

Philip II of Macedonia (Part Two)

Philip II (*382): king of Macedonia (360-336), responsible for the modernization of his kingdom and its expansion into Greece, father of Alexander the Great.

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In 356, Philip was invited to become the protector of a city named Crenides, east of Amphipolis. Accepting it would almost certainly create problems with the Thracians (and indeed, Athenian diplomats were able to unite three Thracian leaders against Macedonia), but on the other hand, control of this rich agricultural town would give the Macedonian king access to the Pangaeon mountains, which were rich in precious ores. So, he accepted what was offered, and the city received a new name: Philippi. The mines were exploited with new techniques, offering Philip an additional yearly income of about 1,000 talents.

Until then, the Macedonian king had been nothing more or less than the foremost Macedonian aristocrat. From now on, however, he exceeded his equals in wealth, and Philip could start to create a new type of society. It was no longer an archaic state ruled by noblemen who accepted one of them as "first among equals", more or less like the aristocrats in Homer's Iliad; instead, Macedonia was to become a full-blown monarchy, not unlike the Achaemenid Empire. Philip copied several Persian institutions, like the office of *spasaka* (or *episkopos*; a man who controlled the towns on behalf of the king), and the royal pages (the sons of the noblemen, who received an education at court and guaranteed, as hostages, their fathers' conduct). Like the Persian king, Philip had the money to buy whatever he needed.

Meanwhile, the Athenians still tried to get back Amphipolis, and because they were involved in the Social war, they left the fighting to their allies, the Thracian Cetriporis, the Paeonian Lyppaeus, and the Illyrian Grabus. The continued Athenian interest in the northern part of the Aegean, however, created distrust in the Greek cities. Olynthus was the first to ally itself to Philip; in return, he captured Potidaea and handed it over to the Olynthians. The terms of the treaty are not entirely clear, but it is likely that the Macedonians were permitted free use of the Potidaean ports. The Athenian garrison that had defended the city was sent back home safely: in this way, Philip opened the way towards reconciliation. In the same summer, Philip's wife Olympias gave birth to a son who was called Alexander, and his wife Philina became mother of Arridaeus. More or less at the same time, one of Philip's commanders, Parmenion, defeated the pro-Athenian Illyrian leader Grabus in a great battle, and one of Philip's horses won a course during the Olympic Games. If we are to believe the philosopher Plutarch of Chaeronea, Philip heard the news about the birth of Alexander and that of the victories of Parmenion and the race-horse on the very day of his capture of Potidaea. This is probably not true, but the summer of 356 was remarkable. Later, Philip was recognized as king - no longer was he just a regent, but the real ruler, with the right to be succeeded by one of his own sons. Thus ended one of the most spectacular years in Philip's spectacular career.

Next year, he started to besiege Methone, a port that was situated north of Pydna. Because the Social War was in its final stages, the Athenians were unable to offer help, and the city fell in 354. During the siege, Philip lost an eye.

The Third Sacred War

While these events were taking place in the north, the Third Sacred War had broken out in the south, the greatest disturbance in the history of Greece, and in fact the end of its independence. Thebes had suffered some minor setbacks on Euboea and wanted to compensate for them by the conquest of Phocis, a comparatively powerless state in the west of central Greece. However, the Phocians learned what was about to happen, and in the spring of 356, they helped themselves to the temple treasury of Delphi, and hired an army of mercenary. Technically, this was sacrilege, and it offered the Thebans an excuse to do what they wanted to do anyhow: they were fighting for the honor of the god of Delphi, Apollo.

When the Thebans had learned that Athens had lost the Social War (summer 355), they understood that this once powerful state could not help the Phocians, and in 354, war broke out. Within a few months, all Greek cities were allied to one of the opposing sides. In the east, the former allies of Athens sided with Thebes, and Athens itself, although powerless, joined the Phocians. Sparta did the same, and its archenemies Argos and Megalopolis received help from Thebes; in the far west, the parties in the civil wars of Syracuse and the rest of Sicily and southern Italy lined up with one side or another; and in the north, the inhabitants of Pherae used the Phocians to liberate Thessaly from Theban occupation (or, the other way round, the Thessalians asked Theban help against the Pheraeans).

While the Greeks were destroying each other, two kings were smiling: Artaxerxes III Ochus knew that his Egyptian enemies would receive no support, and Philip knew that he could consolidate his conquests. In 353, he defeated the Thracian leader Amadocus and Cetriporis, who became his vassals. The eastern frontier, which was destabilized after the annexation of Crenides/Philippi, was secure again.

Coin of Philip showing Apollo with the features of Alexander

In fact, the future was even brighter than Philip expected. In Thessaly, the inhabitants of Larissa and their Theban allies were challenged by the Pheraeans and the Phocians. Traditionally, Larissa had been allowed to appoint the tagos, president, of the Thessalian confederacy, but the Pheraeans had obtained it under their leader, a tyrant named Jason. But he had been killed and everything was open again. Philip, who hardly needed an invitation, gladly offered help to the Larissians when they requested it in 353, and invaded Thessaly, proclaiming to fight for Thebes and the honor of Apollo, whose portrait from now on graced Macedonian coins.

Unexpectedly, Philip was defeated, for the first time in his life, by the Phocian commander Phayllus, who employed catapults, a weapon that the Macedonians had never seen before. During the winter, Philip had to overcome a mutiny of his soldiers (the only one in his career), but in 352, he was back again. The Phocians and Pheraeans offered battle on the coastal plain (the "Crocus Field"), where they expected Athenian help, but the Macedonian king had already defeated his opponents before the Athenians arrived. Philip ordered the execution of the sacrilegious Phocians, proceeded to Larissa, and got what he wanted: he was the new tagos.

The surrender of Pherae was a matter of time, and although Philip was unable to advance to central Greece (the Athenians occupied Thermopylae), 352 had been a good year for Philip. He had now united Macedonia and Thessaly in a personal union: a spectacular achievement, which gave him membership in the panhellenic organizations. He was no longer a barbarian.

This was not the end of Philip's successes. On learning that the Athenians had garrisoned Thermopylae, he did not continue his push to the south, but instead invaded Thrace, where he reached the Sea of Marmara in November 352. It showed the world that his army was faster than any other.

His whereabouts in 351 are unreported, but there was a rumor that he was ill - perhaps because he really was, or perhaps because he was, for once, inactive and preferred to stay at home with his wives and two six-year old sons. Anyhow, in 350, the Olynthians appealed to Athens for help. It seems that Philip had decided to conquer Olynthus and its neighborhood now that no Greek power could help it. In 349, he laid siege to the city, and in the next year, he took it (after he had bought the help of a traitor), and razed it to the ground. In the meantime, he intervened among the Molossians, another former ally, and expelled king Arybbas. The new king was Olympias' brother Alexander of Molossis.

Meanwhile, the Sacred War was still going on. First, Thebes had been successful, then Phocis had recovered and after a period of guerilla warfare, the Phocians invaded Boeotia in 347. Their funds were now running out and this invasion was their last attempt to win the war. Thebes was tired of the war too, and appealed to the Macedonian king. What happened exactly is unclear. There was an attempt to block Thermopylae, but the garrison was not in place when the Macedonian army arrived, and in 346, the Phocians surrendered to Philip. Perhaps, as is stated in some sources, he had bribed the Phocian generals, but this may be contemporary propaganda, broadcasted to demoralize the Phocians. Anyhow, Phocis surrendered, a peace treaty was concluded, and its two votes in the panhellenic councils were given to Philip.

The Third Sacred War was over. Thebes, Phocis, and all other Greek city-states were seriously weakened, and Philip had shown this part of the world that he was its supreme leader. A little earlier, the Macedonian king had already concluded a second treaty, with Athens (the "peace of Philocrates"). This marked the end of a war that had started when Philip had attacked Amphipolis and Pydna in 357 (above).

The historian Diodorus of Sicily states that by now, Philip was already thinking about an invasion of the Achaemenid Empire. This may explain why Philip and Athens allied themselves: the Macedonian army, supported by the Athenian navy, could be a serious enemy for the Persian king Artaxerxes III Ochus, who was still trying to conquer Egypt. Yet, war was not to break out yet, and perhaps the anecdote told by Plutarch is more reliable: Persian envoys visited the Macedonian court, and received a warm welcome from the young prince Alexander (text).

The road to hegemony

The next couple of years are poorly documented, which suggests that Philip was involved in the northern areas of his kingdom. In 345, he was active in the north of what is now Albania (receiving a wound in his leg); he continued to reorganize Thessaly, and in late 342, we find the Macedonian army in Thrace, where it subdued the kingdom of a man named Cersobleptes, and from where Philip continued to the Black Sea. In 341, he founded Philippopolis, modern Plovdiv. The area between the Aegean Sea and the Balkan mountains received a viceroy, not unlike a Persian satrap.

The obvious next step was to expand the frontiers to the Sea of Marmara, where several Greek cities were still independent. In the winter of 341/340, Philip started to besiege Perinthus and Byzantium. Then, the unthinkable happened: Artaxerxes III Ochus ordered direct Persian intervention in Europe, something that had not happened since the days of his ancestor Xerxes. The shock that the Macedonians experienced was still felt eight years later, when Philip's son Alexander wrote a letter to the Persian king Darius III Codomannus, in which he stated that the Persian help to Perinthus and Byzantium had been the cause of war (text).

But although this may have been unexpected to Philip, in fact, the Persian king had no alternative. The Macedonians threatened the use of the straits, one of Persia's vital interests. Until then, the normal policy of Persian kings against the Yavanai (Greeks) had been to set up others against them. But now, Philip was allied to all Greeks, so there was no alternative for direct intervention. Therefore, Artaxerxes ordered satrap Arsites of Hellespontine Phrygia and general Mentor of Rhodes to send mercenaries to Perinthus.

It seems that Philip first wanted to continue the struggle. Back home, prince Alexander was appointed as regent, and Philip ordered his trusted general Parmenion to come to his assistance. At the same time, the Persians invaded Thrace and the satrap of Caria ordered the Greeks of Rhodes, Cos, and Chios to send troops to Perinthus. The Athenians were in a state of shock, because they imported food from the Black Sea area, and could not allow Philip to obtain a stronghold in Perinthus or Byzantium, where he could cut off the Athenian food supply. When Philip did indeed seize 240 grain ships, they declared war. Now, the Macedonian king had to give up the siege of Perinthus. It was the second defeat in his career.

Artaxerxes could be happy. After the Athenian declaration of war, he could play the old game of using Greeks against Greeks. He had won back the diplomatic initiative. One additional payment was enough to restore the ties with Thebes, which started to prepare for war in 339. At the same time, the Athenians blocked the Macedonian ports.

But Europe had never seen a man like king Philip of Macedonia, who possessed the talent to benefit from his very defeats. He accepted the loss of Perinthus as the price he had to pay for something better: war in the south, where he had already broken the powers of the Greek cities. He only needed to conquer them, so that he could reorganize Greece according to his wishes. This would be easy, because during the last decades, the Greeks had relied upon mercenaries, but after the end of the Third Sacred War, these professionals had been hired by the Persians. The Greeks could only employ citizen levies, whereas the Macedonian king would use a well-trained, professional army.

Philip was not in a hurry. In 339, he campaigned north of the Balkan mountains, near the Danube, and it was only in 338 that he finally descended upon Greece. In the meantime, the Athenian politician Demosthenes had created an anti-Macedonian alliance, and it looks as if Philip postponed to strike until it was ready. He wanted one, decisive battle against a well-prepared army, to make it very clear that the Greeks were no match. The final battle took place in August 338, near Chaeronea, west of Thebes (text). Philip employed less than half of his army, and his victory was never in doubt.

Now, everybody knew that the Greeks had not recuperated from the Third Sacred War. They had had all time to prepare themselves and had been decisively beaten. The Macedonian propaganda made sure that everyone understood the significance of this battle. Philip had conquered Greece. And besides, much was made of the fact that crown prince Alexander, eighteen years old, had led the decisive charge. Philip's dynasty was strong. Resistance was futile.