

The Significance of the Mutiny at the Hyphasis River to Alexander the Great and the World

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Abstract

During Alexander the Great's more than ten years of glorious and great warfare, the mutiny on the Hyphasis River was the first large-scale conflict between Alexander and his soldiers in history. While marveling at Alexander's amazing leadership, the cause of the mutiny and the detailed process of this entire incident are also worthy of being explored and studied. From the passionate speeches delivered by Alexander to the memorials and ceremonies to the gods after the mutiny, they all lead us to Alexander and his mysterious events.

Keywords

Alexander the Great, mutiny, Hyphasis River, altars, inscriptions.

1. Introduction

Alexander the Great, also known as Alexander III of Macedon, was a king of the ancient Greek kingdom of Macedon, but also a legend and miracle in the history of warfare. After Alexander succeeded his father Philip the second to the throne and inherited a strong kingdom and an experienced army in 336BC, he was awarded the generalship of Greece and used this authority to launch his father's Pan-Hellenic project to lead the Greeks in the conquest of Persia. [1] In 334 BC, he started to invade the Persian Empire(Achaemenid Empire) and began a series of campaigns that lasted 10 years.

2. Mutiny at the Hyphasis River

2.1. The Beginning of An Outbreak of Dissatisfaction Among Macedonian Soldiers

In a summer or early fall of 326, camped on the banks of the Beas or Hyphasis River after an arduous but victorious campaign in India, Alexander wanted to proceed further east. However, his troops, exhausted from years of fighting, troubled by unfamiliar terrain and climate, anxious about the future and cannot see the end of Alexander's conquest and ambition, did not want to continue. They had spent almost eight years among toils and dangers. They watched their comrades die one by one in warfare among eight years. The hooves of the horses had been worn thin by steady marching. Their arms and clothing were wearing out so they had to clothe themselves in foreign materials. This was also the season, as luck would have it, of the heavy rains. Also, the heavy rains and other extreme weather conditions had been continuously torturing them and made the Macedonians completely lost their hope. There also were the snakes.

2.2. Alexander the Great's Countermeasures and Their Functions and Influences

Alexander gave the Macedonian army some welfare[2] first trying to appease their emotions and willingness to turn back. He allowed the men to ravage the local areas. To the wives of the

soldiers he further gave a monthly ration. He also disbursed to the children a service bonus in proportion to their fathers' military records. But all these actions did not shake their determination to return.

According to Arrian's notes, since the moral of Macedonian army was low and many did not want to continue the campaign, Alexander gave a speech in order to boost the atmosphere and continue his conquest. In Alexander's speech, he first mentioned that "let me remind you: through your courage and endurance you have gained possession of Ionia, the Hellespont, ..., Hydaspes, Acesines and Hydraotes flow now through country which is ours. With all that accomplished, why do you hesitate to extend the power of Macedon—your power—to the Hyphasis and the tribes on the other side? Are you afraid that a few natives who may still be left will offer opposition?"

Why did he give this speech? Undoubtedly, the audience of his speech are all the soldiers who refused to campaign further, and Alexander gave this impassioned speech to boost the Macedonian army's morale and persuade the soldiers to conquer the world for him. By stating several specific places that have been conquered by Alexander together with his soldiers, and using the term like "you have gained possession..." "are you afraid that" instead of the term "I" is a technique of empathy, to let the Macedonian soldiers share his feelings and keep fighting for him. Plus, ending the speech with two Rhetorical questions is a kind of agitation to arouse soldiers' fighting spirit, desires to conquer and to win. In general, Alexander's unquestionable and self-confident and passionate performance in his speech reflected that he still believed that the soldiers were only experiencing short-term slack and low morale, and nothing could stop him from conquering the world. This also carry a foreshadowing for the vagueness information and implied meaning of the inscription on altars.

Then, Alexander, who doesn't give up, called a meeting and announced his plans to go on, disclosing that he intended to go beyond the Ganges even, to the Eastern ocean, and to Asia and even farther to the whole world. Thus, at the Hyphasis River, Alexander confirmed what many must have long suspected, namely, that while Zeus reigned over the gods on Mt. Olympus, his son intended to rule over the whole earth. The campaign would never end until Alexander had conquered the whole world.

It is not surprising that Alexander's disclosure of his future plans was spectacularly unsuccessful. For a long time, there was silence. Then Coenus, one of the phalanx commanders, and a very well-respected soldier who had seen action at every major battle, finally spoke up, advising Alexander to set some limit to the present enterprise. He suggested that if Alexander wanted to begin another expedition against the Indians of the east or to the Black Sea or to Carthage and the Libyan territories beyond, he should do so with other Greek and Macedonian troops.

[3] Coenus then memorably pointed out to Alexander that, if there was one thing above all others that a successful man should know, it was when to stop. Although his speech was sharp and disrespectful to Alexander, his speech still won everyone's applause and tears. Under his whole army and companion's pressure, Alexander took a step back and weaken his original strong determination, only declared that he would pressure no Macedonian to accompany him, but he himself was resolved to go on. He proclaimed, "...I shall have others who will need no compulsion to follow their king. If you wish to go home, you are at liberty to do so – and you may tell your people there that you deserted your king in the midst of his enemies."

Alexander retreated to his tent to sulk for three days, which is his last insistence, to wait and see if emotional blackmail would work after an appeal to self-interest. But his actions were not only unsuccessful, but also brought in the long silence of his soldiers. In the end, the troops got at least some of what they wanted: the army turned south and the king's original intention was thwarted, Alexander was forced to stop his conquest to farther world.

3. Altars of Twelve Olympian Gods and Inscriptions on Them

Then comes the most interesting part. Alexander erected altars of the twelve Olympian gods, each one seventy-five feet high, in order to best mark the limits of his conquest. On these altars were inscribed the following words:

“To Father Ammon and Heracles his brother, and to Athena Providence, and to Zeus of Olympus and to the Kabeiri of Samothrace, and to the Indian Sun, and to the Delphian Apollo.”

Although neither the altars nor the inscriptions have been found, it is an interesting point to discuss. Why did he write or authorize this inscription? Who was his intended audience and what was the message he wanted them to receive? Although it was only a one-line inscription, it had profound historical significance: digging deeper into the meaning of these inscriptions can help us understand Alexander's inner world at that time, and also helps us to understand the great significance of this mutiny at the Hyphasis River during Alexander's conquest of the world.

First of all, there is no doubt that one of the audiences of these inscriptions are the gods and deities mentioned in the inscription, since Alexander hopes to communicate with the gods through sacrifices. These altars and the inscriptions on them were thought to be dedications to give thanks to the gods and goddesses who had promised and brought Alexander his unprecedented and unbroken string of successes.

However, is communicating with deities the only purpose of Alexander? So much manpower and material resources are needed to build towering altars and other outbuildings. [4] According to Arrian's notes, Alexander ordered the altars set up as high as the greatest towers and in breadth even greater than towers. Everyone should be familiar with this significant scene. Just like the “tent”. Alexander gave orders to the Macedonian army to make a camp of heroic proportions with an enormous ditch and rampart, together with massive couches and weapons, in order to create the impression that the Macedonians were giant and to show that Alexander himself still had a high status and received love and compliance from his whole army. This alleged attempt to enhance his fame by deceit would only make sense if Alexander had experienced a setback and was too eager to cover it up. Now Alexander has encountered the same situation again. Under the collective pressure of his soldiers, he had to turn back and negatively stop his conquest of the rest of the world. On the twelve altars and inscriptions on it, Alexander mentioned gods and deities who had brought him success, but he also intentionally forgot to mention why he stopped, at that specific moment and place. To understand why Alexander did that, we need to go back to the battle of Granicus River and the related inscriptions in 334BC.

After his victory at the battle against the Persian army, Alexander sent the 300 suits of Persian armor back to Athens as the votive dedication to the Goddess Athena. These suits of armor were inscribed in Greek with the following sentence: “Alexander, son of Philip, and the Hellenes, except for the Lacedaemonians, from the barbarians who dwell in Asia.” Marking the glorious beginning of Alexander's legendary campaign, the inscription was Alexander's attempt to demonstrate his competence, to justify his conquest, and to reveal his ambition.

After knowing about the background information and the content of the Granicus inscription, we must have a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of Alexander's inscriptions on twelve altars. Alexander was vague about why he turned back in this specific place, because he wanted to tell the local civilians and all the troops who followed him a message: he stopped here naturally, instead of turning back because of the pressure of the soldiers. This makes a big difference. At the same time, the inscription on the altars echoes the previous Granicus inscription, marking a glorious and ambitious beginning of Alexander's journey, and a decent end.

What is more, according to Arrian's notes, Alexander ordered the altars set up as high as the greatest towers and in breadth even greater than towers. We can tell from the information that the height and breadth of buildings not only indicated the great wealth and high prestige owned by Alexander, but also has cultural connections with near eastern places. [5] In the Assyrian ideological language of power, mountains, like seas, figured as markers of frontiers symbolizing world-wide empires. Often, temples or newly founded cities with their buildings are described in similar terms as mountains or rock masses, or even called mountains or rocks because of their height. Emphasizing height and monumentality, temples and cities are thus equated with mountains. Therefore, it might be possible that the account that Alexander's altars erected at the Hyphasis were extremely high can be explained in terms of an ideological ancient Near Eastern code: The altars were high like towers or mountains and thus marked the frontier of his empire close to the end of his "world".

4. Conclusion

The mutiny at the Hyphasis River has profound significance on Alexander the Great and his conquest of the world. The inscription on twelve altars expressed gratitude to the gods on the surface, however the unwritten part of the inscription leads to a deeper meaning. This mutiny can be regarded as the only episode in the more than ten years of Alexander's battle, but in the end, Alexander resolved it peacefully and ended in a way generally accepted by the world. Who knows whether this mutiny at the Hyphasis River is good or bad after looking at the overall situation in history?

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