MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

PROPAGANDA IN CASE STUDIES OF
THE BATTLES OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT

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MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Alexander the Great lived up to his name and is still doing so some two thousand years after his death. Nothing he did was small or unambitious. At sixteen he was made regent of Macedonia while his father Philip launched an attack on Byzantium, during which time he put down a rebellion, turned the enemy settlement into a Macedonian military outpost, and re-named it after himself: Alexandropolis.\(^1\) In 338BC, at eighteen, he fought alongside his father in the decisive battle at Chaeronea, commanding the heavy cavalry against the Sacred Band of Thebes, the elite of the Theban army. This preeminent group of 300 soldiers was the strongest band in Greece in the fourth century, comparable to the 300 Spartans led by Leonidas in 480BC.\(^2\) After his father’s assassination Alexander launched a major invasion of Persia, met with victory in every battle, and created the largest empire known to the time. Alexander’s accomplishments even extended beyond his superlative skill as a general. The story goes that a horse breeder from Thessaly approached Philip with a magnificent charger named Buchephalas, but the horse seemed vicious and would let no one mount him.\(^3\) There followed an irritated exchange between Philip and the boy Alexander, who could not stand the thought of losing such a fine animal. At last a wager was made: if the youth managed to mount and ride the horse, Philip would pay the extravagant 13 talents the Thessalian demanded as payment; if he failed, Alexander would begin his young life deeply in debt. According to Plutarch, author of one of the few surviving accounts of Alexander’s life, the impetuous young boy turned Bucephalas toward the sun, having noticed the horse was shying at his own shadow. For awhile Alexander walked beside

\(^1\) Green 1991, pp. 65-66.
\(^2\) Green 1991, pp. 73-74.
\(^3\) Plut. Alexander 6.
him, and then ran, then cast aside his cloak and leapt on the animal’s back. Not content with merely satisfying the terms of the wager, he urged Bucephalas to full gallop, and returned to the cheers of Philip and his companions. We see that Alexander is described as reaching for the unattainable even at a young age, always managing to satisfy his desires. He is best known in the popular mind for his pitched battles waged against the Persians and for his eastern campaign in India, where he was famously forced to turn back, not by the enemy, but by his own troops. He remained undefeated but in June 323BC, amidst plans for a European campaign, he fell ill and died. He was only thirty-two years old.

He is perhaps least known for his feats as a siege commander, but even here his legend looms large. Alexander’s siege of Tyre in 332BC is generally regarded as one of the most famous sieges in history, though it receives little attention in popular accounts of Alexander’s military exploits.\(^4\) The rocky little island was about a half mile inland, encircled by 150 foot stone walls, and further protected by a naturally deep channel. Tyre had a reputation as an unassailable fortress, and only Alexander would have been surprised that the Tyrians paid him no heed. The only person to successfully capture the city before Alexander was Nebuchadnezzar, who had attacked it 250 years earlier in 585BC. His siege took him no less than thirteen years, and even after such a lengthy siege Tyre did not surrender outright. Instead, the two sides came to an agreement, so the city may not even be properly regarded as captured. Alexander’s siege, meanwhile, took a scant seven months.\(^5\) Alexander managed a complete victory, taking the city by storm, and in only 4% of the time it took Nebuchadnezzar: here is an example of the success for

\(^4\) Rogers 2005, p. 81, 83.
\(^5\) Rogers 2005, p. 82; Cartledge 1999, p. 147.
which Alexander is known, and yet, at least one source could not resist the urge to embellish the event further. Diodorus Siculus, another Alexander biographer, added to his description of the city’s defenses a set of giant marble wheels and spokes that deflected arrows, and seaweed pillows that covered the walls and softened the blows of projectiles. These machines are otherwise unattested as methods of resisting siege, are absent entirely from the other Alexander biographies, and are logistically quite implausible. Here the biographer has added exciting elements to liven up his description of Alexander’s greatest siege.

The example of Tyre reveals embellishment by a more modern author who sought to “up the ante.” Some of Alexander’s other battles are equally unbelievable, but they have been affected by a more sinister force – propaganda. Information regarding the outcome of these battles, and the forces that engaged in them, was deliberately altered by Alexander and later by his Successors to bolster Macedonian success. In the ancient world, propaganda manifested in dispatches sent back to allied cities and garrisons, and occasionally also in false word sent forward to misinform enemy scouts, but the primary target, unlike in WWII, was almost always allied forces. Orators like Demosthenes and Hypereides made speeches in an attempt to sway Greek opinion, and the written dispatches sent by military leaders would not themselves be viewed by many people, but read to crowds. Hindsight often allows a reader to spot propaganda that would have seemed plausible when it was initially circulated, but ancient historians were not as concerned with the “cold, hard facts” as modern historians are. Instead, much of their attention goes to literary tradition, with explaining why events occurred the way they did.

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6 Diod. 17.43, 45.
(and this includes offering their own opinions on the matter), and with comparing current events to those of the past. A good story was better than the dull truth, and for this reason our most colorful authors seldom give information about troop strength or the movements of specific units on the battlefield. Likewise, ancient historians were, like modern historians, writing for their audience – in the case of the Alexander biographers, they largely wrote for Romans. This too must be kept in mind when examining the descriptions of Alexander’s battles, which are described in a way to best impress a Roman reader. The motivation of ancient historians and the propaganda initiated during Alexander’s time has created an untrustworthy account of his life, but not one that is unsalvageable for those of us who desire to know what really happened.

Propaganda has inflated the importance Alexander’s deeds as a general far beyond the reasonable. Some may have been added to enhance the excitement, but others were rooted in propaganda with a specific purpose and are less obvious. This paper examines the surviving ancient sources for such propaganda, focusing on specific case studies in Alexander’s military career. The propaganda affecting his campaigns is traditionally examined by source, the inaccurate information stemming from Alexander himself, his official historians, the Successors, or later sources. In this study, propaganda is distinguished instead by two overarching themes: Alexander as a panhellenic champion and as a hero in the style of his idol, Achilles. The former is a reflection of the cultural context of Alexander’s Asiatic campaign and his official political motivations; he was purportedly invading Persia to avenge their earlier attacks on Greece, and his campaign is made to conform to the basic themes of those fifth-century wars. This context powerfully affects the figures given by the ancient sources for the Persian army, which seem to have
been wildly exaggerated. The latter manifests itself in descriptions of Alexander’s personal bravery and tactical boldness, praised even when it better resembled recklessness, and in the inflated importance of his enemies. The purpose of this paper is to re-examine specific case studies from conflicts at Pelium, the Granicus, Issus, Gaugamela, and the Hydaspes for these two motivations in order to assess more accurately the Macedonian king’s deeds as a general.

Alexander’s achievements must be viewed in the historical milieu of his reign, especially with respect to the well-developed anti-Persian sentiments prevalent at the time. Panhellenism, the unification of the Greeks, was a widespread and popular idea among Athenian intellectuals, and both Philip and Alexander each gained support for an invasion of Asia Minor from the Greeks by appealing to this cultural ideal.7 Alexander’s official, contemporary biographers would have either consciously or unconsciously cast the events of his campaign in a panhellenic light. Thus the Macedonian and Greek forces are described in terms similar to those used for the brave Greeks during the invasions of 490 and 480BC, despite the fact that now the Greeks were the aggressors and that the army was led by a non-Greek: Alexander of Macedon. Likewise, the Persians led by Darius III were represented as merely the next generation of those massive, but ultimately inferior forces sent by the earlier Persian kings. Alexander’s Successors presumably would have followed suit, exaggerating their own involvement and exploiting the theme of cultural unity that no single leader managed to maintain after Alexander’s death.

Though none of the sources contemporary to Alexander have survived, later biographies reflect this panhellenic trend strongly, and increasingly heroize Alexander. The Persians are still transparently stereotyped, opulent and unsuccessful, but Alexander has risen to a

legendary status. The later biographers transmit the hyperbole initiated by propaganda as truth. They accept descriptions that match the greatness they presume existed in Alexander, and so distort the Macedonian king’s actual deeds.

Evidence for the sort of panhellenic propaganda described above appears no more strongly than in the figures given by the ancient sources for troop totals and casualties, specifically for the pitched battles at Issus and Gaugamela. Alexander’s Macedonian and Greek army is shown routinely struggling against forces many times its own size, but despite the numerical disparity the soldiers manage not only to win but also to incur few losses. Military historians note that the inflation of enemy troops and casualties heightens the sense of victory, and occurs even in descriptions of battles from recent history, such as published numbers from Nazi Germany during World War II.\(^8\) Modern research also suggests that eyewitness information from frightening experiences often paints a distorted picture.\(^9\) For example, soldiers and sailors who survived the attack at Pearl Harbor “emerged with an extremely confused picture of the calamity – black smoke, the drone of low-flying aircraft, and shared terror,” so that, even though the event had been fresh in their minds, they could not describe it, exaggerating the enemy presence.\(^10\) Nonetheless, the grossly enlarged figures for the Persian army have clearly been affected by more than standard propaganda and simple exaggeration; they surpass modern estimates many times over and deliberately recall the earlier massive Persian armies defeated by few Greeks. Any analysis of the figures given by the surviving ancient sources is complicated, however, by inconsistently reported numbers and the seemingly random, eminently reasonable figures occasionally put forward in the texts.

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\(^8\) Fuller 1989, p. 162.
Glimpses of realistic figures that have survived the wash of propaganda illustrate just how absurd the usual figures really are. To assess Alexander’s success as a general requires close examination of the numerical data given by the surviving ancient sources to determine to what extent the king’s victories were exaggerated, and in what way.

Alexander’s self-proclaimed association and rivalry with Achilles has resulted in descriptions that focus on his personal bravery and heroism, creating a biographical narrative with a significantly Homeric cast. The extant biographies, focused on Alexander’s character, highlight anecdotes that illustrate his great rage and terrible grief, recalling the superlative emotions of a Greek hero. This characterization is carried into Alexander’s battles, where he is always described as fighting in the forefront. If he was not naturally so brave, he adopted the bravery of his idol Achilles, eagerly placing himself in positions that resulted in sometimes very serious wounds. Alexander’s bold behavior was, in reality, intemperate recklessness; his death would have been disastrous for his army. He put himself in danger for the sake of his own glory, surpassing the obligations of a Macedonian king, who was expected to fight alongside his soldiers, but the biographers do not present Alexander’s dangerous boldness as anything other than noble. His behavior at war is portrayed as the unavoidable result of his need to be heroic, but although we cannot know his true feelings, his consistent position on the front line at the very least suggests some motivation other than prudence was at work. More importantly, the recklessness portrayed as such a natural part of his character also appears in his tactical errors.

Twice Alexander made reckless decisions that almost cost him dearly. In 335BC, Alexander marched against Pelium, a Thracian fortress, and began to lay siege to it even
though he knew enemy reinforcements were due imminently. When the enemy force arrived, Alexander extricated himself only by means of an ingenious scare tactic. By marching and changing the formation in total silence, and then ordering his army to erupt into shouting, Alexander created panic among the enemy reinforcements, allowing the Macedonians to escape. Though other biographers ignore this episode, Arrian describes the event for the sake of this surprising turnaround, pointedly failing to address that Alexander put his army into a dangerous situation in the first place. Alexander’s second tactical error occurs at the battle of the Granicus, in the descriptions of which Peter Green finds evidence for a full-blown cover-up operation by the written sources. In Arrian and Plutarch’s biographies, Alexander makes an impetuous charge across the river, while in Diodorus’ version, Alexander crosses peacefully at night and attacks the Persians at dawn. Green argues that these distinct accounts are two halves of one major conflict: first an attack across the river, which fails, and subsequently a peaceful crossing at night, followed by attack on land at dawn. The tactical mistake of the original charge is either entirely deleted, as in the case of Diodorus’ biography, or converted to a success, as in Arrian and Plutarch. Both errors at Pelium and the Granicus ultimately had very little effect on Alexander’s military career. Pelium could have been a disaster, but the danger was averted, and the Macedonian king’s charge at the Granicus only lost him a small number of men. Greater was the potential blow to Alexander’s pride and political strength, so both incidents are hidden in the extant sources and the risky behavior that prompted them and ensuing danger disguised. Despite different treatment, the wounds made glorious and tactical errors removed or ignored, an overall trend of Alexander’s fondness for risk emerges.
The descriptions of Alexander’s battles at Pelium and at the Granicus reflect a desire to downplay the Macedonian king’s losses or carelessness, however minor the event, but at the Hydaspes no such loss occurred. The Macedonian army fought bravely and won the battle without any significant setbacks, but nonetheless, modern authors find that the battle has been greatly misrepresented. Instead of masking a failure, the Hydaspes battle is simply described as being far more important than it actually was. In reality the Indian army was small, the Indian elephants were frightening but largely ineffective, and the Indian soldiers, led by Porus, were inexperienced at best. The battle itself is also described as being dangerous indeed, and includes a river-crossing during a perilous storm, but the bad weather was a boon to Alexander, and caused significant damage to Porus’ chariots. Porus himself occupies the role of a brave and noble enemy to Alexander, though modern historians have confirmed his territory and influence were in fact quite small. The importance of the battle has been inflated to serve as a convenient bookend to Alexander’s great military career before the ignoble retreat forced by his own soldiers. Homeric heroes are defined not only by their own bravery and nobility, but by that of their foes; here, at last, is a great foe for Alexander, the final enemy he conquers before his return to Babylon.

Teasing out inaccuracies in the descriptions of Alexander’s battles is exceedingly difficult, as good propaganda by its very nature masquerades as the genuine, and the difference between an embellished story and an example of true brilliance is hard to discern when even our ancient sources are secondary. Wilkinson, in discussing the analysis of history in general, writes that “the past is there, tantalizing, and yet at best it
appears as through a glass, darkly.” The variations between descriptions from the ancient authors make it abundantly clear just how “darkly” we are forced to view Alexander’s career. This paper does not attempt to reconstruct Alexander’s battles, either numerically or by maneuver, but indicates where propaganda has taken its toll, and for what purpose, whether for political reasons or to disguise the king’s recklessness.

Alexander was a great general in his own time, and remains one of the greatest in history. His string of successes is, at worst, marred by only very minor failures: a temporary retreat at Pelium, and an even more fleeting retreat at the battle of the Granicus River. His true accomplishments have has been overemphasized in the number of Persians his army faced and slew, in the low number of his own soldiers sacrificed for victory, and in the strength and character of individual enemies and kingdoms. This paper does not set out to destroy the legendary Alexander but to understand him as a real general, and to tear away ridiculous details from victories that remain great even when viewed skeptically.

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CHAPTER 2: THE ANCIENT SOURCES AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Introduction

Historians studying Alexander are simultaneously blessed with a wealth and
dearth of information about the Macedonian king’s life. Four full biographies detail the
events of his military career, and numerous sources make reference to specific events.
The earliest of our best surviving sources, though, was written probably no earlier than
three centuries after the king’s death, and the latest no less than five.\textsuperscript{12} Four biographies
are examined here: those of Arrian, Curtius, Diodorus and Plutarch. An in-depth analysis
of these authors as Alexander historians is outside the scope of this paper,\textsuperscript{13} but here they
are briefly surveyed for their overall strengths and weaknesses with the aim of
understanding them as military historians. The description of Alexander’s military
campaigns has been powerfully affected by the insertion of propaganda, both by
Alexander himself and by his Successors, which has largely been passed down through
the extant sources. Alexander’s army occupied the role of the small, highly trained Greek
and Macedonian force against which the weak, effeminate, opulent Persians were
inevitably crushed despite their significant numerical superiority. The surviving
biographies suffer from the contemporary sources’ conformation of Alexander’s
campaign to this mold. Additionally, later authors focused primarily on the Macedonian
king’s character and provided only patchy information about the details of his campaign.
If Alexander is to be understood as a general, and his successes to be appreciated fully,
the reader remains aware of these considerations.

\textsuperscript{12} Bosworth 1996, p. 31.
Panellenism and the Persian Stereotype

The extant Alexander biographers follow in a long Greek tradition when they describe Darius III and his army, purposefully recalling the Persian Wars and the characterization of the Persians that sprang up during and immediately after the initial conflict. For the second Persian invasion, in 480BC, Herodotus attests to an army of 2,317,610 men – an astronomically large number of troops.\(^{14}\) Xenophon, writing a generation after the last Persian invasion, inflates the army led by Artaxerxes II in 399-401BC to 1,206,200 men.\(^{15}\) No modern historians are willing to accept these figures.\(^{16}\) In the tradition of ancient Greek historians, Persian armies are stereotypically enormous, but, ironically, this troop strength does not translate into military success. Instead, the Persians are overpowered by the Greeks despite the vast superiority in number of Persian troops. Greek authors tried to reconcile this inconsistency through a variety of explanations, chief among which was a Persian love of luxury, which undermined their military potency. Herodotus places some blame for Persian inferiority on the nature of their recruitment, because they were drawn from subjugated peoples, undisciplined, and “indiscriminately mixed up” amongst each other.\(^{17}\) This attitude is reflected in Herodotus’ interest in cataloguing the separate, origin-based contingents of the Persian army. Ethnic unity, for the Greeks, begot superiority. Herodotus further explores psychological reasons for Persian losses by suggesting the Persians are likely to flee because they are motivated only by fear of their leader, whereas Greeks are motivated by

\(^{14}\) Herodotus, 7.186.
\(^{15}\) Cawkwell 2005, p. 17; Xenophon Anabasis, 1.7.
\(^{16}\) Cawkwell 2005, p. 10.
\(^{17}\) Herodotus, 7.40.
their fear of (or respect for) the law. Laws created by wise men, such as Solon and Lycurgus, were accepted by Greek cities, not inflicted upon them by tyrannical decree. The Persian soldiers are described as knowing nothing of personal motivation; they must be whipped across the Hellespont, whipped into action at Thermopylae, and whipping was necessary to ensure what little discipline the army displayed. Cawkwell argues that Herodotus’ account is filled with contempt for the Persian army, voiced not as a firm condemnation but in mockery. The perceived Persian weakness was not due to some inherent racial trait, but because of their behavior and lavish lifestyle. These were men corrupted, and according to this world view it is no wonder a single Greek was worth many Persians in strength.

With the Persians occupying the role of the “other” after their two unsuccessful attempts to annex Greece, by the mid-fourth century they came to represent all the Greeks opposed. To be pro-tyrant became synonymous with pro-Persian. The fact that so many Greek intellectuals advocated war between the Greeks and the Persians suggests it was a widespread sentiment. In the fifth century, the epic Amazonomachy and Lapith battles were compared with historical battles with the Persians, as in Polygnotus’ mural in the Stoa Poikile, where the victories of Heracles and Theseus were portrayed alongside the Athenian victory at Marathon. Public imagery such as this reinforced the association of the Persians with the ignoble losses of the other mythical anti-Greek forces, such as the

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18 Herodotus 7.140.
19 Herodotus 7.56, 223, 103.
21 Cawkwell 2005, p. 10.
22 Hall 1989, p. 59.
23 Flower 2000, p. 105.
Trojans and Amazons, who also originated in the east. Alexander’s personal association with Achilles only furthered this theme of the Greek hero invading Asia, and continued the process of defining the Persians as the opulent enemy. As a military force, the Persians are cruel, easily overtaken by their own craven fear, and they cannot help but fall for the trickery of the cunning Greeks. They are not fit for war; they are soft and effeminate. Perhaps worst of all, they love luxury and are materialistic to a grotesque degree, are emotional and despotic, and are thus liable to excess and the inevitable – at least, in the Greek mind – downfall that follows such excess. Their softness stems from a luxuriant upbringing, and they grow up fearful, utterly lacking discipline, because they have not been inured to hardship. The death of Darius III was presented merely as the last step in a series that began when the first Persian invasion failed in 490 BC. Darius I did not even attend the invasion in person, and would do nothing so common and mean as fight a battle, going against what the Greeks thought a matter of duty for all men, especially leaders.

Perhaps to stress the effeminacy of the Persians, especially their luxury-loving kings, Greek authors present them as often being outclassed by their women in politics and battle. Herodotus writes that Xerxes succeeded Darius I as king of Persia because Atossa, his mother, was “all powerful,” not for his own merit. Artemesia, the extraordinary female commander who fought against the Greeks under Xerxes, “took up

25 Hall 1989, p. 68.
26 Flower 2000, p. 108.
27 Hall 1989, p. 79.
29 Hall 1989, pp. 70-71.
30 Cawkwell 2005, p. 49.
31 Herodotus, 7.3.
the tyranny” after her husband’s death despite the presence of a grown son.32 She not only fought, but she led “the second most famous squadron in the entire navy,” and “none of Xerxes’ allies gave him better advice” than she.33 During Alexander’s invasion, at the battle of Issus, the retreating Darius III cast off his royal insignia to avoid recognition in his flight, leaving behind not only his soldiers but his mother, wife, and children, including his young heir.34 At the battle of Gaugamela, false reports came to the captives that Alexander had been defeated, but Darius’ mother remained in the camp so not to sully the gratitude she felt for her benevolent captor.35 These anecdotes were not related to suggest the superiority of Persian women, but to emphasize the weakness of their men.

The details of Alexander’s Asiatic campaign have certainly been affected by this existing stereotype. Though the Greeks may have respected the Persians earlier in their shared history, by Alexander’s time the barbarian image had solidified into something strikingly negative.36 The Persians represented an alien violence, against which only the united and disciplined Greeks stood a chance.37 This attitude helped to divert attention from the fact that the Greeks were led by their own tyrant from Macedonia. Philip garnered support for his Asiatic campaign by claiming he desired to free the Greeks in Asia from Persian rule, and to avenge previous attacks – Alexander, after his father’s death, followed suit.38 This claim achieved the desired results for Alexander: support from the Greek city-states.39 The Persians in all of the extant Alexander biographies fit

32 Herodotus, 7.99.
33 Herodotus, 7.99.
34 Curt. 3.11; Diod. 17.59.
35 Curt. 3.11; Diod. 17.59.
37 Hall 1989, p. 58.
38 Flower 2000, p. 98.
the stereotype quite well, and Alexander’s small but well-trained force fulfills its formulaic role by routing the outlandishly large Persian army. The descriptions of these battles undoubtedly owe much to the stereotypes created after the first two Persian invasions.

The Ancient Sources

The records of Alexander’s military successes written during his lifetime or shortly thereafter adhered to this characterization of the Persians, but none of the early histories have survived to present day. Many of the accounts contemporary to Alexander were used as reference material for the surviving biographies, and at least partial descriptions of Alexander’s life seem to have been told by quite a few individuals. Ptolemy, Aristobulus, Callisthenes, Eumenes, Cleitarchus, Nearchus, Chares of Mytilene, Diyllus of Athens and Duris of Samos are all described as authors of histories relating to Alexander. Careful examination of our existing texts has gleaned some evidence of these accounts. For instance, Cleitarchus seems to have been an almost notoriously sensational writer, while Ptolemy and Aristobulus both attempted to exculpate Alexander’s guilt from events like Cleitus’ murder.\(^4\) Callisthenes seems to have been responsible for the official association between Alexander and Achilles.\(^4\) Without the actual texts, however, we cannot attribute certain pieces of information to specific authors, let alone determine their precise motivation.

Despite these difficulties, an awareness of cultural context allows us to draw reasonable conclusions regarding the types of information the contemporary sources

recorded and why. Alexander’s official records would certainly have reflected his purportedly panhellenic aims. Official propaganda would have very likely inflated the figures for the Persian army to match those of the Persian Wars. The official records focused on more than just the numerical details of each battle, and we can readily imagine that Alexander’s troops were described in a way reminiscent of the descriptions of the Greeks in 490 and 480BC, and the Persians likewise. Callisthenes, before falling out of favor, seems to have emphasized the heroic aspect of Alexander to a degree visible to us even through the later sources. Early in the campaign, his apparent focus on Alexander as invincible may have caused hesitation among the king’s detractors, serving a purpose beyond mere flattery to the king. His hand is visible elsewhere, as well. Modern authors see the condemnation of Parmenio present in the extant ancient sources as evidence for the official explanation of his murder, penned originally by Callisthenes. The justification of certain maneuvers, political or military, was the duty of the official historian. Official records had good reason to push Alexander’s successes to greater heights, both for posterity and for the dispatches sent back to Greece and Macedonia, and we can reasonably expect them to have done so.

Within a generation of Alexander’s death, “rumors and slanders of poisoning gave an impetus to full-blown fiction,” largely because of the efforts of the Successors, who needed Alexander’s image to maintain control. Whether such notable authors as Ptolemy and Nearchus, or comparative nonentities like Aristobulus, their experiences

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42 Carney 2000, p. 268.
43 Bosworth 1980, p. 31.
44 Carney, p. 268.
would have affected their reportage. Ptolemy’s narrative was a first-hand account, and thus theoretically very reliable, but it would certainly have stressed the actions in which he was prominent, and downplayed the successes of people he disliked, specifically other Successors. All would have been eager to use their history with Alexander to their advantage, as they did even with physical objects associated with Alexander. Ptolemy hijacked Alexander’s body and placed it in Alexandria, where the tomb was the focus of processions and funeral games, and Eumenes held council meetings in front of “a vacant throne … symbolizing the presence of the king.” First hand or no, each likely told a story that inflated Alexander’s greatness, downplayed his failures, and strengthened each author’s connection to the Macedonian king, all to advance their own aims. The panhellenic motivation initiated by Alexander himself is thus accompanied by plain aggrandizement put forward by the Successors.

The surviving ancient biographies examined in this study, those written by Arrian, Curtius, Diodorus, and Plutarch would certainly have been affected by the memory of the previous Persian invasions. The idea of a fatal obsession with luxury and subsequent weakness is reinforced again and again. After the battle of Issus, Plutarch’s Alexander is confronted with Darius’ tent, full of basins, pitchers, baths, and caskets holding unguents, all made of gold, the room filled with a marvelous fragrance and perfume. The ruler remarks in jest, “So this, it seems, is what it is to be a king.” At the battle itself, Curtius painstakingly details every luxury the Persians bring with them into combat. He records that silver altars bearing the sacred flame, young men in scarlet robes, and a chariot

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drawn by white horses and driven by golden whips preceded the army.\textsuperscript{51} The soldiers themselves were “splendidly bedecked in barbarian opulence”: golden necklaces, clothes interwoven with gold, long-sleeved tunics actually studded with jewels.\textsuperscript{52} Curtius vividly describes the king’s “kinsmen,” dressed “almost like women” in their extravagance, and states Darius III himself rode in a chariot embossed with gold and silver, the yoke studded with jewels, his tunic purple, embroidered with gold, which he wore (of course) “in the style of a woman.”\textsuperscript{53} Especially in Curtius, luxury is strongly associated with weakness and femininity, and the presence of so much wealth at a place of combat demonstrated the Persian inability to behave properly in battle. When Darius III is finally killed, he is redeemed only because though he is too weak to resist the excesses that caused his downfall, he recognizes that his failure was inevitable. He follows in the footsteps of other eastern despots, such as Croesus, who gain wisdom after a loss of power. The Greek belief that excessive prosperity and hubris were followed by destruction was widespread, and to the Greeks, no empire was greater, richer, or more prosperous than the Persian Empire.\textsuperscript{54} Alexander’s pity for Darius III at his death is not because the Persian king earned it through his personal valor, but because the Great King was toppled by the gods, the last step in the slow defeat of an empire that became too prosperous.

The use of anecdotes such as the scene in Darius III’s tent reveals the most frustrating shortcomings of the surviving sources: not their transmission of panhellenic propaganda, which is often recognizable, but their disinterest in quantifying Alexander’s

\textsuperscript{51} Curt. 3.7.
\textsuperscript{52} Curt. 3.7.
\textsuperscript{53} Curt. 3.7.
\textsuperscript{54} Hall 1989, p. 7.
greatness as a general. Bosworth accurately surmises that “rhetoric tends to prevail” in the extant sources, that battle descriptions are “vivid and uninformative,” occasionally contradictory, and focus primarily on “the gruesome and the sensational.”\(^{55}\) Carney sees “the usually transparent ropes” of an attempt to manipulate the reader, but suggests these are remnants of the propaganda-heavy sources contemporary to Alexander.\(^{56}\) The extant sources do not seem to add to or omit events from Alexander’s life, and their accounts do not deviate significantly from the generally known path of Alexander’s campaign. However, the anecdotes the extant authors choose to tell are rooted in existing ideas about Alexander. His status as a legend, even immediately after his death, would have made shocking or unbelievable accounts seem to reflect the truth about his superlative skill.

Plutarch (c. 46-127AD) records a flourish of interest in Alexander by the great generals and politicians of the Late Republic, including Julius Caesar himself.\(^ {57}\) The close contacts between Rome and the vestiges of Alexander’s empire, as represented by the last of the Ptolemaic rulers, would likely have prompted this association between a new empire and Alexander’s. Pompey is also explicitly associated with Alexander in Plutarch’s work, sharing the epithet “the Great,” and his portraiture is quite clearly modeled after the Macedonian’s. Mark Antony, says Mossé, with his mastery of the east and Ptolemaic queen, certainly thought on Alexander: he named his son by Cleopatra after the Macedonian king.\(^ {58}\) It is that legendary status Alexander had achieved by the time of Plutarch’s writing that most contaminates his account of the king’s life. His is the

\(^{55}\) Bosworth 1996, p. 31.
\(^{56}\) Carney 2000, pp. 253-264.
\(^{57}\) Plut. Caesar 11.
\(^{58}\) Mossé 2004, p. 171.
weakest of the Alexander biographies by far from a military standpoint, and though Bosworth admits “there is no denying the force of Plutarch’s rhetoric,” which explains the popularity of his account, “it is rhetoric none the less,” though some disagree. Alexander’s military exploits are described as very successful without qualification, often without describing the number of troops on one side or the other, either at the beginning or the end of a battle. His version of Alexander’s life is filled with a wealth of anecdotes, and presents “a richer story” than the other authors. Plutarch seems to have been perhaps too fond of Alexander, as his biography is remarkably uncritical of the man.

Arrian (86-160AD) provides a dramatically different sort of biography, which often supplies the positions of specific units on the battlefield before the bigger conflicts, details some of the lesser battles that Plutarch ignores, and even hints at the more mundane details of supply transport and communication. His main sources are generally regarded as the two best eyewitnesses of Alexander’s campaign, Ptolemy and Aristobulus, and also perhaps the ephemerides, or day-book, which held the army’s official records. Arrian is regarded by many as the most reliable source for military information, and his treatment of verifiable details (e.g., geography) is the most sound of the extant sources. His account lacks the colorful details of Plutarch’s anecdotes, and seems concerned less with little stories than the overall description of Alexander’s life. Arrian’s work notably recalls the language and style of Herodotus, and he regularly notes the similarities between the Persian Wars and Alexander’s Asiatic campaign, though not

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59 Bosworth 1996, p. 3; Lamberton 2001, pp. 99-100, argues that Plutarch offers more useful military information than he is usually credited for, but no attempt has yet been made to elucidate Plutarch’s strengths in military material.


always or even often explicitly. For that reason, too, Arrian compares well with Xenophon, and often draws on similar language, as when he describes the distress and anxiety of Alexander’s soldiers after the king’s wound from the Malli, which strongly recalls the emotion of the Ten Thousand after the execution of their generals. The Macedonians wondered “how they could get safely home, encircled as they were by many warlike tribes,” while the Ten Thousand reflected that “round about them on every side were many hostile cities.” Arrian was even celebrated as “the new Xenophon” in the ancient biographical tradition. Though a solid source for military information, Arrian’s Herodotean language reveals his motive, and areas where Alexander’s military movements and strategy recall the Persian Wars hint that the facts were forced into a mold they may not have originally fit so neatly. The propaganda-inflated numbers from the contemporary sources seem to have been passed though Arrian faithfully, and as a result, his biography stresses the panhellenic, anti-Persian aspect of Alexander’s campaign more than the other surviving sources.

Curtius, who wrote during the first or early second century AD, provides a biography of Alexander that is highly descriptive but stylistically simple, compared to other authors, and is primarily concerned with the passions and emotions of Alexander, his enemies, and his soldiers. This may be the result of his reliance on Cleitarchus,

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63 Hammond 1993, p. 190.
64 Bosworth 2000, p. 4.
65 Xenophon, *Anabasis* 3.1; Arr. 6.13.
66 Xenophon, *Anabasis* 3.1; Arr. 6.13.
whose sensational style was previously mentioned. Though Curtius censures Alexander for his degradation to Persian dress and habits, he nonetheless paints a highly idealized image of the Macedonian king, focusing primarily on his personality. Curtius is favorably received by modern historians as a source for military information, as his figures are usually sober despite his focus on gore and the emotional aspects of the battles. Still, like Plutarch, he includes military figures erratically. Curtius focuses instead on the shocking, emotional aspect of Alexander’s military career, writing for his Roman audience, who had an innate fascination with Alexander as a conqueror. Bosworth calls him “the most enigmatic and frustrating of all the extant sources,” perhaps because of this strange duality. Curtius is second only to Arrian in describing the movements of certain units on the battlefield, but his inconsistent reportage of numerical details prevents a full comparison.

Diodorus (c. 90-30 BC) describes an Alexander “quite close” to that of Curtius, but there are problems with his account as well. Green dismisses Diodorus as “a notoriously uncritical and unreliable source” for the most part, calling his description of the battle of Issus “contaminated.” His biography is not entirely worthless, and in fact is at times “precise, detailed, and informative,” but the campaign narrative is also occasionally “sensational and slapdash.” This seems to be because of his reliance on a pair of ill-matched sources, Cleitarchus and a “much more scrupulous” source, alternately

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69 Mossé 2004, p. 174
70 Mossé 2004, pp. 172.
71 Baynham 1998, p. 11.
73 Mossé 2004, p. 174
75 Bosworth 2000, p. 8.
identified as Diyllus of Athens or Duris of Samos. Diodorus’ account is short and extremely varied in tone, and to rely on him for information requires an event-by-event analysis. For instance, Diodorus’ account of some events is quite solid, such as his description of the battle at the Granicus River, while others are blatantly embellished, as is his description of siege weaponry at Tyre.

Conclusion

To understand Alexander as a commander requires a close look at the surviving descriptions of his campaigns, all of which must be treated with caution. Though focused primarily on Alexander as a personality, they nonetheless give relatively consistent descriptions of his major battles. In the few places they reveal their sources or offer a personal opinion, more can be discerned about where and what sort of inaccuracies they have unwittingly transmitted. Alexander’s role as the champion of Greek forces against Asia, especially early in his career, has left its mark on the surviving historical record, and we will see that we must weigh these cultural prejudices carefully as we study the major battles against Persia. This characterization was one he would have put forward himself to gain the friendship (or at least dull the hostility) of the Greeks, and was reinforced by his Successors and again by the extant biographers, who could not ignore his heroic status. Though they focus on his personality, Alexander is largely defined by his role as the leader of a small band of well-disciplined soldiers, destined to rebel against Persian opulence and weakness of spirit. The surviving descriptions of Alexander’s life and military career must not be viewed in isolation, but with an awareness of the goals of both the later ancient sources and those contemporary to the Macedonian king.

CHAPTER 3: NUMERICAL INFLATION AND DEFLATION

Introduction

Alexander owes his lasting fame to his great military success. He largely deserves the praise granted him as a general, but the numerical details included in the surviving biographies cannot be trusted. Alexander’s exploits have certainly been embellished and exaggerated, and many modern scholars are unwilling to accept the figures offered by the extant sources.\(^\text{77}\) Inaccuracies in the transmission of numerical troop or casualty information are not at all uncommon in military history; Fuller finds the figures in Alexander’s biographies compare well with numbers published for the purposes of propaganda in WWII.\(^\text{78}\) The figures for Alexander’s battles are not merely affected by standard propaganda, however, but also by the panhellenic, anti-Persian context in which they were originally published. The outrageously large Persian army recalls the great menace of the earlier invasions of Greece. Where standard military propaganda would inflate the allied army to prevent panic and encourage confidence, Alexander’s force and casualties remain small to purposefully recall the comparatively tiny Greek forces of an earlier generation.

Besides reinforcing Alexander’s claim that he was representing the Greeks by taking vengeance against Asia, other considerations have affected the numbers recorded in the sources as well. Low losses indicate expert generalship, as well as extremely high-quality troops compared to the expendable enemy. These low numbers for allied losses satisfied not just Alexander’s panhellenic motivation but also had the practical effect that mercenaries would see the Macedonian army as profitable and relatively safe. To inflate

\(^{77}\) Devine 1986a, p. 108; Devine 1986b, p. 270; Devine 1987, p. 92-93; Bosworth 1996, p 57; and Rogers 2005, p. 67 all offer particularly strong opinions on the unreliability of the numbers.

\(^{78}\) Fuller 1989, p. 162.
enemy troop numbers and deflate allied losses would have greatly increased Alexander’s already growing reputation as a commander. Enemy cities, faced with the approach of the powerful Macedonian force, would have been more likely to surrender. Conquered cities would have been less likely to revolt against their garrisons for fear of the troops that had been so effective in small numbers on the field.

Though the stated troop and casualty totals have been distorted for the sake of propaganda, the figures associated with the sieges and river-crossing battles, though still obviously affected, are nonetheless more reasonable than those supplied for the pitched battles. Figures are not provided at all for most of the sieges by authors other than Arrian, although even he does not provide them consistently. Sieges and river-crossing battles owe their greatness to overcoming engineering and natural obstacles, and this may account for less attention being given to the numerically superior enemy. Pitched battles illustrate the inflated Persian forces and deflated Macedonian casualties in a much clearer fashion, perhaps to demonstrate the severity of the situation and might of the Macedonians in a way otherwise accomplished by roaring water or siege weaponry.
Inflation and Deflation of Troop Totals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Arrian</th>
<th>Curtius</th>
<th>Diodorus</th>
<th>Plutarch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td><strong>Mac. Troops</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cavalry</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>(missing)</td>
<td>5,100</td>
<td>4,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foot</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>32,000</td>
<td>30,000-43,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>35,000</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>37,10080</td>
<td>34,000-47,00081</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mac. Casualties</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>85+</td>
<td>(missing)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foot</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (wounded)</strong></td>
<td>11582</td>
<td></td>
<td>3483</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Persian Troops</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cavalry</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>(missing)</td>
<td>10,000+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foot</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>100,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>110,00085</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Persian Casualties</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cavalry</td>
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<td>(missing)</td>
<td>2,000+</td>
<td>2,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foot</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>10,000+</td>
<td>20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (captives)</strong></td>
<td>21,000</td>
<td>(2,000)86</td>
<td>(20,000)87</td>
<td>22,50088</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Figures given by Arrian, Diodorus, and Plutarch for the battle of the Granicus.

The inflation of enemy troops is weakest in the figures for the battle at the Granicus, which was Alexander’s first Asiatic conflict, and serves as the first of three progressively more difficult battles (see Figure 1). In 335BC, Darius’ generals were ordered to gather at the Granicus River to halt Alexander’s progress into Persia. Plutarch relates that “most of the Macedonian officers were alarmed at the depth of the river and

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79 Arr. 1.11.  
80 Diod. 17.17.  
81 Plut. Alexander 15.  
82 Arr. 1.16.  
83 Plut. Alexander 16.  
84 Arr. 1.14.  
85 Diod. 17.19.  
86 Arr. 1.16.  
87 Diod. 17.21.  
88 Plut. Alexander 16.
Figure 1. The battle of the Granicus according to Arrian and Plutarch.
rough and uneven slope of the banks” along which the Persians arrayed.\textsuperscript{89} Darius himself was not present, but several prominent Persians fought in the conflict, along with a significant number (20,000 in Plutarch and Arrian) of Greek mercenaries.\textsuperscript{90} According to Arrian and Plutarch, Alexander and his cavalry charged into the river and met the Persian cavalry at the other side, defeated them, and then rounded on and crushed the infantry. This is significantly different from the description given by Diodorus, and this contradiction is discussed further in Chapter 4.

The surviving extant sources give similar numbers for the Macedonian troops at the Granicus, but the disparity between those given for the Persian army between Arrian and Diodorus is striking. Arrian has used a more accurate source, and clearly Diodorus has not. 110,000 enemy troops becomes an increasingly unbelievable figure in light of the fact that this force was not a large part of the Persian army, merely the Greek mercenaries and a portion of the Persian cavalry. Of course, in Arrian’s version the river-crossing itself accounts for most of the difficulty. Perhaps the lack of excitement in Diodorus’ peaceful crossing prompted him to accept a larger number for the Persians in order to maintain a level of intensity and danger. The Macedonians are outnumbered approximately 3:1 in his account, but these hard odds are nothing compared to those given for the battles of Issus and Gaugamela.

\textsuperscript{89} Plut. \textit{Alexander} 16.
\textsuperscript{90} Plut. \textit{Alexander} 16; Arr. 1.14.
Table 2: Figures given by Arrian, Curtius, Diodorus, and Plutarch for the battle of Issus.

The battle of Issus well illustrates the inflation and deflation undertaken to push Alexander’s victories to new heights.\(^{102}\) The battle occurred in 333BC over the Pinarus River, which was shallow enough for even the infantry to cross, but nonetheless somewhat of an obstacle (see Figure 2). The prominent geographical feature was not the river, but instead the bottleneck created by the sea to one side and the mountains to the

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\(^{91}\) Arr. 2.10.
\(^{92}\) Curt. 3.11.
\(^{93}\) Diod. 17.36.
\(^{94}\) Arr. 2.8.
\(^{95}\) Curt. 3.9. This number is certainly smaller than it should be. To the cavalry should be added “the cavalry of the Hyrcanians and the Medes and … the other races,” as well as that of Nabarzanes and to the infantry should be added the “most warlike of tribes,” which waited in reserve. Curtius unhelpfully does not enumerate them, but notes their presence.
\(^{96}\) Diod. 17.31.
\(^{97}\) Plut. Alexander 18.
\(^{98}\) Arr. 2.11.
\(^{99}\) Curt. 3.11.
\(^{100}\) Diod. 17.36.
\(^{101}\) Plut. Alexander 20.
\(^{102}\) Rogers 2005, p. 67.
Figure 2. The battle of the Issus.
other, which prevented any out-flanking maneuvers. The two armies approached hesitantly, changing the dispositions several times before the actual conflict, and both sides continued to shift units in response to the other throughout the battle. Alexander attacked the Persian left with a fierce cavalry charge, doing considerable damage to the Persian archers, and attempting to draw that wing of the army aside just enough to open a gap in the line. The Macedonian infantry, meanwhile, were embroiled in a bitter struggle with the Persian mercenaries in the center, and were saved only when the cavalry, led by Alexander, punched through the Persian line at the gap and attacked the mercenaries from behind. Darius began to flee in the general confusion, and though Alexander “strained every nerve” to capture or kill him, the trouble on the Persian right and center was too much to ignore.\(^\text{103}\) Once these areas were secure, Alexander set off after Darius and continued the chase even after nightfall, but the Persian king escaped. The battle was successful; the Macedonians triumphed over the Persian army, which was routed and fled shortly after Darius’ flight became known.

Although the ancient authors do not often give updates on the size of Alexander’s army at the battle of Issus, all of the figures for the Persian army seem suspiciously great from a logistical standpoint, though they are relatively consistent. Arrian and Plutarch agree on the size of the Persian force, and though Diodorus’ figure is 100,000 less than theirs, the figure is still quite large. The 119,000 soldiers mentioned by Curtius seem much more reasonable, but this is only because he does not give a numerical amount for a significant portion of the army (see note 19). Although we must approach any modern attempt to estimate the actual size of the army with caution, Warry suggests the Persian army at the battle of Issus involved some 11,000-13,000 cavalry and 90,000-95,000

\(^{103}\) Green 1991, p. 230.
infantry for a total of about 105,000 Persian soldiers, about $1/5^{th}$ of the lowest complete figure in the ancient sources. Not one of these surviving texts provides an updated figure for the army size, but using the approximately 37,000 troops present at the battle of the Granicus provides a ratio of 16:1 Persians to Macedonians. Even taking the high estimates for the Granicus, or Arrian’s larger figure for Macedonian troop strength at the battle of Gaugamela, the Macedonians were still outnumbered 12:1.

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104 Warry 1995, p. 80.
Table 3: Figures given by Arrian, Curtius, Diodorus, and Plutarch for the battle of Gaugamela.

The battle of Gaugamela also suffers from enemy troop inflation, to what Bosworth calls “a grotesque degree.” The last of Alexander’s Persian battles was not complicated by rivers or mountain passes. It occurred instead on the plains, which Darius had flattened even further for the benefit of his scythed chariots (see Figure 3). The

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Arrian</th>
<th>Curtius</th>
<th>Diodorus</th>
<th>Plutarch</th>
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<td><strong>Mace. Troops</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cavalry</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foot</td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>47,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Mace. Casualties** |       |         |          |          |
| Cavalry             | 1,000 | ?       | ?        | -        |
| Foot                | 100   | ?       | 500 (very many) |          |
| Total (wounded)     | 1,100 | 300     |          |          |

| **Persian Troops** |         |         |          |          |
| Cavalry            | 40,000  | 45,000  | 200,000  | ?        |
| Foot               | 1,000,000 | 200,000 | 800,000  | ?        |
| Misc               | 200     | ?       | ?        |          |
| Total              | 1,040,200 | 245,000 | 1,000,000 | 1,000,000 |

| **Persian Casualties** |       |         |          |          |
| Cavalry              | ?      | ?       | ?        | -        |
| Foot                 | ?      | ?       | ?        |          |
| Misc                 | 300,000 |       |          |          |
| Total (captives)     | (<300,000) | 40,000  | 90,000   |          |

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105 Arr. 3.13.
106 Arr. 3.16.
107 Curt. 4.16.
108 Diod. 17.61.
109 Arr. 3.8.
110 Curt. 4.12.
111 Diod. 17.53.
113 Arr. 3.16. The number of Persian prisoners “greatly exceeded” the number of casualties.
114 Curt. 4.16.
115 Diod. 17.61.
Figure 3. The battle of Gaugamela.
Persian army kept two forces of cavalry heaped on its wings, to nonetheless prevent any Macedonian attempt to outflank them. Alexander again drew the Persian left away from the center, creating a gap in the line. The Persians opened a gap in the Macedonian line as well, but instead of sending cavalry through to attack the Macedonian rear, the soldiers instead began a raid on Alexander’s baggage train. Alexander, meanwhile, pulled his cavalry into a wedge-shaped formation and broke through the gap in the Persian line. Though the Persians had a significant lead in numbers, and were faring well despite a few poor decisions, the sight of the cavalry rushing towards him prompted Darius to flee. This led to chaos as soldiers turned to follow him, and a battle that should have been an easy Persian victory became a total rout.

The Persian army appears most bloated at the battle of Gaugamela. The figures appear quite inflated in isolation, but the unobjectionable figure given for the Macedonian side makes the absurdity even more obvious. The “fabulous and fantastic” numbers for the Persian army are ridiculous from a logistical standpoint, and even with an expert tactician acting as general, and taking the lowest figures from the ancient sources, Alexander’s army is still outnumbered by some 200,000 men. The ratio here is at its worst, with the Persians outnumbering the Macedonians 22:1 by Arrian’s figures. A more realistic suggestion for the Persian army size from Warry ranges from 64-65,000 infantry, and 35,000 cavalry, less than 10% of the 1,000,000 troops suggested by Diodorus and Plutarch. Curtius’ figures are still obviously inflated, but are by far the most reasonable. His source must have differed from the other biographers, but what prompted him to include this figure is not certain. Nothing in his

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118 Fuller 1989, p. 164.
language gives his source away, and his incomplete description of the forces at Issus is maddening. Did he use a more accurate source there, too? His figure for the casualties matches those in the other surviving biographies, which makes his more reasonable figure for the Persian troops at Gaugamela all the more confusing.

Close inspection of the numbers given for the Persian army does not inspire confidence in our ancient sources.\(^{120}\) We cannot find a single reliable author because the authors are not consistent from battle to battle and sometimes all agree on patently absurd numbers. Modern sources agree that the Persians almost certainly had a significant numerical superiority at both pitched battles, but few are willing to defend the bloated numbers in the ancient sources.\(^{121}\) Some, like Sekunda and Warry, suspect the inflated figures include all individuals on the royal payroll, including keepers of the horses, cooks, and any other paid followers.\(^{122}\) This could conceivably be the case with Plutarch, whose language is vague, but is not helpful with the largest figure, given by Arrian. He describes not only the size of the Persian army as a force in general, but the size of specific units, explicitly designating a massive military force.\(^{123}\) The progression of the three Asiatic battles is also confusing. The Macedonians fought against just a portion of the Persian army at the Granicus, so the smaller size of the Persian forces compared to later battles makes sense. At the battle of Issus, though, they should have fought Darius’ army at its largest. Darius’ army is thoroughly defeated, and yet he somehow manages to almost double its size by the time of Gaugamela. What were those 400,000 troops doing during the battle of Issus?

\(^{120}\) Hammond 1992, p. 398.
\(^{121}\) Cartledge 2004, p. 145.
\(^{122}\) Sekunda and Warry 1998, p. 78.
\(^{123}\) Arr. 3.8.
The reason for ballooning the figures, arguably within the realm of standard military propaganda for the river battles but downright unreasonable for the pitched battles, seems to be the long-standing tradition of massive Persian armies. The overlarge figures for the Persian armies have been chosen to illustrate the conflict between a small Greek force and a massive, losing army. This is why Arrian, whose descriptions of the movements of the battles are generally quite good, nonetheless sports the most inflated numbers; he is writing as the new Xenophon, detailing the life of the last and best representative of the Greeks versus the Persians. Contemporary sources probably offered both low and high numbers, the official published sources containing large numbers to promote morale and link Alexander’s similarity with the Greek heroes and victors of the past, while the official, unpublished logistical records Hammond is certain were kept would have been dryly accurate.\textsuperscript{124} Eyewitness testimony, as gathered by interested biographers contemporary to Alexander’s Successors, would have varied considerably. The authors consciously relied on sources that best supported their interpretations of Alexander’s successes, and favored descriptions that made him out to be the panhellenic hero they thought he was.

\textbf{Inflation and Deflation of Losses}

As previously mentioned, inflating the size of the enemy army was not the only way to increase the greatness of a victory: An army could accomplish much the same by minimizing their own casualties, thus downplaying the might of their foes, and suggesting superior strength down to the individual soldier’s level. Rogers suggests the low losses for the victorious Macedonians are partly due to the style of warfare, where

\textsuperscript{124} Hammond 1989, pp. 57, 59.
most fatalities occur during the rout, but even this is not enough to explain the figures in the ancient sources. The miniscule Macedonian losses at the Granicus are addressed in Chapter 4, but those related to Issus and Gaugamela, though greater, are still incredibly low. At Issus, the Macedonians lose, at most, a paltry 450 men. The greatest number of Macedonian losses described for the battle at Gaugamela is Arrian’s 1,100. The low losses probably stem from propaganda intended to suggest that Alexander’s soldiers were well protected and that each victory was complete. Low losses are important to the panhellenic model in which Alexander was operating, as well, to indicate the hardiness of the Greeks.

The small Macedonian losses are sharply contrasted with the “patently absurd” Persian losses, as evidenced by Tables 2 and 3. The reason for this may be the most obvious: the Persian losses must be scaled to match the inflated army size. The figures for the Persian dead at Issus are almost the same between the authors, as they are for the army size, and approximately 18% of the Persian army fell in battle. The percentage killed is much less consistent in the figures for Gaugamela, but remains relatively low, as Arrian records 28% of the army killed, Curtius 16%, and Diodorus only 9%. For this reason, the Persian losses at the Granicus are especially perplexing. Diodorus records that 10% of the Persian army died and a full 18% were captured as prisoners, while Arrian records only 5% of the army taken captive, and a whopping 53% died on the field. This great disparity was perhaps caused by each author’s motives and biases in choosing sources for the event. Diodorus records the death of 10,000 “Persian infantry,” and does

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125 Rogers 2005, p. 75.
126 Diód. 17.36.
127 Arr. 3.16.
128 Devine 1986a, p. 108.
not distinguish between the Greek mercenaries and the native Persians.\textsuperscript{129} In Arrian’s account, the cavalry casualties are light because Alexander abandoned chasing them so he could turn his attention to the “foreign mercenaries,” the Greeks.\textsuperscript{130} Arrian describes them disparagingly, that their obedience to formation was “not, indeed, from any deliberate intention of proving their courage, but simply because [they were] deprived of their wits.”\textsuperscript{131} Alexander has them “butchered to a man,” taking only 2,000 prisoners out of 20,000, whom he has sent “to hard labor in Macedonia as a punishment for contravening the resolution of the League of Corinth by fighting in a foreign army against their own countrymen.”\textsuperscript{132} Arrian’s focus on the infantry as betrayers of Greece is in keeping with Alexander’s mission of panhellenism, and as a result his figures focus on the death of almost all the mercenaries. Diodorus is uninterested in the infantry’s status as Greek mercenaries, and has favored a source that does not note the anti-Persian aspect.

\textbf{Conclusion}

When the high Persian troop totals and casualty numbers are compared with the low Macedonian figures, one begins to wonder if the Macedonians were anything less than superheroes. Though Hammond provides good evidence to believe the Macedonians kept accurate records of their casualties and military figures, clearly these numbers did not find their way into our extant sources, except perhaps as Plutarch’s record for the Hydaspes, Curtius’ for Gaugamela, and Arrian’s for the Granicus.\textsuperscript{133} The distribution of plausible figures appears to be random. Though affected by standard

\textsuperscript{129} Diod. 17.21.
\textsuperscript{130} Arr. 1.16.
\textsuperscript{131} Arr. 1.16.
\textsuperscript{132} Arr. 1.16-17.
\textsuperscript{133} Hammond 1989, pp. 57, 59.
military propaganda, these more reasonable figures probably came from logistical documents or letters, while the truly extreme figures are probably a result of political propaganda contemporary to Alexander. The Macedonian’s victories at the Granicus, at Issus, and at Gaugamela were viewed in the west as the triumph of Greece over Persia.\(^{134}\) Even at the battle at the Hydaspes River, despite the fact that Alexander was no longer fighting in Asia, his panhellenic justification continued. While sliding and struggling for footing as he crossed the river in Plutarch’s account, Alexander exclaimed, “O you Athenians, will you ever believe what risks I am running just to earn your praise?”\(^{135}\) Though his panhellenic motivation for attacking India arguably fell on deaf ears, undoubtedly the official reports attempted to justify his actions as a continuation of honoring the mainland Greeks. Alexander’s cultural context as a panhellenic hero permeated every aspect of his career, and reveals itself with considerable clarity in the numerical descriptions of his battles.

\(^{134}\) Flower 2000, p. 133.  
\(^{135}\) Plut. Alexander 59.
CHAPTER 4: HOMERIC HEROISM AND ALEXANDER’S RECKLESSNESS

Introduction

Alexander was long dead when our surviving biographies were written, and his cult had been established throughout his former empire almost immediately after his death. It is not surprising that a man so successful in battle was later regarded as a hero and a god, but Alexander reinforced and perhaps instantiated the association during his lifetime. He is not merely heroic in his success, but is explicitly compared to Achilles, and seems to have begun emulating the Greek hero early in life. Many references are made to Alexander’s swiftness, both as a general and personally, which perhaps would be the only way he could hope to emulate Achilles in body, as he was rather short in stature.136 Along with qualities like speed, Alexander exhibits Achilles’ towering rage and deep grief, but these emotions appear to have been unconsciously adopted, and emphasized by his biographers. From a military standpoint, Alexander’s emulation of Achilles’ courage stands out considerably. The numerous wounds he received in battle attest to his personal bravery. He was reckless not only with his person, but occasionally also with his army. The ancient authors seldom lay blame on Alexander for arriving in tactically dangerous situations; bad situations arise accidentally, or are unavoidable. Though the two most prominent examples, at the siege of Pelium and at the Granicus River, are admittedly from early in Alexander’s career as a general, the ancient authors do not attempt to use his inexperience as an excuse. Instead, they fail to address the mistake at all, as at Pelium, or mask failure by rewriting history, as Green suggests occurred at the Granicus. Though occasionally a detriment to his health, Alexander

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136 Homer, *Iliad* 1.66, 1.74; Diod. 16.86, 17.4.
appears to have naturally fit the Homeric model for bravery, and the similarities between himself and Achilles are only emphasized, not invented.

**Alexander as Homeric Hero**

If we accept the ancient sources, Alexander instigated the comparison between himself and Achilles. Plutarch relates that he kept the *Iliad* under his pillow and regarded it as a handbook on the art of war. Later, when a small casket (but Darius’ “most valuable item”) was brought to him, Alexander announced that he intended to keep his most valuable item inside it: his copy of the *Iliad*. Arrian, Diodorus and Plutarch all record that Alexander made sacrifices at Troy on the eve of his Asiatic campaign. Plutarch writes that he anointed the grave of Achilles with oil, and crowned it with a wreath, dismissing a chance to see Paris’ lyre while wistfully wishing he could see Achilles’. Arrian records that, along with Alexander’s wreath for Achilles, Hephaestion put one on the tomb of Patroclus. Alexander also traded a set of armor for one from the Trojan war, and he had it carried into battle with him ever after. Diodorus’ account is briefer, mentioning only that Alexander visited the tombs of Achilles and Ajax, and honored them with offerings and marks of respect. Later, the Macedonian even justified his marriage to Roxane by referring to his ancestral hero, noting that Achilles too shared his bed with a captive. He eagerly re-enacted even Achilles’ less laudable feats, as at Gaza, where he had Betis’ body tied behind his chariot.

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140 Arr. 1.11.
141 Arr. 1.11.
142 Diod. 17.17.
143 Curt. 8.4.
and dragged along, just as Achilles did Hector.\textsuperscript{144} The idea of comparing himself to Achilles may have been suggested to Alexander when he was a child, as his tutor Lysimachus was in the habit of comparing himself to Phoenix, and calling Alexander his Achilles.\textsuperscript{145} Alexander’s association with Achilles is not always so explicit, though, and is reinforced by the Macedonian king’s embodiment of his dead hero’s more prominent traits, such as Achilles’ intense emotions.

The \textit{Iliad} begins with Achilles’ rage, and the depth of his fury is invoked again and again.\textsuperscript{146} He is filled with “heart-devouring anger” for having been robbed of the treasure he considered rightly his, and later this same rage is turned toward Hector.\textsuperscript{147} Alexander, too, regularly feels he has been robbed and grows furious. Plutarch suggests Alexander’s “fury had been sated with blood, like a lion’s” by the destruction of Thebes.\textsuperscript{148} Diodorus suggests the source of this furor was that the Thebans called him a tyrant, which “stung” him, causing him to fly “into a towering rage” and threaten the Thebans with “the extremity of punishment,” which he so delivered.\textsuperscript{149} At Tyre, too, Alexander became angry when the Tyrians refused his entry, and exacted cruel punishment there.\textsuperscript{150} The murder of Cleitus illustrates the speed with which his fury could be roused, and the price exacted even from a man Alexander loved.\textsuperscript{151} Alexander was not only quick to anger, according to the ancient sources, but was deeply hurt by the accusations of his troops, and resorted to running off to his tent in a way that parallels the

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\textsuperscript{144} Curt. 4.6.  \\
\textsuperscript{145} Plut. \textit{Alexander} 24.  \\
\textsuperscript{146} Homer, \textit{Iliad} 1.1, 1.226, 1.581, 9.89.  \\
\textsuperscript{147} Homer, \textit{Iliad} 9.316, 22.369.  \\
\textsuperscript{148} Plut. \textit{Alexander} 13.  \\
\textsuperscript{149} Diod. 17.9.  \\
\textsuperscript{150} Diod. 17.40.  \\
\textsuperscript{151} Arr. 4.8-9.  
\end{flushright}
sulking of Achilles quite clearly. Achilles “raged on, grimly camped by his fast fleet,” because of a wrong done by Agamemnon, and his “cruel, relentless fury” would not allow him to relent and join the Greeks in battle.\footnote{Homer, \textit{Iliad} 1.581, 9.777.} Alexander, too, retreats to his tent in anger. Curtius relates that at the Hyphasis, he “jumped down from the dais” and retreated to his tent, and “two days were devoted to his anger” before he finally relented on the third, and Arrian corroborates the length of his isolation.\footnote{Curt. 9.3; Arr. 5.29.} Plutarch’s Alexander was “so overcome with disappointment and anger that he shut himself up and lay prostrate in his tent,” not only recollecting Achilles but also the archetype of the jilted lover.\footnote{Plut. \textit{Alexander} 62; Bosworth 2000, p. 21.} At Opis, Arrian’s Alexander “neither ate nor washed nor permitted any of his friends to see him,” again for three days.\footnote{Arr. 7.11.} Plutarch relates that he “angrily rebuked” the Macedonians for the words that “stung him,” and that he “refused to receive them” for a long time despite their pitiful lamentations.\footnote{Plut. \textit{Alexander} 71.}

Another clear parallel between Alexander and Achilles is the death of each man’s “favorite,” and each man’s subsequent reaction. At the news of Patroclus’ death, “a black cloud of grief came shrouding over Achilles.”\footnote{Homer, \textit{Iliad} 18.24.} He dirtied his face with soot and ash, fouling his face and clothes.\footnote{Homer, \textit{Iliad} 18.27.} Achilles heedlessly allows Greek soldiers to die while he remains in his tent, but Patroclus he “loved beyond all other comrades,” and was heartbroken.\footnote{Homer, \textit{Iliad} 18.95.} Hephaestion occupied a similar place to Alexander, who “had loved

\footnote{152 Homer, \textit{Iliad} 1.581, 9.777.} \footnote{153 Curt. 9.3; Arr. 5.29.} \footnote{154 Plut. \textit{Alexander} 62; Bosworth 2000, p. 21.} \footnote{155 Arr. 7.11.} \footnote{156 Plut. \textit{Alexander} 71.} \footnote{157 Homer, \textit{Iliad} 18.24.} \footnote{158 Homer, \textit{Iliad} 18.27.} \footnote{159 Homer, \textit{Iliad} 18.95.}
Alexander was “intensely grieved” by his death, according to Diodorus. Plutarch relates that his grief was “uncontrollable,” that he ordered the manes and tails of the horses to be shorn, hung his friend’s physician and forbade the playing of flutes. Alexander “flung himself on the body of his friend and lay there nearly all day long in tears,” took no food for two days, nor paid attention to his bodily needs, according to Arrian, who directly states that Alexander cut his hair short in emulation of Achilles’ grief for Patroclus. Alexander shared not only grief with his Homeric hero, but also sought to outdo him in the creation of a funeral pyre for his dead friend. Achilles’ pyre for Patroclus was a hundred feet in length and breadth. Alexander’s for Hephaestion was even more outrageous, almost a mile in length and breadth and approximately 260 feet tall, according to Diodorus. Plutarch and Arrian appraise the funeral costs at 10,000 talents. Each man offered a superlative sacrifice for his fallen comrade, as well: both sacrificed animals, and Alexander’s 10,000-12,000 victims probably surpassed the unstated number for Patroclus. Achilles’ chief sacrificial victims were not among the animals, though, but consisted of a dozen young, unfortunate Trojans. Not to be outdone, Alexander “set off on a campaign, as if the tracking down and hunting of men might console him, and he subdued the tribe of the Cosseans, massacring the whole male population … [as] a sacrifice to the spirit of

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Hephaestion,” a chilling defeat of Achilles’ “mere” twelve Trojans.169 Here, too, it seems that the Macedonian king encouraged the association with Achilles, and that Alexander spent a great amount of money on his friend’s funeral is not unreasonable, though the exact details and his motive for destroying the Cosseans may have been exaggerated to make the comparison clearer.

**Personal Recklessness**

If Alexander behaved like Achilles, and admired him, it was because they presumably shared the same self-proclaimed motivation: martial glory, especially at the expense of a long, domestic life. Achilles famously decides to continue the fight against the Trojans, turning aside the chance to live long should he return home, preferring that his glory “will never die.”170 On the eve of his Asiatic campaign, Diodorus relates that Alexander went against the wishes of his advisors, “eager for action,” thinking it would be “a disgrace” to stay home and father children before embarking on a journey that quite conceivably could have cost him his life.171 Plutarch declares that Alexander “cared nothing for pleasure and wealth, but only for deeds of valor and glory,” which is certainly in keeping with the actions of the Macedonian king’s short life.172 Arrian notes that Alexander also admired Hercules and Dionysus for their fame, and his aspirations eventually turned to frank comparisons when he believed he equaled (or even surpassed) these figures.173 Curtius is the most straightforward about Alexander’s lust for glory. Where Diodorus relates the scene of Alexander’s refusal to compromise with Darius, he

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171 Diod. 17.16.
173 Arr. 3.3, 5.26.
simply says Alexander would accept “if [he] were Parmenio.”

Though this directly refers to Parmenio’s lack of courage and desire for battle, Curtius’ version sets Alexander’s heroic desires directly against the classically Persian desire for wealth, oddly embodied by Parmenio, whom Alexander suggests “[prefers] money to military glory.”

The most striking episode, however, is Alexander’s speech after his nearly fatal wound by the Malli, reported by Curtius:

“To die in such exploits, if fortune so will it, is a noble fate. Such is the stock from which I am descended that I must wish for a full life rather than a long one.”

Though probably not Alexander’s exact words, Alexander’s actions correspond to such a belief. This interpretation is supported by the consideration of Alexander’s regular, unnecessarily dangerous role in battle, and the subsequent wounds he received. The possibility of single combat with the cream of Persia’s crop is represented as being irresistible to Alexander, just as Achilles sought glory in the front lines. When criticizing Agamemnon early in the Iliad, Achilles lambastes him for not fighting in battle personally. He would have found no fault with Alexander, who is cited numerous times for leading his troops into battle personally, often at the head of the right wing of the Companions during cavalry charges, but also on foot during sieges. Alexander, like Achilles, is perpetually the aggressor; the latter famously chases Hector to “seize great glory” for the sake of fallen Patroclus. At the Granicus, Alexander “galloped out

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174 Diod. 17.54.
175 Curt. 4.8.
176 Curt. 9.6.
177 Homer, Iliad 1. 262-67.
178 At the Granicus: Diod., 17.19, Plut. Alexander 16; At Tyre: Arr. 2.24; At Halicarnassus: Diod., 17.26, Arr. 1.22; At Gaza: Curt. 4.6; At Issus: Diod. 17.33, Plut. Alexander 20; At Gaugamela: Diod. 17.57; Vs. Bandits: Curt. 7.6; Vs. the Malli: Arr. 6.9.
179 Homer, Iliad 22.165-171.
in front of his men,” baited by the sight of noble Persians to slay.180 He is motivated specifically by the chance at striking down Persian nobility, which relates well with a lesser discussed aspect of Homeric martial heroism, namely that cutting down a famous or powerful enemy was almost as good as having that great pedigree yourself, and complete martial glory required such a high-profile enemy.181

Alexander’s occupation on the front line suits him as a hero in the form of Achilles, but he was regularly in mortal danger. No wounds are recorded for the pacification of Greece and the tribes around Macedonia, but his first close call occurred in his very first conflict with the Persians. Arrian reports that at the battle of the Granicus Rhosaces sliced off part of his helmet, and Plutarch that the barbarian’s battle-axe (this time in the hand of Spithridates) grazed the hair on his head.182 Alexander was also stabbed by a javelin, although the blade did not go all the way through his breastplate.183 Diodorus’ account is the most violent, as the spear actually passes though Alexander’s shield and right epomis before lodging in the breastplate; Alexander still remains unharmed, but Rhosaces’ swing of the axe gives him a “slight scalp wound.”184 At Issus, Alexander took a wound to the thigh, but this was apparently not a very serious injury, though one agreed on by all the extant sources.185 His next wound was more serious; at the siege of Gaza, he was hit in the shoulder by a catapult missile and was saved only because it first passed through his shield and cuirass before lodging there.186 Curtius goes into detail, that “blood began to gush” from the wound, and that Alexander tried to

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180 Arr. 1.16.
182 Arr. 1.16; Plut. Alexander 16.
183 Plut. Alexander 16.
184 Diod. 17.20.
185 Arr. 2.12; Curt. 3.12; Diod. 17.34; Plut. Alexander 20.
186 Arr. 2.27; Curt. 4.6; Plut. Alexander 25.
stand his ground, but fainted and had to be carried off the field.  

Alexander was wounded again on the way to Marakanda, this time in the leg. Arrian says Alexander was shot “through” the leg, and that the fibula was broken, while Curtius states that the arrowhead was left “firmly lodged” in the bone. Plutarch’s wound is slightly more serious, because the arrow “splintered the shin bone so that the fragments had to be taken out.” Almost immediately the Macedonian king was wounded again, shortly after discovering Darius had been murdered, a wound which Arrian simply records as “a violent blow from a stone upon his head and neck.” Plutarch and Curtius go into more detail, the former detailing that Alexander’s “vision became clouded and remained so for a long time after,” and that later “everything went dark” and Alexander “collapsed unconscious,” much to the horror of his army. Curtius goes on to describe the king’s subsequent slow recovery, his orders issued in “a quavering voice” that became “increasingly feeble” as he spoke. There is yet another arrow wound to the shoulder, this one apparently not very serious, and a slight wound to the ankle at Massaga according to Arrian, reported as a much more serious wound in Curtius’ account. This list of the king’s wounds suggests that the danger in which he thrived was not a mere invention of the sources to conform Alexander’s image to that of a hero fighting on the front lines, but rather something he deliberately sought out time and time again.

The most memorable of Alexander’s wounds is undoubtedly the arrow wound taken in India, at the otherwise unnamed Malli town. Standing alone on the walls, his

187 Curt. 4.6.  
188 Arr. 3.30; Curt. 7.6.  
189 Plut. Alexander 45.  
190 Arr. 4.3.  
191 Plut. Alexander 45; Curt. 7.6.  
192 Curt. 7.7.  
193 Arr. 4.24, .26; Curt. 8.10.
army held back first by hesitation and then by ladders broken by their eagerness to reach him, Alexander made an “incredible and phenomenal move” – he leaped alone into the mass of enemy soldiers on the other side. 194 Curtius describes Alexander, weary from keeping the Malli at bay, “helmet shattered by rocks,” as being transfixed by an arrow “two cubits long.” 195 In typical Curtian style, the wound spits forth “a thick jet of blood,” and Alexander collapses. 196 In Plutarch’s account, Alexander landed on his feet, and held fast as the Malli “rained blows upon his armor with sword and spear as he tried to defend himself,” until at last he was shot by an arrow that punched through his breastplate and “lodged in his chest between the ribs.” 197 Arrian’s account is the least descriptive as to the actual injury, but he describes the wound as being dire indeed, as air mixed with blood, indicating a punctured lung. 198 Alexander sank to his knees in both Plutarch and Diodorus’ accounts, and “was wounded over and over again,” taking another blow to the neck with a club before help finally reached him. 199

Many remark on Alexander’s short life, but in light of the number of wounds he received and the dangerous atmosphere he seems to have enjoyed, that he lived to thirty-two seems miraculously long. Most of the extant sources do not comment on Alexander’s dangerous lifestyle, other than to point out his need for glory in a way that recalls Achilles. Curtius is the only author to repeatedly point out Alexander’s bravado when noting his position in the front rank. Before his wound at Gaza, Alexander fights

194 Curt. 9.4-5; Arr. 6.9; Plut. Alexander 63.
195 Curt. 9.5.
196 Curt. 9.5.
197 Plut. Alexander 63.
198 Arr. 6.10.
199 Plut. Alexander 63; Diod. 17.99.
“courageously” ahead of his men.\textsuperscript{200} A hint of praise for Alexander’s toughness is apparent in the detail that the Macedonian rode around “fulfilling his objectives no less energetically” for the unbandaged wound still bleeding from his leg.\textsuperscript{201} Alexander’s position on the front lines, even when they result in all but his most serious wounds, get no word of condemnation from the ancient sources. The strongest negative statement regarding Alexander’s recklessness in battle is offered again by Curtius, but it is weak criticism at best. Curtius merely prefaces the suicidal leap into the Malli fortress with his opinion that it adds “far more to his reputation for recklessness than to his glorious record.”\textsuperscript{202} All of Alexander’s other wounds are part of that glorious record, and he is admired for soldiering on despite his wounds.

Alexander’s perceived lust for glory may owe more to his heritage as a Macedonian king than his own personal recklessness. Alexander was operating in a mode that may have been a long-standing Macedonian tradition, although as with most aspects of Macedonian history, our evidence begins with Philip. Macedonian kings were inextricably tied up with their armies, and the army’s acceptance of a successor was necessary to take the kingship.\textsuperscript{203} Philip’s great success as a general is often eclipsed by the deeds of Alexander, but the father was easily as innovative as the son – and also took his share of wounds.\textsuperscript{204} All told, he was wounded at least in the eye, the collarbone, the arm, and the leg.\textsuperscript{205} His collarbone was shattered during a conflict with the Illyrians, and

\textsuperscript{200} Curt. 4.6.  
\textsuperscript{201} Curt. 8.10.  
\textsuperscript{202} Curt. 9.5.  
\textsuperscript{203} Badian 1963, p. 248; Fredericksmyer 1990, p. 304.  
\textsuperscript{204} Billows 1995, pp. 16, 18.  
\textsuperscript{205} Riginos 1994, p. 105.
his leg maimed so badly by the Triballi that he was lame thereafter. In the twenty-three years between the beginning of Philip’s rule and his death, he seems to have sustained only these four wounds, and only three in combat – Alexander fought in his first battle at age sixteen, and took at least six, perhaps seven wounds in combat in the remaining sixteen years of his life. Though a precedent for personal bravery certainly existed in Philip’s time, Alexander managed to place himself in far more dangerous situations than his father. Where the extant authors do not seem to see the threat of Alexander’s death, they record the fear of the Macedonian army, for whom Alexander’s death would have been a catastrophe. The men knew “the lives of them all depended on his alone.” When Alexander fell sick at the river Cydnus, Curtius describes the soldiers as complaining “in tears,” consumed by “a deep anxiety that bordered on grief,” utterly at a loss as to what they would do if he died. Their worries were quite real. Alexander had no official successor, so they would not know where to turn. The army might be divided, and with it any funds Alexander had with him. Who would arrange for food and supplies for the trip home? Who would supply a fleet to cross the Hellespont? Formerly pacified cities might rebel at the news of Alexander’s death and refuse to allow the Macedonians in, so that even the overland aspect of the trip would be mired in danger. The valid concerns of the army, however, remained unaddressed despite Alexander’s constant flirtation with danger
and death. Arrian records that, after one of Alexander’s minor shoulder wounds, “all prisoners were butchered” by Alexander’s soldiers in revenge for the injury.\textsuperscript{210} Though the troops undoubtedly felt a fondness, maybe even a deep love for their general, it seems more likely the soldiers were angered by their proximity to disaster, anger that would have been better directed toward Alexander himself. He regularly placed himself, and thus his army, in very real danger, and went beyond the personal involvement necessitated by a Macedonian king. For this reason, his boldness should be viewed as recklessness, and deserves the same condemnation as of a general that repeatedly and needlessly endangered his troops.

**Tactical Recklessness**

Alexander did not treat his army as carelessly as he did his own person, though the effect was the same. He appears to have made only two tactical errors of any significance, but both were the fault of over-eagerness. The first occurred in 335BC at the siege of Pelium, a city on the western edge of Macedonia, shortly before Alexander crossed into Asia. Alexander set out for the city after crossing the Danube, when he was informed of reports of revolt in western Macedonia (see Figure 4).\textsuperscript{211} Cleitus, an Illyrian king, was stirring up trouble, and had acquired as allies Glaucias, king of the Taulantians, and the tribe of the Autariates, who intended to attack the Macedonians on the march.\textsuperscript{212} Alexander’s host, king Langaros of the Agrianes, offered to take care of the Autariates, so Alexander sped off toward Pelium, where Cleitus was waiting.\textsuperscript{213} The

\textsuperscript{210} Arr. 4.24.  
\textsuperscript{211} Arr. 1.4.  
\textsuperscript{212} Arr. 1.4.  
\textsuperscript{213} Arr. 1.5.
Figure 4. The location of Pelium in relation to Alexander’s route through mainland Greece.
Illyrian could not have chosen a better location. The city occupied a naturally defensible position, all but impregnable, approached by a narrow pass and surrounded on three sides by densely wooded mountains.\(^2\) This well-defended city occupied an important place on the Macedonian border, and because Alexander intended to leave a very small force behind with Antipater, his regent, he could afford no major rebellions at home while campaigning in Asia.\(^3\) Necessity hardly excuses the situation in which he soon found himself. Alexander “thought fit to get on the move without delay,” according to Arrian, and arrived at Pelium before Glaucias. He surprised the Illyrians in the middle of a sacrifice, who fled to the walls of the town at Alexander’s approach, leaving the sacrificial victims behind: three girls, three boys, and three black rams.\(^4\) Alexander’s speed would have been wise had he expected an immediate engagement, and he certainly caught the Illyrians off guard, but his army arrived only to begin a siege they could not possibly complete in time.\(^5\) They had been informed that Glaucias was coming to reinforce Cleitus’ army, and when the reinforcements arrived (only a day after Alexander’s own arrival) the Macedonians were trapped. Kern rightly calls this an embarrassing situation, and a dangerous one too, with Alexander’s army caught between an extremely well defended city and a large enemy force to the immediate rear.\(^6\)

Several modern sources describe Alexander’s subsequent maneuvers as extraordinary or fantastic: Green insists “the ruse by which [Alexander] extricated himself must stand as one of the most eccentrically brilliant stratagems in the whole

\(^2\) Green 1991, p. 132.
\(^3\) Fuller 1989, p. 85.
\(^4\) Arr. 1.5.
\(^5\) Fuller 1989, p. 85.
history of warfare.” 219 The Macedonians were instructed to march in a silent parade, thoroughly confusing the Illyrians. They practiced a variety of maneuvers in complete and total silence, and at the sudden signal of a commander burst into a fierce war-cry that shook the enemy troops to the core. 220 As the Macedonians erupted into a charge, the Tautantians fled in disorder, and the Macedonians managed to make their way out of the narrow pass. 221 Safely outside and having convinced the forces of Cleitus and Glaucias that he had retreated, Alexander waited three days for them to lower their guard, and then assaulted Pelium again, this time with no enemy to his rear, and successfully took the fortress. 222

Alexander’s remarkable recovery obscures the fact that he deliberately marched his forces into a highly dangerous situation, and had his bizarre posturing failed to extricate them, Alexander the Great may not have even begun the campaign for which he is so famous. Though modern sources praise the Macedonian for his incredible escape, tacticians like Fuller concede that the event better demonstrates the hazards of siege warfare than Alexander’s ability as a general. 223 It is noteworthy that the siege is not even mentioned by the other ancient sources – Arrian is the only one at all interested in Alexander’s military movements between the sack of Thebes and the excursion into Asia. The affair is painted as a minor conflict compared to the greatness of the pitched battles, but ultimately it was very important from a military standpoint. Pelium occupied a critical location on Macedonia’s western frontier, and the rebellion was spearheaded by Cleitus, the son of the Illyrian Bardylis who had resisted against Philip; securing the

220 Arr. 1.6.
221 Arr. 1.6.
222 Arr. 1.7.
border was imperative to Alexander’s successful occupation of Asia if he was to take most of his soldiers with him.\textsuperscript{224} Alexander left Antipater with too small an army to defend itself from numerous assailants, but the victory was decisive, and only one outbreak occurred on the northern and western borders during Alexander’s entire campaign.\textsuperscript{225} The siege of Pelium was also the first recorded usage of field artillery\textsuperscript{226} – all in all, an incredible battle that somehow escapes mention in all but one of the sources. Whether because the siege was deemed unworthy for its lack of panhellenistic importance or because it forces the recognition of Alexander’s blundering into what Arrian simply calls an “awkward position,” it remains one of Alexander’s only major mistakes.\textsuperscript{227}

The only other major error of tactics in Alexander’s career appears in his attack at the Granicus River. Green has found evidence for a failed maneuver and subsequent cover-up in the disparity between the descriptions of Arrian, Plutarch and Diodorus. Where at Pelium Alexander’s mistake is simply glossed over, or the entire event omitted, the description of the Granicus battle appears to have been rewritten completely. The surviving accounts are said to contain “substantial inaccuracies,” as across the three surviving biographies (Curtius’ section has been lost) two separate battles emerge.\textsuperscript{228} The “sketchy and abbreviated” nature of the surviving descriptions suggests a lack of information available to our extant sources, perhaps because the later biographers struggled with the contradictory information.\textsuperscript{229}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{224} Green 1991, p. 131.
\item \textsuperscript{225} Fuller 1989, p. 85.
\item \textsuperscript{226} Fuller 1989, p. 226.
\item \textsuperscript{227} Arr. 1.6.
\item \textsuperscript{228} Green 1991, p. 494.
\item \textsuperscript{229} Devine 1986b, p. 266.
\end{itemize}
Plutarch and Arrian for the most part agree, but Diodorus’ version differs significantly.\textsuperscript{230} In Plutarch’s version, in the late afternoon Alexander insisted “the Hellespont would blush for shame if, once he had crossed it, he should shrink back from the Granicus,” and immediately thereafter “plunged into the stream with thirteen squadrons of cavalry.”\textsuperscript{231} Arrian’s account also takes place in the afternoon, with Alexander declaring in direct speech, “I should be ashamed of myself if a little trickle of water … were too much for us to cross.”\textsuperscript{232} Just as in Plutarch’s account, Alexander launches into the water with his cavalry and a single company of infantry.\textsuperscript{233} The story told by Diodorus, however, is quite different. Alexander “at dawn boldly brought his army across the river and deployed in good order before [the Persians] could stop him,” meeting him after this deployment with a cavalry charge.\textsuperscript{234} Oddly enough, this is exactly the advice Parmenio suggests in Arrian’s version, only to be disregarded by the young king:

“In my view our best plan in the present situation is to halt here, on this side of the river. The enemy infantry is heavily outnumbered by ours, and I do not think they will run the risk of remaining so close to us throughout the night; so if they withdraw, we can get across at dawn without opposition – indeed, we shall be over before they have a chance of getting into position to meet us.”\textsuperscript{235}

The battle, of course, ends the same way in all the sources: victory for the Macedonians, rout for the Persians, and slaughter for the enemy Greek mercenaries. The number of Persian dead claimed by the ancient sources ranges from 1,000-2,500 cavalry,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{230} Green 1991, p. 494.
\item \textsuperscript{231} Plut. Alexander 16.
\item \textsuperscript{232} Arr. 1.13.
\item \textsuperscript{233} Arr. 1.15.
\item \textsuperscript{234} Diod. 17.19.
\item \textsuperscript{235} Arr. 1.13.
\end{itemize}
along with approximately 20,000 Greek mercenaries “butchered to a man,” though in reality the number of mercenaries was probably somewhat lower.\(^{236}\) The figure for Macedonian losses, however, is so outrageously small that Green finds “it can hardly be explained away as propaganda,” dwarfing the losses at Alexander’s other battles by a wide margin.\(^{237}\) Diodorus does not list Macedonian casualties, but Arrian has the highest estimate at 25 Companions, 60 miscellaneous cavalry, and 30 infantrymen.\(^{238}\) Plutarch also lists 25 Companions killed, but only 9 infantry.\(^{239}\) That Arrian records such low losses is very odd indeed, as he writes the Macedonians “suffered severely.”\(^{240}\) Devine disregards Arrian’s remark and suggests the minimal losses reflect the ease with which the Macedonians overtook the Persians.\(^{241}\)

Arrian and Plutarch’s version of the battle is typically preferred to that of Diodorus, which is usually discarded as inaccurate.\(^{242}\) Diodorus is not usually considered a trustworthy source for military details on his own, and his description of outlandish siege equipment at Tyre only tarnishes his reputation further.\(^{243}\) The acceptance of Arrian’s account has caused problems for modern researchers, however, who struggle to understand the backwards Persian dispositions. Fuller calls the Persian formation as presented by Arrian and Plutarch “as defective as could be,” with the cavalry stacked against the riverbed where they could not possibly charge and the infantry placed

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\(^{237}\) Green 1991, p. 503.

\(^{238}\) Arr. 1.16.

\(^{239}\) Plut. *Alexander* 16.

\(^{240}\) Arr. 1.15.

\(^{241}\) Devine 1986b, p. 272.

\(^{242}\) Green 1991, p. 494; Devine 1986b, p. 266.

\(^{243}\) Diod. 17.43, 17.45.
impotently behind. Green calls the formation “patently suicidal,” boldly asserting the tactic makes the Persians “appear stupid almost past comprehension.” Memnon’s light-armed javelin men would have done a far better job posted on the river’s edge against Alexander’s floundering cavalry, whereas the mounted troops could at best wait for Alexander’s men to reach them and fight “a cavalry battle … with infantry tactics,” as Arrian observes. Not only was the Persian formation inexplicably backwards, but Alexander’s charge was foolhardy even for the risk-loving king. Green suggests that the only reason the battle did not end in complete disaster for the Macedonians was the “even more lunatic” strategy adopted by the Persians. Devine interprets Arrian’s description of Alexander’s advance into the river at an oblique angle as the same kind of maneuver he employed at Issus and Gaugamela, namely, the drawing-off of one side of the Persian line to create a gap in the line. If this was indeed the goal, it is odd that there is no record of the cavalry wedge breaking through this gap.

Diodorus’ version of the Granicus battle, however, seems to provide an “eminently sane” order of battle, one in which Parmenio’s advice has been followed. Green hypothesizes that these conflicting stories – one strategically nonsensical, the other attested by a single unreliable author – are in fact the two halves of a prolonged conflict. He believes there were “two battles at the Granicus, one, abortive, in the afternoon, the second, overwhelmingly successful, the following morning.” The version put forth by Arrian and Plutarch is that earlier, abortive attack. The absurdly low Macedonian

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244 Fuller 1989, p. 148.
246 Green 1991, p. 501; Arr. 1.15.
248 Devine 1986b, p. 274.
casualties are more appropriate if they represent the casualties suffered by the thirteen squadrons that made the initial charge across the river, including the few infantrymen, who made up that one company of infantry Arrian includes following the cavalry.\textsuperscript{251} After withdrawing from the river, into which the Persians would be unlikely to follow lest they in turn experience the suffering just inflicted on the Macedonians, Alexander waited and crossed the Granicus sometime during the night or early morning, making a very successful attack at dawn.\textsuperscript{252}

If Alexander did initially fail, the reasons for editing the official account are obvious. The battle at the Granicus River was the first major conflict of Alexander’s Asiatic campaign, and even if transformed into a great success the morning after, that the very first charge failed “would make the worst possible impression, not least on the still undecided Greek cities of Asia minor.”\textsuperscript{253} This warning is echoed at the end of Parmenio’s speech in Arrian: “A failure at the outset would be a serious thing now, and highly detrimental to our success in the long run.”\textsuperscript{254} Though Devine is eager to point out the overall unimportance of the battle of the Granicus, at least militarily, he admits Alexander needed a decisive victory for political reasons.\textsuperscript{255} For this reason the sense of action is heightened by descriptions of the treacherousness of the river itself, but modern examinations have found it lacking in depth and breadth.\textsuperscript{256} The story told in Plutarch and Arrian is probably that introduced in all likelihood by Eumenes, Alexander’s chief
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secretary, and Callisthenes, the official historian.\textsuperscript{257} The actual cover-up is less interesting than the failure itself: here is evidence of Alexander’s hot-headed recklessness doing him harm, suggesting he was as eager for action and heedless of danger as Achilles. Alexander already had considerable experience as a commander, though it was his first conflict in Asia, and his botched charge was caused not by stupidity, but by the same personal bravery that drew him to the front lines.

Conclusion

Alexander suffered no significant defeats during his time as a general, a feat that remains incredible even today. The setbacks he faced were minor, and the failures at the siege of Pelium and the Granicus River battle, though potentially catastrophic, were at worst near-misses. The Macedonian king’s emulation of Homeric ideals created dangerous situations for himself, and by extension his army, a fact that seems to strike home only after his wound from the Malli, but he somehow managed to avoid major disaster. Alexander wanted to be a hero on the level of Achilles, and not much embellishment is required to qualify him. His anger and grief may have been exaggerated to align his feelings with the extreme emotions of his Greek idol, but the bare facts attest to the similarity; his grief for Hephaestion was great, and Cleitus died because of the Macedonian’s short temper. Alexander likely appreciated the attempts from his contemporaries to bring up the comparison between himself and Achilles, and actively sought to further the connection with his heroic rival. That this put himself and his army in danger was not his greatest concern; he wanted glory, and miraculously

\textsuperscript{257} Green 1991, p. 505.
avoided real defeat by a combination of his own ingenuity, luck, and the creative writing of his official historians.
CHAPTER 5: INFLATED IMPORTANCE AT THE HYDASPES

Introduction

Alexander’s association with Achilles has thus far sharpened only the description of himself and his deeds, but at the battle of the Hydaspes River a new form of propaganda reveals itself: the inflated importance of the enemy. As we have seen, the great size of the Persian army is really only emphasized to show how poorly Darius managed it, and how worthless the individual soldiers were compared to the Macedonians. Darius himself is described as being quite cowardly, turning tail at both Issus and Gaugamela, eventually killed not in battle but at the hands of his own men.

The battles in India, the greatest of which occurred at the Hydaspes River, have an entirely different feeling to them. The Macedonians are still outnumbered, but now by a brave warrior king, fierce troops, exotic beasts, and even nature itself.

In describing the battle at the Hydaspes River, the last of Alexander’s great battles, Curtius notes the Macedonian king “derived glory from perilous situations” – undoubtedly true, and this battle was the most perilous the Macedonian king had ever attempted. The ancient sources describe a battle that combines obstacles which Alexander had previously faced one at a time: a river crossing, a large enemy force, and a high-ranking ruler. As these obstacles appear in India, they were even more dangerous than when they occurred in isolation. The river crossing occurs not in the bright of day but at night, during a thunderstorm, and the water is deeper, the slippery ground more treacherous. The army is not only large, but also includes exotic creatures that bar the way, and Alexander can only attack with a small portion of his army. Porus is a far superior foe than the cowardly (if ultimately ill-fated) Persian king, a ruler who fights

258 Curt. 8.13.
bravely in battle. This is consistent with the long tradition of anti-Persian sentiments exploited in the descriptions of the battles in Asia. Alexander’s enemies were not uniformly disparaged, only the Persians receive such disdain. The glorification of the Hydaspes River battle goes beyond the mere contrast of Persian foe with non-Persian foe, however. Modern scholars suspect the importance of the battle has been overstated to explain the Macedonian near-mutiny that occurred shortly after the conflict and to give Alexander one last great battle before the end of his campaign.259

The Hydaspes River Battle

Curtius tells us the Macedonians were alarmed not only by the size of Porus’ army, but also by the size of the river.260 The Hydaspes was “roaring, … swift and turbulent,” and according to the sources Alexander did not attempt to repeat a crossing in anything like the style of the Granicus.261 Curtius describes the river as being quite daunting, four stades wide, with a deep bed and no shallows at all, giving “the appearance of a vast sea” rather than a river.262 During the night crossing, the storm that Alexander used as cover made the going much worse. Curtius describes “a downpour scarcely tolerable,” and “roaring winds” that buffet the troops.263 Plutarch, ever intrigued by bizarre natural phenomena, especially regarding the will of the gods, relates that during the crossing a number of Alexander’s men were “struck dead by the lightning.”264 This would be standard fare, in keeping with other peculiar natural events that predicted

260 Curt. 8.13.
261 Arr. 5.10.
262 Curt. 8.13.
263 Curt. 8.13.
264 Arr. 5.10; Plut. Alexander 60.
Alexander’s future success or failure, but Plutarch makes no mention of religious significance.\textsuperscript{265} The enraged river and violent storm would usually indicate the displeasure of the gods, especially when men are dropping dead, but the anecdote is merely told to emphasize the bravery of Alexander and his men in a truly adverse situation.

Having crossed the river, the small Macedonian assault force met Porus’ son, whose own force was quickly routed. Though Arrian explicitly discounts the story, Plutarch says “most historians” agreed that Alexander’s beloved horse Bucephalas was wounded in this conflict, and later died as a result.\textsuperscript{266} This was clearly no small skirmish, but a serious battle in its own right.

The size of Porus’ army was comparatively smaller than those of Darius and his generals, but because Alexander had to attack with a smaller assault force, the Macedonians were nonetheless outnumbered 3:1, according to Arrian’s figures; the same ratio as at the Granicus. The figure does not suffer from the same degree of inflation as Issus or Gaugamela, which is expected, because the battle does not suffer from the same variety of propaganda, and escaped “Persian-style” extreme inflation. The figures are less lopsided, but the intensity of the battle is still well reflected by the numbers, specifically the Indian casualties.

\textsuperscript{265} Omens regarding specific events: A bird at Tyre: Plut.\textit{ Alexander} 25; Flocks of birds at Alexandria: Plut.\textit{ Alexander} 26. General omens: “pure and clear oil” from the ground near Alexander’s tent: Plut.\textit{ Alexander} 57; Lamb born covered in substance that looks like Darius’ crown: Plut.\textit{ Alexander} 57.

\textsuperscript{266} Arr. 5.14; Plut.\textit{ Alexander} 61.
Table 4. Figures given by Arrian, Curtius, Diodorus, and Plutarch for the battle of the Hydaspes.

Diodorus records a full 22% of the Indian army killed, a rather large percentage compared to the those of the Persians in other battles, and Arrian’s whopping 64% is extremely unusual (see Table 4). Plutarch’s figure for the Indian losses only accounts for those killed in the small force led by Porus’ son, and indicate that 40% were killed, and

* These are the figures for Alexander’s smaller attack force, which did most of the fighting.

267 Arr. 5.14.
268 Arr. 5.18.
269 Diod. 17.89.
270 Arr. 5.16.
271 Curt. 8.13-14. The number of cavalry is not stated with the 30,000 infantry, 300 chariots and 85 elephants, but 4,000 are later “dispatched” – whether this was the entirety of the cavalry or if some remained in reserve is not made clear by the text.
272 Diod. 17.87. Add to this “an army little smaller” than Porus’, belonging to Embisarus, otherwise known as Abisares.
274 Arr. 5.15, 18.
275 Diod. 17.89.
276 Plut. Alexander 60. These are only the losses from Porus’ smaller strike force, composed of 1000 cavalry and 60 chariots, which Alexander immediately destroyed.
others captured. These figures theoretically reinforce the bravery of the Indian soldiers, who are not easily routed like the Persians; they stay, fight, and die. The Macedonians are even further disadvantaged by the presence of elephants among the tough Indian soldiers, which rendered Alexander’s most powerful unit, the Companion cavalry, almost useless.

The Macedonians had fought against elephant contingents in the past, but not in their natural environment and certainly not on this scale. The ancient sources suggest that the encounter had a profound effect on the Macedonian troops, much more so than the size of the army itself. At the very least, the image of the elephants fighting seems to have appealed immensely to our surviving extant sources. The animals were “arrayed so as to strike terror” in the Macedonians, and caused the Indian army to look “much like a city, for the elephants resembled towers, and the soldiers between them the curtain walls.” The men feared “those immense bodies with their huge bulk,” deafening soldiers with their “horrendous trumpeting.” The fear was well-founded, according to the ancient sources. Some Macedonians were crushed underfoot, while the animals’ great trunks grasped others and either passed them to the drivers, who presumably killed them, or else dashed them to the ground. Yet others were pierced by the elephants’ long tusks, dying instantly. Porus’ own elephant “towered over the other beasts,” by far the noblest, and showed an “extraordinary intelligence.” The elephants made a powerful impression on the minds of the forces that fought against them, and were the hallmark of this battle.

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277 Diod. 17.87.  
278 Curt. 8.13.  
279 Curt. 8.14; Diod. 17.88.  
280 Diod. 17.88.  
281 Curt. 8.13; Plut. Alexander 60.
As if this wasn’t enough, Porus himself cut an extremely dramatic figure, exceedingly tall, looking on his elephant “as an ordinary man looks on a horse.”

Diodorus and Arrian record that he stood five cubits, or over seven feet in height. He wore armor with a gold and silver inlay, and both Curtius and Diodorus took care to indicate his physical strength, which matched his kingly appearance. He is described as notably courageous, and fought “heroically” until loss of blood brought him fainting to the ground. He was king over “the neighboring Indians” near those ruled by Taxiles. In fact, although Taxilia was “rich and prosperous,” the largest city in the area, it was only the largest settlement on this side of the Hydaspes. Curtius’ Porus was openly boastful of his kingdom’s strength, admitting to Alexander that he resisted because he “did not think there was anyone stronger” than himself. When asked what Alexander should do with him, Porus asked to be treated “like a king,” which pleased Alexander greatly.

Alexander’s last battle is described as being his greatest. Here he and his Macedonians fought against the fiercest possible foes on dangerous terrain and in bad weather. There are no recorded celebrations after the battle of Gaugamela, or any of the Persian battles, but after the Hydaspes the Macedonians reveled in their victory. The contest was recounted in texts and also in art. Although their exact purpose is not

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282 Plut. Alexander 60.
283 Diod. 17.87; Arr. 5.19.
284 Curt. 8.13; Diod. 17.88.
285 Diod. 17.88.
286 Diod. 17.87.
287 Arr. 5.8.
289 Plut. Alexander 60.
290 Holt 2003, p. 77.
291 Holt 2003, p. 77.
known, the so-called elephant medallions (see Figure 5) clearly depict the events of the battle at the Hydaspes, and no equivalent exists for any of the Persian battles.\textsuperscript{292} The elephants depicted on the coins display the exotic nature of the defeated foe, which became to Greece what Hannibal and his elephants embodied for the Romans: “legendary symbols of an all but overwhelming alien power.”\textsuperscript{293} The prominent figure clutching a thunderbolt (Figure 5c) that appears on the coins seems to be Alexander himself, and Holt argues the lightning bolt he grips is meant not just to suggest his divinity or divine luck, but specifically his mastery over the thunderstorm that allowed for his crossing.\textsuperscript{294} For the same reason, the chariots, made useless by the muddy ground, are also featured prominently. Although the date, purpose and findspot of these artifacts remains controversial, they clearly indicate the association of Alexander with this particular battle.

But was this battle really so grand and difficult? Bosworth suggests the truths hidden in the ancient sources belie the propaganda, that the battle of the Hydaspes “was no epic struggle of heroes, but … the annihilation of a relatively small and inexperienced army fatefuly embroiled in a battle it had no chance of winning.”\textsuperscript{295} The perilous river crossing, as previously mentioned, is described in dire terms, but (other than Plutarch’s electrocuted soldiers) the storm seems to have worked directly to Alexander’s advantage. It provided a moonless night and sufficient sound to cover the movements of many troops.\textsuperscript{296} It also had the devastating effect of completely nullifying Porus’ chariots,

\textsuperscript{292} Holt 2003, pp. 74, 76.
\textsuperscript{293} Holt 2003, p. 49.
\textsuperscript{294} Holt 2003, p. 153.
\textsuperscript{295} Bosworth 1996, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{296} Arr. 5.13.
Figure 5. The elephant medallions and sketches to show detail (above coin). a) Bank Leu tetradrachim. Elephant on obverse and an archer on reverse. b) American Numismatic Society tetradrachm. Elephant and rider on obverse and an archer in a chariot on reverse. c) Copenhagen specimen. Elephant with two riders being pursued by a horseman on obverse and Alexander clutching a thunderbolt on reverse. Note the repeated use of elephants, which were powerful symbols of the exotic power of the East. Also note the appearance of chariots, the capture and destruction of which was an important part of the battle.
which were made useless by the “slippery ground,” causing them to “tip and fling out their drivers” in Curtius.\textsuperscript{297} In Arrian the ground was so “deep in soft mud” it consternated Porus’ attempts to set up initial dispositions.\textsuperscript{298} The horses still attached to chariots dragged them into “quagmires and pools of water,” but the unencumbered Macedonian cavalry had no trouble maneuvering.\textsuperscript{299}

Fighting Porus’ army was probably not as frightening as Curtius suggests, either, because size and strength of the army has been exaggerated significantly – though not as drastically as at Issus and Gaugamela.\textsuperscript{300} Alexander’s cavalry almost matches the Indian in number, and these were the cream of the crop, the same body of soldiers responsible for his successes against the Persians.\textsuperscript{301} That almost the entire battle was fought and won by Alexander’s expeditionary force is telling of both the numerical strength and quality of the Indian soldiers, at least in comparison to Alexander’s.\textsuperscript{302} Devine’s close examination of the Hydaspes river battle concludes that Plutarch’s figures are closest to truth, numbering Porus’ entire army at approximately 20,000 infantry and 2,000 cavalry.\textsuperscript{303} He argues that the number of infantry could not have been as high as 30,000, let alone 50,000, unless the number of Alexander’s troops is significantly deflated in the ancient sources.\textsuperscript{304} The Macedonians surrounded the entire body of Indian infantry in the second portion of the battle, causing the elephants to trample their own troops in the dense, confusing mass, and even high estimates for the Macedonian army would not have

\textsuperscript{297} Curt. 8.14. 
\textsuperscript{298} Arr. 5.15. 
\textsuperscript{299} Curt. 8.14. 
\textsuperscript{300} Curt. 8.13. 
\textsuperscript{302} Bosworth 1996, p. 15. 
\textsuperscript{303} Devine 1987, p. 108. 
\textsuperscript{304} Devine 1987, p. 108.
allowed the enveloping of such a large body of troops, even if disorganized. \textsuperscript{305} The individual Indian soldiers were certainly outclassed if they were indeed dredged up from rural towns (as discussed below) compared to the highly trained and experienced Macedonians. \textsuperscript{306} The Indian force was smaller and practically immobile, lacking the proper training for complicated field maneuvers. The high losses do not reflect the heroic bravery of the Indians, but rather the ensuing Macedonian massacre of unorganized troops.

The focus on the terrifying nature of the elephants is used persuasively by the ancient sources to explain the horror inflicted on the Macedonian troops; it was supposedly the rumor of even larger elephant armies further east that pushed the Macedonian soldiers to revolt and demand that Alexander return home. \textsuperscript{307} Plutarch directly states, “a consequence of this battle with Porus was that it blunted the edge of the Macedonians’ courage,” foreshadowing future revolts. \textsuperscript{308} Curtius and Diodorus both explicitly excuse the Macedonians from their fear, the former reporting that the elephants struck terror into hearts “which were generally given to confidence,” and the latter that “the Macedonians faced the frightening experience manfully.” \textsuperscript{309} The elephants may well have terrified the Macedonian troops, and the mutiny at Opis was not long after the battle at the Hydaspes. It is impossible to say how deeply the conflicts with elephant contingents frightened the soldiers; they had been marching into territory even more bizarre and foreign than they could have imagined, and the threat of more elephant combat may merely have been too much to bear.

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\textsuperscript{305} Bosworth 1996, p. 15;  \\
\textsuperscript{306} Bosworth 1996, p. 15.  \\
\textsuperscript{307} Everson 2004, p. 203.  \\
\textsuperscript{308} Plut. \textit{Alexander} 62.  \\
\textsuperscript{309} Curt. 8.13; Diod. 17.88. 
\end{flushright}
Porus’ importance as a ruler and as an individual is certainly overstated. As a ruler, he occupied territory far smaller than Macedonia proper, which was comparatively small even to other local rulers, and Bosworth attacks the source picture of a prosperous land dotted by cities as a gross exaggeration.\textsuperscript{310} Porus had no allies, and was merely a “small, beleaguered prince.”\textsuperscript{311} The massacre of inexperienced troops and their lesser ruler, however, does not make for a good story. Instead, we see a tall, brave Porus, strangely foreign on his equally valiant and oversized elephant. This is in keeping with the Homeric flavor of Alexander’s campaign, where the glory of the victor is not only enhanced by his own skill and bravery but by the greatness or pedigree of the victim.\textsuperscript{312} Porus “possessed as much acumen as could exist among savages,” according to Curtius – a worthy enemy for Alexander, the best that could be found in an uncivilized land, whose defeat made for an excellent end to the campaign.\textsuperscript{313} Here is the noble enemy that Darius failed to embody time and time again. He, too, suffers the tragedy of the necessarily transitory nature of good fortune; by advising Alexander to keep this in mind, he earns the king’s friendship.\textsuperscript{314}

**Conclusion**

The actual battle at the Hydaspes River seems to have had little in common with the epic picture painted by our extant sources, plagued by embellishment and overstatement in every area. Porus’ importance as a king is as overstated as his height, the Indian army fails to behave at all like a disciplined force, and the frightening aspects

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Bosworth 1996, p. 9.
\item Bosworth 1996, p. 9-11.
\item Curt. 8.13.
\item Curt. 8.14.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
of the elements and elephants are also overstated, presumably to heighten the tension of Alexander’s last great battle against a worthy foe. Propaganda inflating the victory – and the Indian troop strength – was likely the work of Alexander’s own historians, or at the very least that of his Successors. Whereas the battles against the Persians were tightly held to a panhellenic standard, the battle at the Hydaspes was embellished in a more Homeric vein. Even lesser episodes in Alexander’s Indian campaign keep to this theme. During one conflict, Ptolemy kills an enemy general with a stereotypically Homeric thigh-wound, and Arrian describes the whole scene in language evocative of a kill by Patroclus in the Iliad. Arrian even breaks into heroic verse with a near-perfect dactylic hexameter, which gives the scene the appropriate rhythm. Of course, Ptolemy’s Indian general is insignificant in comparison to the magnanimous Porus, whose great army and noble defeat solidified Alexander’s role as a hero.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Alexander remains one of the most successful and ambitious generals in recorded history, and for good reason. His nearly flawless string of successes, one after the other, attest to his resourcefulness and skill in manipulating his army in varying foreign terrain. Over the thirty-two years of his life he spent fully half of them either fighting in or preparing for battle. He pacified Greece by a combination of force and political maneuvers, destroying Thebes and appealing to a panhellenic cause. After solidifying his borders, he crossed the Hellespont into Asia and conquered the Persian Empire in three major battles, first at the Granicus, then at Issus, and finally at Gaugamela. He engaged in numerous but rapid sieges, as at Miletus, Gaza, Halicarnassus, and Tyre. An even greater number of cities surrendered before his army even came into view, so great was his reputation. He pushed on to India, a land virtually unknown to the Greeks, defeating tribe after tribe until, at last, his soldiers could take no more and forced him to return to Babylon.

Alexander’s success, however, is not as brilliant as it appears in the surviving ancient sources. Persian troop strengths are greatly inflated to support the stereotype that had become a part of the Greek cultural identity. Alexander exploited this by setting out to avenge Greece, and played on the by-then well-worn theme of a small, hardy Greek army vs. a massive, undisciplined, enslaved Persian army. The Persians are transparently demonized, disparaged in every way but numerically, and this negative ideal has overemphasized Alexander’s ability to cope with fighting against a force that outnumbered his army. He stands in a tradition that goes back to Homer, the fearless Greek leader against a wealthy Eastern empire. To align himself with the heroes that
fought against such forces, his victories had to be embellished to an unbelievable degree, but specifically in regards to the numbers. The Persians could not be described as being a powerful or worthy enemy, as this would betray the stereotype, so Alexander’s conflicts with them were made dire the only way possible: by inflating the size of the enemy army.

Alexander’s persistent association and rivalry with Achilles also provided a contextual backdrop that required his deeds be embellished and his mistakes erased. He took no less than six serious wounds in combat, far more than Philip and over a shorter period of fighting, for the sake of his desire for glory. He was more than brave, he was downright careless with his life, despite the disaster his death would have brought down on his army and kingdom. While his personal recklessness is disguised, his tactical mistakes, also caused by boldness, are quietly ignored or covered up. Such actions created a superhuman model that no successor could recreate, but this was in keeping with the legend he emulated; Achilles’ strength is unbelievable, and so too is Alexander’s.

The description of the battle at the Hydaspes, Alexander’s greatest battle in the ancient sources, has been considerably exaggerated. Massive numbers of troops increased the sense of victory in the Persian battles, but at the Hydaspes the inflation is largely of quality. The river is more dangerous, the weather more harmful, the troops and elephants more fierce, and Porus himself a far greater warrior and king than Darius. Alexander himself and his contemporaries inflated the importance of this battle to give the Macedonian king one last, truly heroic battle before the end of his eastern campaign.

Alexander’s military career must be understood in its cultural context as well as within the world of heroes which he deliberately placed himself. His greatness cannot be
measured, as it were, by body-count; the numbers provided by the ancient sources have been inflated and do not reflect the actual size of the armies he triumphed against. His bravery is at some points laudable, but as a model for future generals his heedless behavior must be considered with his successes. Alexander wagered everything at each of his battles, including his life, and his frequent injuries reflect just how narrowly he avoided losing it all. And yet, despite this flirtation with disaster, Alexander was victorious. He could have died many times, but he did not; he could have lost his cavalry at the Granicus, but he did not; he could have gotten his entire army killed at Pelium, but did not. His success in the battles against the Persians and Indians have been overstated, but the fact remains that though his army was typically outnumbered and fighting on foreign terrain, they triumphed every time. Examining these case studies broadens our understanding of Alexander as a general. Though his victories have been overstated from a numerical standpoint, he was nonetheless shockingly bold. He seems to have genuinely sought martial glory in a distinctly Greek fashion, and his survival and that of his army is either due to expert handling or a truly unbelievable string of good fortune. His career was cut short by his early death, but was nonetheless of a length that luck is an unsatisfactory explanation for his success. Alexander’s military campaign remains overwhelmingly successful despite the acknowledgement of his minor failures, and he still overwhelmingly deserves his title of “the Great.”
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