ALEXANDER THE GREAT: HERO OR VILLAIN?

Directions: The legacy of Alexander the Great has been debated throughout the centuries. Now it is time for you to join the conversation by reliving the events of Alexander’s conquest of the East through the eyes of those he conquered: the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Persians, and the Indians. View history from their perspective. Read and annotate all five pages (the summary of events and the four detailed accounts), underlining important points. Then, use the organization sheet (only the side titled “Alexander the Great: Villain”) to compile talking points to argue that Alexander should be remembered as a villain. During class, we will have a full period discussion/debate on this topic, so be ready!
Key Events in Alexander’s Military Career

Background Information About Alexander the Great
Alexander the Great was born in 356 B.C.E. in the kingdom of Macedonia, north of mainland Greece. Although he lived only to the age of 32, he ruled the largest empire the world had ever seen, stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indus River. Alexander was a strong military leader, and he conquered many foreign lands with the powerful army his father had left to him. He failed to designate a legitimate heir to succeed him after his death. He died in Babylon (present-day Iraq) in 323 B.C.E. The divided empire he left behind quickly crumbled as various groups fought to control its vast lands.

Event A: Alexander in Thebes
In 335 B.C.E., the Greek city-state of Thebes revolted and declared its independence from Macedonian rule. Alexander the Great, ruler of Macedonia and all of Greece, traveled to Thebes with 30,000 troops to crush the revolt. Alexander’s forces were more experienced than the Thebans, and also greatly outnumbered them. While the Thebans fought with determination, Alexander’s army eventually defeated them. After the battle, Alexander’s troops destroyed the city.

Event B: Alexander in Egypt
In 332 B.C.E., Alexander the Great and his forces arrived in Egypt. The Macedonian forces met no resistance when they entered the country, and the Egyptians enthroned Alexander as king, or pharaoh. In early 331 B.C.E., Alexander made a journey to a desert oasis, where he claimed the Oracle of Ammon identified him as the true son of the Greek God Zeus. Before he left Egypt, Alexander founded a new city northwest of Memphis, and named it after himself: Alexandria. The city later grew to become a center for culture and learning for several hundred years.

Event C: Alexander in Persia
In 334 B.C.E., Alexander the Great set out to conquer the Persian Empire, the most powerful empire in the ancient world. Thousands of Macedonians and Persians were killed in the numerous battles in Persia. At the Battle of Issus, Alexander’s forces defeated the Persian army led by King Darius III. After capturing and destroying the Persian capital of Persepolis, Alexander became the unquestioned ruler of the Persian empire. While he ruled, he appointed many Persians as governors in his conquered territories and allowed the Persians to continue practicing their customs and beliefs.

Event D: Alexander in India
In 327 B.C.E., Alexander the Great led his forces across the Hindu Kush mountains and entered India. Over the next three years, his troops fought many battles to conquer various Indian rulers. Both the Macedonians and the Indians suffered heavy casualties. During his time in India, Alexander closely questioned the Brahmins, or holy men, to learn about Hinduism. After a victory at the Battle of the River Hydaspes, Alexander’s troops began the long journey home to Macedonia.
Information About Event A: Alexander in Thebes from the Perspective of Conquered

When Philip II of Macedonia was assassinated in 336 B.C.E., the Macedonian army immediately accepted Alexander as his father’s rightful successor. News of Philip’s death then traveled to the League of Corinth, the federation of Greek city-states that Philip had assembled after he conquered all of Greece. The league members elected Alexander to be Philip’s successor as commander-in-chief. They gave him the power to raise troops from mainland Greece to make war against Persia—the most powerful empire in the ancient world at the time.

However, not all the Greek city-states supported him. More than the other city-states, Thebes in particular had reasons to resist Macedonian rule. Many Thebans were bitter about the treatment they had received from Alexander’s father, King Philip II. When Philip conquered all of Greece in 338 B.C.E., he treated some cities more harshly than others. After defeating the Thebans, he held Theban prisoners for ransom or sold them into slavery. He executed the leaders of the Theban anti-Macedonian group, and established a new government under his control. In addition, Philip stationed a military post, or garrison, permanently in Thebes to help prevent future uprisings. Most Thebans expected no better treatment from Philip’s successor. They viewed his son Alexander in the same light they viewed Philip—one tyrant was just replacing another.

Then in 335 B.C.E., Thebes seized an opportunity to declare its independence while Alexander was fighting a rebellion home in Macedonia. The Thebans prepared to defend their independence from Alexander and his 30,000 troops, who had set out to reconquer the city.

First, Theban forces surrounded and blocked off the Macedonian garrison. This prevented the garrison soldiers from fighting and the Macedonian troops from bringing in reinforcements and supplies. The Thebans also built an outer wall to the city and assigned part of their cavalry to defend it. Slaves and resident aliens defended the city walls, while the main body of the Theban troops prepared to confront Macedonian troops outside the walls.

When Alexander arrived, he was met with strong resistance. He divided his troops into three groups, with the third group held in reserve. Although the Thebans were less experienced and outnumbered, they fought bravely. Unfortunately, they left a gate unguarded, and some Macedonian soldiers found it and poured through the city. They freed the Macedonian troops in the garrison, who then joined in the battle, as did the third group of troops. Theban troops and citizens alike scattered to avoid being slaughtered. It was no use.

By the time the battle was over, 6,000 Thebans had been killed. In addition, Alexander sold more than 20,000 citizens—mostly women and children—into slavery. Then he ordered his troops to destroy every building in the city, with the exception of a few temples. Once again, the Thebans were crushed without mercy.
Information About Event B: Alexander in Egypt from the Perspective of Conquered

After two years in Asia Minor and the Near East, Alexander and his forces arrived in Egypt in 332 B.C.E. The Egyptian people greeted them with mixed feelings. On the one hand, many were relieved and welcomed the conqueror. They hoped he would be an improvement over the Persians, who had ruled Egypt for the previous 20 years, and had been harsh and at times incompetent. The Persians violated, or desecrated, Egyptian temples and sacred customs. Egyptians knew that Alexander respected Egyptian beliefs, including their Gods. However, they were also aware of his reputation as a cruel conqueror who slaughtered people and destroyed cities. With this in mind, the Persian governor, or satrap, of Egypt willingly surrendered power, and even offered Alexander silver and all his furniture.

In 331 B.C.E., Alexander decided to journey to the oasis of Siwah (SEE-wah) to visit a prophet. He arrived at the site of a famous Oracle of Amon (pronounced AH-mun)—the Egyptian King of the Gods. Many people portrayed the reception Alexander received at Siwah as a true “sign from the Gods.” However, no one knows what really happened during his visit to the oracle. Alexander never revealed exactly what the oracle privately told him. Alexander convinced himself, and many others, that he heard what he wanted to hear all along—that he was the true son of Zeus (or Ammon), King of the Gods. From that point on, Alexander began to encourage others to honor him as a God. This upset many of his followers, who did not believe in the mostly Eastern tradition of emperor worship.

Before Alexander left Egypt to pursue more conquests, he marked out the boundaries for a city near the Nile River, which he named after himself: Alexandria. Soon after Alexander decided to found the city, he designated a Greek architect and planner to build it. However, the Macedonian general Ptolemy I (pronounced TOL-eh-mee), Alexander’s successor as ruler of Egypt, was actually responsible for much of the city’s development. He moved his capital there from Memphis, and saw to it that the city grew as both a commercial port and a huge cultural center.

Although Alexandria became one of the ancient world’s leading cities, the Egyptians were not allowed to play a key role in its development. The city mainly became a center for Greek culture, emphasizing Greek philosophy and scholarship. The Egyptians—who had helped build the city from its foundation, and on whose land the city stood—were mostly excluded from this magnificent learning center, a fact they bitterly resented.

Alexandria is considered the best example of Alexander’s successful spreading of Greek culture. Yet, he played no actual role in the city’s growth and development. Once he chose the site for the city, Alexander never returned during his lifetime. He was buried there after his death.
Information About Event C: Alexander in Persia from the Perspective of Conquered

When Alexander the Great set out for Asia Minor in 334 B.C.E. with 35,000 troops, the Persian Empire was the largest in the world. Its territory stretched thousands of miles, across deserts and mountains, from Egypt to India.

The Persians knew that since the Persian Wars in the fifth century B.C.E., during which Persians destroyed many Greek cities, the Greeks had dreamed of revenge. However, by the time of Alexander the Great, Persia no longer posed a military threat to the Greeks. The only threat Persia posed to Greece was economic competition—the two were rivals for control of the trade routes in the eastern Mediterranean. Nevertheless, driven by revenge and his own burning desire to rule vast lands, Alexander set out to conquer Persia.

Alexander’s military campaign against the Persian Empire was brutal and relentless. While some of his strategies were well planned, more often he relied on simple brute force against the Persians, without regard for the casualties they or his own troops might suffer. Alexander’s chief strategy was often to create a line of troops heavily armed with javelins and spears, or a phalanx (pronounced FAL-anks), and charge directly at the enemy.

In one of the most famous battles—the Battle of Issus (pronounced ISS-uss) in 333 B.C.E.—Persian forces killed a great number of Alexander’s troops, despite his strategies and tactics. Many historians believe that the Persians could have won this battle if their leader, King Darius III (pronounced DAHR-ee-yuss), had not panicked and fled the battlefield. Without him, the remainder of the Persian army scattered in retreat, leaving Alexander to claim victory.

In some cases, Alexander showed respect for the conquered Persians, appointing Persian governors to rule territories and allowing the Persian people to continue practicing their religious beliefs. However, Alexander also treated the people and territories he conquered in a cruel and disrespectful manner. For example, when he attacked Tyre (pronounced TY-ur), a Phoenician island city belonging to the Persian Empire, the citizens fought back strongly for eight months. When Alexander finally captured the city, he was so furious that he sold most of the city’s 30,000 people into slavery. During another battle, Alexander and his troops pursued the retreating Persian army for many hours and slaughtered nearly 40,000 men. Finally, Alexander captured the Persian capital of Persepolis (pronounced pur-SEP-oh-liss) without opposition. He was now the conqueror and ruler of all of Persia. Despite the advice of even his closest aides, Alexander stole, or plundered, the city’s great riches for himself. Then, in a drunken state, he allowed his men to burn down the Great Palace and its surrounding temples. Alexander thus destroyed a magnificent center of Persian culture, traditions, and artistic achievements. Although some people praised Alexander for his respect for other cultures, the Persians saw firsthand the other side of his nature—a vengeful conqueror who often had a total disregard for the traditions, customs, and beliefs of another people.
Information About Event D: Alexander in India from the Perspective of Conquered

By the year 327 B.C.E., Alexander the Great had conquered all of Greece, Egypt, and the Persian Empire. Still, he was not satisfied. In that year, Alexander led his troops over the Hindu Kush mountains down into the plain by the Indus River. The Greeks called this region India. (Many of Alexander’s campaigns took place within the boundaries of modern-day Pakistan.)

Alexander and his forces spent the next three years in India. They fought many battles, conquered many territories, and suffered heavy losses. Many Indian kings strongly resisted Alexander’s attempts to bring India under his empire. They used every means they had—including new elements of warfare such as elephants—to fight the heavily armed Macedonian forces. One brave king named Porus (pronounced POR-uss) nearly led his troops to victory over Alexander, despite being outnumbered and surrounded.

By the fall of 326 B.C.E, Alexander’s armies had already fought and defeated many Indian rulers. The forces then began a movement west and south into the Punjab (pronounced POON-jahb) region. They found resistance wherever they went—and met it with total ruthlessness. In town after town, when natives resisted or tried to flee, the Macedonian forces adopted a single tactic: slaughter all males, and enslave all women and children.

In one nine-month period, Alexander’s forces traveled down the Indus River—and killed as many as 80,000 people. The Macedonians were especially harsh in dealing with the Brahmins, the Indian holy men who often advised and encouraged the Indian kings to resist Alexander. When his forces were able to capture Brahmins, Alexander would often question them closely, trying to learn as much as he could about Hinduism, the Indian religion. However, then Alexander had them executed for encouraging the Indian kings to resist his rule.

By the end of 326 B.C.E., Alexander and his men had been conquering territories and foreign lands for more than eight years. They had journeyed thousands of miles. They often traveled for months in brutal heat across deserts, and in horrible snow and cold over mountains. Now, Alexander was intent on traveling east into the deepest part of India—all the way to the Ganges (pronounced GAHN-jees) River and beyond. However, at this point Alexander’s forces turned on him. They refused to follow him any farther, and demanded that the army turn around and head home. Reluctantly—and angrily—Alexander agreed. Forced to abandon his goal of spreading his vast empire across all of India, Alexander bitterly began the long journey toward home. Because of this, some historians like to say that “Alexander never conquered India; it conquered him.”