

John Watson McCrindle



THE INVASION
OF INDIA BY

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

John Watson McCrindle

The Invasion of India by Alexander the Great

As Described by Greek Historians

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Contact: info@e-artnow.org

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“Of the life of Alexander we have five consecutive narratives, besides numerous allusions and fragments scattered up and down various Greek and Latin writers.... Unluckily, among all the five there is not a single contemporary chronicler.... The value of all, it is clear, must depend upon the faithfulness with which they represent the earlier writings which they had before them, and upon the amount of critical power which they may have brought to bear upon their examination. Unluckily again, among all the five, one only has any claim to the name of a critic. Arrian alone seems to have had at once the will and the power to exercise a discreet judgment upon the statements of those who went before him. Diodôros we believe to be perfectly honest, but he is, at the same time, impenetrably stupid. Plutarch, as he himself tells us, does not write history, but lives; his object is rather to gather anecdotes, to point a moral, than to give a formal narrative of political and military events. Justin is a feeble and careless epitomizer. Quintus Curtius is, in our eyes, little better than a romance writer; he is the only one of the five whom we should suspect of any wilful departure from the truth.”—From *Historical Essays*, by Professor Freeman, 2d series, third edition, pp. 183, 184.

The invasion of India by Alexander the Great, like the first voyage of Columbus to America, was the means of opening

up a new world to the knowledge of mankind. Before the great conqueror visited that remote and sequestered country, which was then thought to lie at the utmost ends of the earth, nothing was known regarding it beyond a few vague particulars mentioned by Herodotos, and such grains of truth as could be sifted from the mass of fictions which formed the staple of the treatise on India written by Ktêsias of Knidos. A comparison of this work with the *Indika* of Megasthenes, which was written after the invasion, will show how entirely all real knowledge of the country was due to that event. It may even, we think, be asserted that had that invasion not taken place, the knowledge of India among the nations of the West would not have advanced much beyond where Ktêsias left it, until the maritime passage to the East by the Cape of Good Hope had been discovered.

It was early in the year 326 B.C. that Alexander, fresh from the conquest of the fierce tribes of northern Afghânistân, led his army over into the plains of India by a bridge of boats, with which he had spanned the Indus a little below its junction with the Kabul river.¹ He remained in the country not more than twenty months all told, yet in that brief space he reduced the Panjâb as far as the Satlej, and the whole of the spacious valley of the lower Indus, downwards to the ocean itself. He would even have penetrated to the Ganges had his army consented to follow him, and, in the opinion of Sandrokottos, would have succeeded in adding to his empire the vast regions through which that river flows. The rapidity with which he achieved his actual conquests in the country appears all the more surprising when we take into account that at every stage of

his advance he encountered a most determined resistance. The people were not only of a most martial temperament, but were at the same time inured to arms; and had they but been united and led by such a capable commander as Pôros, the Macedonian army was doomed to utter destruction. Alexander, with all his matchless strategy, could not have averted such a catastrophe; for what is the record of his Indian campaigns? We find that the toughest of all his battles was that which he fought on the banks of the Hydaspes against Pôros; that he had hot work in overcoming the resistance of the Kathaians before the walls of Sangala; that he was wounded near to death in his assault upon the Mallian stronghold; and that in the valley of the Indus he could only overpower the opposition instigated by the Brahmans by means of wholesale massacres and executions. It may hence be safely inferred that if Alexander had found India united in arms to withstand his aggression, the star of his good fortune would have culminated with his passage of the Indus. But he found, on the contrary, the political condition of the country when he entered it eminently favourable to his designs. The regions of the Indus and its great tributary streams were then divided into separate states—some under kingly and others under republican governments, but all alike prevented by their mutual jealousies and feuds from acting in concert against a common enemy, and therefore all the more easy to overcome. Alexander, in pursuance of his usual policy, sought to secure the permanence of his Indian conquests by founding cities,² which he strongly fortified and garrisoned with large bodies of troops to overawe and hold in

subjection the tribes in their neighbourhood. The system of government also which he established was the same as that which he had provided for his other subject provinces, the civil administration being entrusted to native chiefs, while the executive and military authority was wielded by Macedonian officers.

The Asiatic nations in general submissively acquiesced in the new order of things, and after a time found no reason to regret the old order which it had superseded. Under their Hellenic masters they enjoyed a greater measure of freedom than they had ever before known; commerce was promoted, wealth increased, the administration of justice improved, and altogether they reached a higher level of culture, both intellectual and moral, than they could possibly have attained under a continuance of Persian supremacy.

India did not participate to any great extent in these advantages. Her people were too proud and warlike to brook long the burden and reproach of foreign thralldom, and within a few years after the Conqueror's death they completely freed themselves from the yoke he imposed, and were thereafter ruled by their native princes. The Greek occupation having thus proved so transient, had little more effect in shaping the future course of the national destinies than a casual raid of Scottish borderers into Cumberland in the old days could have had in shaping the general course of English history.³

By this disruption of her relations with the rest of Alexander's empire, India fell back into her former isolation from all the outside world, and for more than fifteen or

sixteen centuries afterwards the western nations knew as little of her internal condition as they knew till lately of the interior of the Dark Continent. The invasion was, however, by no means fruitless of some good results. As has been already indicated, it drew aside the veil which had till then shrouded India from the observation of the rest of the world, and it thus widened the horizon of knowledge. It is fortunate that what then became known of India was not left for its preservation at the mercy of mere oral tradition, but was committed to the safer custody of writing. Not a few of Alexander's officers and companions were men of high attainments in literature and science, and some of their number composed memoirs of his wars, in the course of which they recorded their impressions of India and the races by which they found it inhabited.⁴ These reports, even in the fragmentary state in which they have come down to us, have proved of inestimable value to scholars engaged in the investigation of Indian antiquity—a task which the sad deficiency of Sanskrit literature in history and chronology has rendered one of no ordinary difficulty. Strabo, we must however note, stigmatized the authors referred to as being in general a set of liars, of whom only a few managed now and then to stammer out some words of truth. This sweeping censure is, however, a most egregious calumny. It may indeed be admitted that their descriptions are not uniformly free from error or exaggeration, and may even be tainted by some intermixture of fiction, but on the whole they wrote in good faith—a fact which even Strabo himself practically admits by frequently citing their authority for his statements. If one or two of them are to some extent liable

to the censure, it must be remembered that Ptolemy, Aristoboulos, Nearchos, Megasthenes, and others of them, are writers of unimpeachable veracity.

It is to be regretted that the works in which these writers recorded their Indian experiences have all, without exception, perished. We know, however, the main substance of their contents from the histories of Alexander, written several centuries after his death by the authors we have here translated, as well as from Strabo, Pliny, Ailianos, Athênaios, Orosius, and others.

The following is a list of the writers on India who visited the country either with Alexander, or not many years after his death, or who were at least his contemporaries:—

1. Ptolemy, the son of Lagos, who became king of Egypt.
2. Aristoboulos of Potidaia, or, as it was called afterwards, Kassandreia.
3. Nearchos, a Kretan by birth, but settled at Amphipolis, admiral of the fleet.
4. Onêsikritos of Astypalaia, or, as some say, of Aegina, pilot of the fleet.
5. Eumenês of Kardia, Alexander's secretary, who kept the *Ephemerides* or Court Journal. His countryman, Hieronymos, in his work on Alexander's successors, made a few references to the campaigns of the Conqueror.

6. Chares of Mitylene, wrote anecdotes of Alexander's private life.
7. Kallisthenes of Olynthos, Aristotle's kinsman, author of an account of Alexander's Asiatic expedition.
8. Kleitarchos (Clitarchus), son of Deinôn of Rhodes, author of a life of Alexander.
9. Androstenes of Thasos, a naval officer, author of a Paraplous.
10. Polykleitos of Larissa, author of a history of Alexander, full of geographical details.
11. Kyrtilos of Pharsalos, who wrote of the exploits of Alexander.
12. Anaximenes of Lampsakos, author of a history of Alexander.
13. Diognêtos, who, with Baitôn, measured and recorded the distances of Alexander's marches.
14. Archelaös, a geographer, supposed to have accompanied Alexander's expedition.
15. Amyntas, author of a work on Alexander's *Stathmoi*, i.e. stages or halting-places.
16. Patroklês, a writer on geography.
17. Megasthenês, friend of Seleukos Nikator, and his ambassador at the Court of Sandrokottos, king of Palibothra, composed an *Indika*.

18. Dêimachos, ambassador at the same court in the days of the son and successor of Sandrokottos, author of a work on India in two books.
19. Diodotos of Erythrai, who, like Eumenês, kept Alexander's Court Journal, and may possibly have been in India.

Five consecutive narratives of Alexander's Indian campaigns, compiled several centuries after his death from the works of the writers enumerated, who were either witnesses of the events they described, or living at the time of their occurrence, have descended to our times, and are respectively contained in the following productions:—

1. The Anabasis of Alexander, by Arrian of Nikomêdeia.
2. The History of Alexander the Great, by Quintus Curtius Rufus.
3. The Life of Alexander, in Plutarch's Parallel Lives.
4. The History of Diodôros the Sicilian.
5. The Book of Macedonian History, compiled from the Universal History of Trogius Pompeius, by Justinus Frontinus.

ARRIAN

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Arrian, who is universally allowed to be by far the best of all Alexander's historians, was at once a philosopher, a statesman, a military commander, an expert in the tactics of war, and an accomplished writer. He was born towards the end of the first century of our aera at Nikomêdeia (now Ismiknid or Ismid), the capital of Bithynia, situated near the head of a deep bay at the south-eastern end of the Propontis or Sea of Marmora. He became a disciple of the Stoic philosopher Epiktêtos (much in the same way as Xenophon attached himself to Sôkrates), and gave to the world an abstract of his master's lectures, together with an *Encheiridion* or manual of his philosophy—a work which was long and widely popular. Under the Emperor Hadrian he was appointed in A.D. 132 prefect of Kappadokia. He had not long filled this office when a large body of wild Alan horsemen made one of their formidable raids into his province. They had hitherto proved irresistible, but on this occasion they were completely foiled by the skilful strategy and tactics of Arrian, who expelled them from his borders before they had secured any plunder. In Rome he was preferred to various high offices, and under Antoninus Pius was raised to the consulship. In his later years he retired to his native city, where he occupied himself in composing treatises on a considerable variety of subjects, but chiefly on history and

geography. He died at an advanced age in the reign of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius.

His account of Alexander's Asiatic expedition was followed by a treatise on India called the *Indika*. The first part of this work, which gives a description of India and its people, was based chiefly on the *Indika* of Megasthenes; and the second part, which narrates the famous voyage of Nearchos from the mouth of the Indus to the head of the Persian Gulf, was based on a journal kept by Nearchos himself. The work is but a supplement to his history. He speaks himself with noble pride of this great work. "This I do assert," he says, "that this historical record of Alexander's deeds is, and has been from my youth up, in place to me of native land, family, and honours of state; and so I do not regard myself as unworthy to take rank among the foremost writers in the Greek language, if Alexander be forsooth among the foremost in arms." "Quel délire de l'amour propre!" here exclaims Sainte-Croix. His merits as an author are thus well stated by a writer in Smith's *Classical Dictionary*: "This great work (the *Anabasis*) reminds the reader of Xenophon's *Anabasis*, not only by its title, but also by the ease and clearness of its style.... Great as his merits thus are as an historian, they are yet surpassed by his excellences as an historical critic. His *Anabasis* is based upon the most trustworthy historians among the contemporaries of Alexander.... One of the great merits of the work is the clearness and distinctness with which he describes all military movements and operations, the drawing up of the armies for battle, and the conduct of battles and sieges."

Q. CURTIUS RUFUS

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Nothing is known with any certainty respecting either the life of this historian or the time at which he lived. Niebuhr makes him contemporary with Septimius Severus, but most critics with Vespasian. Zumpt again, who, like some other eminent scholars, identifies him with the rhetorician Q. Curtius Rufus, of whom Suetonius wrote a life now lost, places him as early as Augustus.⁵ The style in which his history is written certainly shows him to have been a consummate master of rhetoric. He was particularly given to adorning his narrative with speeches and public harangues, and these, as Zumpt observes, are marked with a degree of power and effectiveness which scarcely anything in that species of writing can surpass. It may also be said that his style for elegance does not fall much short of the perfection of Cicero himself. It has of course its faults, and in these can be traced the incipient degeneracy of the Latin language, such as the introduction of poetical diction into prose, the ambition of expressing everything pointedly and strikingly, not to mention certain deviations from strict grammatical propriety.

The materials of his narrative were drawn chiefly from Ptolemy, who accompanied Alexander into India, from Kleitarchos their contemporary, and from Timagenes, who flourished in the reign of Augustus, and wrote an excellent history of Alexander and his successors. While the sources

whence he derived his information were thus good on the whole, he was himself deficient in the knowledge of military tactics, geography, chronology, astronomy, and especially in historical criticism, and he is therefore as an historical authority far inferior to Arrian. But in perusing his "pictured pages" the reader takes but little note of his errors and inconsistencies, being fascinated with his graceful and glowing narrative, interspersed as it is with brilliant orations, sage maxims, sound moral reflections, vivid descriptions of life and manners, and beautiful estimates of character. It is not surprising that with such merits Curtius has been one of the most popular of the classical authors. In spite of all his sins, for which he has so often been pilloried by the censors of literary morals, his history of Alexander has been the delight and admiration of not a few of the greatest of European scholars. He seems to have taken Livy as his model, as Arrian took Xenophon for his. His work consisted originally of ten books, but the first two are lost, and in some of the others considerable gaps occur. The French translation of Curtius by Vaugelas, who devoted thirty years of his life to the task, is so remarkable for its elegance that it has been pronounced to be as inimitable as Alexander himself was invincible. It is not, however, a very close version.

PLUTARCH

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There are but few works in the wide circle of literature which have afforded so much instruction and entertainment to the world as Plutarch's *Parallel Lives of the Famous Men of Greece and Rome*. These *Lives*, which are forty-six in number, are arranged in pairs, and each pair contains the *life* of a Greek and a Roman, followed, though not always, by a comparison drawn between the two. Alexander the Great and Caesar are ranked together, but no comparison follows. In his introduction to the *life* of the former, Plutarch explains his method as a biographer. "We do not," he says, "give the actions in full detail and with a scrupulous exactness, but rather in a short summary, since we are not writing *histories*, but *lives*. It is not always in the most distinguished achievements that men's vices or virtues may be best discerned, but often an action of but little note—a short saying or a jest—may mark a person's real character more than the greatest sieges or the most important battles." His *Lives*, therefore, while useful to the writer of history, must be used with care, since they are not intended as materials for history. His narrative of Alexander's progress through India has one or two passages which show this indifference to historical accuracy, as when, for instance, he states that the soldiers of Alexander refused to pass the Ganges when they saw the opposite bank covered with the army of the King of the Praisians.⁶ His account of