

Alexander The Great's Cavalry Battle at the Hydaspes River

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There is perhaps no greater example of Alexander the Great's adaptability to novel circumstances than his cunning battle strategy at the Hydaspes River in India. There, Alexander met Porus, one of the strongest rajahs in India, in the last pitched battle of the Macedonian's career. Driven by his unquenchable thirst for conquest, Alexander hoped to march his army all the way to the Eastern Ocean, generally recognized as the limit of the Eastern continent. Porus was an obstacle in Alexander's route to the ocean and his rejection of the Macedonian's surrender request induced Alexander to prepare for battle.

Alexander met the Indians at the Hydaspes River, where Porus confronted the Macedonians with a massive force of infantry and a terrifying weapon, the elephant. The presence of Porus's seemingly insurmountable force compelled Alexander to devise a strategy to neutralize the larger Indian infantry and the portentous elephants. This paper will deal with the most important factor that led to Alexander's victory — his success in coaxing Porus to move the entire Indian cavalry to Porus's left wing, thereby enabling two Macedonian hipparchies (cavalry squadrons) to ride behind the Indians' line and surprise them from the rear. Although modern historians debate the exact sequence of events for the battle, an examination of the available sources can illuminate the points of debate. The precise nexus of these discrepancies concerns Alexander's orders to Coenus, the commander of the two hipparchies that rode behind the Indian lines. The position advanced by William Tarn, and supported by N.G.L. Hammond, R.D. Milns, and others is inconsistent with the information given by the ancient sources. This material includes the extant works of Arrian, Plutarch, Diodorus, Curtius, and Justin. Altogether they provide the information necessary to reconcile the differing views and to provide an accurate

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reconstruction of Alexander's maneuvers.¹

Of the sources available to modern scholars, Arrian's *Anabasis* provides the most comprehensive account of the cavalry battle. Arrian was himself a military man with administrative experience. His good judgment and critical analysis of the histories of Alexander at his disposal enabled him to base his study on the most reliable sources.²

Arrian based his *Anabasis* on sources which no longer exist. All of the narratives written by contemporaries of Alexander have been lost; only scattered fragments of a few survive. Some of the contemporaries actually accompanied Alexander on his expedition, providing firsthand knowledge of the campaign and the nature of Alexander's personality. Other historians, however, based their works almost entirely on rumors, stories, and conjecture, but nevertheless commanded a large readership. The loss of these original histories compels modern historians to glean all of their information about the original sources from accounts written several centuries after Alexander's death.

The most reliable of the "lost-historians" was Ptolemy, whose account provided one of the bases for Arrian's work. As a general in Alexander's army, Ptolemy knew the daily activities of the expeditionary force. He also encountered Alexander personally; but, more importantly, he provided detailed accounts of Alexander's military engagements. Moreover, when he undertook the task of writing a history of Alexander's campaign, he referred to the *Royal Journal*, a detailed record of Alexander's campaigns kept by Alexander's official scribes. This journal contained a precise record of Alexander's entire campaign and would have proven invaluable to Ptolemy's reconstruction of events that had occurred forty years beforehand.³

Arrian's second major source of information was another contemporary of Alexander, Aristobulus. Aristobulus also accompanied Alexander on his campaign, but whereas Ptolemy was praised for his knowledge of military affairs, Aristobulus's contributions lay in his overall trustworthiness.⁴ According to Lionel Pearson, an expert on the lost-historians, Aristobulus was more concerned with telling the truth than with magnifying Alexander's achievements.⁵ The conservative military figures related by Aristobulus illustrated his reliability and prompted Arrian to select his work to supplement Ptolemy's when he wrote his *Anabasis*.

1. W.W. Tarn, *Alexander the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1948), II, pp. 193-198. N.G.L. Hammond, *Alexander the Great: King, Commander, and Statesman* (Park Ridge, N.J.: Noyes Press, 1980), p. 208, R.D. Milns, *Alexander the Great* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), p. 214.

2. Hammond, *Alexander*, pp. 3-4.

3. Ibid. p. 1.

4. Lionel Pearson, *The Lost Histories of Alexander the Great* (American Philological Assoc., 1960), p. 150.

5. Ibid.

Arrian states that he chose Ptolemy and Aristobulus as his main sources because they both accompanied Alexander on his expedition. He trusts the veracity of their accounts when they agree.⁶ From the tone of his work, one can surmise that Arrian relied primarily on Ptolemy, who had access to the *Royal Journal* and other official material, while he used Aristobulus to supplement Ptolemy's insights into Alexander's personality.⁷ Throughout the *Anabasis*, Arrian supplies a mass of details on everyday matters, military formations, battle strategies, and other topics. Ptolemy probably provided this information.⁸ The frequent omission of geographical details and specific aspects of natural history, subjects treated thoroughly by Aristobulus, implies that Arrian chose to incorporate Aristobulus's information as material supplementary to Ptolemy's history.

Arrian's selection of Ptolemy and Aristobulus implies an evaluation of the other sources at his disposal. If he believed that any of the other sources were as reliable, he certainly would have referred to them. In fact, Arrian probably addresses Cleitarchus and other such writers, when he says that he would include "other statements made in other accounts of others, when I thought them worth mention and not entirely trustworthy, but only as tales of Alexander."⁹ Arrian verifies this policy when he includes Onesicritus's vivid characterization of Alexander's horse, Bucephalus, whom Onesicritus described as a high-spirited animal who was "never mounted by any but Alexander himself, since [he] would brook no other rider."¹⁰

Arrian's reliance upon Ptolemy and Aristobulus can be explained further by Arrian's claim that neither man would distort the truth because neither had anything to gain or lose.¹¹ Alexander was dead by the time the two men completed their works, so they could not be rewarded or punished as a result of publishing a truthful account. Moreover, Arrian concluded that since Ptolemy himself was a king, "mendacity would have been more dishonorable for him than for anyone else."¹²

One of the best known and most widely read accounts of Alexander's exploits is Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*. Unlike Arrian, Plutarch collected anecdotes and memoirs from a variety of sources to compile his story, without critical appraisal of any; thus, his *Life* cannot be relied upon by the Alexander

6. Arrian, *Anabasis*, trans. P.A. Brunt (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976), Preface .1.

7. Tarn, *Alexander*, p. 1.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 308.

9. Arrian, *Anabasis*, Preface .3.

10. Arrian, *Anabasis*, trans. Edgar Iliff Robson (New York: Putnams, 1929), 5.19.5.

11. Arrian, Preface .3.

12. *Ibid.* Although Arrian believed that neither man would lie in his account, he placed too much trust in the two men. Both felt a strong attachment to Alexander which influenced the tone of their works even after Alexander's death.

historian for complete historical accuracy. Plutarch did not intend to write a history of Alexander's expedition. He reminds his readers of this at the outset of his monograph, stating "I am writing biography, not history."¹³ His book consists of a highly selective sequence of episodes and anecdotes culled from certain phases of Alexander's career. Plutarch was interested in a characterization that would illustrate a specific theme: the distinction of Alexander's personality and achievements.¹⁴ Plutarch displayed this inclination in his account of Alexander's struggle to cross the Hydaspes River against the forces of nature. He attributes to Alexander the remark: "O Athenians, will you ever believe what risks I am running just to earn your praise?"¹⁵ One can be reasonably sure that Alexander never uttered these words, yet Plutarch includes them to illustrate Alexander's tremendous drive, which he felt was fueled by a desire to be accepted by the Greek cities.¹⁶

Diodorus's account of Alexander's expedition presents several interpretative problems to modern historians. William Tarn believes that Diodorus used two principal sources for his work. His conviction rests on the premise that Diodorus's writing reveals two distinct portraits of Alexander, one good and one bad. Tarn indicates that Diodorus's first source was probably a "mercenary's source" who at one point served under Darius and incorporated his negative attitude towards Alexander into his account.¹⁷ But P.A. Brunt and Lionel Pearson disproved the existence of this "mercenary's source" and attributed Tarn's argument to an overstatement of the case.¹⁸ Pearson explains that Diodorus had to abbreviate the events of the expedition so that it would fit into the space allotted it in his general history. He notes further that the omission of certain events does not mean that Diodorus was unaware of them; some may have lacked the moral content and thematic significance that Diodorus desired.¹⁹

J.R. Hamilton advanced a more reasonable position when he argued that Diodorus based much of his work on Cleitarchus while himself injecting the magnanimous virtues of Alexander.²⁰ Cleitarchus was one of the most influential historians of the era, though he had no personal association with

13. Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1971), 1.2.

14. Tarn, *Alexander*, pp. 296-297.

15. Plutarch, 60.6.

16. At times, Arrian commits the same offense; but, like Plutarch, he does so to bring attention to a particularly important moment or event.

17. Tarn, *Alexander*, p. 128.

18. Pearson, *Lost Histories*, p. 79.

19. *Ibid.*

20. J.R. Hamilton, "Cleitarchus and Diodorus 17," *Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean in Ancient History*, ed. K.H. Kinzler (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1977), pp. 126-127.

Alexander and did not participate in the expedition. Cleitarchus wrote his history after collecting many fantastic stories about Alexander and compiling them to maximize their dramatic effects. This salient feature of his work prompted Quintilian to describe Cleitarchus's work as "brilliantly ingenious but notoriously untrustworthy" (*Inst.*, 10.1.744).²¹ As a Greek, Cleitarchus probably disliked the Macedonians and let his bias surface in his vilifying accounts of Alexander's expedition.²² But, as Hammond suggests, it was probably Cleitarchus's ability to incorporate sensational stories and popular beliefs into his accounts that made him a favorite among Greek readers.

Cleitarchus's popularity evidently did not diminish, because his work was still celebrated in the late Roman Republic.²³ This notoriety would have ensured Diodorus's access to his writings in Rome. The many parallels drawn between Diodorus and Cleitarchus indicate that Diodorus relied on Cleitarchus's book for the majority of his own narrative, adding few of his own comments.²⁴

Curtius also seems to have drawn much of his work's content from Cleitarchus, though the tone of Curtius's work differs from that of Diodorus. Curtius's primary objective seems to be the construction of a dramatic, not critical, narrative of Alexander; his picturesque descriptions of Alexander's campaign give his book the flavor of a romantic adventure.²⁵ Scholars recognize that Curtius did not intend to write a critically accurate history, because he explains, "I have copied from others more than I believe; for while I cannot assert that things which I doubt are true, at the same time I cannot leave out what is traditional."²⁶ But, concurrently, Curtius's account offers valuable information and details missing from the other sources. Though his account is often inflated, it provides some essential information about the cavalry battle at the Hydaspes.

The final complete source of Alexander material is Justin's *Historiae Philippicae*, which he intended to be an abridgement of Trogu's *History of the World*. Justin is very brief, and his utilization of the more obscure stories concerning Alexander's exploits led Tarn to remark that "Justin often gives the impression that he is trying to go one better than Curtius or somebody else; his book is full of foolish exaggerations of things given elsewhere."²⁷ Most Alexander scholars accept this view and give little credence to Justin's account of Alexander's expedition.

21. Hammond, *Alexander*, p. 3.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

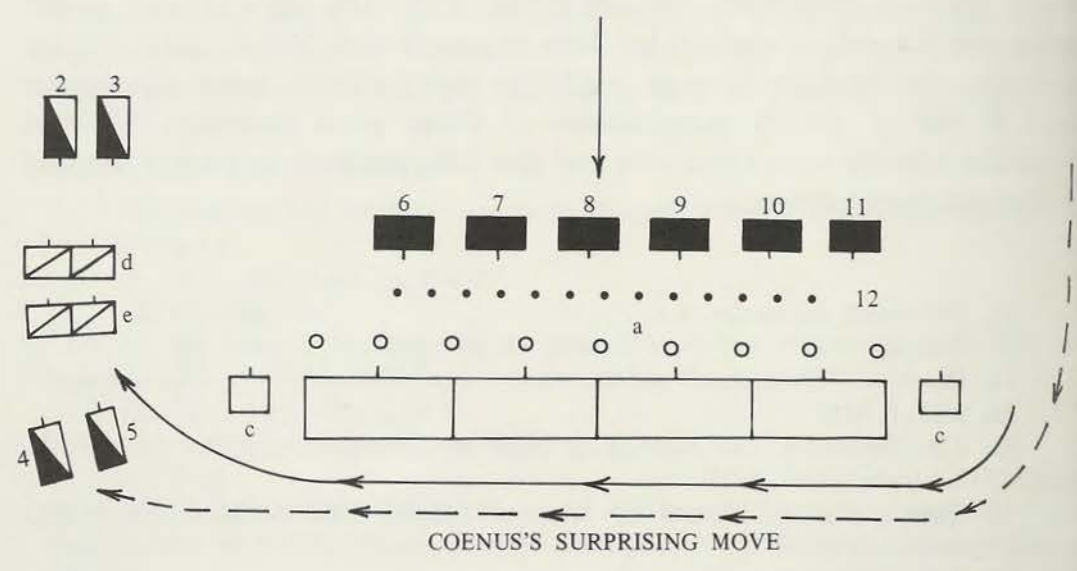
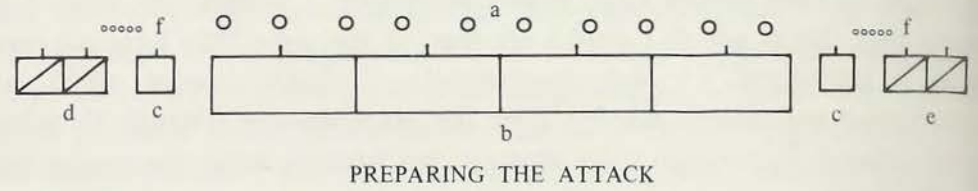
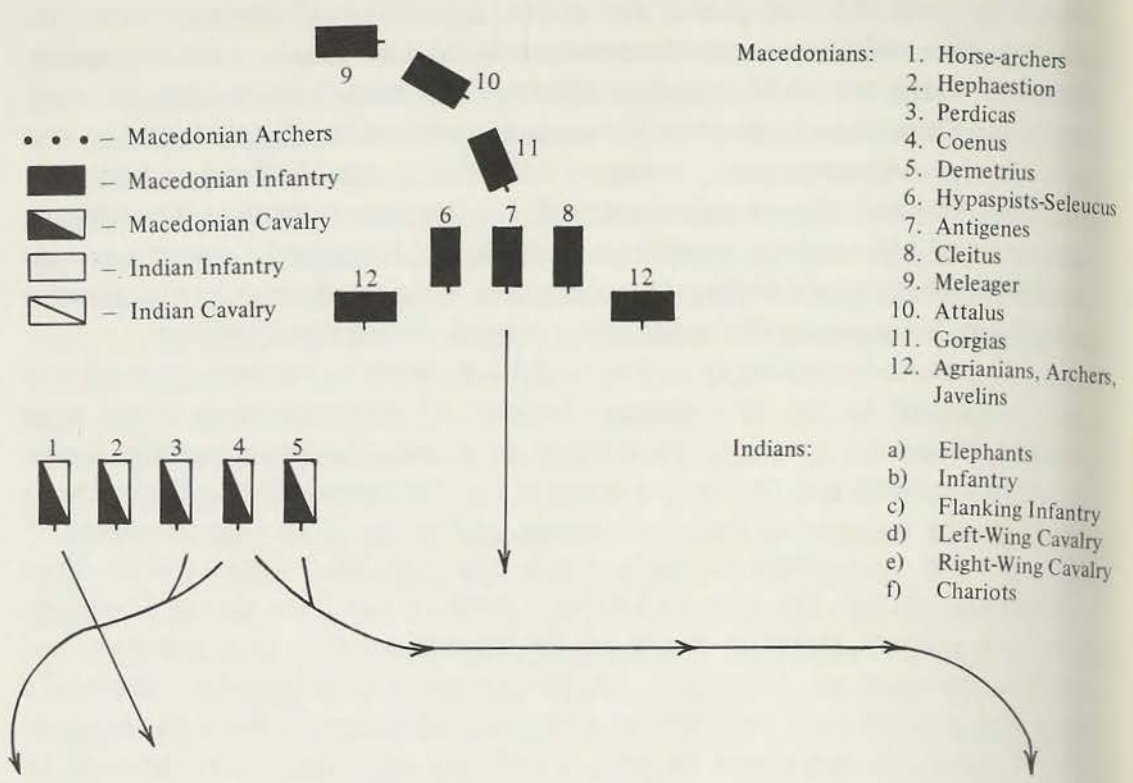
23. Hamilton, "Cleitarchus," p. 145.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

25. J.W. McCrindle, *The Invasion of India by Alexander the Great* (New York: Archibald Constable, 1896), p. 11.

26. Quintus Curtius, *History of Alexander*, trans. John C. Rolfe (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1946).

27. Tarn, *Alexander*, p. 123.



For specific information about the cavalry battle at the Hydaspes, Arrian proves to be the most comprehensive source. The details of Alexander's organization, the text of the orders given to his generals, and the vivid description of the river crossing all reflect the account of a competent military observer. Arrian's inclusion of these details implies that he bases his account on Ptolemy, who crossed the Hydaspes with Alexander and was aware of his commander's tactics.²⁸

Within their limitations, both Curtius and Diodorus provide valuable information to supplement Arrian's battle account. Though both Curtius and Diodorus romanticized the battle and integrated some sensational encounters into their histories, their sensationalism does not render them useless. According to Tarn, Curtius has "quite invaluable pieces of information embedded in his rhetoric."²⁹ Curtius tells his reader that Alexander ordered Coenus to attack Porus's right wing after Alexander had charged Porus's left wing. Curtius's description agrees with Arrian's, which states that Alexander ordered Coenus "to move as if to [Porus's] right" (*ōs epi to dexion*).³⁰ Both sources also support each other in their description of Coenus's rear attack. Arrian states that "Coenus and his troops, according to orders, began to appear in the rear,"³¹ while Curtius declares that Alexander had engaged the enemy when, according to plan, "Coenus with might force charged Porus's left wing."³² The modern historian is, therefore, presented with parallel descriptions of the most decisive maneuver in the battle by two sources who deal specifically with Alexander's orders to Coenus.

Diodorus makes no mention of the elaborate sequence of events that preceded Alexander's crossing, but his account of the battle provides the most realistic casualty figures for both sides. Arrian relied on Ptolemy for his casualty figures, and Ptolemy, as Tarn suggests, probably exaggerated his figures for the honor and glory of Alexander.³³ Diodorus, however, did not rely on military sources for his information and his casualty figures are certainly less manipulated than those Arrian presents.

Relying primarily on Arrian's account, a modern historian can reconstruct the sequence of events that led to the confrontation between Alexander and Porus. When Alexander arrived at the bank of the Hydaspes, he found a great river swollen from the melting Himalayan snows and the monsoon rains.³⁴ On the opposite bank, Porus waited with all of his forces, including a squadron of

28. Pearson, *Lost Histories*, p. 171.

29. Tarn, *Alexander*, p. 129.

30. Arrian, *Anabasis*, 5.16.3.

31. *Ibid.*, 5.17.1.

32. Curtius, *History of Alexander*, 8.14.18.

33. Tarn, *Alexander*, p. 137.

34. From Aristobulus, we learn that the Macedonians were subjected to the misery of marching more than two months through unending rain (Strabo, 15.1.17.).

elephants. Alexander could not launch a direct attack against Porus's force because the Indians held too strong a defensive position and because the Macedonian horses would not face the trumpeting of the elephants.³⁵

Alexander realized that the Indians' defensive advantage rendered a frontal assault impossible. This situation compelled him to devise a strategy that would enable him to cross the Hydaspes and confront Porus on more equitable terms. He accomplished this objective by resorting to a series of feints and ruses intended to weary the Indian troops and lull them into a state of unpreparedness. Meanwhile, he had chosen the site of his crossing, a heavily wooded area seventeen miles upstream which provided secrecy. Its remote location also guaranteed ample time for the entire Macedonian force to cross before any Indian contingent arrived.³⁶

Alexander bided his time, waiting for the ideal moment before he embarked with his troops. He left only a small detachment of men with his general, Craterus. Alexander ordered Craterus "not to attempt a crossing till he had learnt that Porus was in flight and the Greeks conquerors."³⁷ Due to faulty reconnaissance, Alexander and his troops landed on a large, unknown island in the middle of the Hydaspes, delaying their crossing of the river. Fortunately, Alexander discovered a ford to the opposite bank and successfully crossed with the bulk of his cavalry before the enemy arrived.

When Porus received the news from his scouts that a substantial force was crossing upstream, he dispatched a force of 120 chariots and 2000 cavalry to hold the Macedonians in check.³⁸ But Alexander, upon seeing the Indians' lack of cavalry support, charged with his Companion cavalry and broke the enemy's formation, killing about 400 horsemen and capturing all of their chariots.³⁹ Thus, Alexander successfully had deceived the enemy and had equalized the terms of the battle.

When the Indian survivors of this initial engagement told Porus that Alexander had crossed with a massive army, Porus was confronted with the threat of a large, mobile force approaching from the east, while Craterus's force threatened to cross as well. Porus realized that any advance to meet Alexander's army would leave his rear open to attack from Craterus, so he left a small detachment, replete with elephants, to frighten Craterus's cavalry should they attempt to cross.⁴⁰

35. Arrian, *Anabasis*, 5.10.2, tells the reader that Alexander realized that a direct crossing was impossible because the horses were unfamiliar with the smell and trumpeting of the elephants. This fear would have caused them to jump off the rafts during their transit.

36. J.R. Hamilton, *Alexander the Great* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), p. 113.

37. Arrian, *Anabasis*, 5.11.4.

38. *Ibid.*, 5.14.6.

39. *Ibid.*, 5.15.2.

40. *Ibid.*, 5.15.3-4.

For Alexander, the turning of Porus's flank changed the entire complexion of the battle. Porus had anticipated a frontal assault from Alexander's camp across the river; but, in one stroke, Alexander annulled the defensive advantage of the Indians' position on the river bank.⁴¹ Alexander's appearance upriver forced Porus to abandon his defense and establish a new front threatened by the possibility of Craterus's appearance behind his lines.

With Alexander still five to six miles away, Porus had ample time to deploy his own forces on a battlefield of his choosing. He chose a level, sandy plain that promised free movement for his elephants and cavalry. He then drew up his army in battle array as follows:

First the elephants on the front, distant from each other about 100 feet, so that they should form a line in front of the whole infantry line, and at all points terrify the cavalry of Alexander. For in any case he did not expect that any of the enemy would dare force a way through the gaps between the elephants, certainly not on horseback, since the horses would take fright, and still less foot-soldiers, who would be kept back by the heavy armed troops advancing in line and there would be trampled down by the elephants turning on them. (Arrian, *Anabasis* 5.15.5-6)

Arrian's description of the elephants imparts the sense of fear that determined Alexander's movements. But Alexander's strategy was not governed solely by the presence of the elephants; the Indian infantry stationed behind the elephants promised to be just as difficult in battle. Arrian described their position as follows:

not on the same front as the elephants, but holding the second line after them, so that the columns were fitted, more or less, into the intervals left by the animals. Porus had stationed on the wings foot-soldiers, stretching even beyond the line of elephants. Then on each flank of the infantry the cavalry was posted, and in front of the cavalry the charoits, on both sides. (Arrian, *Anabasis* 5.15.6-7)

This formation allowed Porus to capitalize on the tremendous offensive capabilities of his elephants while guaranteeing himself a widespread battle dominated by infantry. Porus knew that the Companion cavalry was Alexander's major strength; but the Indian king expected his elephants' mobility and intimidation to control the flow of the battle and ultimately to decimate the Macedonian ranks.

When Alexander approached the battle site and observed Porus's formation, he halted his cavalry and waited for his infantry to rejoin him. While resting his infantry, Alexander devised his strategy. Porus's strength lay in the

41. Benjamin Ide Wheeler, "Alexander's Invasion of India," *Century Magazine* 58 (1899); 537.

line of elephants interspersed among the infantry, for no Macedonian horse would approach them, and the beasts aroused the fear of the Macedonian soldiers.

Alexander assessed his enemy's strengths and weaknesses, concluding that the presence of the elephants among the large body of Indians dictated his own battle strategy, one centered on the use of the Companion cavalry. Alexander anticipated that a successful cavalry attack would neutralize the Indian cavalry for the remainder of the battle, and allow him to strike before the enemy could counter with any tactical maneuver. Alexander was confident that his unit's speed would ensure that it would be met only by the Indian horsemen. He was also certain that his own cavalry would prevail over the weaker Indian force in that instance.

The sequence of events following Alexander's decision to launch a cavalry attack has been reconstructed in many ways, although all are based on information mainly provided by Arrian. Arrian relates Alexander's initial order to Coenus, who was to command the Macedonian's left wing during the engagement, by stating that "Coenus he sent as if to the right. . . he commanded him that so soon as the Indians should perceive the solid body of cavalry and advance to meet it, he should keep behind them."⁴² And to his infantry, Arrian relates Alexander's orders that "they were not to take part in the action until they observed the enemy's main body of infantry and their cavalry thrown into confusion by his own cavalry force."⁴³

Alexander then launched the first phase of his attack by sending his mounted archers, a thousand strong, against the Indian left wing. The horse archers destroyed most of the chariots and threw the rest of the Indian cavalry into confusion.⁴⁴ Alexander then maneuvered to his own right to attack the enemy's flank before the Indians could make dispositions to meet him.

Porus, observing the developments astride his elephant, made a quick assessment of the strength of the Macedonian cavalry and brought the cavalry from his right wing to join his forces on the left.⁴⁵ Porus had seen Alexander's marginal advantage. He was convinced that the total of his mounted forces was sufficient to decimate Alexander's cavalry and provide momentum for his own infantry.

From Arrian's battle account, one can deduce that as the Macedonians and the Indians clashed, Coenus appeared from behind the enemy's line and imposed the dilemma of a two-front defense. Coenus's attack forced the Indian horses to alter their formation, causing a considerable amount of confusion. Alexander

42. Arrian, *Anabasis*, 5.16.3.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Diodorus, Loeb Edition, trans. C. Bradford Welles (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), 17.88.1.

45. Arrian, *Anabasis*, 5.17.1.

seized this opportunity to deliver a crushing attack, charging his squadron at the precise moment when the horses were changing front. This blow broke the Indians' ranks and they "fell hurriedly back upon their elephants as if to some friendly sheltering wall."⁴⁶

This reconstruction is not accepted by all Alexander scholars. Tarn published a widely accepted interpretation which differs radically from this view.⁴⁷ Tarn's entire reconstruction is based on the assumption that Porus had collected his entire mounted force on his left wing *before* Alexander gave Coenus his orders to move towards Porus's right. But Tarn's conclusion implies a strategic impropriety on the part of both men that was extremely unlikely. Tarn gives no reason why Porus would gather all of his cavalry on the left before Alexander advanced, an assumption that cannot be made without explanation.

Arrian clearly states that Alexander sent Coenus to the Indian right before Alexander halted out of bow-shot, not after he had already begun his advance.⁴⁸ Had Alexander waited until his cavalry squadrons were in view of Porus, his plan to surprise the Indians certainly would have failed. Alexander's approach on Porus's left might have prompted Porus to gather all of his cavalry opposite Alexander's hipparchies, but Tarn's claim that Coenus was then sent to Porus's right is unsupported; the transparency of Coenus's maneuver would have been evident to Porus. Tarn suggests that Porus would have believed that Coenus was supporting the horse archers, but Tarn's conclusion is impossible because the horse archers were preparing to engage the Indian cavalry several hundred paces in front of Alexander's hipparchies.⁴⁹ Obviously, Porus would have detected Coenus's move to his right as some kind of ruse, for the Indian cavalry was no longer stationed on Porus's right wing and Coenus could not attempt to attack the elephants there. Porus would have fathomed Alexander's intentions and would have wheeled part of his cavalry around to face the inevitable charge, or he would have withdrawn his entire cavalry to the shelter of the elephants, thereby denying Alexander the cavalry encounter he desired.

It is obvious that Alexander wanted Porus to collect his entire cavalry on the left wing,⁵⁰ but Tarn avoids this problem by claiming that they were already collected there before Alexander attacked. This view is unacceptable.⁵¹ How

46. *Ibid.*, 5.17.2.

47. Tarn, *Alexander*, pp. 193-198.

48. J.R. Hamilton, "The Cavalry Battle at the Hydaspes," *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, LXXVI (1956), pp. 27-28.

49. Tarn, *Alexander*, p. 196.

50. Wheeler, "Alexander's Invasion," p. 195.

51. Arrian, *Anabasis*, 5.15.7, states that Porus had cavalry posted on each flank of the infantry.

could Alexander know that Porus would bring his entire force to the left to confront the Companions? The only viable explanation is that Porus saw only Alexander's two hipparchies advance and was unaware of Coenus's movements. The sources suggest that Porus's scouting system was rather ineffective, enabling Alexander's crossing to come as a complete surprise. When Porus finally learned of the crossing, he had no knowledge of the size of Alexander's army or of how many cavalry squadrons he commanded. That Coenus's attack came as a complete surprise further indicates that the Indians did not know of Coenus's position.

Alexander needed to convince Porus that an all-out attack by the Indian cavalry would annihilate the Macedonian forces. He accomplished this ruse by sending Coenus to the Indians' right, remaining just out of sight of the Indian line, with orders to attack the Indian horses on Porus's right wing.⁵² Furthermore, if the Indians moved to help the left wing, Coenus was ordered to "keep behind them."⁵³

Alexander realized the importance of disabling the Indian cavalry before the two armies met. Alexander knew that once the battle had begun, he could not offer his *phalanges* much support because his horses refused to approach the elephants. The need to defeat the entire Indian cavalry gives credence to the theory that Alexander sent Coenus to Porus's right with the intention of engaging them if they were not shuttled to the left wing, and to follow them if they rode out in support. Alexander certainly must have believed that Coenus's hipparchies could defeat the Indians. If they had any trouble, he could have come to their aid after destroying the cavalry forces on the left.⁵⁴ As Hammond indicates, this suggestion implies that Alexander was prepared for either situation. He dispels the accusations that Alexander acted rashly by assuming that Porus's orders would conform to his expectations.

Alexander predicted Porus's movements correctly, however, and Porus moved his right wing cavalry to the left. Following orders, Coenus pursued them behind the Indian lines and surprised them in the rear as they engaged Alexander's force. That Coenus passed behind the enemy's lines is unmistakable, for it was impossible for the Macedonians to ride in front of the elephants.⁵⁵ Moreover, if Coenus had ridden across the plain instead of behind the lines, his flank attack would have been discerned by the Indians, who could have adopted measures to combat him.

Tarn further complicates matters by insisting that Alexander planned to

52. Polyaeus, *Strategems of War*, trans. R. Shepherd (Chicago: Ares Pub., 1974), pp. 145-146. Polyaeus's description of Alexander's orders to Coenus and Coenus's surprise appearance behind the Indians is compatible with Arrian's account.

53. Arrian, *Anabasis*, 5.16.3.

54. Hamilton, "Cavalry Battle," pp. 29-30.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

wait for the Indians to charge, thereby allowing Coenus to slip behind and attack them while they were separated from the elephants.⁵⁶ Tarn's speculation here is extremely unlikely, for no cavalry officer would willingly play a defensive role in a cavalry encounter. The entire purpose of a unit's cavalry is to charge so that they will have the momentum to sweep their enemy away.⁵⁷ Alexander showed the value of a charge at the Granicus River when his squadron swept through the stationary Persian cavalry, even though the Persians held a strong defensive position. When halted, the defensive power of a cavalry force is negligible. Even if attacked by an inferior force, an unrivaled cavalry squadron can be overwhelmed. It is more likely that Alexander would feint to Porus's left to convince the Indians that he was preparing to make a flank attack. This feint would have drawn the Indians away from the elephants and to their left to counter Alexander's maneuver, enabling Coenus to surprise them in the rear. Hammond elucidated this point and concluded that Arrian's passage, "then Alexander himself began to ride rapidly along the enemy left with the Companion cavalry, hastening to make a flank attack upon them,"⁵⁸ indicates that Alexander's feint forced the Indians to change their position and enabled Coenus to attack them from behind their own lines.

The rest of the encounter follows primarily as Arrian described it. Seeing that the Indians' cavalry and infantry were in confusion, the Macedonian *phalanges* advanced upon the Indians' line, taking in the flank the elephants who had wheeled to reenforce the Indian cavalry. The Macedonian infantry was the most highly disciplined and professional army in the Greek world. Alexander relied on their mobility and adaptability to overwhelm the powerful beasts. Alexander decided that the best way to neutralize the power of the elephants was to allow them to advance into the center of their phalanx. Then the Macedonians would surround each elephant and pick off its driver with their *sarissae* while discharging volleys of missiles into the elephant's hide.⁵⁹ Once its driver was killed, the elephant would be driven back towards the Indian line, where it would rush about in a panic. The terrified creature often turned against its own troops, causing more destruction among the Indians than among their enemies.

The Indian horsemen, cowering near the protection of the elephants, sought revenge. They rallied to reengage the Macedonian horsemen, but the better disciplined and stronger Macedonian cavalry regrouped and repulsed the Indians' charge. This total destruction of the Indian cavalry gave Alexander's horsemen a free rein to gallop among the Indian infantry and wreak havoc. The

56. Tarn, *Alexander*, p. 195.

57. J.F.C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Alexander the Great* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1960), pp. 195-196.

58. Arrian, *Anabasis*, 5.16.4.

59. Peter Green, *Alexander the Great* (New York: Praeger Pub., 1970), p. 216.

elephants were unable to terrify the horses because they were divided by the mass of their own infantry from Alexander's cavalry.⁶⁰ Thus, Alexander gained the advantage that he had planned — an infantry battle free from harassment by the Indian cavalry.

Meanwhile, the open-order tactics of the Macedonian *phalanges* began to take their toll on the Indians' elephants. The Macedonians continued to dodge the charging beasts, relentlessly slashing and shooting them and their riders. Alexander also equipped special forces with Persian scimitars and axes, intended to hack at the elephants' trunks and hamstrings. The Macedonians were intimidated by the elephants and "[the Macedonians'] fear left nothing untried, not only in dealing death, but in new ways of making death itself painful."⁶¹ The wounded animals, berserk with pain, began to retreat like "ships backing water,"⁶² trumpeting their distress and completely out of control.

Now Alexander's united body of cavalry was allowed to charge into the broken ranks of the Indians, spreading carnage. To deliver the decisive blow, Alexander formed his cavalry in a circle around the entire Indian army. He then gave orders to the *phalanges* to lock shields and advance into the Indian ranks with their *sarissae* protruding. The whole Indian infantry was a confused and inert mass of men incapable of defending itself. The Macedonians cut them down on all sides.

By this time, Craterus and his men had been able to force their way across the Hydaspes. These fresh troops took over the pursuit from Alexander's tired men. Of Porus's men, Arrian says that nearly 20,000 men, 3,000 horses, and all the chariots were lost.⁶³ This figure is probably an exaggeration. Diodorus's figures of 12,000 men killed with 9,000 taken alive seems more realistic.⁶⁴ In this, Alexander's bloodiest battle, the Macedonians lost approximately 700 men and 280 cavalry, the heaviest casualty figure on any of Alexander's battles.

Porus himself was captured by Alexander after being wounded in the shoulder. Porus had attempted to flee, but he was convinced by his friend and Alexander's envoy, Meroes, to surrender and conduct himself to Alexander.⁶⁵ Alexander admired Porus's bravery and military skill and asked Porus to name

60. A.R. Burn, "The Generalship of Alexander," *Greece and Rome* 12 (1965); 158.

61. Curtius, *History of Alexander*, 8.14.29.

62. Arrian, *Anabasis*, 5.17.7.

63. *Ibid.*, 5.18.2.

64. Diodorus, 17.89.1-2.

65. Curtius relates a different account, stating that Alexander, mounted on his horse Bucephalus, pursued Porus himself (8.14.34). . . This view is the same depicted by a commemorative silver decadrachm, minted by Alexander, which shows Alexander on horseback, carrying a *sarissa* and attacking an elephant. The reverse shows Alexander in full Macedonian battle dress, holding a thunderbolt in his hand. The decadrachm is the first to commemorate a contemporary event, so Curtius must have known about it and may have adjusted his account to relate the same scene depicted on the coin. For pictures of the coin, see Barclay V. Head, *Historiae Numorum* (London: Mehteusen and Co., 1933). See also Al

his wish. To this request, Porus replied, "Treat me, Alexander, like a king."⁶⁶ Impressed and pleased by this response, Alexander reinstated Porus as rajah and gave him territory in addition to his original kingdom. Alexander thus became greater in peace than in war, for according to Indian codes, he acted as *Dharmayijyi*, or conqueror through righteousness.⁶⁷

Alexander's victory at the Hydaspes was a remarkable feat because of the initial adversities which he overcame. If one examines the basic reasoning behind Alexander's battle strategy, one will see that his tactical maneuvers rested on five strategic principles that he adhered to in all of his battles.⁶⁸ The first of these was that he employed all of his available forces with the utmost energy. At the Hydaspes, Alexander had to adjust his strategy to meet Porus's dispositions. Porus's formation dictated a battle heavily reliant on the infantries. For this reason, Alexander crossed the Hydaspes with as many men as he could so that the odds of winning a set engagement would be increased.

The second principle adhered to by Alexander was the concentration of force at the point where he intended to strike the decisive blow, even at the risk of being at a disadvantage at other points. The success at the decisive point would compensate for any setbacks suffered along any other portion of the line. Alexander struck this blow at the Hydaspes with his superb Companion cavalry, attacking Porus's left wing cavalry, drawing them away from the protection of the elephants. He then struck the mortal blow by waiting until the fleeting moment when the Indian cavalry attempted to form two ranks, then overwhelming their force and tilting the scales of victory in his favor.

The third principle which Alexander embraced was the importance of rapid movements in defeating the enemy. In all of his battles, speed dominated his movements and allowed him to accomplish more than his enemy. When confronted with Porus's cumbersome and inflexible battle formation, Alexander immediately decided to negate their superiority of infantry by destroying the Indian cavalry, thereby enabling him to give some much needed support to his own infantry while in battle. Alexander accomplished his objective by exploiting the speed and mobility of his Companion cavalry and by taking the offensive. His boldness allowed him to select the decisive point of attack and to put the Indians on the defensive. The lightning-like speed with which Alexander acted allowed him to destroy the Indians' most mobile force while ensuring cavalry protection for his own troops.

More than any other component of the battle, Alexander realized the

N. Oikonomides, "Decadrachm Aids in Identification of Alexander," *Coin World International* (Nov. 25, 1981) for an intriguing analysis of Alexander's intent in commissioning the coin.

66. Arrian, *Anabasis*, 5.19.2. It is unlikely that this exchange actually took place, but Ptolemy probably wanted to highlight Alexander's benevolent qualities, leading Arrian to include this conversation in his own account.

67. Green, *Alexander*, p. 220.

68. Fuller, *The Generalship*, p. 287.

importance of surprise in guaranteeing victory. At the Granicus, Issus, and Arbela, Alexander displayed his ability to devise strategies that would surprise the enemy. His adaptations and surprises at the Hydaspes, however, are perhaps most illustrative of his tactical genius. His deceptions at his base camp allowed him to cross the river and, in an instant, annul Porus's defensive advantage. This surprise, however, was surpassed by the advantage gained when Coenus appeared from behind the enemy lines and attacked the Indian cavalry in the rear. In both instances, Alexander fixed the enemy's attention in a direction other than the one in which he sought surprise, and in so doing, he shattered Porus's battle plans.⁶⁹

Finally, Alexander relied on the pursuit of the enemy to ensure the extinction of the enemy's desire to foment further trouble. Alexander made specific allowances for the pursuit when he ordered Craterus to remain in camp until he saw that victory was in Alexander's grasp. Alexander realized that his infantry would be exhausted after the battle, and that a fresh pursuit force was necessary. Craterus and his troops relentlessly pursued the Indian soldiers and "wrought equal slaughter in the Indian retreat."⁷⁰

An examination of the entire encounter at the Hydaspes reveals the tactical brilliance that Alexander possessed. Though he had fought against unknown foes throughout his expedition, none posed as great a threat or promised to be as difficult to overcome as Porus and his elephants. But Alexander, following the basic strategic principles that had governed all of his cavalry encounters, relied on his horsemen to gain the initial advantage in the battle before the highly trained Macedonian *phalanges* met the formidable challenge of disabling the elephants.

A complete reconstruction of the battle's events can be made if one closely follows Arrian's account and applies the logical military components of a cavalry attack to the narrative. Tarn's interpretation of Arrian's account disregards the basic elements of cavalry warfare and depends upon the assumptions that Porus had concentrated all of his cavalry on his left wing before Coenus received his orders, and that Alexander induced the Indian cavalry to charge him. The first assumption contradicts Arrian's account and is unsupported by Tarn. The second assumption violates all of the rules which govern an effective cavalry encounter. Alexander had shown the value of a cavalry charge in all of his previous battles, and it is unlikely that he would abandon the tactics that had delivered victory to the Macedonians for eight years. Furthermore, Tarn's assumption implies that Alexander would discard the strategic principles of surprise, mobility, and of striking the decisive blow. Alexander had repeatedly shown his ability to devise innovative battle strategies, and it is unreasonable to assume that Alexander would alter his tactical style just when innovation was needed the most.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 300.

70. Arrian, *Anabasis*, 5.18.1.