

The Battle of Hydaspes: Alexander's Culminating Point: 326 BCE

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Abstract: Thesis Statement: Alexander the Great's grand strategy of world conquest and leaders who followed his example such as the Arabs of the seventh and eighth centuries, Napoleon I, and Adolf Hitler, could never achieve world conquest. The reason is that every offensive military operation ultimately reaches a culminating point. This principle applies to the leaders of modern countries today. Methodology: Historiography and conceptual analysis of the writings of ancient and modern scholars and historians. Results: Alexander's desire for world conquest caused him to continually move from one victory to another without creating a new moral and political community coextensive with his conquests and capable of lending stability to a new empire. Conclusion and Implications: Alexander, and other previous or current leaders bent on world conquest can never achieve this goal because every offensive military campaign reaches a culminating point beyond which continued operations risk overextension, counterattack, and defeat.

Keywords: World Conquest, Culminating Point, Offensive Military Operations

1. Introduction

Alexander the Great (Alexander III) (356-323 BCE) was a man of military and administrative genius. In antiquity only Gaius Julius Caesar and Hannibal Barca are worthy of comparison. Alexander's army conquered two million square miles of territory over three continents from the Adriatic Sea to the Indus River in just 12 years. However, he did not take time to consolidate an empire and his conquests balkanized into four power blocks upon his death at Babylon in 323 BCE. The four power blocks included: the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt, the Seleucid Empire, the Attalid Dynasty of the Kingdom of Pergamon, and Macedon. [1]

The lack of organization of Alexander's truncated empire allowed the Roman Republic to absorb the four power blocks into the Roman state. The Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt became a Roman province in 30 BCE, in 63 BCE Pompey conquered the Seleucid Empire, and in 133 BCE. Attalus II of Pergamum bequeathed his kingdom to Rome on his death. Finally, all of Greece became a Roman province in 146 BCE. [2] Polybius (203-120 BCE), a Greek historian points out that Alexander's conquests:

"Still left the greater part of the inhabited world in the

hands of others. The Romans. On the other hand, have brought not just mere portions but almost the whole of the world under their rule." [3].

A normal path for a conqueror is to advance, conquer, consolidate, and pacify the conquered territory. Alexander chose to advance, conquer, and move on to the next conquest without consolidation and pacification of the territories he conquered. To understand this behavior, one must examine the upbringing and personality of Alexander.

2. The Upbringing of Alexander

Alexander the Great (Alexander III) (356-323 BCE) was born into a very privileged position. His father was King Philip II of Macedon, and his mother was Olympias, daughter of Neoptolemus I, king of Epirus. Alexander was born in Pella, Macedon in 356 BCE. His father, Philip, seized the throne of Macedon and reigned from 359-336 BCE. Olympias was an ambitious woman who exercised great influence in Macedon. Philip trained and reorganized the Macedonian army. He expanded his kingdom by diplomacy and conquest, taking over Thrace and Chalcidice, and crushed Thebes and Athens at Chaeronea in 338 BCE to

become master of Greece. Alexander had one sister, two half-brothers and three half-sisters. During his youth, Aristotle (384-322), a Greek philosopher tutored Alexander until he was 16. Alexander learned to read, play the lyre, ride, and hunt. He also received extensive training in combat and military strategy and tactics. Prince Alexander fought several campaigns against rebellious Greek tribes and fought with his father at the Battle of Chaeronea. When Pausanias, captain of the king's bodyguards, assassinated his father Alexander became king of Macedon in 336 BCE. He was 20 years old. Alexander chose his father's ambition of conquering the Persian Empire, then under the control of King Darius III (?-330 BCE). [4-5]

3. The Persian Campaign

During the time of Philip II there were hundreds of ethnic groups who formed city states of varying kinds of governments. An exception was Macedonia. The core of Macedonian society was its nobility who prized military valor and conquest as its main international policy. [6] Before crossing to Asia, Alexander eliminated all potential rivals to the Macedonian throne and in the spring of 335 BCE he launched a Balkan campaign to suppress rebellions in Greek city-states, including the destruction of Thebes to safeguard his northern borders. [7] By 334 BCE Alexander left Antipatros in charge of his European lands and crossed the Hellespont with his army. Arrian (early 2nd century CE) claims Alexander's military force consisted of 30,000 soldiers, 5,000 cavalry and a fleet of 160 ships. [8] He gathered his army from warriors of Macedon, and various Greek city-states. Diodorus of Sicily (90-30 BCE) places the number of troops at 32,000 infantry and 5,100 cavalries. [9]

Alexander scored a succession of victories in Asia against the forces of Darius. Invariably outnumbered, Alexander used unique movements in his phalanx and creative use of his cavalry to prevail in battle. For example, at Gaugamela in 331 BCE he faced an army of circa one million soldiers and his cavalry was outnumbered five to one. Alexander posted a second, rearward-facing phalanx behind his front line and put slanting flank guards on either wing to prevent encirclement. Then Alexander's rightward move forced the Persians to stretch their line, creating a gap between the rapidly shifting units. He formed his Companion cavalry into a wedge and drove it straight through the gap, moving towards Darius' position in the center. Darius fled the field and the Persian army lost heart and its position began to collapse. The Persians lost between 40,000 to 300,000 warriors compared to the Macedonians loss of a few hundred men. [10]

The Macedonians and their allies scored impressive victories at the River Granicus (336 BCE), Issus (333 BCE), Tyre and Gaza (332 BCE), Egypt and Gaugamela (331 BCE). Bessus, the satrap (ancient Persian governor) of Bactria and head of Darius' bodyguard, murdered Darius in 330 BCE. That year, Alexander burned Persepolis and assumed the title of King of Persia. [11]

The conquest of the Persian Empire took eight years and

ended with the suppression of the Sogdian rebel leader, Spitamenes in 328 BCE. However, Alexander's military ambitions knew no bounds. He planned to conquer India, sail to Gadeira and on into the Mediterranean Sea. He would conquer Libya and Carthage and the western Mediterranean as far as the Strait of Gibraltar. [12] This plan would bring him in direct confrontation with the navy of Carthage and legions of Rome. However, in 326 BCE the Macedonian army reached a culminating point.

4. The Indian Campaign

Leaving Amyntas in Bactra with 3,500 horsemen and ten thousand infantry, Alexander's army entered India in 327 BCE. [13] Many of the chieftains, such as King Omphis, the ruler of Taxila, submitted to his authority. Others such as King Porus, the ruler of the Pauravas, had to be beaten into submission. Alexander's army marched towards the west bank of the Hydaspes River, swollen and turbulent from monsoon-torrential rains. On the east bank stood Porus' army. Ancient writers disagree about the size of both armies. Diodorus claims that Poros had 50,000 infantry, 3,000 cavalry, 1,000 chariots and 130 elephants, [14] while Arrian stated that Alexander had 6,000 infantry and 5,000 cavalries under his personal command. [15] The rest of his army of 34,000 infantry and 2,000 cavalry was left in camp under the command of General Krateros. [16-18]

Alexander was a master of distraction, diversion, and deception in war. It was impossible to cross the Hydaspes River on foot, so he sent a team back to the Indus River to bring back boats fit for the crossing. To confuse the enemy of his intent he divided his soldiers into groups and ordered them to continually move up and down the river. Meanwhile, he secretly explored the area and discovered a wooded promontory, screened from view, that was fit for crossing the river. Alexander and his men crossed the river. Scouts reported the invasion to Porus, who sent his son to confront it with a few thousand cavalry and some chariots. Alexander contested them with mounted archers and cavalry. The Persian chariots became stuck in the mud and the Persian forces retreated with a loss of 400 men, including Porus' son. [19-21]

Kraterus then left the main camp with the rest of Alexander's army and crossed the river as previously planned. Porus feared Alexander more than Kraterus. He left a small force with some elephants to oppose Kraterus and marched against Alexander with 30,000 infantry, 4,000 cavalry, and numerous chariots and elephants. He placed his elephants at intervals across his whole front, with the infantry between the animals. These elephants were not the wild, charging beasts used by Hannibal at the Battle of Zama in 202 BCE. [18] Indian war elephants were highly effective killers, raised and ridden by mahouts. They could trample soldiers, strangle them with their trunks, and puncture enemies with their tusks. The riders were excellent archers who posed another threat to the opposing army. Porus placed his cavalry on the wings of his formation with a screen of chariots. [22-24]

In 326 BCE Alexander attacked the left wing of Porus' formation with 1,000 mounted archers and personally led the follow-up attack with the elite cavalry of the Macedonian army. Porus withdrew all his cavalry on the right wing and Alexander moved forward with his cavalry to their rear. In response the Indian formation split their forces and turned to face the attackers. Alexander charged again and drove Porus' left back into the elephants. With both cavalry wings disrupted the Indian formation concentrated their forces in the center. The Macedonian infantry charged the center of Poros' formation but suffered from the actions of the elephants and their mahouts. As the center became more concentrated the wounded elephants attacked both A wounded Porus retired from the field and the Indian formation collapsed. The Indians suffered between 12,000 and 20,000 soldiers, including Porus' two sons. The Macedonian losses were about 1,000 [20]. Alexander respected Porus' courage in battle and appointed him sovereignty over the Pauravas in exchange for unswerving loyalty. Porus agreed. [25-27]

By the summer of 326 BCE Alexander's army reached a culminating point. By then many Macedonians suffered from the lasting effects of wounds sustained in battle and the poor condition of their equipment. The monsoons from June to November added to the discomfort of the soldiers. In addition, insects come out in force after the rain. When I was a Medical Corpsman during the Vietnam War I saw the negative effects on the morale of combat soldiers of continual heavy rains, [28-29] and the threat of venomous snakes, (such as Two-Step Charlie) insects, and noxious plants. Some of Alexander's soldiers died of disease and most missed their families and loved ones in Macedonia. The morale of Alexander's army was low. Strategic and operational effectiveness reach a culminating point for several reasons. In the case of Alexander's army, the soldiers were physically exhausted, and less committed as the war progressed in India. Despite Alexander's inspiring messages and admonishments his army would go no further. Koinos advised Alexander: "return to Macedon, then start afresh against Carthage and the Libyan tribes." [30] Alexander announced to the army that he decided to go back. Livy predicted that at this point Alexander would suffer a fate like Hannibal if he were to engage the legions of the Roman Republic. [31]

The journey back to Babylon was a difficult one as fierce tribe continued to harass the Macedonians. While in the territory of the Malloi, in 325 BCE the Macedonians attacked their major stronghold. During the fighting an arrow struck Alexander in chest, penetrated one of his lungs, and the arrow stuck to a bone. [32-33] General Perdikkas, cut round the wound and drew the barb out. Alexander survived, slowly recovered, and made it back to Babylon. Traumatic injuries induce a complex host response that disrupts immune system homeostasis and predisposes patients to opportunistic infections and inflammatory complications. [34] Alexander had suffered three traumatic wounds prior to this one during his long campaign. [35] The most serious was an arrow through his leg and a fractured fibula at Tanais in the Spring

of 329 BCE. He died in Babylon in 323 BCE of uncertain cause, probably an infection such as malaria or typhoid fever. When he was dying one of his friends asked him to whom he was leaving the kingdom, he said: "To the Strongest." [36] The strong did indeed prevail:

The definitive Roman occupation of the Greek world was established after the Battle of Actium (31 BC), in which Augustus defeated Cleopatra VII, the Greek Ptolemaic queen of Egypt, and the Roman general Mark Antony, and afterwards conquered Alexandria (30 BC), the last great city of Hellenistic Greece. [37]

5. Conclusion

Every offensive military campaign will sooner or later reach a point where the strength of the attacker no longer significantly exceeds that of the defender, and beyond which continued offensive operations therefore risk overextension, counterattack, and defeat. In operational theory, this point is called the culminating point. The art of the attack at all levels is to achieve decisive objectives before the culminating point is reached. The art of defense is to hasten the culmination of the attack, recognize its advent, and prepare to go on the offense when it arrives.

Therefore, leaders such as Alexander, and those who followed his example such as the Arabs of the seventh and eighth centuries, Napoleon I, and Adolf Hitler, and the leaders of modern States can never achieve world conquest. This occurs when commanders, bent on world conquest, fail to concentrate their efforts in key areas and appreciate the resource drain and morale of their armies of extended operations over great distances.

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