



Part 1: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ORDER OF ST. JOHN OF JERUSALEM, KNIGHTS HOSPITALLER

Compiled by Members of the OSJ over the last 963 years.

We hope you enjoy and learn from these snapshots of OSJ history presented through *The Herald*. Most of us are not historians but, rather, civilians with a deep love for the Order and its colorful past. Our contributors and sources will be identified, if known. We'll also offer a bibliography, in case you want to learn more.

Are you curious? We hope so! Perhaps, together, we can shed some light on the colorful, significant, tragic and inspiring past. Of course, where there's light, there's often heat. Our intention is not to be argumentative or confrontational. However, history has a way of becoming just that—an argument. No arguments here, just a story, presented in a serial format (just like the penny paperbacks of yesteryear. One installment each time we publish *The Herald*.

Here's our story:

THE HERALD :: OCTOBER :: 2011 :: No. 1

Setting The Historical Stage

To begin with, some initial questions come to mind when dealing with OSJ History: (1) Who are the Knights of St. (2) How did people come to enter our Order? (3) What historical events gave rise to the need for the Order? (4) What contributions have the Order members made to humanity in the last millennium? (5) How has the Order's mission and operation changed over time? (6) How did the Order structure and govern itself initially and evolve? (8) Is there a "dark side" to the OSJ? (9) What are some life lessons that we can learn from its history?

To help answer these questions, it is necessary to know about the early setting.

When the first Crusaders entered Jerusalem in 1099 there were three hospices in existence which provided both lodging and hospital services to pilgrims coming to the Holy Land to visit the holy sites.

Early records indicate that Father Gerard was the first Master and that these hospices had been established by the last purported "Roman Emperor" Charlemagne sometime during his rule (800-814 AD). An opposing view is that the hospital of St. John the Almoner for pilgrims at Jerusalem had been set up by merchants from Amalfi in 1070.¹ In all likelihood both interpretations are correct in that a number of hospices were set up in Charlemagne's time and additional ones later on. In any event, there were apparently three in Jerusalem in 1099 AD and, as such, it is possible that each was established at a different time and by different patrons. Eventually, in about 1120 AD, Father Raymond du Puy became an Order Grand Master and is credited with establishing the Order throughout the Latin world. More about that later.

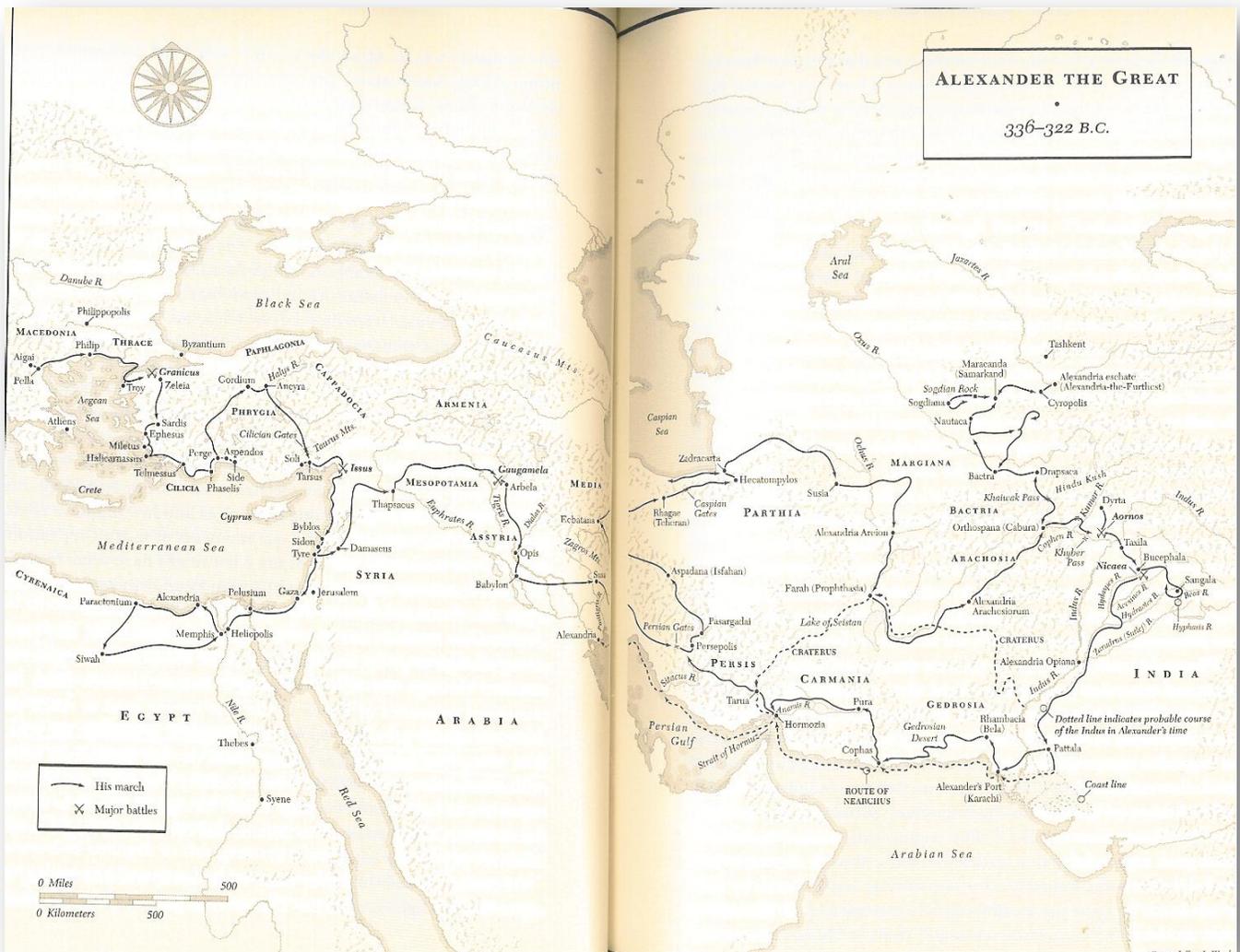
In our introduction to the history of the OSJ, it is necessary to set the stage for the developments that are of primary interest to us today.

The Fault Line of History

There are few places with more action than on the fault line of history which runs roughly from modern day Istanbul (known as Byzantium and, then, Constantinople in earlier times) to Jerusalem (the fault line's epicenter) to Alexandria (in Egypt). Along this line the forces of the West have continually, through all recorded time, come into contact and conflict with the forces of the East.

¹ Seward, Desmond, "*The Monks of War: The Military Religious Orders*", Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, Penguin Books, 1995, pg 30.

Alexander: "Welcome to my world." Get the picture?



The world as it was known to the man who made it all happen in 336-332 BC.

Jerusalem is at the center of our stage and it appears to only have been invaded three times by Western forces: Alexander the Great in approximately 333 BC, after defeating the Persian king Darius at Issus. The second invasion by the Romans occurred during the reign of Augustus Caesar and just a few years before Jesus' birth. The third invasion was by the Crusaders in 1099 AD. At all other times the city remained in the hands of various eastern forces.

Along this fault line of history, the forces of military, technology, religion, and philosophy all came into collision. The objective of telling our story this way is to make the history of the Order of St. John more understandable and, we hope, more interesting.

Alexander, the "not so" great. Or, was he a true Superstar?



To tell OSJ's full history and gain a greater appreciation of the Order's true administrative and military genius, it's critical to first step back a little farther in time, say, to the time of the Greeks.

Alexander III of Macedonia (356-323 BC), a/k/a "Alexander the Great", became king at age 20 when his father, Phillip, was murdered and died at age 33, after having conquered most of the then-known civilized world.

Alexander's armies were incredible, some say impossible to defeat, and he marched them to locations as far away as modern-day India. Facts that interest modern history students the most are that his conquests seem to set the stage for the forces of *east* and *west* to engage with each other time after time, and in all of the lands over which Alexander ruled. Furthermore, Alexander's military strategies and equipment were revolutionary in his day, but re-used effectively centuries later in other east-west conflicts that directly involved the knights of the OSJ.

There's another similarity between the battles Alexander's time and the latter day wars of the Crusades. Alexander wasn't afraid of numbers. He attacked the army of King Darius, who reportedly had 1,000,000 foot soldiers and 40,000 cavalry, with an army of only 30,000 foot soldiers and 5,000 cavalry— and soundly defeated it. The significance of this is that during the "Crusade Period" vastly outnumbered Christian forces would repeat this identical feat several times and larger eastern armies would be routed by smaller western forces using the latest, newer technologies.

The innovations in war came principally from the west. (Some argue that they still do.)

In Alexander's case he improved the Greek phalanx, which consisted of deep rows of armored foot soldiers equipped with shields and long spears. The innovations of Phillip and Alexander the Great, and which were used later by Crusaders, including the Hospitaller knights, included the:

1. Development of torsion catapults that fired arrows up to 200 yards and eventually projectiles that hurled "Greek fire", a tar mixture that explodes on impact and is very hard to put out even with water;
2. Elaborately designed battering rams;
3. New engineering techniques to make wheeled assault towers so mobile that they could be moved directly up to fortified walls of up to five stories high. The combination of swiftness and silence was deadly. This technology's ability to move very quickly and, often, extremely quietly resulted in surprised defenders who did not even know that they were under assault--until it was too late;
4. Development of a fighting force of light troops that could neutralize opposing forces in record time. Alexander's force even consisted "shock and awe" of tanks (elephants) and later the first-known use of SCUD missiles (pyrotechnics);
5. Use of a SWAT team of very small units. He called them "Companions" and they were a force to be reckoned with: 300 specialty riders named the "Royal Squadron". The squadron was comprised of 300 mounted troops that provided a both body guard and shock invasion troops. The "prodromo", a small group of military special forces, conducted reconnaissance missions and entered battle ahead of Alexander's cavalry and infantry units;
6. Creation of "Intelligence units" composed of people with a specialized knowledge of climate, botany, and hydrology (sort of modern day combat weathermen).²

Alexander's Motto: "Innovate, innovate!"

Alexander was all about innovation. He became aware (some say obsessed) about moving large groups of soldiers over long distances at a pretty fast clip. His army was really a moving city that he also needed to feed, clothe, replace, and train as it moved. The concept of supply trains was invented by his army and it was finely developed and tuned while on the march. Use of many of these early innovations allowed later Christian armies to support a large contingency of knights in heavy armor and equipment and to turn the tide, militarily, of many battles of historic proportions, in their favor. Remember: it was a big game—then and now--of East vs. West. Those who could compete with size and swiftness shifted the fault line of history a little toward their favor.

Alexander also showed that, for a significantly smaller force to be successful against a far superior and more powerful defender, it was even more strategically necessary to move quickly. To appreciate the similar kinds of feats the successful Crusaders enjoyed, and would need to repeat, it is necessary to understand just how quickly and effectively Alexander conquered the "known world", known to the Greeks of the time, that is.

(... to be continued ... in January, 2012, in the next issue of The Herald. Stay tuned, there's a lot more history to come!)

² Leebaert, Derek, "To Dare & To Conquer: Special Operations and the Destiny of Nations, from Achilles to Al Qaeda", New York, Little, Brown and Company, 2006, pages 66-69.

THE HERALD'S "OSJ HISTORY SERIES":

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ORDER OF ST. JOHN OF JERUSALEM, KNIGHTS HOSPITALER

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SOURCE MATERIAL AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

Leebaert, Derek, *"To Dare & To Conquer: Special Operations and the Destiny of Nations, from Achilles to Al Qaeda"*, New York, Little, Brown and Company, 2006, pages 66-69.

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