

The Failure of Alexander's Conquest and Administration of Bactria-Sogdiana

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Both during his lifetime and following his death, Alexander III of Macedon became a legend for his conquest of the Persian Empire until “the limits of the known *oecumene*.”¹ Despite this fame, several of Alexander the Great's conquests were not as successful as popular memory suggests. The ancient evidence clearly states the difficulties during Alexander's campaigning in the upper satrapies of Bactria-Sogdiana in 329-327 B.C., which took approximately eighteen months to suppress.² Some scholars have dismissed this as a difficult campaign in which Alexander ultimately succeeded. However, an in-depth study of the ancient evidence not only reveals the failures in the method of conquest which Alexander used in these satrapies, but also his inability to control the satrapy once he had re-crossed the Hindu Kush to conquer India.³ Thus, the events at Bactria-Sogdiana as recorded by the available ancient evidence demonstrate that Alexander only succeeded in “extricat[ing] himself from a problem largely of his own making” in these satrapies, as well as his greater failure in administering the empire.⁴ A study of the vulgate tradition reveals that his inflexible assertion of control on local practices caused revolt, which was impossible to completely suppress during his lifetime due to locals' use of guerrilla tactics and unrelenting determination. This example illustrates the fact that Alexander was famous for his conquests, not the management of his empire. Alexander's speech after the revolt at Hyphasis clearly indicates his preference to conquer new lands rather than to return to his *doriktetos chora*, “which are not held securely.”⁵ This proved to be one of his largest failures, as his empire was already unravelling even before his premature death in 323 B.C.

A case study of Alexander's conquest and administration of Bactria-Sogdiana requires a brief discussion of the existing ancient evidence. Diodorus Siculus provides little information, since there is an extensive lacuna in his manuscripts for this period, while Plutarch and Justin's accounts provide little information about these campaigns.⁶ We must therefore rely on Quintus Curtius Rufus and Arrian's accounts, with some supplementary information from Strabo's *Geographica*. This is particularly challenging, since these two accounts are somewhat contradictory in both the chronology and details of the events which occurred in Bactria-Sogdiana. Although Bosworth's analysis, which concludes that

1 Paul Cartledge, *Alexander the Great: the Hunt for a New Past* (Oxford, Pan Books, 2005), 3.

2 A.B. Bosworth, “A Missing Year in the History of Alexander the Great,” *The Journal of Hellenistic Studies* vol. 101 (1981), 37.

3 The Hindu Kush is a mountain range between Pakistan and Afghanistan. For views that Alexander was ultimately successful in his campaigns in Bactria-Sogdiana: Ibid; N.G.L. Hammond, *The Genius of Alexander the Great* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 159.

4 Frank Holt, *Alexander the Great and Bactria: The Formation of a Greek Frontier in Central Asia* (New York, E.J. Brill, 1988), 69.

5 Arrian. *Anab.* 5.25-26.

6 R. Hamilton, *Alexander the Great* (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), 18.

Curtius' account is more reliable for this period is undoubtedly ambitious, his arguments will be used throughout this paper.⁷ Indeed, Bosworth is correct in stating that Arrian's account seems to suffer from distortions, caused by a break in the narrative to discuss incidents such as the Cleitus affair, as well as recording "doublets" in Ptolemy and Aristobulus' accounts.⁸ Thus, despite the fact that the vulgate tradition is often dismissed as less reliable than Arrian's account, Curtius' chronology, with a more spaced campaign narrative rather than a crowd of events in 327 B.C., will be generally accepted due to the weakness of Arrian's version of events for this period.⁹ In any case, these accounts are not so divergent that they hinder a study of Alexander's attempt to conquer and administer these satrapies.

A close examination of the causes of the revolts, which took nearly two years to suppress, is seminal for an understanding of the conquest of Bactria-Sogdiana.¹⁰ Both Arrian and Curtius' accounts agree that when Alexander first crossed the Hindu Kush into this satrapy he encountered little resistance. The Bactrian cavalry abandoned Bessus as Alexander approached, and Alexander was able to take both the cities of Bactra and Aornus on his first attempt.¹¹ In fact, Bessus was captured and given to Alexander as a form of submission by his own nobles after Alexander crossed the Oxus River in pursuit of this claimant to the Persian throne.¹²

However, the ease of this expedition was to prove misleading, since within weeks of Bessus' capture revolt erupted.¹³ This change in attitude towards Alexander can be explained by Alexander's more direct and controlling methods of administration in this area compared to previous Persian rule. Archaeological data from the Achaemenid period infers that military conquest did not leave a large material impact on the region, and there was much stability in local customs, particularly in pottery and hydraulic technology. This strongly suggests that Achaemenid rule was "no more than a kind of politico-military epiphenomenon," in which the Persian kings imposed relatively little direct control on these satrapies.¹⁴ Considering

7 P. Gaukowsky, "Recherches Récentes sur Alexandre le Grand" (1978-1982), *REG* 96 (1983), 239.

Gaukowsky described Bosworth's method as "égaliser une matière historique dont la plasticité étonne."

8 See Bosworth 1981, 17.

9 *Ibid.*, 33.

10 A.B. Bosworth, "Review: Alexander the Great and Bactria: The Formation of a Greek Frontier in Central Asia" *The Journal of Hellenistic Studies* vol. 110 (1980), 256.

11 Bactrian cavalry abandoning Bessus: Curt. 7.4.20; Arr. *Anab.* 3.28.10; Conquest of Bactria: Arr. *Anab.* 3.29.1; Curt. 7.4.22-32, 7.5.1.

12 Curt. 7.5.22-26; Arr. *Anab.* 3.30.1-5. Arrian relates two accounts, the first by Ptolemy in which he personally delivered Bessus to Alexander since Bessus' subordinates were still uncertain of whether to submit, as well as Aristobulus' account which states that Spitamenes gave Bessus to Alexander himself. Aristobulus' story is more likely, see A.B. Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire: the reign of Alexander the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 108.

13 Frank Holt, *Into the Land of the Bones: Alexander the Great in Afghanistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 45; Hammond 1997, 144; Unrest began with a group of foraging Macedonians being ambushed: Arr. *Anab.* 3.30.11, 4.1.4-5; Curt. 7.6.1-4.

14 Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: a History of the Persian Empire*, trans. Peter T. Daniels (Winona

this, it is unsurprising that Alexander's pillaging of villages along the Tanais following an ambush, as well as his preparations to built Alexandria-Eschate as a new military-political center in the area, would cause outward rebellion. This was a strong imposition on local institutions and necessitated the annexation of land from locals, which was sure to ignite opposition.¹⁵ These rebellions were in fact led by Bessus' usurpers, principally Spitamenes, which suggests that the local aristocracy did not support this new form of administration.¹⁶

Furthermore, the appointment of the "alien" Artabazus from the Western satrapies followed by the Macedonian Amyntas, rather than leaving an incumbent satrap as he did in Areia, would have also stirred resentment.¹⁷ Bessus' local support (albeit short-lived) as satrap of Bactria was apparent when Bactrians supported his claim to the throne; the appointment of such a foreign satrap therefore appeared to the locals as a significant change from previous Achaemenid custom.¹⁸ Furthermore, although Onesicritus' account of Alexander banning the "barbarian" custom of "underdogs" eating the remains of the dead in Bactra has been doubted, this may suggest that Alexander also encountered native customs with which he was not familiar or respectful.¹⁹

Bosworth criticizes the argument that regulating contact between the Sogdians and Scythians would have also caused revolt, but archaeological evidence points that there was active trade between the Scythians and Bactria-Sogdiana. For instance, the carpets with Achaemenid motifs found in a Uralic tomb on Pazyryk.²⁰ Furthermore, Arrian writes of how the Scythian and Bactrian horsemen fought alongside one another.²¹ Thus, Alexander's warning against the Scythians "not to cross the river Tanais without the king's order," and therefore the imposition of direct control over exchange and movement across the river, represents a break with previous socio-economic customs and would have also caused resentment and revolt from both Bactrian-Sogdian and Scythian locals.²² Although similar methods of creating military barriers had worked with the Scythians in the Balkans in 336 B.C., these tactics proved too rigid to adapt to this new geographic and cultural situation.²³ Thus, the management of this satrapy reflected Alexander's lack of understanding of the importance of maintaining previous Persian administration methods, since their balance of local and Persian institutions al-

Lake, IN: Eisenbraun, 2002), 76.

15 P.M. Fraser, *Cities of Alexander the Great* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 67; Holt 2005, 48; Bosworth 1980, 257; Curt. 7.6.10, 12-13; 7.6.24-27; Arr. *Anab.* 4.1.3; 4.4.1-4.

16 Curt. 7.6.15; Arr. *Anab.* 4.3.6.

17 Bosworth 1980, 257; Arr. *Anab.* 3.29.1; Curt. 7.5.1-2.

18 Curt. 5.10.5-6; Arr. *Anab.* 3.21.4.

19 Onesicritus' account is found in Str.11.11.3; Holt 200, 526; W.W. Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria & India* (Chicago, Ares Publishers, 1985), 115-116.

20 Briant 2002, 747.

21 Ibid; Arr. *Anab.* 3.13.3.

22 Briant 2002, 747; Curt. 7.6.12; Arr. *Anab.* 4.1.3.

23 Arr. 1.4.1-5; Holt 2008, 47.

lowed the Achaemenids to maintain legitimacy and at least nominal control of these areas.²⁴

The revolts and guerrilla warfare caused by these changes in administration and infrastructure were disastrous to the Macedonian army since this alien form of warfare proved extremely difficult to suppress. Alexander responded to the first guerrilla assaults against his troops by destroying several cities. Although this was meant to “serve as an example to keep the others in line,” the destruction of local settlements seems to have only contributed to the locals’ animosity towards Alexander since the revolt quickly spread from northern Sogdiana southward to the Hindu Kush.²⁵ One assault against a Macedonian contingent which was sent by Alexander to defend Maracanda against Spitamenes was particularly catastrophic. Arrian and Curtius do not record the same the details of this event, but they generally agree that this was a military disaster in which the Macedonian troops were caught by surprise and killed en masse.²⁶ This emphasizes a great failure in Alexander’s expectations of this mission. If Arrian’s account is correct that Alexander appointed an interpreter rather than a general to lead this operation, this demonstrates that Alexander was not expecting the Macedonian force heading to Maracanda to encounter a guerrilla military engagement.²⁷

In any case, Alexander’s “hammer-and-anvil” tactics could not be used against the Bactrian-Sogdian rebels, since these opponents would not fight a decisive battle against him, preferring guerrilla warfare instead.²⁸ In order to regain control of the satrapy, in the spring of 328 B.C. Alexander resolved to divide his forces into smaller formations in order to deal with each of the revolts individually.²⁹ The risk in Alexander’s spreading of his troops so widely across the upper satrapies can be seen by the defeat of a small garrison of invalid soldiers at Zariaspa in 328 B.C. while Bactrian-Sogdian troops were raiding neighbouring villages. Although Craterus was able to come rapidly and defeat the insurrection, both Arrian and Curtius record that several of the enemies managed to flee, including Spitamenes.³⁰ These measures of destroying towns and villages to stop any form of resistance have caused some scholars to estimate that over 100,000 Bactrians were killed.³¹ Only after Spitamenes was betrayed by his own subordinates, or wife according to Curtius, as well as the successful siege of Sisimithres’ rock in eastern Sogdiana in late 328/327 B.C., did the rebellion begin to subside.³²

24 Maria Brosius, “Alexander and the Persians,” in *Brill’s Companion to Alexander the Great*, ed. Joseph Roisman (Leiden, Brill, 2003), 192.

25 Curt. 7.6.16; Bosworth 1980, 256; Barry S. Strauss, “Alexander: the military campaign,” in *Brill’s Companion to Alexander the Great*, ed. Joseph Roisman (Leiden, Brill, 2003), 141-142. Destruction of cities: Arr. *Anab* 4.2.4-4.3.4; Curt. 7.6.16-23.

26 Curt. 7.7.30-39; Arr. *Anab* 4.5.5-6.

27 Holt 2005, 54; Arr. *Anab*. 4.3.7.

28 Holt 2005, 66; Strauss 2003, 152-153.

29 Curt. 8.1.1-2; Arr. *Anab*. 4.16.1-3.

30 Curt. 8.1.1-6; Arr. *Ana* 4.16.4-17.2.

31 Holt 2005, 58; deriving figure from the index of Diodorus Siculus’ Book 17.

32 Death of Spitamenes: Curt. 8.3.1-16; Arr. *Anab* 4.17.7; Capture of Sisimithres’ rock: Curt. 8.2.19-33. Cal-

These difficulties would have greatly reduced the morale of the Macedonian army. Unlike previous decisive battles, the military confrontations in Bactria-Sogdiana were continuous. Furthermore, the ancient sources' reports of Alexander's injuries while fighting against these guerrilla attacks show the continuous risk that every soldier faced.³³ It has been recorded that Artabazus' retirement in 328 B.C. could not have been due to old age, since he was barely sixty. This further suggests the great difficulty in administering Bactria-Sogdiana if Artabazus did indeed plead to be removed from his office.³⁴ These military difficulties were compounded by the harsh environment. The soldiers had to endure both the fierce cold of the Hindu Kush Mountains and Sogdian blizzards as well as the unbearable heat of the Turkestan desert from Bactra to the Oxus River.³⁵ Although this may be a literary exaggeration by the ancient sources, it is well known that the environment in modern-day Afghanistan is not particularly amenable to travelers.³⁶ It is estimated that approximately 7,000 Macedonian soldiers died, which far exceeded casualties in any campaigns before that time.³⁷ These military and environmental conditions would have contributed to unrest and dissatisfaction, which eventually led to the mutiny at Hyphasis.³⁸

Considering these difficulties, it is interesting to see Alexander's change of tactics in 327 B.C., especially concerning Sisimithres' treatment in comparison to Arimazes' punishment in 328 B.C.³⁹ According to Curtius, after Arimazes' rock surrendered in 328 B.C., Alexander ordered that his family and prominent noblemen should be crucified and the rest of the population enslaved.⁴⁰ Although Arrian, who places this account later in 327 B.C., does not mention this, Bosworth has concluded that this incident would be consistent with Alexander's general military policy, and that one could argue that Arrian's sources would be likely to omit this event due to the harsh nature of this punishment.⁴¹ Thus, this plausible event can be heavily contrasted to Curtius' account of the surrender of Sisimithres' rock in 327 B.C. Rather than destroying the settlement as he had done to several cities including Cyropolis, or massacring the whole population, Alexander allied himself to Sisimithres.⁴² This proved to be particularly useful when he sent Alexander

lim. 4.21.1-9. The narrative above is relying on the Curtius' rather than Arrian's chronological narrative; see Bosworth 1981.

33 One of first assaults Alexander shot through the leg: Arr. *Anab.* 3.30.11; Curt. 7.6.1-4; Alexander knocked unconscious during siege of cities (perhaps Cyropolis): Curt. 7.6.22; Arr. *Anab.* 4.3.3.

34 Bosworth 1988, 237; Curt. 8.1.19; Arr. *Anab.* 4.17.3. Both sources attribute his retirement to old age.

35 Crossing Hindu Kush: Curt. 7.4.22; Arr. *Anab.* 3.28; Crossing Turkestan desert: Curt. 7.5.1-18; surviving the Sogdian blizzard: Curt. 8.4.1-17.

36 Holt 2005, 107.

37 Ibid; Frank Holt, *Alexander the Great and the Mystery of the Elephant Medallions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 14.

38 Arr. *Anab.* 5.28.1 – 29.1; Curt. 9.3.1-20.

39 This is assuming that one except Curtius Rufus' chronology of events; see Bosworth 1981.

40 Curt. 7.11.27-29.

41 Bosworth 1981, 32-33; Curt. 7.11.27-29; Arr. *Anab.* 4.19.4.

42 Curt. 8.2.28-33.

rations during the Sogdian blizzard.⁴³ Alexander's marriage to Roxane can be similarly viewed as politically motivated, rather than due to infatuated love as the sources suggest.⁴⁴ As the daughter of the Bactrian baron Oxyartes, Alexander's marriage to Roxane would create a tie between him and a prominent clan of the region, which would therefore aid in conciliating the remaining unrest in Bactria.⁴⁵ These policies therefore suggest that Alexander could have been attempting a policy of conciliation, after realizing that solely using methods of repression was not subduing the revolt. These methods of conciliation would have also been more likely after the betrayal of Spitamenes, since this would suggest the "war weariness of most Bactrians and Scythians."⁴⁶ Thus, Alexander was finally able to extract himself from Bactria-Sogdiana to continue on his Indian Campaign in 326 B.C.

However, events described by the ancient sources after Alexander left the upper satrapies for his Indian campaign demonstrate that this area was far from subdued. Although Alexander's departure from Bactria-Sogdiana naturally causes the literary evidence to shift away from these satrapies, "leaving everything else in shadow," there are several indications that there were continuing difficulties in managing this area.⁴⁷ According to Arrian, Alexander left a large garrison of 10,000 infantry and 3,500 cavalry, which was approximately a quarter of the size of the Macedonian army at Gaugamela and the largest defence force left in the empire.⁴⁸ This large garrison strongly suggests that Bactria-Sogdiana had not been completely pacified when Alexander left for India. Furthermore, according to both Diodorus Siculus and Curtius, Greek colonists began an armed insurrection with the cooperation of locals and attempted to return to Greece in approximately 326 B.C.⁴⁹ This behaviour is reminiscent of a comment Cleitus supposedly made regarding his satrapy of Bactria during the banquet before his murder, that "I am being sent against wild animals with bloodthirsty natures."⁵⁰ This revolt also mirrors the later attempt of thousands Greek colonists in the upper satrapies to return West after Alexander's death in 323 B.C.⁵¹ Thus, these events indicate that the Greek mercenaries left in Bactria-Sogdiana were unwilling to colonize these areas. Furthermore, these rebellions equally suggest that Alexander's methods of repres-

43 Ibid: 8.4.18-20.

44 Arr. *Anab.* 4.19.5-6; Curt., 7.4.23-26, Str 11.11.4.

45 Holt 2005, 90-91; Elizabeth D. Carney, "Women in Alexander's Court," in *Brill's companion to Alexander the Great*, ed. Joseph Roisman (Leiden, Brill, 2003), 245-246; A.B. Bosworth, "Alexander and the Iranians," *The Journal of Hellenistic Studies* vol. 100 (1980), 10.

46 Holt 2005, 84.

47 Other authors, such as Hammond (1997, 159) suggest Bactria-Sogdiana was in "settled conditions."

48 Holt 1988, 81; Bosworth 1988, 238; Fredrick Hiebert and Pierre Cambon,

Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul (Washington, D.C., National Geographic, 2008), 81.

49 Curt., 9.7.1-6. Diodorus states that the soldiers, upon hearing that Alexander had died when he was badly injured during his campaign against the Sydracae in 326 B.C., began to revolt and demand to return home.

Diod. Sic. 17.99.5.

50 Curt. 8.1.35. Arrian does not record that Cleitus was appointed as satrap of Bactria before he was murdered.

51 Diod. 18.7.

sion could only work effectively when he was in the vicinity. As soon as Alexander continued onwards to his next conquest dissatisfied Greeks and locals alike were free to rebel.

Arrian reveals in 326 B.C. that the Assaceniens near Bactria-Sogdiana were also revolting; the fact that Tyriespis, the governor of the Kabul region, was sent to deal with the revolt suggests the gravity of the situation.⁵² Alexander executed the same Tyriespis for “outrageous” behaviour in 325 B.C., indicating further unrest and problems with administration in the upper satrapies.⁵³ In fact, the appointment of Roxane’s father, Oxyartes, over greater territory than Bactria suggests his dependence on marital ties to this particular Bactrian clan to keep control.⁵⁴ One may argue that some form of administrative control and influence is demonstrated by the excavation of the Greek colony of Aī Khanoum, which was inhabited until the late second century B.C., and shows continuing influences founded by Alexander. However, it has recently been concluded by archaeologists that the foundations date from Seleucus’ reign in 300 B.C.⁵⁵ Thus, it is apparent that Bactria-Sogdiana continued to suffer from military and political unrest throughout the 320s B.C., and seems not to have had any strong politico-military centers and infrastructure, due to the fact that both locals and Greek colonists were disaffected and prone to rebellion.⁵⁶

Thus, the case study of the campaigns and administration of Bactria-Sogdiana reveals several of the overarching problems Alexander faced after having conquered the Persian Empire. Alexander’s lack of understanding of local socio-economic and administrative institutions caused resentment and rebellion in satrapies which were initially willing to cooperate with his nominal control. Moreover, the institutions and colonies which he did create before rapidly turning to the conquest of India were incomplete, as demonstrated by rebellions of both the Greek colonists and local inhabitants when Alexander left. Similar problems of administration and control can be detected in other areas of the empire: for example, Satibarzanes began a revolt in Areia shortly after Alexander left in pursuit of Bessus in 329 B.C.⁵⁷ In fact, on Alexander’s return from India in 325/324 B.C. most satrapies were revolting against Macedonian control.⁵⁸ Thus, perhaps Plutarch’s description of Bactrian revolts as “the heads of hydra which ever grew again” could apply to the other satrapies of the empire.⁵⁹ Thus, the events in Bactria-Sogdiana, although somewhat hidden in our sources, provide an interesting case study of Alexander’s failed methods of administration in the Persian Empire.

⁵² Arr. *Anab.* 5.20.7; Holt 2005, 109.

⁵³ Arr. *Anab.* 6.15.3; Curt. 9.8.9.

⁵⁴ Curt. 9.8.10; Arr. *Anab.* 6.15.3.

⁵⁵ Holt suggested that Aī Khanoum could have grown from a settlement founded by Alexander or Hephaestion, Hiebert states that the archaeological evidence supports a later foundation date. Holt 1988, 42; Hiebert 2008, 82-83.

⁵⁶ Susan Sherwin-White and Amélie Khurt, *From Samarkhand to Sardis: A new approach to the Seleucid empire* (London, Gerald Duckworth & Co., Ltd., 1993), 9.

⁵⁷ Curt. 6.6.20; Arr. *Anab.* 3.25.5.

⁵⁸ Brosius 2003, 189.

⁵⁹ Plutarch, *Mor.* 341 F.

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