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ALEXANDER THE GREAT
THROUGH ACHAEMENID
SPACETIME

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Alexander the Great through Achaemenid Spacetime

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In the autumn of 329 BCE, Alexander III, king of Macedon, king of Asia, was struck by a sudden bout of diarrhea. He was on horseback pursuing nomadic Scythians; they had provoked him with insults and arrows shot from the opposite bank of the Tanais river while he celebrated the founding of his new city, Alexandria Eschate. Alexander's condition was serious and he was carried back to camp in order to recover. Some time later, envoys from the Scythian king arrived to offer apologies for the unfortunate taunt and chase (the work of bad apples), and Alexander had no other option but to accept the gesture, evidently incapacitated by the runs (Arr. 4.4.9 –4.5.1).

This episode occurs in the second part (330-323 BCE) of Alexander's campaign against the Persian Empire and raises some historical problems concerning the ability of Alexander's person to lead his army in such 'search-and-destroy' missions. If the pursuit was stopped by Alexander's diarrhea, why was he attacked by the flux in the first place? Why did his army not continue the pursuit without him? Did they also suffer from diarrhea or were they more affected by the extreme heat? Arrian provides answers, events tied together by neat causal relationships, to some of these questions: Alexander stopped pursuing the Scythians because he was attacked by diarrhea; Alexander was attacked by diarrhea because he drank fetid water; Alexander drank fetid water because he was made thirsty by the great heat. Should the chain of causality stop here, then the land (ἡ γῆ) and its features, its water and air, become sources of problems for Alexander and his army. Specifically, Alexander's body is affected by the landscape, here in an immediate and acute way. But such a localized effect situated in Alexander's body (ἐξ τὴν γαστέρα) brings about a broader outcome. The effect of Alexander's inability to continue the chase is multiplied in the Macedonian army's inability (or unwillingness) to continue the chase. And in this case, Arrian does not make clear why the army stops. The cause of the interruption of the pursuit rests solely in Alexander's body (Arr. 4.4.9). Why then did the Macedonian army stop too? This essay will attempt to demonstrate the significance of Alexander's body within the context of Achaemenid spacetime – space and time as it was organized by the histories and traditions of the Persian Empire.

Alexander's Macedonian army was a highly complex and versatile weapon. Although Alexander's 'success' is difficult to pin on one cause, it may be said with some confidence that the Macedonian army had something, a rather large something, to do with it. Repeatedly, scholars represent the army as capable of winning because of its large size, the quality of its elite fighters, its diversity of tools, staying power, and organization.¹ This last point leads one to think about the army's command structure and the implications thereof. The Macedonian army was blessed with a number of highly talented leaders, Alexander aside. Moreover, the level of cooperation between sub-units and their discipline made it a force that could be distributed over a space in multiple almost-autonomous columns to effectively carry out operations.² As such, it is even stranger to think that the pursuit of the Scythians (above) was stopped on account of Alexander's stomach pains. The possibility of an entire army being affected

by fetid water must be entertained, but it is highly unlikely and not supported by any of the sources.-What seems to be going on here is rather simple: the Macedonian army stopped pursuing the Scythians because Alexander stopped pursuing the Scythians. If this was the case, then the following notion must be considered: Alexander's body was a major factor in the determination of the movements and purpose of the larger body of the Macedonian army.

But how is this not obvious? Clearly, Alexander's body, short and stout as it was, played an oversized role in the campaign. But there is more at a different level, perhaps at the level of the matter that constituted his body. As the Macedonian expedition moves from Gaugamela eastwards, through Achaemenid spacetime, its 'body' is replenished with troops from Macedon or with troops from the newly conquered empire. By the time the army finds itself chasing after Scythians in Sogdiana, it has been topped up by "oriental troops," resulting in a change to its Macedonian character, at least in ethnic terms, as I will describe below.³ In contrast, Alexander's body was not replenished. By 329 BCE, Alexander was in his sixth year of campaigning and his body had suffered through three major battles.⁴ Could this fact have made him more vulnerable to attack by the viruses or bacteria or microbes in the fetid waters of the Sogdianian country? Although this truth is impossible to recover by historicizing methods, Arrian extensively discusses Alexander's wounds. Alexander's body suffers injury time and again as the campaign progresses: undiagnosed concussion (Arr. 1.15.7); catapult shot to the shoulder (Arr. 2.27.2); fibula fractured by an arrow (Arr. 3.30.11); stone blow to head and neck (Arr. 4.3.3); arrow through breastplate (Arr. 4.23.3); scraped ankle (Arr. 4.26.4); perhaps a Poros-inflicted wound (Arr. 5.14.4); punctured lung (Arr. 6.10.1–2).⁵ Is this pattern not to be expected? As the configuration of matter, namely Alexander's body, makes its way through (Achaemenid) space-time, would it not be reasonable to suffer a few reconfigurations, a few nicks in the body? Certainly and obviously so, but the more important point is twofold: Firstly, that Alexander's body, this particular configuration of matter, *matters* and secondly, that the injuries it sustains are indicative of a change that can be understood in historical terms.

On October 1st, 331 BCE at the battle of Gaugamela, Alexander ostensibly achieved the mission his father Philip had set years earlier. What that mission was, in fact, can only be speculated. But, if the campaign was one of revenge against past offences to Greece by the Persians, the deed was done at Gaugamela. The Persian army was destroyed, its navy fleet dispersed, and its major cities open for plunder. Alexander, king of Macedon, became Alexander, king of Asia. But this transformation, the explicit result of the deployment of extreme violence by the Macedonian army over Achaemenid spacetime was a process – an event that emerged as the result of a series of related and past events. As such, this transformation has a history. What is more, this history, at least an aspect of it, is encoded in the changes to Alexander's body through his wounds. Although a detailed analysis of Alexander's injuries is beyond the scope of this essay, there are ideas worth considering at some length.

First, Alexander's body, and the particular configuration of matter moving through Achaemenid spacetime, takes on increasing significance as it determines the movements and actions of a Macedonian army that wreaks havoc on the Persian forces.⁶ That Alexander's body was of special significance was *self-evident* in

Macedon (especially after Alexander won recognition as the legitimate heir to Philip), but in Achaemenid spacetime, the significance of Alexander's body changes from being 'Alexander as a force for destruction' to becoming 'Alexander as a force for construction'. In other words, Alexander's conquest of the Persian Empire cause his body to transition from being engaged in processes of conquest, such as the carrying out of campaigns and sieges, to being involved in processes of consolidation. These processes of consolidation include the appointing of satraps and the collecting of taxes and tribute. This transition is neither either/or in its modality nor is it aoristic. Even before the Persian army led by Darius is destroyed at Gaugamela, Alexander's body meant both destruction and construction, more precisely continuity and change, as is evident in the case of western Asia Minor.⁷ In this landscape, Alexander reconstituted city-states as democracies no longer burdened by tribute; beyond the Hellenic city-states,⁸ he followed Achaemenid precedent and tribute continued.⁹ In 330 BCE, we can see both modes of being as Alexander marches into Babylon (Arr. 3.16.3–5), welcomed as King of Asia, and, a few months later, as he marches out of Persepolis having burned the palace complex to the ground (Arr. 3.18.11–12).

Second, the examples of Babylon and Persepolis bring into focus the year 330 BCE, the moment when the range of meaning of Alexander's body (construction/destruction or continuity/change) intensify. In that very year, Alexander is also represented as both pursuing Darius III (change) and honoring his body by royal burial (continuity) (Arr. 3.19.1 ff.). How did those 'on the ground' interpret these seemingly contradictory actions? And then, how can such responses to Alexander's actions be understood in historical terms? I would like to suggest here that a typology of responses may be useful, however crude. To some, Alexander's body continued to signify a process of destruction, of pure plunder. Bessos, a Persian noble and satrap of Bactria, responds with a challenge, however feeble and on the move, to Alexander's authority (Arr. 3.21.10 and 3.25.3). Why he would even attempt to contest the power of the Macedonian army, Alexander's body multiplied, is unclear. Perhaps Bessos had misunderstood the nature of Alexander's project and had underestimated the limits of Alexander's reach, his unrelenting speed, and his intent to punish Darius's murderers.¹⁰ In other words, Bessos did not detect that Alexander's body moving through (Achaemenid) space-time meant both continuity and change. The case of Spitamenes, perhaps another noble of Persian descent, is also illustrative of the types of responses to Alexander's body. He appears first by Bessos's side (Arr. 3.28.10), only to finally betray him to Alexander's forces. Here, then, is a response of a different kind (although it echoes Bessos's own behavior toward Darius): Alexander's body signifies continuity and features a system of forgiveness and re-integration (initiated by the delivery of a proper gift, i.e., Bessos).

Yet, Spitamenes, if Arrian's account is accurate, returns shortly thereafter and leads the insurrection of Sogdianians against Alexander's ultimate city (Arr. 4.1.4–5). What type of response is this? Here, the contextualization of the building project of the city of Alexandria Eschate is useful. This city would lay beyond Cyropolis, northeast toward the Tanais River. Cyropolis was founded by the very founder of the Achaemenid Empire (Arr. 4.3.1). Can the building of Alexandria Eschate be understood as Alexander the Great one-upping Cyrus the Great? If so, Alexander's project is not only a gesture of consolidation of empire but also of expansion beyond

its established limits. Alexander's empire envelops Cyrus's. Alexander's body is not the body of 'the last of the Achaemenids' but rather something beyond that configuration.¹¹ The meaning of his body has been intensified and extended to entail conquest, consolidation, and expansion. That this was the case may be confirmed by Porus's or Taxiles's reading of Alexander as he moves through "Indian" timespace (Arr. 5.8.4 ff). Each actor understands that Alexander's body and his Macedonian army allow only the types of responses that will result in the empire's expansion.

Now, what is the cumulative effect of these changes? The significance that Alexander's body takes on beginning in 330 BCE as it moves through Achaemenid spacetime and beyond results in a campaign very unlike that begun in 334 BCE. Alexander's body, no longer challenged by Darius and the Persian army, is transformed into a high-level priority target for a proliferation of disparate actors who can respond by submitting, integrating or fighting back (or a combination of these). The composition of Alexander's Macedonian army changes both in terms of its ethnicity and its command structure.¹² The deployment of the army in efforts to consolidate the Persian heartland while expanding into borderlands brings about a multiplicity of back-and-forth marches by the military seemingly covering fewer stades.¹³ Cities are won and then lost, and then won again or destroyed. Subordinates are given orders and fail in executing them.¹⁴ The landscapes are hostile and punishing.¹⁵ Killing, rape, and enslavement flare. Alexander gets diarrhea and the Macedonian army stops its pursuit of rebels. Why, then, was the second part (330-323 BCE) of the campaign so unlike the first part (334-331 BCE)? The most straightforward answer may be that Alexander's body, that particular stout configuration of matter, moved through Achaemenid spacetime.

Notes

1. Ma, John, "Alexander's Decision-Making as Historical Problem", *RÉMA*, 6, 2013, p. 115.
2. For example, Alexander divides his army into three parts, leading the nimblest part himself, with the intent to pursue Darius's mercenaries and to subdue the peoples of the Tapourian mountains (Arr. 3.23.1–2).
3. Bosworth, A. B., *Conquest and Empire*. Cambridge University Press. 1988, 271– 273.
4. Keegan, John. *The Mask of Command*. Elizabeth Sifton Books, New York, 1987, p.32.
5. Is this an argument for an increase in frequency of injury? Quantitative statements about Alexander on the basis of Arrian's account may be meaningless or untrue. But it does seem as if Alexander's injuries increase in number if not in frequency.
6. That Alexander himself seems to be sensitive to the importance of the king's body is evident from his focused cavalry charges both at the battle of Issus and Gaugamela. Alexander aimed at Darius.
7. This is evident by Alexander's reconceptualization of the newly-conquered Priene as a city-state in the Greek tradition. Also see, Sherwin-White 1985.
8. How Alexander determined the Hellenicity of a polity is unclear, and his decisions about dispensation seem to be sensitive to the particularities of each polity. See the case of Aspendus, a Hellenic polity that was forced to pay tribute after some unpleasanties (Bosworth 1988, 254–5).
9. Robin Lane Fox, 2007, p. 271.
10. Heckel, 2006, p. 72, interprets Arr. 3.28.8-10 to suggest that Bessos *et al.* "were convinced that Alexander would not pursue them into Bactria but turn instead to the warmer and richer lands of India."
11. R. Lane Fox, 2007, p. 295, puts forth a striking analysis of the different options available to Persian nobles in light of Alexander's new kingship style.
12. The change brought about by the removal of Philotas and Parmenio are the topic of another essay, if not a book. No matter, let it be know that these changes occur in 330 BCE.

13. This is my intuition based on reading Arrian. But it would be useful to have a more accurate sense of how much distance was covered during the periods of insurrection in Sogdiana and Bactria, *inter alia*.

14. See Pharnuches at Polytimetus River (Arr. 4.3.7).

15. The Gedrosian desert seems to be the single greatest enemy of the Macedonian army (Arr. 6.21–26).

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