

ARRIAN, *THE LIFE OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT*

Arrian of Nicomedia transcended the barriers between the Greek and Roman worlds by making a career serving the Roman empire while retaining his affinity for and appreciation of Greek traditions. Born around 89 A.D. in the city of Nicomedia, a crossroads of commercial and military traffic along a northern Asia Minor trade route, Arrian belonged to a family of the local aristocracy. For reasons of political and economic expediency, his family had been granted Roman citizenship some generations earlier with the annexation of Bithynia into the Roman empire, yet they remained Greek in their cultural orientation.

In his late teens, Arrian traveled to the Greek town of Nicopolis to study with the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, on whom he would later write several books, establishing himself as a philosopher. However, Arrian chose to pursue a career in military and governmental service. Arrian served the Roman empire as proconsul, consul, and imperial legate. His successes were aided by the patronage of several high-ranking Roman officials, as well as from his own talents and resources. He also shared the emperor Hadrian's passion for hunting, which likely furthered his ascent to the legateship. At the end of his life, Arrian settled in Athens, choosing a cultural hub rather than a center of political and military power or a quiet retirement in Nicomedia. He became an Athenian citizen and held the office of archon, a rare honor for a non-Athenian.

Aside from his books on Epictetus, Arrian wrote on hunting, military strategy, and most notably, history. He preferred the Greek tradition of local history rather than focusing on his experiences in Rome, as was customary for most senators. Among his works we find a history of Bithynia before its annexation by Rome, a chronicle of Roman-Parthian relations, and another work recounting the opposition of Parthia to Roman rule. Yet his most famous historical work was devoted the exploits of

Alexander the Great. Arrian attempted to portray the military genius and noble character of Alexander, challenging several of the Macedonian ruler's detractors in the process. In the passage below, Arrian describes the passage of Alexander and his troops to India and Persia, where several anecdotes illustrate how Alexander managed to assimilate such diverse groups of people into his empire.

THE LIFE OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT

By Arrian

BOOK SEVEN

On reaching Pasargadae and Persepolis, Alexander had a sudden impulse to sail down the Euphrates and Tigris into the Persian Gulf; he had already seen something of the mouths of the Indus and of the waters beyond them, and now he wished to do the same with the Tigris and Euphrates. We find in some writers the statement that he intended to sail right round Arabia, Ethiopia, and Libya, pressing forward past the Nomads beyond Mount Atlas to Gadeira, and so into the Mediterranean; thus, had he added Libya and Carthage to his conquests, he could with full justification have claimed the title of King of All Asia, unlike the Median and Persian kings, who, ruling as they did only a fraction of that continent, could not properly call themselves Great Kings at all. Some authorities say that he proposed subsequently to sail into the Black Sea and on to Scythian territory by the Sea of Azov; others, that he meant to make for Sicily and southern Italy to check the Romans, whose reputation, being greatly on the increase, was already causing him concern.

Personally I have no data from which to infer precisely what Alexander had in mind, and I do not care to make guesses; one thing, however, I feel I can say without fear of contradiction, and that is that his plans, whatever they were, had no lack of grandeur or ambition: he would never have remained idle in the enjoyment of any of his conquests, even had he extended his empire from Asia to Europe and from Europe to the British Isles. On the contrary, he would have continued to seek beyond them for unknown lands, as it was ever his nature, if he had no rival, to strive to better his own best.

I have always liked the story of the Indian sages, some of whom Alexander chanced to come upon out of doors in a meadow, where they used to meet to discuss philosophy. On the appearance of Alexander and his army, these venerable men stamped with their feet and gave no other sign of interest. Alexander asked them through interpreters what they meant by this odd behaviour, and they replied:

King Alexander, every man can possess only so much of the earth's surface as this we are standing on. You are but human like the rest of us, save that you are always busy and up to no good, travelling so many miles from your home, a nuisance to yourself and to others. Ah well! You will soon be dead, and then you will own just as much of this earth as will suffice to bury you.' Alexander expressed his approval of these sage words, but in point of fact his conduct was always the exact opposite of what he then professed to admire. On another occasion he is said to have expressed surprise at a remark made by Diogenes of Sinope: he was marching somewhere in the Isthmus with a contingent of Longshields and footguards, and chancing to see Diogenes lying in the sun, he stopped and asked him if there was anything he wanted.

'Nothing,' replied the philosopher; 'though I should be grateful if you and your friends would move to one side, and not keep the sun off me.'

One must admit, then, that Alexander was not wholly a stranger to the loftier flights of philosophy; but the fact remains that he was, to an extraordinary degree, the slave of ambition. In Taxila, once, he met some members of the Indian sect of Wise Men whose practice it is to go naked, and he so much admired their powers of endurance that the fancy took him to have one of them in his personal train. The oldest man among them, whose name was Dandamis (the others were his pupils), refused either to join Alexander himself or to permit any of his pupils to do so. 'If you, my lord,' he is said to have replied, are the son of God, why—so am I. I want nothing from you, for what I have sufficees: I perceive, moreover, that the men you lead get no good from their world-wide wandering over land and sea, and that of their many journeyings there will be no end. I desire nothing that you can give me; I fear no exclusion from any blessings which may perhaps be yours. India, with the fruits of her soil in due season is enough for me while I live; and when I die, I shall be rid of my poor body—my unseemly housemate.' These words convinced Alexander that Dandamis was, in a true sense, a free man; so he made no attempt to compel him. On the other hand, another of these Indian teachers, a man named Calanus, did yield to Alexander's persuasion; this man, according to Megasthenes' account, was declared by his fellow teachers to be a slave to fleshly lusts, an accusation due, no doubt, to the fact

that he chose to renounce the bliss of their own asceticism and to serve another master instead of God.

I have mentioned this because no history of Alexander would be complete without the story of Calanus. In India Calanus had never been ill, but when he was living in Persia all strength ultimately left his body. In spite of his enfeebled state he refused to submit to an invalid regimen, and told Alexander that he was content to die as he was, which would be preferable to enduring the misery of being forced to alter his way of life. Alexander, at some length, tried to talk him out of his obstinacy, but to no purpose; then, convinced that if he were any further opposed he would find one means or another of making away with himself, he yielded to his request, and gave instructions for the building of a funeral pyre under the supervision of Ptolemy son of Lagus, of the Personal Guard. Some say Calanus was escorted to the pyre by a solemn procession—horses, men, soldiers in armour, and people carrying all kinds of precious oils and spices to throw upon the flames; other accounts mention drinking-cups of silver and gold and kingly robes. He was too ill to walk, and a horse was provided for him; but he was incapable of mounting it, and had to be carried on a litter, upon which he lay with his head wreathed with garlands in the Indian fashion, and singing Indian songs, which his countrymen declare were hymns of praise to their gods. The horse he was to have ridden was of the royal breed of Nysa, and before he mounted the pyre he gave it to Lysimachus, one of his pupils in philosophy, and distributed among other pupils and friends the drinking-cups and draperies which Alexander had ordered to be burnt in his honour upon the pyre.

At last he mounted the pyre and with due ceremony laid himself down. All the troops were watching. Alexander could not but feel that there was a sort of delicacy in witnessing such a spectacle—the man, after all, had been his friend; everyone else, however, felt nothing but astonishment to see Calanus give not the smallest sign of shrinking from the flames. We read in Nearchus' account of this incident that at the moment the fire was kindled there was, by Alexander's orders, an impressive salute: the bugles sounded, the troops with one accord roared out their battle-cry, and the elephants joined in with their shrill war-trumpetings.

This story and others to a similar effect have been recorded by good authorities; they are not without value to anyone who cares for

evidence of the unconquerable resolution of the human spirit in carrying a chosen course of action through to the end.

About this time Alexander sent out Atropates to his province. He had himself gone on to Susa, where he had Abulites arrested and put to death for abusing his office as governor. Abulites' son Oxathres shared the same fate. In the various countries subdued by Alexander there had been a great many irregularities on the part of government officials, acts of violence against individuals, and robbing of temples and tombs. The reason is not far to seek, for Alexander had been away for a very long time in India, and nobody really felt he was ever likely to return from the innumerable hostile nations of the East—not to mention the elephants!—but would find a grave somewhere beyond the Indus, Hydraspes, Acesines, and Hyphasis.

Again, the disasters in the Gedrosian desert were a further encouragement to the governors of these more westerly parts to shrug off the idea of his ever getting safely home. None the less, it must be admitted that, by all accounts, Alexander at this period had become readier to accept as wholly reliable the charges which were made to him against officials, and to inflict severe punishment even for minor offences, in the belief that the sort of attitude which allowed an official to commit some petty irregularity might also lead him to serious crime.

Here at Susa he held wedding ceremonies for the high officers of the Hæteri; he also took a wife himself—Barsine, Darius' eldest daughter, and, according to Aristobulus, another as well, namely Parysatis, the youngest daughter of Ochus. He had already married Roxane, daughter of Oxyartes of Bactria. To Hephæstion he gave Drypetis, another of Darius' daughters and sister of his own wife Barsine, as he wanted to be uncle to Hephæstion's children; to Craterus he gave Amastine, daughter of Darius' brother Oxyartes, and to Perdicas a daughter of Atropates, governor of Media. The bride of Ptolemy (of the Guard) was Artacama, daughter of Artabazus, and Eunenes, the King's secretary, had her sister Artonis; Nearchus was given the daughter of Barsine, and Mentor, Seleucus, the daughter of Spitamenes of Bactria. Similarly, the other officers—to the number of eighty all told—were given as brides young women of the noblest Persian and Median blood. The marriage ceremonies were in the Persian fashion: chairs were set for the bridegrooms in order of

precedence, and when healths had been drunk the brides entered and sat down by their bridegrooms, who took them by the hand and kissed them. The King, who was married just as the others were, and in the same place, was the first to perform the ceremony—Alexander was always capable of putting himself on a footing of equality and comradeship with his subordinates, and everyone felt that this act of his was the best proof of his ability to do so. After the ceremony all the men took their wives home, and for every one of them Alexander provided a dowry. There proved to be over 10,000 other Macedonians who had married Asian women; Alexander had them all registered, and every man of them received a wedding gift.

This also seemed a fitting occasion to clear off the men's debts, and Alexander ordered a detailed schedule to be prepared, with a promise of settlement. At first only a few entered their names, suspecting that the order might be a scheme of Alexander's for detecting the spendthrifts who had failed to make do with their army pay. Alexander was annoyed when he learned that most of the men were refusing to enter their names and concealing their possession of covenants to pay, and told them in no uncertain terms what he thought of their suspicions; a King, he declared, is in duty bound to speak nothing but the truth to his subjects, who, in their turn, have no right to suppose that he ever does otherwise. He had tables set up in the army quarters, with money on them, and instructed the clerks in charge to pay off the debts of every man who produced an I.O.U. without even registering their names. After that the troops could not but believe in Alexander's good faith, and they were even more grateful for the concealment of their names than for having their debts paid. This gift to his men is said to have amounted to 20,000 talents—over \$4,000,000.

He also made a number of other money awards for distinguished conduct in the field, or in recognition of a man's reputation for good service generally. A special decoration consisting of a gold crown was granted to certain officers for conspicuous bravery; the recipients were Pucestas—for saving the King's life; Leonnatus—also for saving the King's life, for hard service in India, for his victory in Oria, for facing and defeating in battle, with the forces left under his command, the rebellious Oreitæ and their neighbours, and his satisfactory settlement of affairs in general in Oria; Nearchus (now also arrived at Susa) for his voyage from India along the coasts of the Indian ocean; Onesicritus,

master of the royal galley; and, finally, Hephæstion and the other members of the Personal Guard.

Here in Susa, Alexander received the various officials in charge of affairs in the newly built towns and the governors of the territories he had previously overrun. They brought with them some 30,000 young fellows, all boys of the same age, all wearing the Macedonian battle-dress and trained on Macedonian lines. Alexander called them his *Epigoni*—'inheritors'—and it is said that their coming caused much bad feeling among the Macedonians, who felt it was an indication of his many efforts to lessen his dependence for the future upon his own countrymen. Already the sight of Alexander in Median clothes had caused them no little distress, and most of them had found the Persian marriage ceremonies by no means to their taste—even some of the actual participants had objected to the foreign form of the ceremony, in spite of the fact that they were highly honoured by being, for the occasion, on a footing of equality with the King. They resented, too, the growing orientalism of Peucestas, Governor of Persia, who, to Alexander's evident satisfaction, had adopted the Persian language and dress, just as they resented the inclusion of foreign mounted troops in the regiments of the Hæteri: Bactrians, Sogdians, Arachotians; Zarangians, Areians, Parthians, and the so-called Euacæ from Persia were all introduced into the crack Macedonian cavalry regiments, provided they had some outstanding personal recommendation, such as good looks, or whatever it might be. Besides this, a fifth mounted regiment was formed; it did not consist entirely of oriental troops, but formed an addition to the total cavalry strength and had a certain number of foreign troops posted to it. Foreign officers were also posted to the Guard—Cophen son of Artabazus, Hydarnes and Artiboles sons of Mazæus, Sisines and Phradasmenes sons of Phrathernes; the satrap of Parthia and Hyrcania, Histanes son of Oxyartes and brother of Alexander's wife Roxane, Autobares and his brother Mithrobaeus. The command was given to Hytaspes, a Bactrian, and the orientals were all equipped with the Macedonian spear in place of their native javelin. All this was a cause of deep resentment to the Macedonians, who could not but feel that Alexander's whole outlook was becoming tainted with orientalism, and that he no longer cared a rap for his own people or his own native ways: groups of people into his empire.

Discussion Questions

1. How did Alexander, according to Arrian, treat conquered peoples? How effective were his strategies?
2. What kind of an impression of Alexander's character does Arrian try to convey? Do you find this impression convincing?

Sources

- Arrian, *The Life of Alexander the Great*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt, Great Britain: Penguin, 1958.
- Philip A. Stadter, *Arrian of Nicomedia*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980.