Alexander the Great and the Situation ... the Great? Crash Course World History #8

Crash Course: World History
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=====Intro (00:00)=====

Hi there my name's John Green; this is Crash Course World History, and today we're gonna talk about Alexander the Great, but to do that we're going to begin by talking about ideals of masculinity and heroism and Kim Kardashian and the Situation.

Past John: Mr Green, Mr Green, Mr. Green! Which Situation?

Present John: Oh, Me from the Past, I forgot you wanted to go to Columbia. Me from the Present regrets to inform you that you do not get in.

But since you live in the past, you have no way of knowing who I'm talking about, and it occurs to me that this video may be watched in some glorious future when Kim Kardashian and the Situation have mercifully disappeared from public life, and the supermarket tabloids, instead of talking about celebrities, talk about Foucault and the Higgs-Boson particle, so Kim Kardashian is a professional famous person who rose to notoriety by skoodilypooping with someone named Ray Jay, and Mike "The Situation" I forgot his last name is a professional stupid person with big muscles. They're both known by millions, lives in luxury, and people literally pay to own their odors.

Why do these people crave fame? Why do any of us? Well, I'd argue it's not about money. If it were, our tabloids would be devoted to the lives and times of bankers. I think we all want to leave a legacy. We want to be remembered. We want to be Great.

(Intro)

For a long time, history was all about the Study of Great Men, and it was common to call people as "the Great," but these days historians are less likely to do that, because they recognize that one man's Great is generally another man's Terrible.

And also "the Great" has some misogynistic implications, like, it's almost always men who are called "the Great". You never hear about Cleopatra the Great or Elizabeth the Great. There was, of course, Catherine the Great of Russia, but for her masculine Greatness she was saddled with the completely untrue rumor that she died trying to skoodilypoop with a horse. Saddled? Get it? Anybody? Saddled with the rumor?

Anyway, they could've soiled Catherine the Great's name just by telling the truth: which is that like so many other Great men and women, she died on the toilet. Get it? soiled? Toilet? Yes? Yes!

So, quick biography of Alexander of Macedon, born in 356 BCE, died in 323 BCE at the ripe old age of 32. Alexander was the son of King Philip the 2nd, and when just 13 years old he tamed a horse no one else could ride named Bucephalus, which impressed his father so much he said: "Oh thy son, look thee at a kingdom equal to and worthy of thyself, for Macedonia is too little for thee."

By that time, he was already an accomplished general, but over the next decade he expanded his empire with unprecedented speed and he is famous for having never lost a battle. Today we're going to look at Alexander of Macedon's story by examining three possible definitions of greatness.

=====Gretness Number One (2:37)=====

First, maybe Alexander was great because of his accomplishments. This is an extension of the idea that history is the record of the deeds of great men. Now, of course, that's ridiculous. For one thing, half of people are women; for another, and this is important, there are lots of historic events that no one can take responsibility for, like for instance the Black Plague.

But still, Alexander was accomplished. I mean, he conquered a lot of territory. Like, a lot. His father, Philip, had conquered all of Greece, but Alexander did what the Spartans and Athenians had failed to do: He destroyed the Persian Empire. He conquered all the land the Persians had held including Egypt, and then marched toward India, stopping at the Indus River only because his army was like, "Hey, Alexander, you know what would be awesome? Not marching."

Also, Alexander was a really good general, although historians disagree over whether his tactics were truly brilliant or if his army just happened to have better technology, specifically these extra long spears called sarissas. Much of his reputation as a general, and his reputation in general, anybody? Puns? Maybe I should stop? OK. Is because of Napoleon. Napoleon, like many other generals through the Millennia, was obsessed with Alexander the Great, but more on that in a moment.

That said, Alexander wasn't very good at what we might now call empire-building. Alexander's empire was definitely visually impressive, but it wasn't actually much of an empire.

Like, Alexander specialized in the tearing down of things, but he wasn't so great at the building up of institutions to replace the things he'd torn down. And that's why, pretty soon after his death, his Empire broke into three empires, called the Hellenistic Kingdoms. Each was ruled by one of Alexander's generals, and they became important dynasties. The Antigones in Greece and Macedonia, the Ptolemies in Egypt, the Seleucids in Persia, all of which lasted longer than Alexander's empire itself.

=====Thought Bubble, The Second Greatness (4:17)=====

A Second Greatness: Maybe Alexander was Great because he had an enormous impact on the world after his death. Like King Tut, Alexander the Great was amazingly good at being a dead person. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

So, After Alexander of Macedon died, everyone from the Romans to Napoleon to Oliver Stone loved him, and he was an important military model for many generals throughout history. But his main post-death legacy may be that he introduced the Persian idea of Absolute Monarchy to the Greco-Roman world, which would become a pretty big deal.

Alexander also built a number of cities on his route that became big deals after his death, and it's easy to spot them because he named most of them after himself and one after his horse. The Alexandria in Egypt became a major center of learning in the classical world, and was home to the most amazing library ever, which Julius Caesar probably "accidentally" burned down while trying to conquer a bunch of land to emulate his hero, Alexander the Great.

Plus, the dead Alexander had a huge impact on culture. He gave the region its common language, Greek, which facilitated conversations and commerce. Greek was so widespread that archaeologists have found coins in what is now Afghanistan with pictures of their kings and the word "king" written beneath the pictures — in Greek. This is also why, incidentally, the New Testament was eventually written in Greek.

Although Alexander was mostly just conquering territory for the glory and heroism and greatness of it all, in his wake emerged a more closely connected world that could trade and communicate with more people more efficiently than ever before. Alexander didn't make those things happen, but they probably wouldn't have happened without him.

But here's a question: If you're watching Jersey Shore and get so involved in The Situations romantic conquest that you leave the bath water running, thereby flooding your apartment, and you have to call a plumber, and the plumber comes over and you fall in love with him and get married and live happily ever after, does that make The Situation responsible for your marriage? Thanks, Thought Bubble.

=====The Third Greatness (6:11)=====

Okay, a third definition of greatness: Maybe Alexander is great because of his legend: Since no accounts of his life were written while he lived, embellishment was easy, and maybe that's where true greatness lies. I mean the guy died at 32, before he ever had a chance to get old and lose battles. He was tutored by Aristotle, for God's sakes.

Then there's Alexander's single-minded Ahab-esque pursuit of the Persian King Darius, who he chased across modern-day Iraq and Iran for no real reason except he desperately wanted to kill him, and when Bessus, one of Darius's generals, assassinated him before Alexander had the chance, Alexander chased Bessus around until he could at least kill him.

These almost-comical pursuits of glory and heroism are accompanied in classical histories by stories of Alexander walking through the desert, and then suddenly raining, and these ravens coming to lead him to the army he's supposed to fight, and stories of his hot Persian wife Roxana, who supposedly while still a teenager engineered the assassinations of many of Alexander's fellow wives.

And even at his death, people tried to make Alexander live up to this heroic ideal. Like, Plutarch tells us that he died of a fever, but that's no way for a masculine, empire-building, awesome person to die! So rumors persist that he died either of alcohol poisoning or else of assassination-y poisoning. I mean, no great man can die of a fever. Speaking of Great Men, it's time to strip down for the Open Letter.

=====Open Letter (7:34)=====

So elegant. But first let's see what's in the Secret Compartment today. Oh. It's Kim Kardashian's perfume. Thanks Stan. I'll wear this. I'll check it out, I'll give it a try. C'ah. Wow. That is... mmm... it's like all the worst parts of baby powder and all the worst parts of cat pee. An Open Letter to the Ladies.

Hello, Ladies,

You've really been unfairly neglected in Crash Course World History and also in World History textbooks everywhere. Like, there will be a whole chapter exploring the exploits of great men and then at the end there will be one sentence that's like "also women were doing stuff at the time and it was important, but we don't really know what it was, so back to Alexander the Great…"

History has been very good at marginalizing and demeaning women and we're going to fight against that as we move forward in the story of human civilization. Ladies, I have to go now because my eyes are stinging from the biological weapon known as Kim Kardashian's Gold. Seriously, don't wear it.

Best wishes, John Green

=====The Fourth Greatness (8:34)=====

So in Alexander the Great we have a story about a man who united the world while riding a magical horse only he could tame across deserts where it magically rained for him so that he could chase down his mortal enemy and then leave in his wake a more enlightened world and a gorgeous, murderous wife.

But of course it's not just Assassin's Creed and Call of Duty that celebrate the idea that ennobled violence can lead to a better world. And that takes us to my opinion of how Alexander really came to be Great. Millennia after his death in 1798, Napoleon invaded Egypt, not because he particularly needed to invade Egypt but because he wanted to do what Alexander had done.

And long before Napoleon, the Romans really worshipped Alexander, particularly the Roman General Pompey, AKA Pompeius Magnus, AKA Pompey the Great. Pompey was so obsessed with Alexander that he literally tried to emulate Alexander's boyishly disheveled hair style.

In short, Alexander was Great because others decided he was Great. Because they chose to admire and emulate him. Yes, Alexander was a great general. Yes, he conquered a lot of land. The Situation is also really good at picking up girls... of a certain type. And Kim Kardashian is good at- Stan, what is Kim Kardashian good at?

We made Alexander Great, just as today we make people great when we admire them and try to emulate them. History has traditionally been in the business of finding and celebrating great men, and only occasionally great women, but this obsession with Greatness is troubling to me. It wrongly implies, first, history is made primarily by men and secondly, that history is made primarily by celebrated people, which of course makes us all want to be celebrities.

Thankfully, we've left behind the idea that the best way to become an icon is to butcher people and conquer a lot of land, but the ideals that we've embraced instead aren't necessarily worth celebrating either. All of which is to say we decide what to worship and what to care about and what to pay attention to. We decide whether to care about The Situation. Alexander couldn't make history in a vacuum, and neither can anyone else. Thanks for watching, and I'll see you next week.

=====Credits (10:28)=====

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller; the show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself. Our script supervisor is Danica Johnson, and our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

Last week's phrase of the week was "Thinly Sliced Trees". If you want to take a guess at this week's phrase or suggest new ones you can do so in comments. If you have questions about today's video you can also ask those in comments and our team of historians will attempt to answer them.

Thanks for watching Crash Course and as they say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.