

The Roman Empire was an empire of two major peoples, two main cultures, two basic languages. Latin dominated the western empire, and Greek the eastern. Still the Romans sought no partnership in empire with the Greeks of the east, and until the fall of the western empire in the 5th Century A.D. the Latin half of the empire claimed hegemony (even after the creation of Constantinople in 330 A.D.). Yet Alexander, the king of Macedon, seemed to have been genuinely interested in creating and putting into effect one of the most revolutionary imperial systems the world had seen to that date, and was not to see thereafter, an Empire in which Graeco-Macedonians and Persians were blended in some kind of imperial partnership.

To develop such a system would have come to Alexander both easily and with difficulty as I shall explain. The Greeks by the fourth century were imbued with a deep sense of their own superiority over non-Greek peoples, the barbarians, of which the Macedonians were considered a part. The Macedonians, however, felt that they were Greeks though only their royal family was credited with being such, and that they were misjudged. One might look upon the Macedonians, then, as half-breed Greeks, having Greek pride but not the arrogance to see virtue in only one race. Well and good, then, for Aristotle, the finest Greek mind of his generation, to tell his pupil, the youthful Alexander, that barbarians, Persians and their Iranian kinsmen were by their very natures suitable to be enslaved by Greeks, but it took a leap of bold and innovative imagination for Alexander to rise above this pretentious chauvinism and find a better path.

When Alexander crossed the Hellespont to invade Asia in 334 he invaded a vast empire stretching from Asia Minor to India, an empire already over 200 years old and in some decline. However, there was no decline in the bravery, the battle spirit, and the proud nobility of the ruling aristocracy. They lost battles but won Alexander's admiration. After all they were not utterly unlike Alexander's own horse-riding nobility. They rode to battle, they delighted in the hunt, they relished the pleasures of the banquet table and subscribed to a code of chivalric honour not far from his own Homeric code. Furthermore, as their own king proved himself a coward in two great battles, the Persian nobility came, perhaps reluctantly at first, to see in this Macedonian prince a possible legitimate successor to the Achaemenid Persian throne.

Alexander then proceeded with his great synthesis, for he realized what an asset true partnership would be. He appointed Persian governors, partially adopted Persian dress and court customs, recruited prominent Persians even into the elite Companion cavalry squadrons (the cream of his army which he himself directed), and finally set about the training of thousands of Persian boys to fight as Macedonian phalangites. He had to do this quite often in the face of severe opposition from his own officer corps and the rank and file Macedonians (the army revolted on this issue at Opis shortly before his death). Having himself and 79 senior officers marry Persian women in a common public ceremony illustrated perfectly the direction of his thought. His heir might well be half Persian, half Macedonian and rule over both peoples.

Upon Alexander's death the dream of union was resolutely dropped by his successors and only Seleucus kept his Persian wife in prominence. It must be admitted, however, that not even Alexander learned the Persian language. After all, even if the people of Greece were not superior, Alexander no doubt felt their language was, and many aspects of their scintillating culture. The cities which Alexander founded by the dozens were to become Greek islands on a barbarian sea. Had Alexander lived longer, a better and truer blend might have been effected.