

**BATTLE REPORT:  
ALEXANDER THE GREAT'S SIEGE OF TYRE - 332 BC**

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In 332 BC, during the early years of his military conquests, Alexander the Great laid siege to the island stronghold of Tyre, an eastern trading hub of the Phoenician empire in what is now southern Lebanon. After seven arduous months in 332 BC, his Macedonians succeeded in taking the city using a catalog of siege techniques and engineering innovations. This victory gave Alexander control of the eastern portion of the Phoenician empire, as well as the Phoenician portion of the Persian navy. He also had a clearer path toward his goals of conquering Egypt and Babylon, without the risk of a Persian naval attack on Greece while his attention focused on Asia. This siege also established Alexander as a brilliant commander not only on land, but also at sea.

The most detailed source of information about this siege comes from Arrian (c. 86-160 AD), who wrote the most extensive extant history of Alexander, the *Anabasis Alexandri* or *Campaigns of Alexander*. Other important, yet less extensive, accounts include the *Library of History* by Diodorus Siculus (c. 90-30 BC) and *History of Alexander the Great* by Quintus Curtius Rufus (c. 20-90 AD). Other, more minor, sources include the biography of Alexander in *Parallel Lives* by Plutarch (c. 46-120 AD), *Stratagems* by Polyaeus (c. 100-170 AD), and *Epitome of the 'Philipic History' of Pompeius Trogus* by Justin (c. second or third century AD). As is evident by the dates these historians lived, none of them was alive at the time of Alexander. Therefore, each of these sources constitutes an unverifiable secondary source at best and perhaps a tertiary source at worst.

Known as **ﺻﻮﺭ** (Sūr) to the Phoenicians and **صوﺭ** (Sour)<sup>1</sup> to Arabs today, this island city was an important eastern Mediterranean port with a long history, established approximately 2400

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia contributors, "Tyre, Lebanon," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Tyre,\\_Lebanon&oldid=598168384](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Tyre,_Lebanon&oldid=598168384) (accessed March 30, 2014).

years before Alexander's arrival.<sup>2</sup> The most well-known and lucrative trade item of ancient Tyre was "Tyrian Purple," a dye extracted from *murex* snails that were harvested from the island's shoreline.<sup>3</sup> As the Phoenicians were expert sailors with a large fleet of ships, Alexander had to have known that taking Tyre would be no easy task. The island, which was heavily fortified, was offshore of a mainland city, most of which was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon during a lengthy siege from 586-573 BC.<sup>4</sup> Alexander likely had around 40,000 soldiers following his victory at Issus, but his navy, mostly remnants of the Athenian navy, was no match for that of the Phoenicians. Given the geography, Alexander ingeniously devised an alternate approach to attack the island. Arrian described the waters between the island and the mainland as having shallow, muddy shoals.<sup>5</sup> In the midst of the shoals were chunks of rock, possibly remnants of a mole built by King Hiram of Tyre 700 years earlier and destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar II during his siege over a century later.<sup>6</sup> Alexander resolved to build his own mole using these rocks and the stones in and around mainland "Old Tyre" to assault the island "New Tyre" from the land, negating the Phoenician naval advantage and continuing his plan to defeat the Persian navy by eliminating its base ports.<sup>7</sup>

After the victory at Issus, several Asian cities withdrew their support for Persia and pledged loyalty to Alexander. Such was the case with the Phoenician cities of Byblos and Sidon, which had chafed at being under the Persian yoke. Tyre, perhaps the most powerful Phoenician city, also agreed to capitulate and sent envoys to Alexander to conclude friendship. The situation

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<sup>2</sup> Herodotus *Histories* 2.44.3; Herodotus dates the foundation of the city at 2300 years before he wrote the *Histories*.

<sup>3</sup> Lloyd B. Jensen, "Royal Purple of Tyre," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 22, no. 2 (April 1963): 104, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/543305> (accessed March 26, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> The Count J. de Bertou, "Extract from a Notice on the Site of Ancient Tyre," *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 9 (1839): 288, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1797724> (accessed March 26, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Arrian *Anabasis* 2.18.3.

<sup>6</sup> Bertou, 287.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Cartledge, *Alexander the Great: The Hunt for a New Past* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004): 142.

with Tyre was different from that of Byblos and Sidon since the Tyrian king, Azemilkos, was at sea with the Persian fleet.<sup>8</sup> Alexander likely deduced from this that Tyrian loyalty rested with the Persians, despite assurances to the contrary from the envoys. Perhaps to test the Tyrians, Alexander decided to enter the island city to sacrifice at the temple of Heracles located there. The so-called “Tyrian Heracles” (the Phoenician god Melqart) was the focus of the “purple myth,” which told how Heracles’ dog bit a shellfish, staining its mouth with dye. Heracles ordered a garment dyed with the color, giving birth to “Tyrian purple.”<sup>9</sup> Alexander’s wish to worship at the Heracleian temple at Tyre was an attempt to Hellenize the Phoenician religious tradition, and thereby challenge Tyre’s national sovereignty.<sup>10</sup> In response, the Tyrians agreed to do anything Alexander wanted except to allow any Macedonian or Persian to enter their city. Justin wrote that the Tyrians politely suggested that Alexander would be better off worshipping Heracles at “Old Tyre” on the mainland, since the temple to Heracles there was more ancient.<sup>11</sup> Quintus Curtius Rufus wrote quite a different version of events, stating that Alexander’s heralds were murdered by the Tyrians, and their bodies were thrown into the sea.<sup>12</sup> In either case, such a rejection did not sit well with Alexander.

Alexander called a meeting of his Companions, generals, squadron leaders, and cavalry commanders to discuss this apparent affront. Actually, Alexander may have foreseen such a rejection by the Tyrians and concocted the story about sacrificing at the temple as a ruse to enter the city to take possession of it. Whatever his original intentions, Alexander now resolved to lay siege to the island. He addressed his senior officers directly in this instance, likely due to the

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<sup>8</sup> Arr. 2.15.6.

<sup>9</sup> Jenson, 106.

<sup>10</sup> James Romm, ed., *The Landmark Arrian: The Campaigns of Alexander*, trans. Pamela Mensch (New York: Anchor Books, 2010): 82; see footnote 2.15.7a.

<sup>11</sup> Justin *Epitome of the ‘Philipic History’ of Pompeius Trogus* 11.10.

<sup>12</sup> Quintus Curtius Rufus *History of Alexander* 4.2.15.

great strain such a siege would place on the army.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps Alexander wanted to see their expressions as a gauge of their willingness to endure such a hardship. More than this, he may actually have needed to persuade his friends and officers that the siege of Tyre was worth the effort.<sup>14</sup>

Alexander explained to them that they would not be safe to march onward to Egypt with Tyre's loyalty uncertain. Attempting to conquer Egypt or Babylon while Persia retained control of the sea might shift the Persian focus to Greece and Macedonia while Alexander had his back turned. Persia might yoke the services of anti-Macedonian Sparta, creating a crisis that could end the campaign against Darius and the conquest of Asia.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Alexander explained that destroying Tyre would give the Macedonians control of Phoenicia, perhaps convincing the Phoenician navy, the largest contingent of the Persian navy, to side with Alexander. By utilizing the fleets from Macedonia and Phoenicia, Cyprus would likely fall, and its fleet would make conquering Egypt much easier. With the Macedonians in control of Egypt, in addition to Phoenicia and Cyprus, the Persians would be cut off from the sea west of the Euphrates, making the eventual assault on Babylon easier to win.<sup>16</sup> Such was Alexander's grand plan for pushing southward to Egypt and eastward into Asia via the conquest of Tyre.

From the sources, it does not appear that laying siege to Tyre was Alexander's first choice of options in early 332 BC. Alexander's fleet was still a long way off, and a lengthy siege would slow his march to Egypt.<sup>17</sup> He was encouraged to lay siege, however, by a dream in which Heracles took his hand and escorted him into Tyre. This omen was interpreted as a sign of

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<sup>13</sup> N. G. L. Hammond, "The Speeches in Arrian's *Indica* and *Anabasis*," *The Classical Quarterly, New Series* 49, 1 (1999): 243, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/639500> (accessed March 25, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>15</sup> Arr. 2.17.2.

<sup>16</sup> Arr. 2.17.4.

<sup>17</sup> Curt. 4.2.15.

victory, though that the victory would be won with difficulty.<sup>18</sup> There were other omens as well, and the religion-minded Alexander was thus certain he could find a way to defeat Tyre expeditiously.<sup>19</sup> Alexander, in a fury over his rejection from entering the city, exclaimed to the Tyrians, “You think nothing of this land army...because of your confidence in your position, living as you do on an island, but I am soon going to show you that you are really on the mainland.”<sup>20</sup> With that, Alexander himself threw the first basket of sand into the shallow shoal to begin building a mole to connect the mainland to the island.<sup>21</sup>

At one spot, the water was three fathoms deep, so Alexander’s army needed to gather a massive amount of rocks for the project. They placed wooden stakes in the mud, which held the stones in place. Alexander served as cheerleader to his workers, and he presented gifts to those who were most outstanding in their efforts.<sup>22</sup> At about this time, however, Alexander left Perdicas and Craterus in charge, traveling to Arabia with some light-armed troops. According to Curtius, this was done so as not to “appear to be frittering away time in besieging a single city.”<sup>23</sup> According to Plutarch, the Arabian tribes inhabited the mountains of the Anti-Lebanon (near the Lebanese border with Syria), very far geographically from land we now call “Arabia.”<sup>24</sup> None of the ancient sources appears to offer a reason for attacking these Arabian tribes, except to avoid “frittering away time,” but this trip may have been a mistake for Alexander. Polyaeus wrote that the Tyrians were emboldened by his absence, and took advantage of the opportunity to harass the

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<sup>18</sup> Arr. 2.18.1.

<sup>19</sup> Curt. 4.2.13-14.

<sup>20</sup> Curt. 4.2.5.

<sup>21</sup> Polyaeus *Stratagems* 4.3.3.

<sup>22</sup> Arr. 2.18.4.

<sup>23</sup> Curt. 4.3.1.

<sup>24</sup> Plutarch *Lives* “Alexander” 24.

working Macedonians.<sup>25</sup> The Tyrians shot arrows from atop the walls and sailed ships around the area near the Macedonian mole.

To combat the harassment of the Tyrians, the Macedonians used numerous military technologies, including towers and various types of war engines. Arrian wrote that the Macedonian covered towers with screens made of skins and hides to shield the workers and to prevent the towers from being hit by flaming arrows shot from the walls.<sup>26</sup> Aeneas the Tactician (fourth century BC) echoed the tactic of using skins and hides, recommending the use of curtains or sails, which had the dual purpose of blocking the arrows and allowing the collected arrows to be reused against the enemy.<sup>27</sup> As Aeneas likely fought in the Peloponnesian War, it is likely that the practice was common in Greek warfare by Alexander's time. The Macedonians likely reaped a harvest of arrows by using this method.

The Tyrians attempted to counter the Macedonian towers and stop the mole's progress by filling a cavalry transport ship with combustibles, including dry vine twigs and firewood. They then covered this kindling with pitch, sulfur, and "every other substance that stokes up a blaze."<sup>28</sup> The Tyrians towed the ship with triremes and torched the wood as soon as the ship neared the mole. The towers went up in flames, and Tyrians in light ships attacked the palisade and tore it down at various points. Alexander returned from Arabia, according to Curtius, as Arrian did not record the expedition, to see that the mole had been destroyed.<sup>29</sup> While this must certainly have been a stinging blow to Alexander's pride, he remained undaunted and ordered his men to get back to work. This time, he decided to widen the mole to accommodate more towers and more

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<sup>25</sup> Poly. 4.3.3.

<sup>26</sup> Arr. 2.18.6.

<sup>27</sup> Aeneas the Tactician *How to Survive Under Siege* 32.9.

<sup>28</sup> Arr. 2.19.1.

<sup>29</sup> Curt. 4.3.7.

siege engines.<sup>30</sup> Curtius described the process of building the second mole, explaining that the Macedonians threw entire tree trunks into the sea and covered them with rocks. On these layers, they piled more trees, covered them with earth, and then added more rocks and trees.<sup>31</sup>

Alexander did not want his second mole to meet the same fate as the first.

Alexander now became acutely aware that he would need to establish a naval presence to complete his conquest of Tyre. He traveled to Sidon to gather his fleet. Meanwhile, the kings of Arados and Byblos heard that Alexander had gained possession of their cities, so they decided to leave the Persian fleet and ally their ships with Alexander at Sidon. This gave the Macedonians approximately eighty Phoenician ships. Nine triremes from Rhodes, three from Soloi and Mallos, ten from Lycia, and one fifty-oared Macedonian ship, joined them. Soon afterward, nearly 120 Cyprian ships joined the fleet. Cyprus had heard of Alexander's victory at Issus and likely knew that the Tyrians would eventually fall to Alexander as well. If Arrian's records are accurate, Alexander had 223 ships at his disposal.<sup>32</sup> These he grouped by nationality. Some of them surrounded the island and fired artillery weapons at the walls. The Cyprian ships blockaded the northern harbor, while the Phoenician ships blockaded the southern harbor.

In this phase of the battle, the engineering technology of both sides made the siege of Tyre stand out against other ancient sieges. Alexander positioned war engines on the mole, on cavalry transport ships, and on some of the slower-sailing triremes. Alexander attacked the walls with stone throwers and used light catapults against the Tyrians on the battlements.<sup>33</sup> The Tyrians retaliated with what Diodorus called "ingenious" counter-measures, many of which are

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<sup>30</sup> Arr. 2.19.6.

<sup>31</sup> Curt. 4.3.9.

<sup>32</sup> Arr. 2.20.1-3; Curtius 4.3.11 numbered the fleet at 190 ships.

<sup>33</sup> Diodorus Siculus *Library of History* 17.42.7.



not mentioned in the other sources, indicating that Diodorus may have pulled them out of a technical military manual from his own time.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the Tyrians were ingenious enough to devise clever military technology, as they had a rich tradition of engineering dating 700 years earlier to Hiram of Tyre and the construction assistance he gave to the Biblical David at Jerusalem.<sup>35</sup> One such innovation was heating bronze shields filled with hot sand and boiling excrement, and launching the concoction from the walls at the Macedonians. Of this terror, Curtius wrote, “None of their deterrents aroused greater fear than this.”<sup>36</sup>

The Tyrian defenses complicated the siege, dragging it out still longer. The projectile counter-measures kept Alexander from fighting at close range. In addition, Tyrian swimmers cut the mooring ropes of Alexander’s ships, making it difficult to hold position. To counter this, Alexander used chains rather than cords to secure the ships, an upgrade that took time and considerable effort. In perhaps a last-ditch effort, feeling increasingly smothered by Alexander’s efforts, the Tyrian fleet broke free from the Cyprian ships that blockaded the northern harbor.<sup>37</sup> Launching a counter-attack, Alexander’s fleet managed to sink most of the breakouts, crushing Tyrian spirits still further.

With the mole nearly complete and the island surrounded by his fleet, Alexander launched his major offensive. He systematically attacked Tyre’s walls with his siege engines, looking for weaknesses. Eventually, the Macedonians managed to crumble part of the wall facing Egypt, near the southern harbor. He bridged the opening with gangways, but the Tyrians drove the Macedonians back.<sup>38</sup> Disappointed by this setback, Alexander then instructed his ships

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<sup>34</sup> Footnote 3 of Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, Books 16.66-17, trans. C. Bradford Welles, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 238-239.

<sup>35</sup> 2 Sam 5:11.

<sup>36</sup> Curt. 4.3.26.

<sup>37</sup> Arr. 2.21.1-6.

<sup>38</sup> Arr. 2.22.7.

carrying siege engines to fan out along the walls and get as close as possible, waiting for the right opportunity to strike. Arrian wrote that the Tyrians, surrounded by bombardment, “would not know which way to turn in the terror of the moment.”<sup>39</sup> According to Curtius, “disaster was closing in on them at every point...[and] they were facing disaster in a battle waged concurrently on land and sea.”<sup>40</sup> Alexander and his Companions entered the breached wall along the southern harbor facing Egypt. They entered the city and made their way toward the palace. At this point, the Tyrians abandoned the walls and fled, some of them cut down while fleeing.<sup>41</sup>

In the words of Arrian, “The slaughter was great.”<sup>42</sup> Nearly 8,000 Tyrians were killed, and 30,000 were caught and sold into slavery. This indicates a population of Tyre at approximately 40,000 before the siege, but the sources are somewhat vague about this. Of the Macedonians, twenty shield-bearers and about 400 infantrymen were killed throughout the length of the siege.<sup>43</sup> The sources do not agree about the number of casualties, but the lopsidedness of the conquest remains nevertheless unquestioned. Diodorus wrote that at least 7,000 Tyrians were killed, while Curtius claimed the Tyrian deaths totaled 6,000. Arrian made no mention of it, but both Diodorus and Curtius also wrote that 2,000 Tyrian men of military age were crucified afterward.<sup>44</sup> If true, such an act speaks of Alexander’s brutality in dealing with those who defied him. He may have wanted to send a message to the Levantine communities south of Tyre he would soon encounter as he marched toward Egypt. Regarding his respect for religion, however, it is important to note that Alexander spared the lives of those who sought refuge in the temple of Heracles. Those spared included Tyrian king Azemilkos and some

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<sup>39</sup> Arr. 2.23.3.

<sup>40</sup> Curt. 4.3.14.

<sup>41</sup> Arr. 2.24.1.

<sup>42</sup> Arr. 2.24.3.

<sup>43</sup> Arr. 2.24.3-5.

<sup>44</sup> Diod. 17.46.4; Curt. 4.4.16.

ambassadors from Carthage.<sup>45</sup> Although he spared the lives of the Carthaginian ambassadors, Curtius wrote that Alexander declared war on Carthage following the siege.<sup>46</sup> As the siege concluded, Alexander sacrificed in the temple of Heracles, just as he said he wanted to do at the outset of the siege seven months earlier.

The siege of Tyre ended in the month of Hekatombaion, during the archonship of Niketos at Athens.<sup>47</sup> Because of this seven month effort, Alexander accomplished something that took Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II thirteen years to accomplish. In addition, Alexander secured possession of the eastern capital of the Phoenician trade empire, captured the Phoenician contingent of the Persian navy, dealt a devastating blow to the Persian navy's ability to port its ships, and cleared the way for a southward advance to Egypt without the risk of a Persian takeover of Greece. Militarily, this siege highlighted rapid advances in technology made possible by the expert Phoenician engineers and the lessons learned by the Macedonians from Philip's conquest of Greece several years earlier. For the military historian, the siege tactics and technology employed at Tyre foreshadow Roman siege warfare as employed at Masada (73-74 AD).

In addition to the military significance of the siege of Tyre, historians also can observe a "coming of age" in Alexander. Because this was no quick and decisive pitched battle, Alexander had plenty of time to brood over his failures and capitalize on his successes at Tyre. This siege no doubt tested his patience. In fact, Curtius wrote that Alexander had decided to abandon the siege as it dragged on so that he could head to Egypt sooner. Alexander reckoned, however, that a failure to capture the city would be a disgraceful missed opportunity and might tarnish his ever-

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<sup>45</sup> Arr. 2.45.5.

<sup>46</sup> Curt. 4.4.17.

<sup>47</sup> Arr. 2.24.6.

improving reputation. The thought of having already swept through such a large part of Asia induced him to strengthen his resolve and continue the attack.<sup>48</sup> In addition, it is at about this time that Darius sent envoys to Alexander offering 10,000 talents, all the territory from the Euphrates to the Aegean, and the hand of one of his daughters in marriage. Parmenion, Alexander's most senior general and a close tie to the "old days" when Philip ruled Macedonia, thought it was a good deal. If he were Alexander, he would accept it. In reply, Alexander famously replied "if he were Parmenion, he would do likewise, but since he was Alexander, he would answer Darius as he did in fact answer him."<sup>49</sup> The answer was "no deal." Alexander appears, with his comment to Parmenion and his brilliant tactics at Tyre, to leave the shadow of Philip behind and establish himself as powerful new brand of Macedonian king. He had already shown his expert capabilities in set battles at the Granicus River and at Issus, but Tyre showed he could also master a lengthy siege and a naval operation. Now, there likely remained little doubt in his mind that he could conquer any obstacle and any opponent.

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<sup>48</sup> Curt. 4.4.1-2.

<sup>49</sup> Arr. 2.25.2.

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