

Alexander's Final Plans, Revisited

Alexander the Great's final plans are one of the great counter-factual moments of the ancient world. What would this relentless conquer have done had he not died? We will never know for certain, but that does little to stop speculation. Already in the ancient world, Diodorus Siculus claimed that Alexander had drafted detailed memoranda (ὑπομνήματα) ordering that, among other things, his subjects construct a thousand warships for an expedition against Carthage (18.4.4), which Curtius expands to include an invasion of Italy by marching counter-clockwise around the Mediterranean (10.1.17–18) and Plutarch describes as a desire to sail around Africa to enter the Mediterranean from the East (*Alex.* 68.1–2). Arrian lists several different plans, including the more ambitious goals found in the other sources (*Anab.* 7.1) but then dedicates a longer description of Arabia related to a proposed invasion (*Anab.* 7.19–20), which he credits to Alexander's insatiable desire for conquest (ἄπληστος ἦν τοῦ κτᾶσθαί τι ἀεὶ Ἀλέξανδρος, 7.19.6). Such stories took on a life of their own in the ancient world such that Livy produced a contrafactual digression about what would have happened in a war between Alexander and Rome (9.17–19).

Since the early twentieth century modern historians have been primarily concerned with the historicity of the plans to lead a campaign west, with most of the attention being paid to whether Alexander intended to sail east. To the extent that there is a consensus, most scholars have considered these claims to be exaggerations by later authors (e.g. Finn 2022; Tarn 1921 and 1939), while Brian Bosworth (1993) is representative of a heterodox position that accepts the entire shape of Alexander's plans as found in our ancient sources. By contrast, the first part of Alexander's plans receives much less attention, often because they are simply accepted as

historical little more than broad truisms to explain Alexander's motivation for executing them (e.g. Worthington 2014). While I agree that Alexander intended to invade Arabia, considering Alexander's action on other imperial borders can offer a more specific explanation for the campaign.

One recent trend in scholarship on Alexander has been to strip the historical romance from the ancient sources. Nowhere is this clearer than in the understanding of events in India, which are highly fictionalized in the ancient sources. Sabine Müller and Tim Howe (2012), for instance, argued that the famous mutiny on the Hyphasis River was an invention of later sources meant to build Alexander's *pothos* to reach the ends of the earth and thus obscures more mundane reasons for the army to turn back. Similarly, at the most recent symposium on Alexander the Great in 2024, Hugh Bowden expanded on this position, arguing that Alexander's campaigns in the east largely aimed at subduing and controlling the territory that had been previously claimed by the Achaemenid dynasty. While much attention has been paid to the territorial extent of the Achaemenid empire and Alexander's conquests in the north, west, and east, much less has been given to the south, where the Achaemenid Empire maintained a substantial presence in the Persian Gulf (Hdt. 3.93; Arrian, *Anab.* 3.11.3–7; Briant 2002; Salles 1993). Applying the recent revisions to the understanding of Alexander's campaign to the evidence for this Persian presence offers a new explanation for the historicity of this part of Alexander's so-called "last plans," A campaign against Arabia represented a conclusion to the conquest of Persia rather than the first phase of a more grandiose design.

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