

Was alexander the great greek?

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Alexander the Great has been dead for centuries but the debate regarding his ethnicity is alive and well. Was he Macedonian or Greek? or both or neither and why does this even matter? This requires an examination of the historical, geographical and political practices of his time. The question of why his ethnicity matters is at its core, a question of the significance of cultural identity.

The desirable traits exhibited by Alexander the Great, if claimed by a people, create a positive sense of self-esteem and belonging. The Greek vs Macedonian perspective is easily the most heated current debate. This parochial Alexander is either a fiercely Macedonian despot capable of both genocidal murder and humanitarian propaganda in pursuit of his interests, or a Greek crusader eager to empower his civilization by Hellenizing the world. (Liebert 544) However, the actual man is far more complex and interesting than either of those rather narrowminded views.

But, why all this fighting over a historical icon who lived 25 centuries ago? The modern nation of Macedonia takes great pride in claiming Alexander the Great as their own prodigal son. Similarly, the nation of Greece is extremely proud of Alexander the Great, viewing this inspirational leader as an integral piece of their cultural identity. A brief examination of Alexander the Great's accomplishments helps to explain why he is so jealously coveted.

To begin, in rather broad strokes, Alexander the Great was one of - if not the, greatest conqueror in the world. At just twenty years old, his father was assassinated and Alexander became King of Macedonia. By thirty, Alexander had conquered and controlled an empire that stretched from Greece to India.

His conquests included the Persian Empire which was one of the largest and most powerful empires in the world during his time. (Tharoor Time) At thirty-two, Alexander became ill and died. Modern historians, contemporary writers and even his comrades in arms, could not then and cannot now agree on the cause of his death. Was it some form of foul play such as poisoning, did he perish due to an old wound from the battlefield, or did he succumb to a disease such as malaria? (Schep 72-77) Although the exact cause remains unsettled, one thing is clear, in just a little over a decade, he took what was a backwater kingdom in the Greek world and altered the course of history.

At the time of his death, Alexander the Great was undefeated in battle, had conquered vast swaths of the known world at the time, and had spread Hellenistic culture across the entirety of his vast empire. This occurred because he employed clever tactics in new territory. First, he conquered the territory, established cities, and then, sent colonists into the territory to populate it and turn the cities from essentially garrisons into actual cities. These cities and the people who lived there served as beacons of Hellenistic culture and caused it to spread, influence, and mix with the local cultures it encountered. The hold that the Hellenistic culture took was incredibly strong and its influence can be seen across many civilizations and cultures.

Alexander has featured internationally as a hero a new Achilles and a visionary. The more earthy musings of Hamlet, in the graveyard scene, are just one chauvinistic illustration of the fact that Alexander has featured in the literature of some 80 countries (Cartledge BBC) As shown in that quotation, a figure as important as Alexander the Great would have been great through simply warfare, but his decisions to spread Hellenistic culture

through cities and the colonists ensured that he would grow to be larger than life.

In a word, Alexander the Great was “impressive”. As with most, if not all, impressive figures, different groups desire to claim them as one of their own. However, in most cases the figure is easily identified to a single group, be it a nation or organization, Winston Churchill? British. Julius Caesar? Roman. This process is not quite as easy when it comes to Alexander the Great, as multiple groups with similar names classify him as their own. The majority of this conflict comes from the nations of Greece and Macedonia. The issue arises because depending upon your perspective, each of their claims to Alexander the Great has at least some validity.

In order to examine these claims, it is important to first define whether Ancient Macedonians, of which Alexander was a member, were Greek or not. There are several criteria that come into play here. First, were the core founders of Macedonia Greek? The answer to this question is yes. The founders left the city of Argos which was indisputably Greek to migrate to the area which would become the kingdom of Macedonia. It then follows that the decedents of this group, the Argead Dynasty - of which Alexander the Great was a member, could, at least be considered to have Greek lineage.

However, although one could consider Alexander the Great and other members of the ruling class to have Greek heritage, the mainland Greeks did not always view things this way. They disapproved of considering Macedonians Greeks, thinking them to be uncultured and even primitive in comparison to what they would consider mainland Greeks. A more extreme

form of this prejudice occurred when King Alexander I, a relatively recent ancestor of Alexander the Great and then King of Macedonia attempted to compete in the Olympics. At this time, the only people who were allowed to compete or participate in the Olympics were Freeborn Greek Men. Groups of mainland Greeks argued Alexander I was not Greek and thus, ineligible to participate in something as sacred as the Olympics. This challenge to the Greek ethnicity of both the Argead House and the Macedonians remained a leitmotif throughout the Classical period (480-323), and sport was one of the means by which they answered that ethnic question. (Christesen and Kyle 333)

However, this position did not prevail, at least among the official Olympic judges known as the Hellanodikai. They decided in favor of Alexander I after he was able to prove his lineage traced back to Argos. Alexander I used sport, and specifically the Olympics, to identify with the Greeks (Christesen and Kyle 332) The support of the Hellanodikai was very important to Alexander I because they were trusted, considered wise, and fair. Their endorsement gave a good deal of legitimacy to the Macedonian royalty's claim of being Greek.

Modern Macedonia has a large amount of pride derived from their claim that they are descended from Alexander the Great and ancient Macedonia as a whole. They have named their capital airport Alexander the Great International Airport and in that airport, the Macedonian government has erected a massive statue depicting Alexander the Great on a rearing horse. One experiences this tribute shortly before driving into town on the (no prizes for guessing) Alexander the Great Highway. (Slattery LA Times) The <https://assignbuster.com/was-alexander-the-great-greek/>

claim Modern Macedonian's lay to Alexander the Great is a simple one. He was born in Macedonia, he was crowned king of it when his father Phillip the Second was assassinated, and he ruled it until his death.

However, the modern Greek counter to this argument by pointing out the borders of Modern Macedonia and Ancient Macedonia are not equivalent. In fact, Modern Greece has its own province in the north of the country called Macedonia. Moreover, contained within modern Greece are both the place of Alexander's birth, the city of Pella, and the resting place of Alexander's father Phillip the Second.

In response, the Modern Macedonian's argue that during Alexander's life the borders of Ancient Macedonia greatly extended far beyond both Modern Macedonia and Modern Greece.

So, what was Alexander the Great? Was he Greek? Macedonian? A hybrid of the two? I'm really not entirely sure. One could say that he was born as a Macedonian, from the kingdom of Macedonia, and there's a country of Macedonia today so they should have the greatest claim. There is also the possibility of Greece having the greatest claim to him. He spoke Greek, was tutored by the Greek philosopher Aristotle and spread the Hellenic culture far and wide across the world.

Was he an amalgamation of both Greece and Macedonia, taking bits and pieces from both and as such, a figure far too complex to be claimed by one of those two nations. There are many ways to define it, from saying that someone who was such a larger than life figure and who drastically changed

the course of civilization as we know it doesn't definitively belong to any one culture but by the scale of their impact and influence.

There are those who would wonder why any of this matter at all. To this I say that key founders and other figures are an important part of a nation's cultural history and national background. In reference to the current nations of Greece and Macedonia there are many points of contention in regards to history, economic issues, and ethnic/racial conflict. These range from territorial claims, to blocking European Union membership. All of these together are very important issues. However, they are also very complex and hard to digest issues. In both countries claiming Alexander the Great as their own has become a way of putting one up over the other country. By settling this seemingly minor conflict in a manner satisfactory to both nations it can be a point of unity and international brotherhood, moving towards fixing other issues by having something to build on.

In quoting Alexander the Great himself, I wish you to prosper in peace. May all mortals from now on live like one people in concord and for mutual advancement. Consider the world as your country, with laws common to all and where the best will govern irrespective of tribe. I do not distinguish among men, as the narrow-minded do, both among Greeks and Barbarians. I am not interested in the descendance of the citizens or their racial origins. I classify them using one criterion: their virtue.