THE SIEGES OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT

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Preface

This book is the second of three dealing with the career of Alexander the Great. The first book, *The Army of Alexander the Great*, dealt with most issues pertaining to the army. Such issues will generally not be repeated in this volume or the next. The third volume is entitled *The Field Campaigns of Alexander the Great* and details every set-piece battle and minor campaign of Alexander's brief reign. These three volumes are each intended to stand alone, but are also complementary; when taken as a continuum, they detail every aspect of Alexander's military career.

The books arose out of my doctoral thesis and have, therefore, been six years in the preparation. I undertook the doctorate, and ultimately these books, with the intention of reconstructing Alexander's battles and sieges with a view to determining what tactics he used in gaining the largest empire the world had yet seen. This study, then, has a definite aim: to reconstruct Alexander's great battles and sieges and to assess tactics and their development throughout Alexander's career. This approach may be considered narrow and old-fashioned by some, but I believe much work remains to be done in the area, and that it is still a legitimate field of academic study.

I decided to undertake the thesis after having read Fuller a number of years ago; it constantly struck me that no real attempt has been made by academics to produce a more up-to-date assessment (Fuller was first published in 1958) based upon a considerable body of modern scholarship. Many articles have been written on individual battles and campaigns, but no full-length academic studies. I believe this full-scale approach has more validity, as an individual study will always, by necessity, miss the bigger picture and fail to grasp any developments in Alexander's tactical thinking. Small studies will also fail to properly demonstrate what Alexander's main tactics were, and if he used the same ideas repeatedly or constantly innovated to suit every circumstance.

The study of military history in recent years has become extremely unfashionable, and has been replaced by trendier subject areas like social history and the study of women in the ancient world (both very worthy fields of study in themselves, but not what interests me). This is extremely unfortunate, but I am sure that the pendulum will swing back in our direction at some point in the future. I have always been deeply fascinated by military history, and particularly the ancient world, for everything else depends upon warfare; upon victory and the freedoms it gave, or upon defeat and the travails it brought. As Sun Tzu said:

> The art of war is of vital importance to the state; it is a matter of life and death, a road to either victory or defeat. Hence it is a subject of inquiry which can on no account be neglected.[1]

I could not agree more.

One final note, all dates used within this work are BC, unless otherwise stated.

Acknowledgements

It is a great personal pleasure for me to now be able, with the help of my publisher and editor, to put some of my thoughts on paper, and hopefully pass on some of my interest to others who are of like mind. With this in mind, there are a number of people who deserve my thanks: firstly, Elizabeth for her continued love and support, my friends Martin and Sue Foulkes, and to my family. My greatest thanks, as always, are to Peter Rhodes for his boundless help and friendship. I would finally like to thank Phil Sidnell and the rest of the team at Pen and Sword for making this book possible.

Finally, I would say that this work owes a great debt to the many scholars who have come before me, and to the body of work that they have produced. I hope that in some small way I can add to that work. Despite the various people who have seen, read, and helped with the production of this book, any remaining errors are entirely my own.

Sources

The surviving source material for the career of Alexander the Great is usually divided into two general groups, the first of which is frequently referred to as the 'vulgate tradition' (or derivatives thereof). The term does far more harm to these sources than is probably justified: they present a popular tradition and are represented by Diodorus, Curtius, Pompeius Trogus (in the epitome of Justin) and Plutarch. It is not true to say that these sources are anti-Alexander, but they are certainly not as pro-Alexander as the other tradition, that represented by Arrian.

Diodorus

Of the five narratives that survive, Diodorus is the earliest. Diodorus Siculus was a Greek from Sicily, active in the first century BC, and author of a forty-book history that he called the *Library of History*. Of this great work, book seventeen deals with the career of Alexander. Diodorus is justly criticised by modern authorities for being an uncritical compiler of information. He also has a tendency to play with dates, to move events from one year to another in order to fill a time gap, and to even out events. Diodorus had a tendency to use a single primary source for each book, and in book seventeen this was Cleitarchus. He did, however, take information from other writers where appropriate, such as Ephorus, Apollodorus, Agatharchides and Timaeus. Some of his passages are almost identical to the corresponding passages in Curtius, taking into account differences in the Greek and Latin. The size of his work means that frequently he preserves some material that goes unrecorded in the other surviving sources and this is his primary value.

Diodorus' narratives are similar to the rest of the vulgate tradition, in that it

is rhetorical in nature and contains, in the case of the Battle of the Hydaspes, for example, little of tactical interest. As in Plutarch, terminology, when used, is vague and lacking in full detail. For example, Porus divided his cavalry by posting a body on each flank and that he divided his elephants equally along the length of the front line.[2] The motif of the castle wall, with the elephants representing towers, is repeated throughout the vulgate tradition. Diodorus' descriptions of Alexander's dispositions are even less tactically useful, for example: 'he viewed those of the enemy and arranged his own forces accordingly.'[3] Diodorus also fails to recognize that there were several phases of the battle involving some intricate manoeuvres from Alexander.

Arrian

Lucius Flavius Arrianus (Arrian) was a Greek from Nicomedia in Bithynia (Asia Minor, modern Turkey). The specific date of his birth is nowhere attested, but since he was consul in 130 AD, he was most likely born some time around 85 AD. Although Arrian gained Roman citizenship, he was first and foremost a Greek, writing in Greek and primarily for a Greek audience. In his early life he was a pupil of the great Stoic philosopher, Epictetus, but his *Anabasis* (his history of Alexander) shows little or no bias in that direction. In his adult life, Arrian was a significant figure in the Roman Empire, along with the consulship he was also made governor of Cappadocia by Hadrian and commanded two Roman legions there. In terms of content, Arrian was no Thucydides, but he did choose good sources, even if his reason for the choice was dubious at best.[4]

Arrian's history has generally and rightly been regarded as the finest of the surviving narratives of the career of Alexander the Great. His text is unique in the ancient world in that he specifically gives us information about his use of sources: in his preface, he identifies both his sources and his reasons for using them as his primary sources. Arrian's reasons for selecting his sources are often considered naïve, and I believe this is a perfectly correct judgement, but we must examine his reasoning in more depth.

Arrian opens his history by telling us that:[5]

> Wherever Ptolemy and Aristobulus in their histories of Alexander, the son of Philip, have given the same account, I have followed it on the assumption of its accuracy; where their facts differ I have chosen what I feel to be the more probable and interesting.

This statement may seem to imply that Ptolemy and Aristobulus were considered to be of equal weight by Arrian; this is demonstrably not the case, however. At 6.2.4 Arrian calls Ptolemy 'my principle source'; and for Arrian, therefore, there was evidently a clear hierarchy of quality with regard to his sources: Ptolemy, Aristobulus, and then the rest. Ptolemy is clearly Arrian's main narrative source, and some passages are probably verbatim extracts, such as the narrative of the Danubian campaign. Whilst we can clearly see Ptolemy in the text of Arrian, Aristobulus' contribution is more difficult to assess. The surviving fragments of Aristobulus, coupled with the relative lack of direct citations in Arrian, means that there is insufficient primary material to make any substantive judgements.

Bias is always present in any written material, and in history particularly so. The surviving sources for the career of Alexander are especially prone to this, given that what we have was written so long after his death, and the now-lost contemporary sources were written by individuals who can certainly be accused of having ulterior motives. Ptolemy, for example, has been accused of deliberately altering events to make Perdiccas responsible for the destruction of Thebes.[6] Perdiccas and Ptolemy were rivals in the period immediately after Alexander's death; Perdiccas having invaded Ptolemy's Egypt in 320. If Ptolemy wrote his history around this time, then there was an obvious and strong political motivation for wishing to re-write history in his favour and against Perdiccas. None of the dates for Ptolemy's history are anywhere near this early, however, so we must look more deeply for Ptolemy's motives. It is almost certainly incorrect to assume simple political bias, however. Ptolemy explicitly tells us that Perdiccas was wounded in the initial stages of combat, and was removed from the field, taking no further part in the battle. Any bias in Ptolemy's account is not anti-Perdiccas but is in fact pro-Alexander. Ptolemy has Alexander giving the Thebans every chance to surrender and essentially blames them for their fate. I see no reason, therefore, to dismiss Arrian's account on the grounds of bias against one of his later protagonists.

The Perdiccas bias, or lack thereof, is further complicated by a very similar incident during the siege of Halicarnassus. Arrian tells us that two drunken solders from Perdiccas' *taxis* (division of heavy infantry) made some kind of approach to the city, and were killed by missile fire from the defenders, some of whom began shooting at the rest of the encamped Macedonians. Perdiccas ordered more troops to join the fray, as did Memnon, and considerable confusion ensued. Arrian tells us that Alexander could have broken into the city at this point but sounded the withdrawal. The Diodorus version of events is considerably briefer, and whilst Arrian represents it as an almost total success,

with the city coming close to falling, Diodorus has it as an unqualified defeat.[7] Again, this incident does not show a bias against Perdiccas because, although he clearly acted without orders, the city could have fallen because of his actions and was only prevented from doing so by Alexander. If Ptolemy was genuinely anti-Perdiccas, then we can only assume that he would have taken the same line as Diodorus and presented the incident as a disaster.

The sources are also far from comprehensive in terms of what was written; with regard to the siege of Tyre, it is certain that the texts of Arrian and Curtius omit much of the detail of the siege. There is certainly not enough narrative to fill the eight months that we know it took Alexander to capture the island fortress. One obvious and significant omission is the construction of the mole; it seems to disappear from Arrian and Curtius for quite some time. One minute it is being destroyed by the fire ship, the next it has been doubled in size and is at the very walls of Tyre itself.[8] Diodorus provides a little vital tactical information, that after early mistakes Alexander was protecting the construction workers with a heavy screen of naval vessels. The main reason could be that Ptolemy may have only included the most interesting elements of the siege, which is entirely plausible; but it is also possible that Ptolemy may not have been present for parts of the siege.[9] Junior officers would likely have been sent, from time to time, on scouting or foraging missions. The lack of Ptolemy's name in the histories at this point makes it impossible to know. Arrians' choice of a junior officer (Ptolemy) in the army for the first few years of the campaign, a man who may have been excluded from councils of war during that time, adds yet another layer of complexity to the interpretation of his text.

Curtius

Quintus Curtius Rufus wrote in the second quarter of the first century AD. He was a Roman, writing in Latin, and was himself an active politician, having held public offices under both Tiberius and Claudius. Curtius wrote his history of Alexander in ten books, of which the first two are now lost, and what remains contains lacunae in places (the end of book five and the beginning of book six, and large parts of book ten, for example). Curtius' primary source seems to have been Cleitarchus, but he sensibly added many details from Ptolemy and others.

Although Arrian is correctly regarded as the most reliable of the surviving sources, there is much in Curtius and others that is not in Arrian; either because the latter did not believe it important, or perhaps because he did not have access

to the material. At Issus, for example, Curtius presents us with a picture of events at the Persian court that is not in Arrian. He describes a debate, not with Amyntas as in Arrian, but with Thymondas, son of Mentor.[10] The subject of the debate, according to Curtius, was whether or not to divide the army, a theme that appears in neither Arrian nor Plutarch. Curtius and Diodorus both describe an earlier debate in Babylon, in which the Athenian mercenary, Charidemus, advocated such a division of forces, and was executed for his overzealousness. This should not necessarily be taken to imply that Curtius had access to a Persian source that Arrian did not, perhaps only that Curtius was occasionally interested in issues outside of Arrian's scope.[11]

Curtius' narrative is replete with rhetoric and anecdotal material, as with the other vulgate sources. Curtius does, however, present us with valuable topographical information that is so often missing from Arrian, such as the width of the Hydaspes River, the islands in the river, the island upon which Alexander mistakenly landed, the slippery ground after the rains and the plain where the final battle occurred.[12] Curtius tends to pay little attention to tactical movements, and more to individual *aristeia* (courage, bravery etc.), and is therefore of lesser use in a tactical study than Arrian, but still can not be ignored.

Curtius is not primarily interested in the characters of the various protagonists in the way that Plutarch is, but on occasion his narrative does tend in this direction (too much for our purposes at least). At Gaugamela, for example, Curtius' objective is to highlight the activities of the principal characters, Alexander, Darius and Parmenio, the latter of whom he accuses of gross dereliction of duty, and not to provide a coherent narrative of events. His account of this particular battle is, therefore, problematic to say the least.

All of our sources like to present Alexander as the Homeric hero, but perhaps Curtius is more guilty of it than others. The story found in Curtius (although interestingly not Arrian) of Batis being dragged around the circuit of the city behind Alexander's chariot is an intriguing one.[13] The Homeric story presents Achilles dragging Hector's *corpse* behind his chariot, but here Batis is still alive.

Curtius does, occasionally, give us a useful insight into Alexander's thinking by means of a discussion of character. During the siege of Tyre, for example, Curtius presents us with a picture of a depressed Alexander, a man undecided whether to continue with the siege, or to abandon it; his decision to stay, coming only with the arrival of the Cypriot fleet.[14] This is almost certainly another instance of Curtius misunderstanding his sources. It is likely that Alexander considered leaving to campaign elsewhere as he did at Halicarnassus, but not that he considered abandoning the siege altogether as Curtius suggests.

Arrian is usually the source that looks to remove or reduce blame from Alexander in the event of things not going according to plan, but on occasion Curtius is just as apologetic. During the siege of Tyre, for example, Curtius places the expedition against the Arabs before the assault by the fire ship. This seems an obvious device to remove any blame from Alexander by having him away from the siege on expedition in the Lebanese Mountains at the time of this disastrous counter-attack by the Tyrians, only to have him return, restore order and redouble efforts to construct the mole, this time with proper defences in place.

The general picture presented here of Arrian providing technical details, whilst the vulgate focuses on personalities, is far from universally true. At Tyre, for example, Arrian's account lacks depth and tends to focus on personalities rather than technical detail, and although it does provide us with a reasonable chronology of events, the account is brief and much must have been missed or omitted; that is to say nothing of evident errors discussed earlier. Curtius' account on the other hand is shorter, but contains a greater amount of technical information. On this occasion, Curtius' source is evidently the superior one, probably Cleitarchus. Curtius' narrative shows enough similarities with Arrian and Diodorus for us to conclude that Cleitarchus was not Curtius' only source. Much of the technical detail in Curtius' narrative must have been provided by a technically proficient eye witness.

Elsewhere in his work, Curtius cites three sources: Cleitarchus, Timagenes and Ptolemy.[15] Neither Cleitarchus nor Timagenes are likely to have been the primary source for any battle narrative (although Cleitarchus can probably be considered to be Curtius' primary source overall), and an examination of commonalities with Arrian, who is undoubtedly based upon Ptolemy, shows that he was not Curtius' main source either; although there are enough commonalities to suggest that he did indeed have access to Ptolemy's account. Curtius' attitude towards Parmenio provides us with some clues as to his main source; in places he follows a tradition that is favourable towards Parmenio, whilst being hostile towards Menidas, who was heavily implicated in Parmenio's murder, although there is undoubted criticism of Parmenio also.[16]

Curtius' picture of Alexander himself is also rather different from that which would have been found in Callisthenes. Alexander is depicted as gnashing his teeth in frustration and rage at the escape of Darius, but Curtius perhaps goes too far in describing Alexander as indecisive and prone to panic. This presentation of Alexander tallies nicely with the often-positive picture presented of Parmenio, as noted above. Curtius links his occasionally-negative picture of

Alexander with an improbable description of the whole Macedonian army as also being prone to panic.

Plutarch

Plutarch was a famous biographer who wrote a series of parallel 'lives' of famous Greeks and Romans, every Greek being paired with a Roman counterpart; Alexander being paired with Julius Caesar. All of Plutarch's lives survive, bar two: Epaminondas and Scipio. Plutarch wrote towards the end of the first century and the beginning of the second century AD, although the exact dates of his life are not known with certainty. He was a Greek, originally from Chaeronea, but, like Arrian, he had also been granted Roman citizenship. The primary problem with Plutarch is that he was writing biography and not history: he usually favours stories that illustrated some character trait in his subject, even if the historicity of the event was dubious, such as the taming of Bucephalus episode.

Plutarch's stated aim, to write biography and not history, shows a fine appreciation of the differences between the two. He should not be criticised too strongly by historians for failing to provide a great deal of information that is useful in reconstructing narrative, as this was not his purpose. The lack of useful information in Plutarch is even more acute for the military historian, as he shows almost no appreciation for tactical terminology and its use. He does, however, sometimes refer to sources that others do not. At the Hydaspes, for example, Plutarch's account of the battle is based almost entirely on 'Alexander's letters',[17] although other sources are cited. These include Onesicritus and Sotion, as well as 'most writers' when he clearly does not wish to divulge his source specifically. Given his lack of interest in strategy and tactics, he is of little use to military narratives except in occasional points of detail, or references to non–standard sources such as the 'letters'.

Pompeius Trogus

Much like Diodorus, Pompeius Trogus wrote a world history, but unlike Diodorus, little survives. Trogus was a romanized Gaul originally from Vasio and, like the rest of the vulgate, used Cleitarchus heavily, although he also relied upon Timagenes. One of the main reasons that Trogus does not survive is the success of the much-abbreviated, and evidently of far poorer quality, epitome of

Justin. Historians typically refer to this source as being 'Justin' rather than 'Pompeius Trogus' specifically because of that success, and I have followed that tradition throughout this work.

Attitudes to Parmenio

Some of the key differences in our surviving sources, and indeed in the primary sources that they relied upon can be found in the attitudes to the elder statesman Parmenio. He is sometimes presented as the wise old general acting as a foil to the youthful exuberance of Alexander, but more often, particularly by Arrian, as being overly cautious and lacking the same heroic vision of the king.

There are five instances in Arrian where Alexander considers (however briefly) and then rejects the advice of Parmenio.[18] The first of which is a dialogue that occurred at the Granicus. What ensued is only reported in Arrian and Plutarch; a debate between Alexander and Parmenio as to the best course of action. Parmenio apparently advised waiting until the morning. He believed the Persians, who were greatly inferior in infantry, would withdraw and the Macedonians could get across the river unopposed early the following day. He also, apparently, emphasized the difficulties of the terrain. Both sources have Parmenio's advice being rejected out of hand by Alexander with very little serious consideration.

This is part of a much-used, and often discussed, device of (particularly) Arrian to have the overly-cautious Parmenio's advice rejected by the bold and heroic Alexander. Diodorus has no such debate, but his account of the battle is as if the advice were acted upon. We must note that Ptolemy was fighting in roughly the same area as Alexander, the right wing, and so Ptolemy was probably also glorifying his own role in the battle as well as that of the king, and not simply criticizing the overly-cautious Parmenio. He may also simply have had less knowledge of events on the left, and chosen to concentrate on events that he was directly involved in. At the Granicus, Callisthenes was Arrian's source for at least the debate with Parmenio. Callisthenes is known to have been hostile to Parmenio and is probably the source for all five of the dialogues between Alexander and the old general that show him as being too cautious and set him against Alexander's youthful heroism.

Before the siege of Halicarnassus began in earnest, we have another debate between Parmenio and Alexander as to the wisdom of offering a naval battle. This is significantly different from the other such debates: here Alexander is

portrayed as the pragmatic and cautious party, in opposition to Parmenio's rash and impetuous suggestion. It is perhaps unwise to pass judgment on Parmenio at this point, as we have no indication as to exactly what plan he proposed, although it would probably have been more sophisticated than a simple battle between all available forces.

At Gaugamela, Parmenio is treated favourably by Diodorus, a fact which presents a number of problems. This treatment decreases the likelihood that he was influenced by the negative sentiment in Callisthenes. It could be argued that the prominent place of the Thessalian cavalry in both Diodorus and Plutarch suggests a commonality of source; but I think it more likely that, in the absence of specific passages that are obviously from the same source, their prominent role in both is simply a reflection of actual events. That is to say that they in fact did have a significant role in the battle, and Diodorus and Plutarch are simply honestly reflecting this.

The incident of the call for help by Parmenio at the Battle of Gaugamela, just after Alexander had begun the pursuit of Darius, is also interesting. Again, it shows no malice towards Parmenio at all by Arrian or his source, but simply presents a picture of the Thessalians in genuine difficulty asking for help. Diodorus, in common with Arrian, simply presents Alexander's response without comment, unlike Plutarch and Curtius who note Alexander's frustration at the request. Interestingly, along with Diodorus' attributing no blame to Parmenio for this incident, he also attributes no blame to Alexander. Diodorus' account of this particular battle is far less useful than Curtius or Arrian, but should not be ignored as it provides some corroboration of other sources in some key details.

On a final note, I have tried to avoid being dogmatic in my approach to the sources; it is certainly true that Arrian seems to be the most reliable of the surviving material, but I have not used him to the exclusion of any of the other sources, including non-literary material where appropriate. The vulgate tradition can offer much that is of interest to the military historian, and where they disagree with Arrian it is a mistake to always assume that they are incorrect.

Chapter 1

Siege technology

For much of early Greek history the defenders in any siege situation almost invariably had the upper hand. Walls were generally fairly strong and the only real mechanisms that an attacking army had available were ladders, primitive rams, occasionally sapping (although, surprisingly, this does not seem to have been too common), betrayal and starvation. During a siege where scaling ladders were, effectively, the major means of attack, it is not surprising that most sieges were unsatisfactory, at least from the perspective of the attacking force. Frequently sieges turned out to be lengthy affairs and were won and lost by attrition or betrayal. Successful diplomacy was vital during the classical and archaic periods for a besieger to achieve success, and was raised to a virtual art form by Philip. Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great, was once quoted as saying that he could capture any city as long as he could get a mule laden with gold to the gates. This is a strong indication of the power of bribery and betrayal as a tool for a successful besieger. This situation changed radically with the invention of an entirely new weapon of war: the catapult.

Catapults

The catapult, as we would understand it, is one of those technological advances that have a clear and precise date and location for its invention. It was invented in Syracuse under the auspices of Dionysius I in, or very near to, 399. Earlier references have sometimes been argued, but are not convincing.[19] Diodorus is the first historian to describe the new invention in detail; he tells us in that year 'the entire city became one great arsenal'.[20] It seems that Dionysius gathered from all over Sicily the finest engineers of the day to construct for him vast quantities of the most modern pieces of military technology. As well as manufacturing current

pieces of technology, these engineers and artisans were almost certainly also to undertake research and development work into other entirely new forms of armaments. From this research work the catapult was first developed. Diodorus goes on to tell us that[21]:

> He (Dionysius I) gathered skilled workmen, commandeering them from the cities under his control, and attracting them by high wages from Italy and Greece, as well as Carthaginian territory. For his purpose was to make weapons in great numbers and every kind of missile, and also quadriremes and quinquiremes... not only was every space, such as the porticoes and back rooms of the temples as well as the gymnasia and colonnades of the market place crowded with workers, but the making of great quantities of arms went on. In fact the catapult was invented at this time in Syracuse... a natural consequence of the assembly in one place of the most skilful craftsmen from all over the world.

The first catapult, called the *gastraphetes*, or belly-bow, was a simple device. It was essentially a bow, although it was larger than that which a man could draw using his strength alone. A ratchet mechanism was added to allow the draw string to be drawn further back, and to keep it in position longer than could be achieved by a man holding a bow string in position. To load the weapon, one end was braced against the stomach of the user (hence the name), and the other against the ground or a wall. Both hands were then used to draw back the bow string and hook it to one of the teeth of the ratchet where it sat awaiting the weapon being fired. This early artillery was, essentially, little more than a large crossbow, although it should not be easily dismissed as it was from this weapon that the later ballistae were developed. The bow section of the *gastraphetes* was also slightly different from regular design, as it had to withstand greater stresses than a normal bow. In order to achieve this, the bow was constructed of a compound design. A compound bow would have been made up of three distinct layers. The core of the bow would have been wood, as with a regular weapon. On the inside (the side facing the operator) was glued a layer of horn, providing considerable strength, far greater than a simple wooden bow would have been capable of. On the outside of the device (the side facing the enemy) was glued a layer of sinew. These two diverse materials were both vital to the operation of the bow. The horn essentially resisted compression, and the sinew resisted stretching, and both snapped back into their rest position with considerable force when the tension on them was released. The result of this was that the bow would be under