

Was, and if so to what extent was alexander the great, cruel? essay sample



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The greatness of Alexander (the Great) is often a much debated question. The importance of such debates is arguably minimal- Alexander was quite clearly a great ruler, possibly the greatest to ever live. A much more disputable question regarding Alexander is that of his cruelty throughout his reign as Macedonian King. In order to ascertain the extent of Alexander's cruelty one must analyze a number of key events which occurred during his kingship. These include the actions he took following Phillip's death, Alexander's Razing of Thebes, the slaughter of Greek Mercenaries at Granicus, The Siege of Tyre and the deaths of Callisthenes, Philotas, Parmenio and Cleitus.

After Alexander's father and Macedonian King, Phillip was murdered in late 336BC Alexander took numerous steps to ensure that he succeeded his father as King. Firstly, he ordered the murder of his cousin, Amyntas, who also had some claim to the throne- his father had been a Macedonian King sometime in the past. Before labeling such an act as cruel one must first understand the customs and morals of ancient Greek antiquity. Killing someone, even a relative in order to gain access to the throne was at this time not at all unusual. Indeed, Phillip himself as well as countless others killed off competitors which naturally included relatives in their quest for the Macedonian kingship.

The murder of Attalus was however a completely different story. His death can be attributed, almost single handedly to drunken comments he made during the wedding feast celebrations after the marriage of Phillip, to his second wife Cleopatra. According to Plutarch, he called on the guests to pray for a 'legitimate heir', implying that Alexander was not fit to take the reigns

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of Macedonia because of his mother, Oylmpias's foreign blood. Attalus's murder was thus revenge taken by Alexander because of a few insults directed at him and his mother. This was undoubtedly cruel. There was no political motive behind this. Attalus's only crime was to voice his opinion- a dangerous move in the ancient world.

After the revolt of Thebes in 335BC soon after Alexander had ascended to the throne, he took numerous actions which could be regarded as cruel. Firstly he slaughtered 6000 Thebans in order to take the city- many of which were needlessly slaughtered following surrender. Though Alexander's decision to not round up his troops were probably acceptable given the circumstances. Alexander had offered the Thebans amnesty if they surrendered and handed over their leaders. But they refused, and negotiators- friends of Alexander were strung up on the walls of Thebes like animals. Anger, rather than cruelty was the state of Alexander's mind at this point.

His decision to hand the fate of Thebes over to the rival Greek states who were members of the league of Corinth has been described by historian, J. R Hamilton as a 'calculated act of terrorism'. The members of the league as enemies of Thebes chose to burn it to the ground, as Alexander knew they would. 30,000 Theban men, woman and children alike were enslaved. As a historian one must tend to agree with Hamilton who labels the actual razing itself as cruel terrorism. Unlike the massacre, Alexander had time to think about what he was doing but made a calm and cunning decision to burn an entire city to the ground.

The enslavement of children was even in ancient Greece not that common, and societal views cannot save Alexander's reputation in this instance.

Once the Persian cavalry had been put to flight in Alexander's first battle, the Battle at the Granicus, he authorized the massacre of 20, 000 (Plutarch and Arrians estimate) Greek Mercenaries who had deserted his empire and joined the Persians. Only 1, 000 were spared by the Macedonians who were spurred on by their traditional rivalry with the Greeks. These remaining few were sent to Greece to work in the mines. One must remember that these soldiers were all men who had made the calculated decision to turn against Alexander and break the oath made in the League of Corinth. Unlike at Thebes, all involved had participated. Alexander was only acting in accordance with the League of Corinth.

The Siege of the island city Tyre in 332BC took a staggering 7 months before successful, after which a bloody massacre took place. The Macedonians who were frustrated at the length of the siege and the brutal way that the Tyranians killed their prisoners were left to run rampant by Alexander. The rampage reaped similarities to Thebes, and 30, 000 were again sold into slavery. Cruelty was of course displayed by Alexander, his frustration and anger at the brutality and refusals to surrender of the Tyranians meant that the slaughter was a by-product of the Tyranians behaviour rather than Alexander's cruelty. Alexander's good treatment of cities that surrendered such as Sardis support this idea.

The four infamous 'murders' of Alexander demonstrate his cruelty on a more personal level. In Late 329BC Philotas, a young general was executed by

Alexander due to his alleged involvement in a conspiracy to kill the king. He had refused to inform the King of a plot to kill him, so Alexander concluded that he therefore must be involved with it. There is little evidence to suggest such involvement. The real reason was perhaps the boasting of Philotas who was known to drunkenly rave about how he and his father, Parmenio, were greater than Alexander. Alexander's cruelty reaches a peak during this murder, and again demonstrates his anger at being insulted. Philotas's disapproval of the Policy of Fusion was another factor behind his death. Following this murder Alexander sent an assassin to kill Parmenio. This move was political as if Parmenio found out about his son's murder he may have turned against Alexander, bringing troops with him. Alexander had taken one so he had to take the other.

Alexander's murder of his friend Cleitus the Black, who had once saved his life, was caused by anger and alcohol rather than cruelty. According to Plutarch Cleitus mocked Alexander about the policy of fusion he had implemented and his adoption of Ammon-Ra (Zeus) as his father. This murder was clearly not cruel as Alexander even attempted to take his own life after seeing his dead friend on the ground.

Callisthenes, like Philotas was unjustly and cruelly murdered by Alexander. Because of his disapproval of the policy of fusion, and specifically his refusal to perform Proskynesis to Alexander he was accused of being involved in the 'Royal Pages Conspiracy' - a plot to kill Alexander. Such involvement is unlikely especially considering that many of the Pages refused to implicate him.

In modern times Alexander could be seen as a ruthless war criminal that could be compared with the likes of Saddam Hussein. But the views of society, excuse Alexander to some extent. Also many of these 'cruel' actions were merely made out of anger, frustration or alcohol. History tends to forget the peace and kindness of men, rather than remembering their cruelty. Alexander treated his men, his country and the even the Persians extremely well. Alexander was cruel throughout his reign though no more than any ancient leader. Besides his cruelty is outweighed completely by the kindness and compassion that Alexander showed throughout his lifetime.

Bibliography

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