ALEXANDER’S SACRIFICE BEFORE THE BATTLE OF ISSUS

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It is a pleasure to contribute to a volume in honour of Godfrey Tanner. When I supervised him in Cambridge, he bubbled with ideas and my task was to keep him on track, or rather two tracks, since he chose to take two special subjects instead of the statutory one. In 1952 he was placed in the First Class in both of them. As an Examiner and more than once as a Visiting Professor, I have appreciated the vigour and the liveliness of the Department of Classics which he has developed in the University of Newcastle. It owes everything to his inspiring, vivacious and enthusiastic leadership. I dedicate to him this article, which is on a subject I have taught at Newcastle.

The events preceding the sacrifice may best be summarised from the account of Arrian, whose sources were Ptolemy and Aristobulus, the former certainly present at the time (Arr. 2.11.8). Alexander had marched from the Pass of Jonah southwards to near Iskanderun, a matter of some ten kilometres. There he had rested his army for a day. During the following night or early next day he was informed that his line of supply was cut, because Darius was north of the Pass of Jonah. He sent some of his Companions in a thirty-oared ship to ascertain the truth. They reported that the army of Darius was

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1 Special abbreviations are as follows:


THA  N. G. L. Hammond, Three Historians of Alexander the Great: the so-called Vulgate Authors, Diodorus, Justin and Curtius (Cambridge, 1983)

2 As Arrian stated in his Preface. I see no reason to doubt the statement, which his contemporaries could have checked against their reading of these two accounts, then intact and not, as now, in a few fragments.

3 For this campaign I am following my own account in AG 93-111. My identification of the river Pinarus as the river Payas is argued there on the basis of my thorough survey of the ground. The scouts whom Alexander sent ahead from Myriandrus did not go beyond 'the Gates' (the Jonah Pass) pace Brunt L 1. 149, who mistranslated όττίσω as 'behind them' — a meaning not given in LSJ. The text at Arr. 2. 8. 1 should be retained and translated: 'he sent forward towards the Gates a few cavalrymen and archers, to reconnoitre the road back towards the Gates'.
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encamped beside the river Pinarus (the modern Payas). Alexander ordered his soldiers to take their afternoon meal, and as dark was falling he led them back to the Pass of Jonah, which he reached about midnight (Arr. 2. 8. 2). He was no doubt pleasantly surprised to find that Darius had not taken possession of the Pass first, for the main army of Darius was only some ten kilometres north of the Pass.

It was then after midnight that Alexander made the sacrifice which was reported by Curtius. This sacrifice was the subject of an interesting article by J. D. Bing in *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 111 (1991), 161-5. On reaching the Pass ‘Alexander ordered his men to attend to their bodily needs (3. 8. 22 ‘corpora ... curare’), and he himself climbed up to the ridge of a high mountain and in the brilliant light of many torches made a sacrifice in the traditional manner to the guardian gods of the place’ (‘ipse in iugum editi montis escendit multisque collucentibus facibus patrio more sacrificium dis praesidibus loci fecit’). The order had already been issued (3.8.23 ‘sicut praecptum erat’) that the army should march northwards at the start of the third watch, which began at 2 a.m., that is if the source of Curtius was a Greek writer, as we should expect. Presumably Alexander issued this order in advance, because he did not expect to return from his climb by 2 a.m. That was natural enough; for the Pass being by the shore and the ridge of Mt Amanus being well over 4,000 feet above sea level, he would have needed much more than two hours to ascend and descend the steep flank of the mountain in the dark. One must surely wonder why Alexander undertook such an arduous climb; for he had already marched some ten kilometres and he intended to march another ten kilometres and lead his men into battle. I have serious doubts. Bing, however, expressed none. He accepted the climb as historical.

When the battle was won, according to Curtius 3.12.27, Alexander consecrated three altars on the bank of the river Pinarus to Jupiter, Hercules and Minerva. Bing inferred that the guardian gods to whom Alexander had sacrificed on the high mountain were the same as the gods to whom he dedicated the altars. The inference, however, is questionable. Zeus, Heracles and Athena were thanked by Alexander for his successful crossing of the Hellespont (Arr. 1.11.7), and they were the appropriate deities to thank for the victory over Darius. As far as we know, they were not associated with Mt

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4 For the Greek division into three watches see LSJ s.v. τῶξον. Atkinson 202 thought that Curtius meant the Roman third watch, commencing at midnight; but that would not have given the army any time to rest, and the army starting off at midnight would have reached open ground for deployment well before dawn. The account of Curtius is confused in the matter of the topography (e. g. at 3. 8. 18; see Atkinson 200).
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Amanus, individually or together. Bing’s main point is that the gods to whom Alexander sacrificed and to whom he dedicated the altars were the locally worshipped ‘guardian gods of the place’ and ‘should be recognised as Ba’al Tarz/Tarhunzas, Nergal/Resheph/Runzas, and ‘Anat/Ishtyara’. He gives a very scholarly account of these indigenous deities with their Luwian, Aramaic, Phoenician and Sumero-Babylonian associations, which have been revealed by the decipherment of inscriptions and the study of coins. It is, however, difficult to believe that Alexander knew those names. He was no scholar and no linguist, and he was a newcomer, who marched at speed from Tarsus through Cilicia into Syria; nor in the small hours of the night would he have found on the mountain ridge any natives to tell him these names, if indeed he had interpreters with him. In my opinion, if Alexander did sacrifice on a mountain top, he used Greek names as he did later in dedicating the altars according to Curtius.

What did Curtius mean by the words ‘dis praesidibus loci’? The answer is provided by Curtius 9.9.27, where Alexander, having sailed some 74 kilometres out to sea from the Indus Estuary, sacrificed ‘to the guardian gods of both the sea and the places’ (‘praesidibusque et maris et locorum dis sacrificio facto’) and returned to the (main) fleet. This voyage out to sea was described by Arrian in An. 6.19.5, following Ptolemy and/or Aristobulus, and in Ind. 20.10, following Nearchus. As these were contemporary officers, Arrian’s accounts are acceptable: namely that Alexander sacrificed to Poseidon and gave a gold cup and gold bowls to the sea ‘as thanksgivings’ (χαριστήρια), and in Indica that he ‘sacrificed victims to Poseidon and all the other sea-gods and gave splendid gifts to the sea’ (δώρα μεγαλοπρεπέα). Thus Curtius’ unnamed deities at 9.9.27 were Poseidon and the other seagods, and it was they who were ‘guardian gods of both the sea and the places’, the latter being presumably the waters, the estuary and the islands. They were not Indian deities with Indian names, but Greek deities with Greek names. It is thus to be expected that Alexander sacrificed not to Luwian, Aramaic or other such gods but to Greek deities on the eve of the Battle of Issus.

Let us return to the sacrifice that night. It was not mentioned at all by Diodorus, Justin, Plutarch and Arrian. But a brief history of late Hellenistic date, known as POxy 1798 (FGrH 148), reported an invocation of deities and a sacrifice at night by Alexander. The passage runs as follows.

εξήκοντα γάρ τῶν βαρβάρων μυριάδες ἦσαν. οί δὲ Πέρσαι τῶν Μακεδόνων κατεφρόνουν. Ἀλέξανδρος δὲ πλησίον ὠρῶν τὴν κρίσιν ἐν ἀγωνίαν ἔμεινα καὶ πρὸς εὐχάς ἐτράπη θέτων καὶ Νηρήδας καὶ Νοσειώνα επικαλόμενος, οἰ καὶ τέτρωρον ἁρμα ἐκελεύσει εἰς τὸ πέλαγος ἀναγαγόντας ἰέρας ἐσφάλαιγαζεν δὲ καὶ νυκτὶ κλ...
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‘[The Persians] 60 myriads. .... Alexander, seeing the crisis at hand, was in agony and turned to prayers, invoking Thetis, Nereids, Nereus and Poseidon, and he ordered a four-horse chariot to be brought up and thrown into the sea. And he sacrificed also at night.’

In this account it is evident that the news of Darius’ arrival with 600,000 men at Issus threw Alexander into agony. He was then near Myriandrus (Arr. An. 2.6.2). He uttered his prayers there. On the other hand it was night-time when he sacrificed. By then he was evidently at the Jonah Pass, where he halted his men around midnight (Arr. 2.8.2). There the fragment of the papyrus broke off.

We need to envisage the Jonah Pass from the description by Xenophon who himself passed through it with Cyrus in 401 B.C. The route was narrow between the sea and ‘rocks high overhead’ (ὑπερθέν δὲ ἴσαν πέτρας ἡλιβατοι), and at either end of its length of some 550 metres there was a fortress, of which the walls reached the sea; and a river 100 feet wide flowed between the fortresses (X. An. 1. 4. 4). This description was certainly known to Arrian, who had a great admiration for Xenophon. The only difference in 333 B.C. was that there were no fortresses. They were hardly necessary. For the pass owed its strength to nature, that is in Greek thought to the gods of the place. If we have to choose between POxy and Curtius on purely practical grounds, we shall prefer POxy, because Alexander is saved from an exhausting night climb and is sacrificing at a vital strategic place in the presence of his army. However, Bing opted for Curtius’ sacrifice. He mentioned POxy only in his first footnote: ‘the deities enumerated in POxy 1798 can be dismissed as unhistorical’, with a vague reference to F. Jacoby’s comment.

As in most matters concerning Alexander the choice between variant accounts should be guided by a consideration of the sources which were used.

5 Arrian may have had Xenophon’s ‘rocks high overhead’ in mind when he wrote that Alexander posted his outposts ‘on the rocks’ (ἐπὶ τῶν πέτρων). Brunt L 1 149, ‘resting his army on the crags’, is surely incorrect; for crags make uncomfortable bedding. For the terrain see the first edition of AG 228 and 229 (a satellite photograph). Atkinson 196 gives a good account. Bosworth C 192, ‘What the ancients understood as the Gates comprised the whole extent of the coastal defiles north of Iskenderun’, disregards Arrian’s following of Xenophon, converts Xenophon’s 550 metres into some 12 kilometres, and makes a nonsense of Alexander leaving his camp near Iskenderun at nightfall and reaching ‘the Gates’ at midnight. Another aberration occurred in D. W. Engels, Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian Army (Berkeley, 1978), 52 and 131 n. 35, who thought the Pass was a mile above sea level.
Let us begin with $PO_{xy}$\textsuperscript{6}. It is remarkable for the huge number of Persians, the agony of Alexander, the invocation of Thetis among the deities, and Alexander’s order that a four-horse chariot be brought up and thrown into the sea. The same number, 600,000, was given by Plutarch in Alex. 18. 6, a passage which has many marks of Cleitarchus\textsuperscript{7}, and by Arrian at 2. 8. 8 as a legomenon, that is as a story derived not from Ptolemy or Aristobulus but from some less trustworthy author\textsuperscript{8}. Thetis was not mentioned anywhere in accounts of Alexander by Diodorus, Justin, Curtius, Plutarch and Arrian. Yet here she is cited first in the list of deities, although she was in fact one of the Nereids (Athenaeus 2.67c and 4.135c), and one reason was presumably that she was the mother of Achilles, the ancestor of Alexander on the distaff side. There are good grounds for seeing Cleitarchus as the source behind $PO_{xy}$ 1798 F 44 Col II. On my interpretation he provided very high figures for Alexander’s enemies and their casualties\textsuperscript{9}. He portrayed Alexander as fluctuating between agony and confidence\textsuperscript{10}. He made much of the connection of Alexander with Achilles and the Aeacid house\textsuperscript{11}. Chariots suited his epic style. He was probably the source behind the description of Alexander dragging Batis behind a chariot at Gaza\textsuperscript{12}, of the scythed chariots at Gaugamela, and an eight-horse vehicle carrying Alexander and his Companions in the revel in Carmania. I have argued elsewhere that the source behind $PO_{xy}$ in general was Cleitarchus\textsuperscript{13}. The passage in Curtius 3.8.22 is not paralleled elsewhere. It is surely an unhistorical, graphic incident, invented for its sensational value; for the mountain was not associated in any way with the Jonah Pass or with the impending battle, and a night climb and descent would have imposed an

\textsuperscript{6} It should be emphasised that the accounts of sacrifices in Curt. 3. 8. 22 and $PO_{xy}$ 1798 differ radically one from the other. Bosworth C 207, ‘this (the sacrifice in Curtius) is corroborated by $PO_{xy}$ 1798’, turns a blind eye on the differences of location and detail. Atkinson 202 did not comment on $PO_{xy}$ in that respect.

\textsuperscript{7} These marks are listed in my forthcoming book Sources for Plutarch’s Alexander and Arrian’s Anabasis.

\textsuperscript{8} See Arrian Preface. Brunt L 1 157 n. 5, ‘not ‘Vulgate’ but a report in A’s main source(s)’, overlooks the practice of Arrian which was not to qualify with such expressions as legomenon, legetai, elegeto the matter which was taken from his main sources. Bosworth C 209 ‘the qualification may have existed in his source’, is less dogmatic.

\textsuperscript{9} See THA 25 f., 42 and 44; and FGrH 137 F 25.

\textsuperscript{10} See THA 20 with 27, 100, 122 f. on Diod. 17. 56. 1 and Curt. 4. 12. 21, 4. 13. 2, 16, and 22.

\textsuperscript{11} See THA 64 f., 91 f., 109 and 128.

\textsuperscript{12} See Plu. Alex. 67. 2; THA 127 f., 44 and 156; cf. Hamilton C 185.

\textsuperscript{13} In THA 48.
unnecessary strain on the physique of Alexander and his associates. A similar incident was reported in Plu. *Alex.* 24. 10–14 during an intermission in the siege of Tyre. Then Alexander was said to have risked his life for his old tutor, Lysimachus. These two and a few others became separated from the main group. They were benighted on rough ground in intense cold. Alexander alone raided an enemy camp, killed two barbarians, snatched a firebrand (δαλόν) and kindled a mighty fire which frightened the enemy away. The account is incredible, because the king was always guarded in military operations by a retinue of Somatophylakes, Pages and Guardsmen. The author of the report, we are told by Plutarch, was Chares (*FGrH* 125 F 7). I suggest that he was the author from whom Curtius derived his narrative at 3. 8. 22.

We may consider next whether Alexander was wont to worship local deities under the names given to them by indigenous peoples. Until he reached Egypt, Alexander is reported to have regarded all deities as Greek deities: Athena at Troy (Arr. 1.11.7, contrasted with Athena of Macedonia), Zeus at Sardis (1.17.5-6), Zeus at Gordium (2. 3. 6), Athena at Magarsus (2.5.9), Heracles at Tyre (2.15.7, 16.7, 18.1, 24.5). Thus Bing's view that Alexander sacrificed to Ba'al, Nergal and 'Anat under these and other native names is eccentric and not supported by any evidence. Similarly Alexander sacrificed to Greek heroes such as Protesilaus, Achilles and Amphilocthus, and other heroes canonised in the Homeric poems such as Priam. It was the general Greek view and certainly the view of Alexander that most deities were both universal and local: Zeus at Dodona, Olympus, Olympia, Sardis etc., and Athena at Athens, Troy and Magarsus, for instance. So too Poseidon and the other Greek sea-deities ranged the waters of the world as far as the outer Ocean.

Finally, why did Alexander choose to invoke sea-deities at Myriandrus? On crossing to Asia he had sacrificed in the middle of the Hellespont a bull to Poseidon and the Nereids (Arr. *An.* 1. 11. 6), and on setting out down the Hydaspes he was to sacrifice to Poseidon, Amphitrite, Nereids and Oceanus (*Ind.* 18. 11); and at sea off the Indus estuary he sacrificed in thanksgiving to

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14 It has the same love of brilliant light shining in darkness on a high mountain: 'multisque collucentibus facibus'.

15 The same occurred in 'India' where Alexander and his men saw that Dionysus and Heracles had preceded them. Desert islands too were sacred not to native gods but to Greek deities (Arr. *An.* 7. 20. 4 and *Ind.* 37. 10). When Alexander honoured native gods in Egypt and Babylon, he did so in deference to the priests and to local feeling (3. 1. 4 and 3. 16. 3–4). As Bosworth C 262 noted, the sacrifice to Apis in Egypt was 'Alexander's first sacrifice to a native deity in native guise'.
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Poseidon and all the other sea-gods (Arr. An. 6. 19. 5 and Ind. 20. 10). Alexander sacrificed every day towards or at dawn on behalf of his people, as all Macedonian kings did. On this occasion, at the Jonah Pass, he had two reasons to sacrifice to Thetis, Nereids, Nereus and Poseidon. The first was that he was at the beginning of a day that would be decisive for him and his army, as he told his officers (Arr. An. 2.7.3-9). The crossing of the Hellespont had been no less decisive, and he was to face a similar crisis on the day of Gaugamela (for his sacrifice then see Plu. Alex. 31. 9 and 11). The other was that Darius had not occupied the Pass with a strong garrison of say 10,000 Greek mercenaries, backed by the rest of his army and supported by his fleet at sea. By some misjudgement which must have seemed miraculous Darius chose to adopt a defensive position on the line of the Pinarus river, where Alexander could deploy his infantry phalanx and his Companion Cavalry — something he could not have done against a Persian force holding the Pass of Jonah. On his arrival there about midnight he sacrificed in thanksgiving.

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17 Some weeks earlier Parmenio had found 'the Gates' garrisoned by Persians (Diod. 17. 32. 2). When Cyrus faced a garrison there, he brought up his fleet to win possession (X.An. 1.4.5).