

THE BATTLE OF THE HYDASPES

(326 B. C.)

Alexander became King of Macedonia at the age of 20, in 336 B. C. From his assassinated father, Philip, he inherited a prosperous and united country, the world's best army and an incredible ambition and talent for war. After securing his immediate borders, Alexander led half his army into Asia Minor to challenge the powerful Persian Empire. After winning major victories at Granicus and Issus, conducting a monumental nine month siege at Tyre and overrunning Egypt without a fight, Alexander marched to the heart of the Persian holdings and crushed an enormous Persian army at Gaugamela (331 B. C.). The death of Persian emperor Darius III shortly after the battle made Alexander effectively the new ruler of this vast empire. Alexander spent the next five years consolidating this empire; putting down revolts, chastising barbarians and conquering the tough mountain tribes of south central Asia (the people of modern Afghanistan still boast that they have never been conquered - except by the greatest of all conquerors, Alexander the Great). These campaigns drew the Macedonians ever eastward and, finally, they stood on the borders of the legendary realm of India.

Having gained hegemony over virtually all of the civilized western world, the thirty year old Alexander and his Macedonian "juggernaut" ventured into the Indian sub-continent to satisfy his compulsive curiosity and need for conquest. Alexander marched his army into the Punjab at the invitation of the King of Taxala, who was at war with Porus, a local, but powerful, rajah. He was met at the River Hydaspes (today, the Jhelum) by the army of Porus. His desired crossing thwarted by the presence of Porus' vigilant elephant corps, which lined the banks of the deep and swift river, much swollen by recent rains, Alexander used a ruse to effect an up-river crossing, maneuvering to focus the Indian's attention to their front, while crossing part of his army 16 miles upstream. Faced with part of the Macedonian host on his own side of the river, Porus marched rapidly to meet Alexander in a pitched battle before the remainder of Alexander's army could cross the Hydaspes to join him.

Despite the havoc wreaked upon the phalanx by Porus' elephants, Alexander's massed cavalry, in a spectacular encircling maneuver, totally destroyed Porus' flanks and then rolled up the Indian infantry. Porus, badly wounded, was captured as his army disintegrated. Alexander was so impressed with the skill and courage of Porus that he left him in charge when the Macedonian army returned west.

The Hydaspes was the last major battle fought by Alexander III, King of Macedonia, Captain General of the Hellenic League, King of Kings of the former Persian Empire, reputed son of the god Zeus - better known to history as Alexander the Great. Shortly after the Hydaspes, his exhausted and homesick army, having pushed on to the Hyphasis (modern Beas) River, mutinied and refused to go any further. Giving in to his soldiers' demands, Alexander began his retirement to the west...and a long trek home. Several sources claim that, after returning home, he intended to move west and conquer the Mediterranean periphery. Alexander never reached his homeland. Pausing to put down some rebellions and restore order to his vast empire, Alexander contracted an illness in Babylon (probably some form of malaria), from which he died (abetted by the problems of a recent chest wound, exacerbated by heavy drinking...and, all too possibly, a smidgen of poison) in 323 B. C., at the age of 33.

In eleven years of campaigning, Alexander had used the Macedonian system of combined arms warfare, employed by one of the earliest professional armies (created by his father, Philip of Macedon), to become the most successful and, arguably, the "greatest" field commander in all history. He changed the face and outlook of half the world.

After Alexander's death, with no adult legitimate heir (his queen, Roxana, and his infant son were both murdered shortly after Alexander's death) his empire fragmented under the internecine wars fought by his generals, the Diadochi (Successors), who continued the Macedonian tradition of warfare, adding in lots of elephants.