army despite the season and provided him with better trained and more reliable troops. Philip also based his infantry on the Greek phalanx, but with a few changes. For example, instead of the dory, which is a normal Greek hoplite spear that was around 8 feet long (Ancient Military.com, paragraph 8), he gave his men the sarissa which is an 18-foot spear. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 5) This provided his Macedonian phalanx with a nearly 10 feet longer reach than the phalanx armies of Greece.

Philip’s changes to formations and strategic maneuvering was also a radical change from the armies of Greece. Where Greek armies would rely on their hoplites as the main killing force,

Philip used his hoplites in more of an anchoring method that would allow his cavalry to flank and attack from the sides or rear of the enemy army. Philip's new phalanx was also capable of acting more offensively too by forming a wedge that would open a gap for the cavalry to charge into. (Gabriel, Richard A., page 42)

Philip's cavalry attacked mainly in a wedge formation and were equipped with a sword and the sarissa or a xyston, a roughly 9-foot javelin. Macedonia had long traditions of cavalry warfare, and Philip used them to their full potential. He also increased the amount of cavalry in his army with a ratio of one cavalry man to every six infantry men. This was the largest cavalry to infantry force ratio in any army in antiquity. Philip's changes formed the Macedonian military into the most tactically sophisticated and powerful military force in Greece. (Gabriel, Richard A., page 42)

Philip also made changes to increase the speed and mobility of his army. For starters he lessened the number of animals used as beast of burden by distributing some of the weight to the soldiers to carry. He changed out oxen for horses and mules to act as pack animals and he also reduced the size of non-combatants by limiting the amount allowed to accompany the army. Philip formed a logistics corps and was the first "Greek" general to form a department of military engineering. (Gabriel, Richard A., page 43)

Philip had ambitious goals to conquer and unify all of Greece under Macedonian rule and then to use the might of a unified Greece to invade Persia. The groundwork he would lay would later greatly benefit his son Alexander. Philip knew that military power alone though was not enough to achieve his goals. Luckily, Philip was a political genius that was not shy from using diplomacy, bribery, coercion, assassination, and marriage to achieve his goals. (Gabriel, Richard A., page 43) Philip had seven wives in total (Sorrell, Sonia, paragraph 11) One of these many

wives was Olympias who was Alexander the Great's mother. Philip married Olympias in 357, a princess from the neighboring country, Epirus. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 9) Philip used these marriages to form and strengthen alliances. With Philip's improved military and savvy political knowledge, Macedonia was now a force to be reckoned with.

In 357 Philip attacked Amphipolis, the city he had given Athens, breaking their treaty and declaring war. He captured the city and then captured the gold mines in Mount Pangaeus. These gold mines would help him to finance his various wars. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 10) In 356 Philip captured Crenides which was under the rule of Thrace. This secured his eastern border and he renamed the city Philippi after himself, something his son would later be fond of doing. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 11) Philip conquered two more cities that year. The following year, 355, a Greek city by the name of Methone was captured then raised and re-founded as a Macedonian city. Philip then began his conquest of Thessaly and had strong control over the region by 352. However, joint Greek forces guarded Thermopylae and so Philip decided against an attempt to cross. Instead he returned to Macedon where he planned and prepared his next move. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 12-13)

The Chalcidice peninsula was his next target. In 348, he attacked the peninsula and quickly captured the Greek cities within it. Again, Philip razed these cities but this time he also sold the Greek citizens as slaves and distributed their land to Macedonians. One of these cities was Stageira, which was the birthplace of the Greek philosopher Aristotle. The success of Chalcidice also marked an end for Greek settlements on Macedonia. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 14) Philip then forced his way into the Greek Delphic council, being the first Macedonian to enter the council. Here he used his political smarts to gain

and buy supporters. Many Greeks did not like that a Macedonian king was intruding in a sacred Greek council. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 15)

In 351, an Athenian by the name of Demosthenes delivered a speech warning the Greeks about Philip. He delivered two more speeches to form a series of three, called the Philippics, and three more, called the Olynthiacs. All of these speeches were aimed to inform Greece to beware of Philip. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 15-17) Demosthenes also criticized his fellow Athenians for not taking more actions against Philip and warned of his continuing expansion. “It must not escape you, then, men of Athens, that now all else is mere words and pretexts and that the real aim of this scheming and contriving is that you should remain inactive at home and undefended abroad, while Philip secures his every object without hinderance”. (Mader, Gottfried, pg. 27) In these speeches we can also see how mainland Greeks viewed the Macedonians, as barbarians. Greeks refused to be united by even another Greek so I’m sure that Demosthenes speeches warning of a “barbarian” king who was wanting to rule over all of Greece angered a lot of Greeks.

There was another Athenian orator who viewed Philip as more of a solution instead of a problem. This man’s name was Isocrates, and he published the Philippus in 346. Isocrates encouraged Philip’s goal of uniting Greece to stop the endless fighting between individual city-states. He even proposed that Philip lead a joint Macedonian and Greek army against the Persians, something that Philip already had in mind. (Sorrell, Sonia, paragraph 8)

In 345 and 344, Philip spent most of the time putting down rebellions. Once the rebellions were put down, Philip marched his army into Thrace, and by 339, the majority of Greece was under Macedonian control. Philip’s quick expansion was also noticed by Persia. The need to resist Macedonia caused the Greeks to turn to their ancient enemy of Persia for help.

There were only two cities in Thrace that were able to hold off the Macedonians with the help of Persia and the Greek city-states. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 18-19)

Due to the appearance of a new threat, Philip eventually lifted the sieges and instead confronted an army from Scythia near Danube. Philip won an amazing victory and was even able to kill the Scythian king Areas. He also captured around 20,000 Scythians and took them as slaves. On his way back to Macedonia, however, they were attacked by Thracians and Philip was severely injured while the army also lost all the booty. Philip spent the next couple months recovering from his injuries. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 20)

Greece was now assembling a large army to attack Macedonia with, so as soon as Philip was able, he marched his army to meet them. The two armies fought at Chaeronea on August 2nd, 338 BC in central Greece. The Greeks fielded 35,000 infantry and 2,000 cavalry. Philip led his army of 30,000 infantry and 2,000 cavalry against them. He gave his son Alexander, who was now 18, a command position as well. The professional and seasoned Macedonian army along with Philip's superior tactics allowed for the Macedonians to crush the united Greek army. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 21-22)

After the victory, Philip secured his new territory by placing Macedonian garrisons in strategic positions in places like Thebes and Corinth. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 23) At Corinth Philip summoned representatives from each Greek city-state to secure peace. Philip offered up the League of Corinth, a defensive alliance between Macedon and the Greek city-states. Philip would become hegemon or leader of the League and would be supreme commander in chief over all military forces. The city-states agreed and in doing so Greece was united for the first time in history. (Gabriel, Richard A., page 43)

During Philip's conquest of Greece, he lost an eye and suffered a leg injury that left him lame. (Gabriel, Richard A., page 43) With the unifying of Greece now complete, Philip began planning his invasion of Persia. During this time, he married his seventh and last wife Cleopatra who was of Macedonian nobility. Philip even placed his new wife in a position of status above Olympias. (Sorrell, Sonia, paragraph 11) Needless to say, this marriage caused problems with Olympias and Alexander. During the marriage banquet, Attalus, who was a general in the Macedonian army and Cleopatra's uncle, commented that Philip could now father a legitimate heir of pure Macedonian blood. Alexander, angry that he had just called him a bastard, threw his cup at him. It's said that Philip stood up and drew his sword then attempted to charge Alexander but instead tripped and fell. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 24) Alexander then shouted: "Here is the man who was making ready to cross from Europe to Asia, and who cannot even cross from one table to another without losing his balance." (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 25) Alexander fled to Epirus with his mother but was eventually allowed to come back. Cleopatra eventually had a boy who they named Caranus. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 26)

In 337, Philip came to the League's council at Corinth with his plans to invade Persia. He had gained support for this plan by pointing out an invasion of Persia would be retribution for the Persians invasion of Greece more than 100 years before. In 336 Philip sent 10,000 men under generals Attalus and Parmenio to cross into Asia Minor in preparation for the main body. (Gabriel, Richard A., page 43) Before Philip left to conquer Persia, though, he attended the celebrations for his daughter Cleopatra's wedding to Alexander of Epirus, who was Olympias' brother. It was during these celebrations that Philip was assassinated. (Project of historyofmacedonia.org, paragraph 27) The assassin's name was Pausanias who was one of

Philip's own bodyguards. Pausanias was killed while trying to escape and so his motives remain unknown. (Sorrell, Sonia, paragraph 12)

There are different theories for who might have been behind Philip's assassination. A popular theory is that Alexander's mother, Olympias, planned the assassination to secure the throne for her son because she feared Philip would name his new son his successor.

(Bibliography.com, paragraph 10) However, it is debated that Philip planned to keep Alexander as his heir and so an assassination wouldn't be necessary to keep Alexander in power. She might have also planned it because of jealousy over Philip's new wife. Some think that maybe Pausanias was the only one who planned and executed the assassination. Others say it might have been the Persian king who was behind it, fearing an attack from a united Greece.

(Bibliography.com, paragraph 10) Although we may never know who was behind his death, our list of suspects is as long as Philip's list of enemies, which were many.

After Philip's death, Alexander, at age 21, became king of Macedon and Greece. Alexander's way was paved for him to continue what his father set out to do and conquer Persia. Alexander did have to deal with rebellious Greeks at first who used Philip's death as an opportunity to escape from Macedonian rule. However, thanks to his father's re-inventing of the Macedonian army and the power and wealth Macedon had gained under Philip's rule the rebellions were stomped out and Alexander was set to launch his father's invasion of Persia.

If it wasn't for Philip's achievements though Alexander might never have accomplished what he did. Macedon might have crumbled under the weight of its enemies or remained a weak nation. When Philip took power, Macedonia was surrounded by enemies and growing constantly weaker. If Philip had failed like his brothers before him to secure his borders or defeat his enemies within then Macedonia might have passed through history without notice.

If Philip wasn't assassinated, he would have launched his conquest of Persia and might have been successful like his son. If so, with Philip's political skills and heirs to take over when he died, a lasting Macedonian Empire might have formed instead of the divided successor kingdoms of the Hellenistic Age. This might have led to Alexander expanding to form an even greater empire leading to an even greater expansion of Greek culture and ideas.

Unfortunately, we can only hypothesize what could have happened. Philip left his mark on history though and his achievements and the achievements of his son Alexander changed history. I hope this paper was able to show you some of the great accomplishments and genius of Philip II.

Work Cited

1. Ancient Military.com, Copyright © 2011 AncientMilitary.com

<http://www.ancientmilitary.com/greek-warriors.htm>

2. Biography.com Editors, The Biography.com website, Philip of Macedon Biography.com, A&E Television Networks, last updated July 7, 2014

<https://www.biography.com/people/philip-ii-of-macedon-21322787>

3. Gabriel, Richard A. "The Genius of Philip II." *Military History*, vol. 25, no. 6, Feb/Mar2009, p. 38. EBSCOhost,

[https://ezproxy.parkland.edu:443/login?url=https://search.ebscohost-com.ezproxy.parkland.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=35963985&site=eds-live](https://ezproxy.parkland.edu:443/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.parkland.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=35963985&site=eds-live)

4. Mader, Gottfried. "'Pax Duello Mixta': Demosthenes and the Rhetoric of War and Peace." *Classical Journal*, vol. 101, no. 1, October/ November 2005, pp. 11-35. EBSCOhost,

<https://ezproxy.parkland.edu:443/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ofs&AN=505155410&site=eds-live>

5. Project of historyofmacedonia.org, philipofmacedon.org,

www.historyofmacedonia.org/AncientMacedonia/PhilipofMacedon.html

6. Sorrell, Sonia. "Philip II of Macedon." *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, January. EBSCOhost, ezproxy.parkland.edu:443/login?

<https://ezproxy.parkland.edu:443/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ers&AN=89454356&site=eds-live>