

From the Balkans to Bactria: How Alexander the Great's Mountain Wars Grew Bloodier

In "Alexander and 'Afghan Insurgency': A Reassessment," Howe argues that Alexander's Bactrian and Sogdian campaigns were not as novel or as challenging as is the common opinion, and that Alexander's tactics in them were no different from those of his Balkan campaign of 335. Thus, by extension, all his mountain wars had little difference (Howe 2015). However, Howe privileges tactical maneuvers and combat style over the impact of the campaign on soldiers and civilians and their different responses to it. In my paper, I deviate strongly from Howe by discussing distinct aspects of the Bactrian and Sogdian campaigns: (1) the initial lack of Macedonian success due in part to (2) the enemy's effective use of unfamiliar tactics, and the resulting (3) expansion in the rate and frequency of violence, which established a pattern of preemptive slaughter that was perpetuated throughout India.

In their campaigns against the Thracians and Illyrians (Arr.1.1.4-1.6.11), the Macedonians enjoyed general success from the outset, suffering low casualties (Arr.1.2.7) and staving off enemy ambushes (Arr.1.5.9-11). This success was due in large part to the army's familiarity with the terrain and the different tribes. Indeed, since the army was combating an ancestral enemy, many of its veterans would have experienced Thracian and Illyrian tactics, and the enemies' battle formations often mirrored the Macedonians' own. The Thracians (Arr. 1.1.11-12) and Syrmus' Illyrians (Arr.1.2.4) both engaged in pitched battle, and the Macedonians were also supported by Agrianians who knew the territory and matched the skills of its natives (Arr. 1.5.1-2).

The Bactrian and Sogdian campaigns, however, saw little initial success. Unlike the comparatively swift capture and destruction of Pelion in Illyria or even the long but decisive siege of Tyre, the Macedonians' efforts to capture Bactrian and Sogdian strongholds took

much time and multiple attempts; the decisive defeat of the Illyrians could not be replicated despite the use of similar tactics. Spitamenes and his Scythian allies successfully ambushed and massacred Macedonians on multiple occasions, most notably the Jaxartes River (Curt.7.6.1-10; Arr. 3.30.10-11), the Polytimetus River (Curt.7.7.30-39; Arr.4.5.2-4.6.2), and a fortress near Bactra (Arr. 4.16.4-5). The mounted archers among the Sacae and Massagetae were indeed a different kind of enemy than their Balkan counterparts, and the fighting conditions the Macedonians endured in Bactria and Sogdiana were not as similar to their Balkan experience as Howe suggests (2015). Certainly, the organized resistance of Spitamenes as his Scythian allies stalled Alexander's usual rapid success against mountain-dwelling enemies.

Macedonian tactics from the homeland were ineffective in Bactria and Sogdiana; in response, the army increased its rate and range of violence against both soldiers and non-combatants. The Macedonian use of terrorism in the Balkans, which Howe discusses, pales in comparison to the rate of destruction in Bactria and Sogdiana, where the fiercest form of military retaliation, *andrapodismos*, became the standard response to cities that did not capitulate, and Alexander made regular examples of resisting cities, although this also failed to suppress opposition (Holt 1993). The killing of soldiers caught in post-battle rout (Howe 2015) or the use of *andrapodismos* after a difficult siege were common aspects of Greek war; even Alexander's night raid on the Triballi (Arr.1.6.10) finds precedent in the Greek historical memory (*Il.*10.470-535) and involved no non-combatants. To the contrary, in the east of the Persian Empire, the frequency of *andrapodismos* increased considerably, and the Macedonian massacre of the Branchidae and utter destruction of the Zeravshan Valley expanded military violence from soldiers to non-combatants. This mounting violence came as a direct response to the seeming futility of the campaign and recalcitrance of the resistance leaders.

My paper argues that, contrary to Howe's view, because of unfamiliar topography, different enemy tactics, unforeseen reversals, and especially an increase in bloodshed and willingness to kill non-combatants (thereby setting the tone for the rest of the eastern campaign), the Bactrian and Sogdian campaigns were markedly different from those in the Balkans early in Alexander's reign. They thus allow us an insight into the Macedonians' changing perceptions of acceptable violence and their experience of the war in a way that Howe's thesis does not.

Bibliography

Holt, F. (1993) *Alexander the Great and Bactria*. Leiden.

Howe, T. (2015) "Alexander and 'Afghan Insurgency': A Reassessment," in *Brill's Companion to Insurgency and Terrorism in the Ancient Mediterranean*. Edited by Timothy Howe and Lee Brice. Brill: 151-182.