

ALEXANDER THE GREAT AT BACTRA: A BURNING QUESTION

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Abstract: Scholars have generally claimed that Alexander the Great's extraordinary order that his army burn all of its non-essential personal possessions occurred in Hyrcania, on the eve of the Bactrian invasion. The evidence, however, shows that the event more likely happened at Bactra several years later, at the end of the Bactrian campaign.

Key words: Alexander the Great, Hyrcania, Bactria, India, logistics.

Alexander the Great spent more of his reign in Bactria and Sogdiana than in any other part of his vast empire, including Macedonia and Greece. Yet, many aspects of the king's long sojourn in Central Asia remain obscure due to the poor quality of the surviving narrative sources. All five of these accounts are late and derivative; one of them (Arrian) chooses at just this point to switch from a chronological to a thematic approach, and another (Diodorus) suffers a frustrating lacuna (Holt 2012, 165–172). In some cases, archaeological and documentary evidence can be marshaled to good effect (Naveh/Shaked 2012; Rtveladze 2002), but nagging problems still remain. One of these is the question of when, why, and where Alexander issued the extraordinary order for his entire army to burn its personal baggage. This was certainly a demoralizing loss of valuable loot that had been gathered along the triumphant march through Persia, some of it already carried for many miles only to be abandoned by royal decree. Departing from the opinion of most scholars, this paper argues that the event occurred at Bactra at the end of spring 327 BC in circumstances that signal a new experiment in Alexander's logistical thinking.

Historical sources give two versions of when and where the Macedonian army first destroyed its spoils of war.¹ According to Curtius, the order was issued in Hyrcania soon after the death of Darius in 330 BC. Curtius situates the burning at the end of an

¹ A second incident occurred during the devastating march through the Gedrosian Desert in 325, when the troops ate the baggage animals and could no longer carry their own packs: Curtius 9.10.12; cf. Arrian 6.25.1–2.

infamous series of stories: Alexander rescues his beloved horse Bucephalus from the Mardi (6.5.11–21); Alexander receives as a gift the beloved eunuch Bagoas (6.5.22–23); Alexander meets and mates with the queen of the Amazons (6.5.24–32); Alexander begins to succumb to his passions under the corrupting influence of Persian luxury, which alienates his veteran soldiers (6.6.1–10); Alexander avoids mutiny with gifts and bonuses, then circumvents the men's dangerous idleness through an opportune war against the rebel Bessus (6.6.11–13). At this point the unexpected order comes from Alexander (6.6.14–17):

And because the marching of the army was impeded by burdensome spoils and instruments of luxury, he commanded that all of the non-essential baggage beginning with his own be centrally collected. There was a large level area into which the loaded wagons were driven. While everyone wondered what their leader was going to do, he ordered the draught animals led away and that first his and then the rest of the belongings be burned. They set ablaze all that had been snatched intact from the burning cities of their enemies, daring not to weep over their spoils since the king's was being destroyed as well. Soon reason assuaged their grief, and suited for military service and ready for everything, they were glad to have shed their packs and not their discipline. Therefore, they set out for the region of Bactria.

Diodorus runs through a similar list of events in Hyrcania: the recovery of Bucephalus from the Mardi (17.63.3–8); the dalliance with the Amazon queen (17.77.1–3); Alexander's adoption of Persian luxury and habits (17.77.4–7); and the silencing of dissent among the Macedonians with gifts (17.78.1). Diodorus then introduces the rebellion of Bessus, but mentions nothing at all about circumventing idleness or the burning of baggage to speed the army's march to Bactria. Justin's epitome of the lost work of Pompeius Trogus offers a similar mélange of tales, including the Amazons and the army's resentment toward Alexander's changing personality, but no order to lighten the army (12.3.4–12.5.8). Arrian describes the Mardi campaign, but without reference to the Bucephalus story (3.24); he likewise omits all of the other sensationalized elements found in Curtius, Diodorus, and Justin. Arrian reports nothing about destroying the army's baggage.

Besides Curtius, the only other sources that do describe such an incident place it three years later at Bactra in 327 BC. According to Plutarch (*Alexander* 57.1–2, and repeated in *Aemilius Paulus* 12.6):

Intending to cross the mountains into India, and seeing that the army was already laden with spoils, making it weighed down and hard to move, at dawn when the wagons were marshaled he first set fire to his own and the Companions' baggage, then ordered the same for the Macedonians. The planning of this expedient turned out to be more troublesome than its execution, for it upset only a few. Most of the men shouted loudly with enthusiasm, shared their necessities with those in need, and then utterly burned and destroyed whatever was unessential, filling Alexander with eagerness. Besides, he was already regarded with fear and considered a merciless punisher of those displeasing him.

Polyaenus includes the event among his *Strategems of War* (4.3.10):

Alexander turned back toward India. Because the soldiers had in train wagons weighed down with the heavy Persian spoils they had amassed, which were not essential to the Indian campaign, he set fire first to the royal wagons and next the others. The Macedonians, having lost their plunder, were keener to obtain more in the coming war.

The details of these three versions are sufficiently alike to rule out the possibility that this event actually happened twice, as separate actions in Hyrcania (Curtius) and then again in Bactria (Plutarch, Polyaeus). In each source, the baggage had already been loaded into wagons as part of a secret plan (its calculation emphasized by Plutarch) to catch the unsuspecting soldiers off guard.² Alexander obviously anticipated opposition to the order and that, if his men suspected anything beforehand, many items might be surreptitiously held back from the train. All versions point out that Alexander's possessions were torched first to set an example and that in the end most men obeyed with a measure of enthusiasm. Curtius and Plutarch note that all who were disturbed by the order held their tongues out of disciplined respect, or growing fear.

Since the accounts are so similar, and because tricking and dispossessing the army twice in this way would hardly keep up morale for new campaigns, we are surely dealing with a single occurrence that must be situated either in Hyrcania or in Bactria. In current Alexander scholarship, the former is by far the dominant position. In his pioneering study of Alexander's logistics, Donald Engels (1978, 86–87) opted for Hyrcania. Scholars such as A.B. Bosworth (1988), Jona Lendering (2004), Ian Worthington (2004), and Krzysztof Nawotka (2010) have agreed. The few choosing Bactra include N.G.L. Hammond (1997, 161) and J.R. Hamilton (1969, 157).³ Yet, the question has never been thoroughly argued on either side. Proper methodology requires us to explain how and why this conflict in the sources might have arisen, and ultimately which version makes better sense of the evidence.

In Alexander *Quellenforschung*, it is often possible to use Diodorus as a useful check on Curtius since both tend to follow the same so-called Vulgate source tradition. It has been shown above, for example, that Curtius and Diodorus present the same package of stories for Hyrcania, except notably the burning of baggage. Thus, either Curtius has inserted this story or Diodorus has omitted it. The testimony of Plutarch and Polyaeus would suggest the former explanation, but this would be much more certain if Diodorus, too, situated the burning in Bactria. Unfortunately, Diodorus' account of Alexander's departure for India is missing.⁴ It is worth noting, however, a possible trace in Curtius' history of the story's transference from Bactria to Hyrcania. When introducing Alexander's decision to invade India in the aftermath of recent sedition, Curtius remarks (8.9.1): "But in order not to promote idleness (*otium*), which naturally sows rumors, he set out for India." These words echo Curtius' earlier description of Alexander's decision to invade Bactria as a response to Macedonian opposition in Hyrcania (6.6.12): "Therefore, lest the situation turn seditious, it was necessary to replace their idleness (*otium*) with war." The former marker probably locates the burning story's original context, before it was moved by Curtius (along with its trigger about Macedonian unrest fostered by idleness) to serve as the tailpiece to his series of Hyrcanian anecdotes. For Curtius, the discipline

² *Contra* Hammond (1983, 29), the notion that there are two distinct source traditions because the wagons were burned in one version, but only the unloaded baggage in the other, is not supported by the texts. The animals (of course) were led away, but not necessarily the wagons. Except for a transposition of time and place, there is a single source tradition for this incident.

³ Although he confuses Egypt for India, Atkinson (1994, 205–206) seems also to favor Bactria over Hyrcania.

⁴ The lacuna stretches from the capture of Bessus in 329 to the Swat campaign of 327.

of the soldiers when ordered to burn their possessions balances his account at the key moment when one phase of the war has ended and another begins, when Alexander wavers between Macedonian and Persian kingship, and when his army first teeters on the fulcrum of discipline/disorder.

Trying to identify and explain a transposition in the other direction, from Hyrcania to Bactria, is less fruitful. Plutarch covers some of the same Hyrcanian stories as Curtius and Diodorus (rescue of Bucephalus, growing Persian influence, the Amazon queen), but squarely locates the baggage incident at Bactra. Why he, or Polyaeus for that matter, should bother to shuffle the event out of Hyrcania is unclear: Neither author is attempting to spotlight major themes or draw special attention to India. Plutarch puts the burning rather artlessly between the magnificent burial of old Demaratus and a recitation of portents, while Polyaeus just lists the incident randomly between Alexander's later battle with Porus and his much earlier campaign in Thrace.⁵ If artifice rather than error accounts for the transference of the burning from one time and place to another, then Curtius seems the likely person to have done so.

We must next consider which circumstances, those in Hyrcania or those in Bactria, better explain the king's order to destroy the personal baggage of his troops. In Curtius there exists a troubling incongruity. In the face of growing opposition to his policies, Alexander allegedly dispensed gifts to his troops to win back their favor and then straightaway had these possessions destroyed. Diodorus also mentions the largesse, but of course not the immediate purging of it. Indeed, it makes no sense to antagonize the troops in this bizarre fashion. In addition, it is unlikely that Alexander would be pressed to take such drastic measures at this point in his march. The more urgent pursuit of Darius had not occasioned such an order, and the terrain between Hyrcania and Bactria posed no sudden new challenge to Alexander's logistics.⁶ In Hyrcania the king was already managing the situation by sending most of the baggage wagons along flatter roads (Curtius 6.4.3; Arrian 3.23.2) where needed.

On the other hand, the circumstances in Bactria fit the incident perfectly, and furthermore help make sense of other pieces of evidence. Whereas Curtius has the men gladly destroying possessions they had just been given to keep them quiet, the accounts of Plutarch and Polyaeus are internally consistent. Curtius offers no real explanation for why the troops became enthusiastic about the order, but Plutarch and Polyaeus do. Plutarch writes that the army dared not complain about the order because of recent actions by the king, and then gives appropriate examples from the campaigns in Bactria and Sogdiana to make his case (*Alexander* 57.3). These examples obviously could not follow the migration of this story from Bactria to Hyrcania. Polyaeus stresses the Macedonians' zeal to acquire more plunder in India, which (as will be shown below) they certainly did. Both explanations correspond to the situation in Bactria, and are inappropriate for Hyrcania.

More importantly, the pending march of Alexander's army at Bactra did warrant a new and somewhat drastic change in logistics. Unlike Hyrcania, from Bactria the men

⁵ Polyaeus is, however, writing in general at this point about marches, wagons, and transport barges. There would be no reason to change Hyrcania to Bactria.

⁶ Engels (1978, 86) describes an initial march "through an uncultivated and sparsely settled region" which he notes gave way to a fairly easy invasion route via Merv to Bactra (89). This does not explain a sudden need to abandon baggage that had already been hauled across the mountains and deserts of Persia.

were about to cross mountains that had once already wrecked their baggage train. When struggling over the treacherous Hindu Kush Mountains in spring 329 BC, the Macedonian army was forced to kill and eat its baggage animals (Arrian 3.28.8–9; Diodorus 17.83.1; Curtius 7.4.22–25; Strabo 15.2.10). It was this challenge that Alexander faced again in spring 327. To avoid another disaster, the king chose a different route over these mountains that took his forces ten days to accomplish rather than the previous 15–16 (Arrian 4.22.4; Strabo 15.1.26). Not only a shorter path, but also a lighter army would contribute to the efficiency of the second trek. The peremptory burning of all non-essential possessions accords well with these circumstances. Another recent experience surely influenced the king's novel solution to this logistical challenge. For two years leading up to the departure of the army for India, the soldiers had not been burdened in their operations by the transport of personal baggage. Beginning with his first arrival at Bactra in 329 BC, Alexander had lightened his army by ordering that the soldiers' packs and other impedimenta be stored there (Curtius 7.5.1). This is the same Curtius who had reported these very packs burned back in Hyrcania. It should not be imagined that Curtius means here new packs weighted with fresh plunder gathered since the alleged burning in Hyrcania, because in those intervening months no plundering is recorded by our sources and, in fact, Alexander had taken measures to prevent his men from looting along the way (Arrian 3.25.2).

Throughout the long campaign in Bactria and Sogdiana, the city of Bactra remained the base camp and major supply hub for the army.⁷ As Macedonian forces fanned out across the region in annual missions, they left behind anything that might encumber them (their sick and injured, non-combatants, personal belongings) at the guarded depot in Bactra. This was the only period in Alexander's conquest of the East during which the baggage train was not a ubiquitous adjunct of the field army, and the advantages were not lost on Alexander as he planned to move back across the Hindu Kush in 327 BC. If ever there was a time to rid the army of personal baggage, this was it: the troops had not been attached to it for two years, the increased efficiency of the unburdened army had been demonstrated, and ahead lay the challenge of recrossing the mountainous spine of what is today Afghanistan.

Curtius, Plutarch, and Polyaeus all note the readiness of Alexander's troops to move forward after the firing of their belongings, although Curtius never explains their motivation. According to Polyaeus, the Macedonians were eager to make good their losses by acquiring more plunder in India. Yet, it is Curtius' history (8.5.3) that emphasizes in other contexts the prospects for plunder in India, "a land filled not only with gold but also gems and pearls." Curtius adds that after the Battle of the Hydaspes, Alexander addressed his assembled army on this very theme (9.1.2–3):

He promised them rich spoils ahead in regions celebrated for their wealth. Therefore, he said, the loot taken from the Persians should be seen as cheap and ordinary (*vilia et obsoleta*). Now the men would fill not only their homes, but all of Macedonia and Greece, with gems, pearls, ivory, and gold. The soldiers, eager for money and glory, trusted the king because he had not lied to them, and promised to serve him.

⁷ For this very reason, the Sogdian leader Spitamenes raided Bactra: see the discussions in Holt (1994; 2012, 71–73).

This is the sort of speech that complements a recent loss of plunder at Bactra rather than Hyrcania. The Persian goods being replaced in India would be a distant memory if they had been abandoned four years earlier in Hyrcania, but not if lost at Bactra. The recent blow would be softened by Alexander's alleged description of the lost spoils from Persia as "cheap and ordinary" compared to those in India. The implication is that Alexander had not misled them about fresh spoils in India, a promise appropriate to the situation at Bactra on the eve of the Indian invasion, thus renewing their enthusiasm for the campaign. From other sources (Diodorus 17.94.4; Arrian 6.16.2), we learn that the king did indeed give his troops free rein to plunder everything of value in India. One prominent member of Alexander's court managed to amass more than 28 tons of gold and silver while in that region (Plutarch, *Eumenes* 2). Circumstances clearly suggest that the Macedonian army burned its baggage at Bactra and then recouped its losses on the other side of the Hindu Kush Mountains.

One final point is that in the same context as Alexander's speech about the wealth of India and his encouragement of the troops to seize what they wished, the king also introduced new measures to care for the dependents traveling with the army. Diodorus (17.94.4) reports:

While the soldiers were out plundering, Alexander held a meeting with their wives and children. He instituted a monthly ration for the women and another for the children calculated on the basis of the father's rank.

This innovation, like the looting, was meant to regain the good will of his armed forces. The royal provisioning of the camp-followers may have been necessary because the men, still replenishing their spoils, were hard-pressed to provide for their dependants. At Bactra they had clearly jettisoned their spoils, but not the ongoing expense of these familiars.

The burning question of where, when, and why Alexander took the extraordinary measure of destroying the personal possessions of his entire army has now been considered at some length. Among the extant sources for this event, Curtius is at odds with Plutarch and Polyaeus because one or the others has transferred this incident to the wrong time and place. As a whole, the evidence supports the conclusion that the baggage was burned at Bactra in 327 BC and not in Hyrcania some three years earlier.

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