

*The Place in History of,*

*PYRRHUS OF EPIRUS. 319 – 272 B.C*

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*“A Pyrrhic Victory.” Volume I, “The Shaping of Destiny.”*

*Volume II. “Destiny Unfolds.”*

In this essay, I will attempt to present a brief biography of Pyrrhus as a prelude to a discussion of the critical importance of his life and career, which had profound effects on both Ancient Rome and Greece.

Pyrrhus was a central and important figure in the Hellenistic World that followed Alexander the Great (356 – 323 B.C.).

He was also the one to begin the struggle between the Greeks and the Romans for domination of the eastern Mediterranean, and he foresaw the titanic contest between the Romans and the Carthaginians in the west.

One indication of the importance of his career is that Hannibal described him as the greatest commander of an army the world had seen, after Alexander himself. An admiration similar to that of Napoleon toward Frederick the Great of Prussia.

The early part of his life was troubled, with dynastic coups displacing both his father, Aeacides, the king of Epirus, and himself. Pyrrhus was an infant when his father lost his throne. A group of loyal friends fled Epirus, taking Pyrrhus with them, and the party sought refuge at the court of Glaucias, the king of Illyria. It is said Glaucias was unsure of what to do, as he was afraid of Cassander, the king of Macedonia, who had been the enemy of Aeacides. His heart softened to Pyrrhus, however. Glaucias took him into his household, cared for him as a son, and restored him to his throne when he was twelve years of age, leaving a council of wise men to act as his advisors until he was old enough to rule in his own right.

Pyrrhus’s own displacement occurred when he was 17 years of age. He had travelled from Epirus to Illyria to attend the marriage of one of Glaucias’s sons. During his absence the throne was taken by a kinsman, Neoptolemus. This man carried the same name as the son of Achilles, who was the legendary founder of the line of the Epirote royal family.

It was after Pyrrhus’s own coup when he began his journey on the world stage.

Following his exile, Pyrrhus joined the court of Antigonos and Demetrius, the father and son rulers of Anatolia, the eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean, and part of Greece. This was a natural step for Pyrrhus to take, as Demetrius had married his sister, Deidameia.

Antigonos had been one of Alexander’s senior generals, and after the Battle of the Granicus, in 334 B.C., he had been made the Governor of Phrygia.

The Granicus was the first of the four major battles fought by Alexander, and Antigonos was the first governor appointed to rule conquered territory in Alexander’s name.

The territory under his sway was expanded over the years, and in the settlement made in Babylon by the Council of Generals following the death of Alexander.

Antigonos spent the rest of his life trying to keep the empire left by Alexander intact.

Pyrrhus joined Antigonus and Demetrius at a critical time, shortly before the fateful Battle of Ipsus in 301 B.C.

In the 22 years since Alexander's death in 323 B.C., his generals, the Successors or Diadochoi, had fought each other over Alexander's empire. This struggle was inevitable, and foreseen by Alexander in his dying moments, as there was no clear succession that would follow his death. The only blood relatives who could succeed him were his infant son by Roxanne, Alexander IV, who could not have universal support because she was a Bactian princess rather than a Macedonian, and his half-brother Philip Arridhaeus, who was a halfwit.

Many of the generals died in these struggles, but by 301 B.C., the empire of Alexander was divided up into four great Hellenistic kingdoms, in addition to Macedonia itself.

MACEDONIA – Ruled by Cassander, the son of Antipater, Alexander's Regent.

ANATOLIA, the eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean, and part of Greece, ruled by Antigonus and Demetrius.

ASIA was ruled by Seleucus. (Syria, Mesopotamia and the eastern territories of Alexander's empire).

EGYPT – Ruled by Ptolemy.

THRACE – Ruled by Lysimachus.

The Battle of Ipsus, where Pyrrhus commanded an infantry brigade, was fought by Antigonus and Demetrius against the invading forces of Lysimachus and Seleucus. It was a battle of heroic proportions, both sides bringing over 70,000 men. The critical element was the squadron of 400 war elephants brought by Seleucus.

The left wing of the army, part of which was under Pyrrhus's command, overcame their adversaries, but Demetrius pursued the enemy cavalry too far, leaving the army without cavalry support. The elephant squadron brought by Seleucus then trapped Antigonus's infantry. Antigonus was killed and the battle lost.

Pyrrhus and Demetrius fled Anatolia with part of the army, collected their fleet at Ephesus and retired to Greece.

Contrary to their expectations, Athens refused to admit Demetrius, and they went on to Megara to consider their options.

Demetrius soon undertook a campaign in Thrace, to ravage Lysimachus's territory while Lysimachus was still in Anatolia, arguing over the spoils with Seleucus.

Pyrrhus remained in Greece, to supervise Demetrius's territory. In Athens Pyrrhus gained the acquaintance of Cineas, a Thessalian who had studied oratory with Demosthenes. Cineas became Pyrrhus's friend and counsellor. Pyrrhus was later to say that Cineas had taken more towns with his oratory than he had taken with his army.

Demetrius's fortunes improved considerably, and he was offered a treaty of peace by Ptolemy.

Pyrrhus travelled to Egypt as a political hostage, to guarantee the pact.

In Egypt, Pyrrhus was treated as part of Ptolemy's family, just as Philip had been in Thebes by Epaminondas. He was educated in the role of a king, and married Ptolemy's step-daughter, Antigone. Ptolemy then restored Pyrrhus as king of Epirus, in 298 B.C.

The nature of Pyrrhus's kingship was precarious however, as to avoid a civil war, his return was negotiated as a dual kingship with Neoptolemus. The two kings fell out, and Pyrrhus preemptively assassinated Neoptolemus.

Now settled as the sole king of Epirus, Pyrrhus became involved in the complicated politics of the Aegean. He joined the struggle of the other kings against Demetrius, and became a key figure in neighbouring Macedonia. For a short time he even became king of Macedonia.

By 281 B.C. Pyrrhus's adventures in Greece had been played out for some time, and he had spent several years at peace in Epirus, improving the well-being of his country. This despite the fact that he lost his dear wife, Antigone.

It was then that he was invited to help the city of Tarentum and curb the ambitions of the Romans in southern Italy. Like Achilles, he was restless at times of inactivity, and as Plutarch quotes from the Iliad,

“..... but heart-sick he brooded  
Pining at home for the war-cry, the noise of the battle.”

His invasion of Italy and then of Sicily were the defining moments of his life, both in terms of the greatness of the undertaking, and the costly second victory over the Romans at Asculum which gave rise to the expression, “A Pyrrhic victory.” A victory that comes at such a cost that it threatens to destroy the victor.

After both his victories, at Heracleia and Asculum, Pyrrhus sent Cineas to negotiate a treaty of peace with Rome, as it was clear to him that it was beyond his resources to conquer the Romans.

*The response to Pyrrhus's overtures was a critical moment in Roman history.*

Pyrrhus offered an alliance with Rome, in which he would help the Romans to complete the conquest of Italy. In return, all he asked for was for Rome to consider him a friend, and acknowledge the independence of the Greek cities in southern Italy. His proposals were favourably considered by most of the Senate, but the Roman response was guided by a speech by the aged and blind Appius Claudius. He asked what was Rome doing in agreeing to accept help from a man whose army could not hold a fraction of Macedonia, and declaring to the world their inability to fight their own battles.

From this moment, the Romans refused to discuss any proposal of peace until Pyrrhus evacuated Italy.

Pyrrhus then left a garrison at Tarentum, and invaded Sicily, having been invited by the cities of Syracuse and Agrigentum to help them repel the Carthaginians. Pyrrhus's campaigns were initially successful, but he fell out with the Greek cities and returned to Italy, where he was finally defeated by the Romans at the battle of Beneventum. He then withdrew from Italy, and returned to Greece with the remnants of his army.

We can see from his campaigns in Italy and Sicily, that Pyrrhus has a unique place in history.

- 1) He was the one to begin the struggle for supremacy between the Greeks and the Romans. He was a critical figure in the time of transition between the world of Alexander and the world of Rome.

- 2) The refusal of the Romans to accept any foreign help or interference in Italy indicates a moment of self-awareness where perhaps they began to see the great path ahead of them.
- 3) The idea that Roman security depended on complete control of central and southern Italy spurred them on, so that this was achieved by the time the First Punic War began in 264 B.C. This conflict was essentially a fight to the death between Rome and Carthage, and at its end in 241 B.C., Rome had complete control of Sicily.

Another intriguing philosophical point is made apparent by Pyrrhus's view of his campaigns. In Plutarch's *Life of Flaminius*, the point is made that apart from the victories against the Persians, "...Greece fought all her battles against and to enslave herself. Every one of her trophies stands as a memorial to her own shame and misfortune."

When pressed for a statement of purpose by Cineas before undertaking the invasion of Italy, Pyrrhus was led to declare that the only thing that really mattered was a position of leadership in Greece, and all other campaigns were a means to that end. This may serve to soften Plutarch's severe criticism of the endless internecine conflicts between the Greek states over the centuries.

Here one can see how the greatness of the vision of Alexander and his father Philip was unique in the Greek world.

Following his return to Greece, Pyrrhus again became involved in dynastic conflicts, this time in the Peloponnese, and was killed in a battle in the streets of Argos.

As foretold, Pyrrhus left behind him the name of a great warrior, but one who ultimately failed because his visions were greater than his resources.

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