

Battle of the Persian Gate

Coordinates: 30°42′30″N 51°35′55″E

The **Battle of the Persian Gate** was a military conflict between a Persian force, commanded by the satrap of Persis, Ariobarzanes, and the invading Hellenic League, commanded by Alexander the Great. In the winter of 330 BC, Ariobarzanes led a last stand of the outnumbered Persian forces at the Persian Gates near Persepolis,^[5] holding back the Macedonian army for a month. Alexander eventually found a path to the rear of the Persians from the captured prisoners of war or a local shepherd, defeating the Persians and capturing Persepolis.

Background

The Persian Empire suffered a series of defeats against the Macedonian forces at Granicus (334 BC), Issus/Issos (333 BC) and Gaugamela (331 BC), and by the end of 331 BC Alexander had advanced to Babylon and Susa. A Royal Road connected Susa (the first Persian capital city in Elam) with the more eastern capitals of Persepolis and Pasargadae in Persis, and was the natural avenue for Alexander's continued campaign. Meanwhile, King Darius III was trying to raise a new army at Ecbatana.^[6] Ariobarzanes was charged with preventing the Macedonian advance into Persis. He relied heavily on the terrain Alexander needed to pass through. There were only a few possible routes through the Zagros Mountains, all of which were made more hazardous by winter's onset.

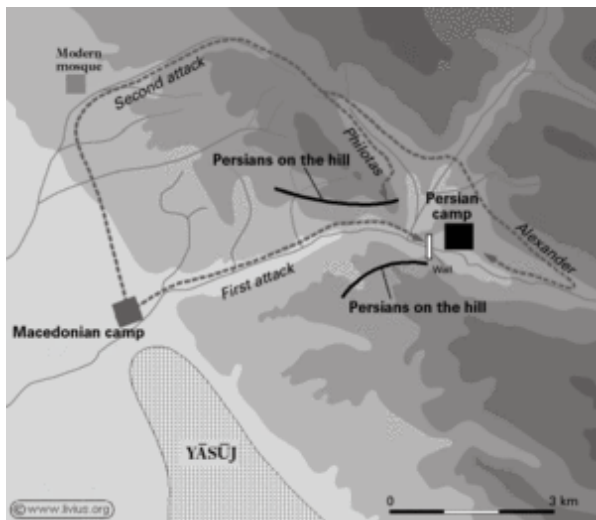
After the conquest of Susa, Alexander split the Macedonian army into two parts. Alexander's general, Parmenion, took one half along the Royal Road, and Alexander himself took the route towards Persis. Passing into Persis required traversing the Persian Gates, a narrow mountain pass that lent itself easily to ambush.^[7]

Battle of the Persian Gate	
Part of the Wars of Alexander the Great	
	
The Persian Gate	
Date	20 January, 330 BC
Location	Persian Gate, near Persepolis 30°42′30″N 51°35′55″E
Result	Hellenic victory <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eventual sacking and razing of Persepolis, resulting in its decline
Territorial changes	Alexander consolidates control of half of Persia and captures its dynastic center
Belligerents	
 Kingdom of Macedon	 Persian Empire
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> League of Corinth 	
Commanders and leaders	
 Alexander III	 Ariobarzanes
 Craterus	
 Ptolemy	
Strength	
17,000 picked fighters ^{[1][2]} More than 14,000	40,000 infantry and 700 cavalry (Arrian)

During his advance, Alexander subdued the Uxians, a local hill tribe which had demanded the same tribute from him they used to receive from the Persian kings for safe passage.^[8] As he passed into the Persian Gates, he met with no resistance. Believing that he would not encounter any more enemy forces during his march, Alexander neglected to send scouts ahead of his vanguard, and thus walked into Ariobarzanes' ambush.

The valley leading up to the Persian Gate, called the Tang'e Meyran, is initially very wide, allowing the Macedonian army to enter the mountains at full march. Ariobarzanes occupied a position near the modern-day village of Cheshmeh Chenar. The road curves to the southeast (to face the rising sun) and narrows considerably at that point, making the terrain particularly treacherous, thus well suited for Ariobarzanes's purposes. According to the historian Arrian, Ariobarzanes had a force of 40,000 infantry and 700 cavalry and faced a Macedonian force of over 10,000. However, some modern historians have claimed these figures for the Achaemenid force to be grossly exaggerated and implausible.^{[9][10]} *Encyclopædia Iranica* suggests a number of defenders of just 700 (or no more than 2,000) men, based on the maximum number of troops likely at Ariobarzanes' disposal, but it notes that most modern historians follow Arrian, Curtius, and Diodorus unreservedly.^[11]

Battle



Map of the Persian Gate

The Persian Gate was only a couple of meters wide at the ambush point. Once the Macedonian army had advanced far enough into the narrow pass, the Persians rained down boulders on them from the northern slopes. From the southern slope, Persian archers launched their projectiles. Alexander's army initially suffered heavy casualties, losing entire platoons at a time.^[12] The Macedonians attempted to withdraw, but the terrain and their still-advancing rear guard made an orderly retreat impossible. Alexander was forced to leave his dead behind to save the rest of his army—a great mark of disgrace to the Macedonians and to other Greeks, who valued highly the recovery and proper burial of their fallen.^[13]

Ariobarzanes had some reason to believe that success here could change the course of the war. Preventing Alexander's passage through the Persian Gates would force the Macedonian army to use other routes to

700-2000 (modern estimate)^{[1][3][4]}

Casualties and losses

Moderate-Heavy

Entire force



Location of the Battle of the Persian Gate

Alexander the Great



[\[Interactive fullscreen map\]](#)

This is a stopgap mapping solution, while attempts are made to resolve technical difficulties with `{{OSM Location map}}`

current battle

invade Persia proper, all of which would allow Darius more time to field another army and possibly stop the Macedonian invasion altogether.

Ariobarzanes held the pass for a month, but Alexander succeeded in encircling the Persians in a pincer attack with Ptolemy and broke through the Persian defenses. Alexander and his elite contingent then attacked Ariobarzanes from above in a surprise attack until the Persians could no longer block the pass.^[14] Accounts of how he did so vary widely. Curtius and Arrian both report that prisoners of war led Alexander through the mountains to the rear of the Persian position, while a token force remained in the Macedonian camp under the command of Craterus.^[15]

"[The Persians]...Fought a memorable fight... Unarmed as they were, they seized the armed men in their embrace, and dragging them down to the ground... Stabbed most of them with their own weapons."^[16]

Diodorus and Plutarch generally concur with this assessment, although their numbers vary widely. Modern historians W. Heckel and Stein also lend credence to this argument. Although precise figures are unavailable, some historians say that this engagement cost Alexander his greatest losses in his campaign to conquer Persia.

According to some accounts, Ariobarzanes and his surviving companions were trapped, but rather than surrender, they charged straight into the Macedonian lines. One account states that Ariobarzanes was killed in the last charge, while Arrian's version reports that Ariobarzanes escaped to the north, where he finally surrendered to Alexander with his companions. Modern historian J. Prevas maintains that Ariobarzanes and his forces retreated to Persepolis, where they found the city gates closed by Tiridates, a Persian noble and guardian of the royal treasury under Darius III, who had been in secret contact with Alexander the Great.^[14] Tiridates considered resisting Alexander's forces to be futile, and so allowed Alexander to massacre Ariobarzanes and his troops right outside the city walls rather than fight.^[14] This is in agreement with Curtius' account which states that the Persian force, after both inflicting and suffering heavy casualties in the ensuing battle, broke through the Macedonian forces and retreated to Persepolis, but were denied entrance into the capital, at which point they returned to fight Alexander's army to the death.^[17]

A few historians regard the Battle of the Persian Gate as the most serious challenge to Alexander's conquest of Persia.^{[18][19]} Michael Wood has called the battle decisive^[20] and A. B. Bosworth refers to it as a "complete and decisive victory for Alexander".^[21]

Aftermath

Similarities between the battle fought at Thermopylae and the Persian Gates have been recognized by ancient and modern authors.^[22] The Persian Gates played the role "of a Persian Thermopylae and like Thermopylae it fell."^[23] The Battle of the Persian Gates served as a kind of reversal of the Battle of Thermopylae, fought in Greece in 480 BC in an attempt to hold off the invading Persian forces.^[13] Here, on Alexander's campaign to exact revenge for the Persian invasion of Greece, he faced the same situation from the Persians. There are also accounts that an Iranian shepherd led Alexander's forces around the Persian defenses, just as a local Greek showed the Persian forces a secret path around the pass at Thermopylae.^{[13][24]}

The defeat of Ariobarzanes' forces at the Persian Gate removed the last military obstacle between Alexander and Persepolis. Upon his arrival at the city of Persepolis, Alexander appointed a general named Phrasaortes as successor of Ariobarzanes. Alexander seized the treasury of Persepolis, which at the time held the largest concentration of wealth in the world, and guaranteed himself financial

independence from the Greek states.^[25] Four months later, Alexander allowed the troops to loot Persepolis, kill all its men and enslave all its women, perhaps as a way to fulfill the expectations of his army and the Greek citizens, or perhaps as a final act of vengeance towards the Persians.^[26] This destruction of the city can be viewed as unusual, as its inhabitants had surrendered without a fight and Alexander had earlier left Persian cities he conquered, such as Susa, relatively untouched.^[27] In May 330 BC, Alexander ordered the terrace of Persepolis, including its palaces and royal audience halls, to be burned before he left to find Darius III.^[28] Sources disagree as to why he ordered the destruction: it could have been a deliberate act of revenge for the burning of the Acropolis of Athens during the second Persian invasion of Greece, an impulsive, drunken act, or it could have been out of Alexander's supposed anger over not being recognized as the legitimate successor to Darius III.^{[28][29]}

Notes

1. Shahbazi, A. Sh. "ARIOBARZANES" (<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ariobarzanes-greek-form-of-old-iranian-proper-name-arya-brzana>). *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Retrieved 2022-02-11.
2. D. W. Engels: *Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian Army*, University of California Press, Berkeley and London, 1978, ISBN 0-520-04272-7, pp. 72f. (fn. 7)
3. Bill Yenne: "Alexander the Great: Lessons from History's Undefeated General", St. Martin's Press, New York, 2010, pp. 90
4. CAIS "The Battle of the Persian Gate and the Martyrdom of General Ariobarzan and his defending regiment"
5. Robinson, Cyril Edward (1929). *A History of Greece* (<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.183571>). Methuen & Company Limited. Retrieved 7 April 2013.
6. Piekarski, Michał (2019). *Hydaspes 326 p.n.e.* Warszawa: Bellona. p. 14. ISBN 978-83-11-15799-6.
7. For the identification, see Speck, Henry (2002). "Alexander at the Persian Gates. A Study in Historiography and Topography". *American Journal of Ancient History*. n.s. 1 (1): 7–208. ISSN 0362-8914 (<https://www.worldcat.org/issn/0362-8914>). more... (https://www.livius.org/a/iran/persian_gates/yasuj.html).
8. Engels, D. W. (1978). *Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian Army*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press. pp. 72f. ISBN 0-520-04272-7.
9. Mehrdad Kia: "The Persian Empire: A Historical Encyclopedia [2 volumes]: A Historical Encyclopedia", ABC-CLIO, LLC, Santa Barbara and Denver, 2016, pp. 97
10. Bowden, Hugh (2014). *Alexander the Great: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
11. "Alexander historians give Ariobarzanes a large army (40,000 infantry and 700 cavalry in Arrian, *Anabasis* 3.18.2; 25,000 infantry in Curtius 5.3.17 and Diodorus 17.68.1; the latter adds 300 horsemen), and their modern successors follow them unreservedly (e.g., Th. Doge, *Alexander*, Boston and New York, 1890, p. 401; J. F. C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Alexander the Great*, London, 1958, pp. 228ff.; N. G. L. Hammond, **Alexander the Great: King, Commander and Statesman*, London, 1981, p. 185). However, Greek estimates for the Persian infantry were generally valueless (C. Hignett, *Xerxes' Invasion of Greece*, Oxford, 1962, pp. 350f.), and Ariobarzanes could hardly have mustered more troops than he had taken to Gaugamela. Arrian's 700 can thus be interpreted as indicating the total strength of Ariobarzanes. Against them, Alexander led an army of well over 10,000 men, for having sent Parmenion with the baggage train and heavier-armed troops down the carriage road, he himself took the Macedonian infantry, the lancers and archers through the mountainous track (Arrian, *Anabasis* 3.18.1; Curtius 5.3.16f.; Diodorus 17.68.1; Stein, op. cit., pp. 19f.)"
12. Quintus Curtius Rufus

13. Prevas 17
14. Prevas 18
15. Arrian 3.18.5-6; Curtius 5.4.29
16. Curtius 5.3.31-2
17. Quintis Curtius Rufus:Delphi Complete Works of Quintus Curtius Rufus - History of Alexander (Illustrated) (Delphi Ancient Classics Book 75), Delphi Classics, Ltd., Hastings and East Sussex, 2017
18. Berve, Das Alexanderreich II, p. 61; A. B. Bosworth
19. A Historical Commentary on Arrian's History of Alexander I, Oxford, 1980, p. 326
20. Wood, Michael (1997). *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great: A Journey from Greece to Asia* (<https://archive.org/details/infootstepsofale00wood>). University of California Press. p. 108 (<https://archive.org/details/infootstepsofale00wood/page/108>). ISBN 978-0-520-21307-4. "decusuve."
21. Bosworth, A.B. (1993). *Conquest and Empire: The Reign of Alexander the Great* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=4oLAWmjkPnkC&q=decisive&pg=PA90>). p. 91. ISBN 978-0-521-40679-6.
22. Heckel, p. 171
23. (Burn, 1973, p. 121)
24. Sarathi Bose, Partha (2003). *Alexander the Great's Art of Strategy* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=49Tc7jRSBrIC&pg=PA134>). Gotham. p. 134. ISBN 1-59240-053-1.
25. Prevas 19
26. Prevas 23
27. Prevas 27
28. Prevas 33
29. Prevas, John (2005). *Envy of the Gods: Alexander the Great's Ill-fated Journey Across Asia* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=aE2yN9gwkwC&pg=PA38>). Da Capo Press. pp. 38–. ISBN 9780306814426. Retrieved 7 April 2013.

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External links

- Ariobarzanes (<https://www.livius.org/ap-ark/ariobarzanes/ariobarzanes2.html>): An Article by Jona Lendering.

- Pharnabazus (<http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/P/Pharnaba.asp>), The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition 2006.
 - King Darius III (<https://web.archive.org/web/20031018213726/http://www.gaugamela.com/>): A Research Article on Darius-III Codomannus
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 - Persian Gates (https://www.livius.org/pen-pg/persian_gate/persian_gate.html): Photos of the battlefield.
 - [1] (<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ariobarzanes-greek-form-of-old-iranian-proper-name-arya-brzana>): ARIOBARZANES, Greek form of an Old Iranian proper name AÚrya-bráza
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