

The Many Fleets of Alexander the Great

The reputation of Alexander III as a brilliant field commander is often contrasted by his apparent lack of interest in naval matters. After all, he disbanded his fleet at the first sign of resistance. However, this one-sided view is not accurate. Alexander the Great did in fact have a well-funded and highly organized navy that dominated the Eastern Mediterranean. This model was used later in his reign during the Indian campaign, and the successes of these fleets could very well have influenced the future campaigns of Alexander. Unfortunately, the finer details of these fleets are few and far between, for these fleets operated out of the spotlight, away from the king. I will analyze the organization, purpose, and importance of the many fleets of Alexander the Great, proving that he valued his navy just as much as his army. To accomplish this, I will examine the fleets in two parts: one following Alexander and describing how he personally led his fleets, and another analyzing the Macedonian fleets away from their king. This organization aims to illustrate the scale of the Macedonian naval operations and how Alexander benefitted from a thalassocracy, something he strived to maintain.

The surviving texts from antiquity that tell of the campaigns of Alexander are often mired in bias, colorful language, or inconsistencies. This is true for mentions of his fleets as well. Often the most detailed with regard to military matters, I have scoured Arrian for all mentions of the relative fleets. This analysis is supported by the accounts of Curtius Rufus, Diodorus Siculus, and Plutarch. Secondary scholarship, while certainly abundant when it comes to Alexander, is relatively light with regard to his navy. Mid-20th century scholars, such as Fuller (1960) and Tarn (1948) view Alexander's navy as nothing more than a supporting arm of his army. In the 1970s and 1980s, there was an expanse in Macedonian naval thought, spearheaded by Bosworth (1980)

and Hauben (1976), both of whom are used freely. Their works were not able to change the narrative of modern scholars like Adams (2004) and Stoneman (2004) since they only follow the spotlight of Alexander, mentioning the fleet as nothing more than secondary. However, some modern scholars continue to research Alexander's fleets, like Murray (2012), and by using all these works, a narrative for the many fleets of Alexander can be constructed.

The narratives that illustrate the campaigns of Alexander focus nearly all their attention on the monarch himself. With this in mind, it is understandable that the most detailed accounts of the navy are given when it is under Alexander's direct command. For the majority of the campaign, the navy under the command of the king served to aid the land forces in the realm of logistics, to accelerate and supply the army (Engels, 1978). Alexander also commanded his fleets under the walls of fortified coastal strongholds, namely the sieges of Miletus and Tyre (Murray, 2012; Adams, 2004). Sailing down the Indus River, Alexander commanded the colossal fleet that transported a large portion of the Macedonian army and their supplies, allowing for the rapid southern movement (Engels, 1978). This research aims to highlight the critical importance Alexander placed on his fleet by personally commanding it. A topic of contention is often the disbandment of his first fleet. Scholars disagree on the intelligence of the decision (Bosworth, 1980; Adams, 2004), but through analysis of Alexander's position at the time, one can see that it was not a mistake.

It is considerably more difficult to establish a narrative for the fleets that operated away from Alexander, since they fall outside the reach of the historical spotlight. Even so, I have endeavored to supply an account of events following the main independent fleets of Alexander, mainly those led by Hegelochos, Amphoteros, and Nearchus (Hauben, 1976; Bosworth, 1980). The successes of these independent fleets inspired Alexander to continuously expand his naval

apparatus, especially in the later years of his reign, with supposed plans to construct a harbor in Babylon for a thousand warships, and a naval campaign to circumnavigate Africa. These plans, as well as the continued dominance of Alexander in the Eastern Mediterranean, prove that Alexander wished to maintain a thalassocracy using a powerful navy, and valued this navy just as much as his land forces.

Works Cited

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