

THE WARS OF PUNJAB

PART TWO OF SIXTEEN

The Persians and Alexander

How the richest province on earth was conquered without a single battle being written down — and then, two centuries later, how the greatest soldier in the world was stopped by his own tired men on the bank of the Beas.

C. 545 BCE — 325 BCE

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EVERY WAR FOUGHT ON THE SOIL OF PUNJAB

Told in plain words, from the very beginning

The Day Punjab Stopped Being the Middle of the World

In Part One, Punjab was the centre of Indian civilisation. In Part Two, foreign empires walk in through the door and the centre never comes back.

Something enormous changes between the end of Part One and the start of Part Two, and it is worth stating clearly before we begin.

Until about 900 BCE, the land of the five rivers was where Indian history *happened*. The Kuru kingdom, the first real state in South Asia, sat on the Punjab plain. The Vedas were arranged there. Then the Salvas broke the Kurus, the centre of gravity rolled east to the Ganges, and Punjab became something different: **a frontier**. The rich, flat, tempting edge of India, facing the passes.

And in the 6th century BCE, something came through those passes that Punjab had never seen before — not a tribe, not a raiding chief, but **a world empire**. The Achaemenid Persians ruled from Egypt and Greece to the Indus. Punjab was not the centre of their world either. It was their *twentieth province*. But it was, by a very long way, their richest one.

Three things change forever in this chapter

- **Outsiders start writing about Punjab.** For the first time we have descriptions of this land written by people who came from somewhere else — Persian kings carving province-lists into cliffs, Greek historians interviewing travellers, Macedonian officers keeping campaign diaries. It is a completely different kind of evidence from the hymns of Part One.
- **Punjab enters world history.** Soldiers from the Peshawar valley and the Indus march across the Hellespont and burn Athens. That is not a legend. It is in Herodotus.
- **The pattern of the next 2,300 years is set.** Invader comes through the passes → Punjab's separate little states fight him one at a time → they lose one at a time. You will watch this exact sequence again with the Arabs, the Ghaznavids, the Ghurids, the Mongols, Timur and Babur.

THE HONESTY LABELS, AGAIN

Same system as Part One. **CERTAIN** means contemporary evidence — an inscription carved at the time, or an eyewitness account. **LIKELY** means it is reported by good sources writing later, and most historians accept it.

STORY means it may well be legend.

Part Two has much more **Certain** in it than Part One — but it comes with a new problem. Almost everything we know about Alexander in Punjab comes from *his own side*. Nobody on the Indian side wrote a word about him that survives. Keep that in mind on every page.

Cyrus the Great Comes East — And the War Vanishes

LIKELY

WON BY

Persia — probably, partly, and nobody wrote down how

WHEN

Roughly **545–530 BCE**.

WHERE

Afghanistan and the country west of the Indus — the Kabul valley, Swat, and the edge of Gandhara.

WHO

Cyrus the Great, founder of the Persian Empire, against the hill peoples of the north-west.

THE PROBLEM

Not one ancient writer describes a single battle, siege or surrender. We have only fragments.

Who was Cyrus, and why does he matter here?

In about thirty years, one man built the largest empire the world had yet seen. Cyrus took Media, then Lydia in Turkey, then Babylon — and by around 539 BCE he had run out of west to conquer. So he turned east, through what is now Afghanistan.

What happened next is one of the strangest holes in ancient history. **The Persians ended up owning the Indus country. Nobody recorded them taking it.**

What we actually have

Four scraps, and that is all.

1. **Arrian, writing 600 years later, says the trans-Indus peoples “paid tribute to Cyrus.”** Notice the word: *tribute*, not conquest. And it covers the Kabul and Swat valleys — not the Punjab plain.
2. **Pliny says Cyrus destroyed a city called Kapisa** — probably Begram, north of Kabul. That is one clause in a geography book, six centuries after the event.
3. **A disaster in the Makran desert.** Local people told Alexander’s officers in 325 BCE that Cyrus had once tried to cross the Gedrosian desert and came out “*with only seven of his men.*”
4. **Ctesias says an Indian killed him.** In this version Cyrus fought a people called the Derbices, who “*suddenly brought up some elephants which had been kept in ambush*” and scattered his cavalry. Cyrus fell from his horse

and “*an Indian wounded him mortally with a javelin under the thigh.*” He died three days later. Ten thousand fell on each side.

HANDLE WITH CARE

Every one of those four is shaky. The “seven men” story was told to Alexander’s men by locals, and its whole purpose was to make Alexander’s own catastrophic desert march look heroic by comparison — and it pairs Cyrus with **Semiramis**, a completely legendary Assyrian queen. As for the Indian javelin: Herodotus says Cyrus died fighting the Massagetae, Xenophon says he died peacefully in bed, and Berossus says he died against the Dahae. **Ctesias is the least reliable of the four — and his is the only version in which India kills Cyrus.**

Did an Indian king actually beat him? The theory that will not die

The Indian historian **Buddha Prakash** proposed something very attractive: that **Pukkusati of Gandhara** — the king who beat Avanti in Part One — organised the north-western tribes into a confederacy that acted as “a bulwark” against Persia, and that *the army Cyrus lost in Gedrosia was actually destroyed by Punjabi and Gandharan forces.*

It is a wonderful story. It is also, honestly, unprovable:

- **No source connects the two.** Not one. It joins two separate bodies of evidence with a guess.
- **The dates do not hold still.** Scholars cannot even agree whether Pukkusati ruled before or after the Persian conquest.
- **It uses a fiction as evidence.** The Gedrosia story is late propaganda. You cannot build a real battle on top of it.
- **And the Behistun inscription is silent.** When Darius later lists Gandara as a Persian province, he mentions no earlier resistance at all.

The fair verdict: **an attractive and entirely unprovable idea.** What it really tells us about is the modern world, not the ancient one — how nations read their own resistance back into a documentary blank.

THE STORY WORTH REMEMBERING

The Conquest That Left No Fingerprints

Think about what is missing here. The Persian Empire took the single richest province it would ever own — a province that would pay **almost a third of the imperial budget** — and there is no account of the campaign. No battle name. No general. No siege. No treaty. Nothing.

Compare that with what we *do* have from the same empire: Darius's exact battle dates carved on a cliff, down to the day of the month, for skirmishes against rebels in Afghanistan. The Persians were perfectly capable of recording a war. They simply did not record this one — or if they did, it has not survived.

And it is not just the Persians. On the Indian side there is **total silence**. Not a single Indian text of any kind mentions the Persian conquest of the Indus. The largest empire on earth annexed north-western India and Indian literature does not notice.

That silence is the most important fact in this whole chapter. It is why almost everything you are about to read comes from Greeks, Persians and Macedonians — people describing Punjab from the outside, often without going there.

Darius Takes the Indus — The Spy Voyage

CERTAIN

The first documented case in history of somebody surveying a country before invading it.

WON BY

Darius I of Persia — with a map, not a battle

WHEN The survey around 519–516 BCE; the annexation somewhere in 518–515 BCE.	WHERE Gandhara first, then Hindush — the Indus country, reaching to about the Jhelum.
WHO Darius I of Persia against whatever local kingdoms and republics stood in the Indus valley. None of their names survive.	HOW WE KNOW Darius’s own inscriptions, carved into rock while he was alive — the hardest evidence in this entire book so far.

The evidence that dates the conquest: a missing word

Around 520 BCE, Darius had a huge inscription carved into a cliff at **Behistun** in western Iran, listing the twenty-three lands he ruled. Two of them are ours:

“...Bactria, Sogdia, **Gandara**, Scythia, **Sattagydia**, Arachosia and Maka; twenty-three lands in all.”

Behistun inscription, c. 520–518 BCE

Look at what is *not* there. There is no **Hindush** — the Indus province. And on every later inscription Darius made, Hindush is there.

That single missing word does something no story can do: **it dates the conquest**. Gandhara was Persian by 520 BCE. The Indus was not. Between that inscription and the next one, Darius took it.

What happened in between: the voyage of Scylax

Here is Herodotus, writing about seventy years later:

*“Darius, desiring to know of the river Indus... where it runs out into the sea, sent with ships, besides others whom he trusted to speak the truth, **Scylax also, a man of Caryanda**.”*

They set out from Caspatyrus, sailed down the river to the sea and then west across the ocean, and “in the thirtieth month” reached Egypt. “After these had made their voyage round the coast, Darius both subdued the Indians and made use of this sea.”

Herodotus 4.44

Read that last sentence again, because it is the whole point. **First the survey. Then the conquest.** Darius sent a Greek sea-captain to chart the Indus and the ocean route home, waited thirty months for the report, and only then annexed the province.

This is a professional imperial operation — reconnaissance, mapping, logistics, and only afterwards the army. It is the reason there is no dramatic battle story: by the time the Persian army arrived, **they already knew the ground better than the people living on it.**

ONE HONEST WRINKLE

Herodotus says they sailed “down the river towards the east” — and the Indus flows *south-west*. This is the standard objection to the whole story. The best answer, from the scholar A. D. H. Bivar, is that Caspatyrus was near **Peshawar**, and the fleet first sailed east down the **Kabul river** — which really does flow east — and only turned south after joining the Indus near Attock. Nobody has located Caspatyrus for certain.

What Punjab and the Indus were worth

Herodotus lists what each Persian province paid in tax every year. The numbers are astonishing:

PROVINCE	ANNUAL TRIBUTE	SHARE OF THE WHOLE EMPIRE'S REVENUE
India (the 20th province)	360 talents of gold dust	About 32% — roughly a third of everything
Babylonia and Assyria	1,000 talents silver	About 7%
Egypt, Libya, Cyrene, Barca	700 talents	About 5%
Lydia	500 talents	About 3.4%
Gandhara + Sattagydia + neighbours (the 7th province)	170 talents silver	About 1.2% — one of the poorest districts in the empire

In modern weight, 360 talents of gold dust is roughly **eight to nine tonnes of gold, every single year** — a cube of solid gold about 75 centimetres on each side. India paid more than four times what Babylonia paid. It paid seven times what all of Egypt paid.

And notice the contrast inside our own region: **the Indus plain was the treasure. The Gandharan hills were nearly worthless.** That gap — rich plains, poor hills — will drive a thousand years of raiding, and you will see it again in every part of this book.

WHY PERSIA WON

- **They looked before they leapt.** Thirty months of survey. No Indian power had ever been studied like that.
- **Overwhelming scale.** Persia could bring the resources of Iran, Mesopotamia, Anatolia and Egypt to bear on one river valley.
- **Professional administration.** They did not need to destroy anything. They installed a satrap, fixed a tax, and moved on.
- **They took Gandhara first.** Securing the hills gave them the passes, the base and the manpower before touching the plain.

WHY PUNJAB LOST

- **There was no “Punjab” to defend it.** The region was a patchwork of small kingdoms and armed republics with no common ruler, no common army and no common plan.
- **Nobody saw it coming.** The Persians spent two and a half years mapping the country and apparently nobody worked out why.
- **The prize was too rich to defend.** A wealthy farming plain with no natural barriers is the easiest kind of country to take and the hardest kind to hold.
- **Being conquered was survivable.** Persian rule meant paying tax, not being destroyed. For a local king, submission was often the rational choice — and that logic is why it happened so quietly.

THE STORY WORTH REMEMBERING — THE FUNNY ONE

The Giant Gold-Digging Ants of India

Herodotus had never been to India. He wrote down what Persians told him. And what they told him about where the gold came from is the best thing in his entire book.

Out in the sandy desert beyond the settled land, he says, there live **ants** — “**in size smaller than dogs but larger than foxes.**” These ants dig burrows, and as they dig they push up sand from below, exactly as ordinary ants do. But the sand of that desert is **full of gold.** So the ant-hills are heaps of gold dust.

Here is how the Indians steal it, according to Herodotus, and every detail matters:

Each man harnesses **three camels** — **two males on the outside and one female in the middle** — and the female must be a mother who has *left her young calves behind at home*. They ride out at the hottest hour of the morning, because that is when the ants go underground to escape the heat. They fill their bags from the ant-hills as fast as they can. Then they turn and run.

The ants come boiling out of the ground — they smell them, Herodotus says — and “*this animal is superior to every other creature in swiftness.*” The chase is desperate. The male camels start to tire.

But the she-camel in the middle does not tire, because she is running home to her calves. And that is why she is harnessed in the middle, and that is why the Indians get home with the gold — most of them.

It is nonsense, of course. But it is *brilliantly constructed* nonsense — the heat, the timing, the camel psychology all hang together perfectly. And the most likely explanation is charming: in the high country of Ladakh and Tibet, gold is genuinely found in the earth thrown up by **marmots**, large burrowing rodents. Somewhere along a very long chain of translation, “marmot” became “giant ant.”

The same passage of Herodotus contains one of the earliest descriptions of **cotton** in European literature: *“the trees which grow wild produce wool which surpasses in beauty and excellence that from sheep.”* He got the plant right and the ants wrong.

A SMALLER TRUE STORY

Herodotus also records that the Persian governor of Babylon kept so many **Indian hunting dogs** that *“four large villages in the plain, being free from other contributions, had been appointed to provide food for the hounds.”* Four entire villages, exempted from all tax, existing only to feed one governor’s dogs from Punjab. Ctesias adds that Indian dogs “are very large and even attack lions” — a claim you will meet again, in a form that is even harder to believe, at Sangala.

Punjab's Soldiers Burn Athens

CERTAIN

The most extraordinary fact in this chapter, and almost nobody in Punjab knows it.

WON BY

The Greeks — with Punjab's men on the losing side

WHEN 480–479 BCE. Athens burned in June 479; the decisive battle was that August.	WHERE Greece — Athens, and the plain of Plataea in Boeotia. About 4,000 km from home.
WHO Contingents of Indians and Gandarians in the army of Xerxes, then of Mardonius, against the allied Greek cities.	HOW WE KNOW Herodotus lists them by name, by equipment and by commander.

What they looked like

When Xerxes marched on Greece he took soldiers from every province of the empire, and Herodotus catalogues them. Two entries are ours:

*“The Indians wore garments made of tree-wool, and they had bows of reed and arrows of reed with iron points.” Their commander was **Pharnazathres son of Artabates**.*

*“The Parthians and Chorasmians and Sogdians and **Gandarians** and Dadicans served with the same equipment as the Bactrians” — reed bows and short spears, Median-style headgear. Their commander was **Artyphius son of Artabanus**.*

Herodotus 7.65–66

Three things to notice, because they say a lot about what Punjab was in 480 BCE:

- **“Tree-wool” is cotton.** In an army where everybody else wore wool, leather or linen, the Indians turned up in cotton. Nobody in the Mediterranean world had it.
- **Cane bows and cane arrows.** A distinctively Indian technology — light, fast, and made from a material the rest of the empire did not use.
- **Iron arrowheads.** These were not primitive troops. Punjab was making good iron.

And then there is the cavalry. Herodotus says the Indian horsemen “*both rode horses and drove chariots, in which were harnessed horses **or wild asses.***” The Indian wild ass — the *khur* — still survives in the Rann of Kutch. Nothing else in the largest army the ancient world had ever assembled looked remotely like that.

A CORRECTION WORTH MAKING

You will often read that Indian and Gandharan soldiers fought at **Thermopylae** — the famous stand of the 300. **Herodotus does not say that.** The units he names in those assaults are the Medes, the Cissians, and then the Immortals. Indians were in the army and therefore in the theatre, but placing them at the Hot Gates is a modern embellishment. This book will not repeat it.

The bit that is certain, and astonishing

After the Persian fleet was smashed at Salamis, Xerxes went home and left his general **Mardonius** in Greece with a hand-picked army. Herodotus tells us exactly who Mardonius kept — and this is the key passage of the whole section:

*“Mardonius chose out for himself first all those Persians who are called 'Immortals'... and after them of the other Persians those who wore cuirasses, and the body of a thousand horse: also **the Medes, Sacans, Bactrians and Indians, foot and horsemen both.**”*

Herodotus 8.113

Out of an army drawn from forty-odd nations, Mardonius kept **five**: Persians, Medes, Sacae, Bactrians and Indians. In other words, the professional judgement of the best general in the Persian Empire was that **the men from the Indus were among the five nationalities good enough to win a war with.**

That army reoccupied Athens in June 479, and when Mardonius pulled out a few weeks later he “*set fire to Athens and cast down and destroyed whatever was left standing of the walls, houses or temples.*”

Which means, plainly: **soldiers from the Peshawar valley and the Indus plain helped burn Athens to the ground.**

Plataea, August 479 BCE

Then came the largest battle of heavy infantry the ancient world had yet seen. Herodotus gives Mardonius’s line of battle nation by nation, each matched against a Greek city. Here is where our men stood:

PERSIAN CONTINGENT	FACING
Persians (the best troops)	The Spartans
Medes	Corinthians, Potidaeans, Orchomenians, Sicyonians
Bactrians	Epidaurians, Troezenians, Tirynthians, Mycenaeans and others
THE INDIANS	Hermionians, Eretrians, Styreans, Chalcidians

Sacae	Ambraciots, Anactorians, Leucadians, Aeginetans
Greek allies of Persia (Boeotians, Thessalians, Macedonians)	The Athenians, Plataeans, Megarians

Hold that image. On a hot morning in central Greece, men from the Indus stood in a battle line facing men from **Eretria** and **Chalcis** — two small towns on a Greek island. Neither side can have had the faintest idea what the other was.

WHY THE GREEKS WON

- **Armour.** The Greek hoplite wore a bronze helmet, a breastplate and greaves, and carried a heavy shield. The Persian line was mostly light infantry in cloth, with wicker shields.
- **The shield wall.** Greek hoplites fought locked together as one machine. The Persian army fought as forty separate national contingents, each with its own weapons and its own habits.
- **Close quarters.** Persia's strength was archery. Once the Greeks closed the distance, bows were useless and the fight became a shoving match between armoured men and unarmoured ones.
- **Mardonius attacked on bad ground** — and when he was killed, the whole coalition had nothing holding it together.

WHY THE PERSIAN ARMY LOST

- **An empire is not an army.** Forty nations, forty languages, forty ways of fighting, no common drill.
- **Only the Persians themselves fought to the end.** Herodotus says the Persians died hard around Mardonius; the other contingents mostly broke and ran for the stockade without properly engaging. The Indians almost certainly belong to that second group.
- **Wrong weapons for the job.** Cane bows and short spears are excellent for skirmishing in hill country. They are close to useless against a wall of bronze.
- **No reason to die there.** A Greek at Plataea was defending his home. A man from the Indus was 4,000 km from his, fighting for a king he had never met.

THE STORY WORTH REMEMBERING

Four Thousand Kilometres From the Five Rivers

We know no Indian casualty figure from Plataea. Herodotus gives none. We do not know the name of a single soldier from the Indus who marched into Greece, or of one who came back.

But think about what that march actually was. A man from Gandhara or the Indus plain, conscripted or recruited around 481 BCE, walked out of the Punjab, across Iran, across Anatolia, over a bridge of boats spanning the sea into Europe, down through Thrace and Macedonia, into Greece. He was there when Athens burned. He stood in a battle line the following summer against people from an island he could never have heard of. Then, if he lived, he had to walk home — through a hostile country, in winter, with an army that had just been destroyed.

It is almost certainly the furthest from home any Punjabi soldier fought until the World Wars — and it happened 2,500 years ago. You will find no monument to it anywhere in Punjab.

Gaugamela: Punjab’s Last Fight for Persia

CERTAIN

WON BY Alexander of Macedon — and the Persian Empire ends

WHEN 1 October 331 BCE.	WHERE Gaugamela, in northern Iraq. Not in Punjab — but Punjab was in it.
WHO Two Indian contingents in Darius III’s army, plus fifteen war elephants, against Alexander.	WHY IT MATTERS This is the last time Punjab fights <i>for</i> Persia. Five years later Alexander is on the Jhelum.

Arrian had access to a captured Persian battle plan, which makes this the best-documented battle of the ancient world. Two entries in it are ours:

- “**The Indians who were conterminous with the Bactrians**” — almost certainly Gandharans — under **Bessus**, satrap of Bactria, on the Persian left.
- “**The Arachotians and the men who were called mountaineer Indians**” — probably from Sattagydia or the Indus — under **Barsaentes**.
- And: “**about fifteen [elephants], belonging to the Indians who live this side of the Indus.**”

The first war elephants Europe ever faced — and they did nothing

This is a small, strange, enormously consequential moment. Fifteen elephants had been walked from the Indus to Iraq. They were the first elephants any European army had ever confronted.

And they never entered the battle. They are not mentioned in any account of the fighting. Afterwards, Alexander’s men simply **captured them in the Persian camp**. The most likely explanation is the dullest one: after a march of thousands of kilometres, they were too exhausted to be used.

Yet those fifteen tired animals changed military history. Alexander’s officers saw them, took them, and never forgot them. Within a generation every Hellenistic king in the Mediterranean was desperate for elephants — a craze that ends with Seleucus trading four whole provinces for five hundred of them, and with Hannibal in the Alps.

WHY ALEXANDER WON

- **He attacked at an angle.** Alexander marched his line obliquely to the right, dragging the Persian left after him and stretching it until a gap opened.
- **He aimed at one man.** The moment the gap appeared he drove a wedge of cavalry straight at Darius personally. Kill or scare the king and the empire's army stops existing.
- **Discipline under pressure.** When the Persians broke through his own line, his phalanx held its shape instead of turning to save the baggage.

WHY PERSIA LOST

- **The one great chance was thrown away.** At the crisis of the battle, the Persian and Indian cavalry of the centre *did* break clean through Alexander's line. Instead of turning to take his phalanx in the rear — which might have won the battle and saved the empire — **they rode on to the camp to loot the baggage.**
- **Numbers without cohesion.** Again: a huge multinational army with no common training.
- **Darius left the field.** Once the king ran, everything downstream of him collapsed.
- **The elephants were a wasted asset** — brought thousands of miles and never deployed.

THE STORY WORTH REMEMBERING

The Two Satraps Who Commanded Punjab's Men

Both of the officers who led Indian troops at Gaugamela came to remarkable ends, and between them they explain how the Persian Empire actually died.

Bessus, who commanded the Gandharans, murdered his own king. As Darius III fled east after the battle, Bessus and a group of nobles seized him, stabbed him, left him dying by the roadside, and Bessus declared himself the new King of Kings. Alexander hunted him down and had him executed.

Barsaentes, who commanded the "mountaineer Indians," was in on the murder too. And when it went wrong, he did the obvious thing: **he fled to India** — to the very frontier province whose soldiers he had commanded. It did not save him. A few years later the Indians handed him over to Alexander, who had him killed.

The satrap of the Indian frontier ran home to the Indian frontier, and the Indian frontier sold him. That is what the Persian Empire had become by 330 BCE — and it tells you exactly how much loyalty Alexander would find when he arrived in person.

The Mountain War: Massaga and the Seven Thousand

CERTAIN

Alexander enters the north-west. Within a year he commits the act that even his admirers call a stain.

WON BY

Alexander — and it cost him his reputation

WHEN

May 327 – early 326 BCE.

WHERE

The Kunar, Panjkora and Swat valleys — eastern Afghanistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

WHO

Alexander against three tribal confederations: the **Aspasioi**, the **Guracans** and the **Assakenoi**.

THEIR NAMES

Greek versions of the Sanskrit *Ashvaka* — “horsemen.” These were the horse-breeding hill peoples of the north-west.

Why he came this way at all

Alexander split his army at Nicaea, near modern Jalalabad. **Hephaestion and Perdikkas** took the big column straight down the Kabul valley and through the Khyber Pass to bridge the Indus. Alexander took a strike force north into the hills.

The reason is straightforward and it is the reason every invader of India has had to do the same thing: **you cannot leave armed hill tribes sitting above your supply line**. Arrian calls the Assakenoi “*by far the stoutest warriors in that neighbourhood*.” If Alexander marched into Punjab with them behind him, his line back to Afghanistan would be cut within a month.

The campaign, quickly

1. **The first city, in the Kunar valley.** Alexander pushed ahead with cavalry plus **800 infantrymen put on horses** — still carrying their infantry shields — to catch the tribesmen before they reached their forts. At the walls, **a dart went through his breastplate into his shoulder**. Ptolemy and Leonnatus were wounded in the same fight. When the city fell, the Macedonians killed everyone in it, in anger at their king’s wound. It is the first of the campaign’s revenge-massacres. It will not be the last.

2. **Arigaion** was found already on fire — **the inhabitants had burned it themselves and gone**. That single detail tells you what these people had decided about surrender.
3. **The great valley battle**. The tribes massed on high ground and came down, “*emboldened by their superiority in number and despising the Macedonians, because they were seen to be few.*” Alexander split into three columns and beat them. Ptolemy, who wrote the account, deliberately left the enemy an escape route rather than surrounding them — a cool professional judgement that fewer men die when the loser has somewhere to run.
4. **The haul**. Ptolemy’s own figures: “*all the men were captured, to a number exceeding 40,000*” and **230,000 oxen**. Alexander picked the finest cattle to ship home to Macedonia to plough with.

WHAT THOSE NUMBERS MEAN

These are not battlefield tallies. 230,000 head of cattle is plausible as *the entire herd of a whole river system* seized over a season, and the 40,000 “captured” almost certainly means the non-combatant population of a district rounded up, not prisoners of war. No source says what happened to them afterwards.

The siege of Massaga

Massaga was the Assakenoi capital, probably near modern **Chakdara in Lower Swat**. Curtius describes a wall with a stone base and mud-brick above, bonded with embedded stones and timber; a torrent with steep banks on one side, and towering cliffs on two others. Inside were the garrison and **7,000 mercenaries hired from beyond the Indus**.

1. **The trap**. As Alexander pitched camp the Indians rushed out. He ordered his men *to turn and retreat* to a hill about seven stades away — pulling the defenders far from their walls. Believing they had won, the Indians “*rushed upon them with a run and with no kind of order.*” Then Alexander wheeled round at a signal and charged. About 200 Indians died; the rest were driven back inside.
2. **The wound**. Bringing the siege line up, Alexander was hit by an arrow in the ankle — Curtius says the calf. And here is the line that has been quoted ever since: he remarked that *he was called the son of Jupiter, but he felt the defects of a sick body*.
3. **The bridge that snapped**. On the third day Alexander swung a bridge from a siege tower across to the breach and sent up the hypaspists — the same men who had taken Tyre this way. Too many crowded onto it. “*The bridge received too great a weight, and was snapped asunder,*” dropping the assault party under a rain of stones and arrows.
4. **The chief killed**. The Assakenian ruler was killed by a shot from a siege engine. His mercenaries then asked for terms.

What happened to the seven thousand

This is the part every honest account of Alexander has to deal with.

Arrian’s version — from Alexander’s own officers — is the kindest: the mercenaries agreed to join Alexander’s army, marched out with their arms and camped on a hill. Then they decided to slip away in the night, “*because they were unwilling to take up arms against the other Indians.*” Alexander surrounded the hill after dark and “*cut*

them to pieces.”

Diodorus’s version is the damning one. The mercenaries left under truce and camped ten miles away, disturbing nobody. Alexander, who “*nursed an implacable hostility*” toward them, followed and “*falling upon them suddenly wrought a great slaughter.*” When they shouted that he was breaking the treaty, **Alexander answered that he had granted them leave to depart from the city — not friendship with Macedon.**

They formed a ring with their women and children inside it. The women fought: some picked up the weapons of the dead, and others, unarmed, “*rushed in and grasped the opposing shields, and hindered their use.*” They were killed to the last.

“*And this act adheres like a stain to his military career; in all other instances he waged war according to usage and like a king.*”

Plutarch, on the killing of the mercenaries

HOW TO WEIGH THE TWO VERSIONS

Notice the pattern, because it is a useful tool for the whole of this chapter. Arrian works from **Ptolemy and Aristobulus**, both of them Alexander’s own officers with reasons to protect his memory — and he gives a legal defence: *they broke the terms first*. Diodorus and Curtius work from the hostile tradition — and they say it was planned.

When the friendly source and the hostile source agree that the killing happened and disagree only about the excuse, the killing is certain and the excuse is suspect. Plutarch, a Greek writing under Rome with every reason to admire Alexander, singles this out as *the* blot on his career. That is about as close to a verdict as ancient history gets.

WHY ALEXANDER WON

- **Speed against dispersal.** The Assakenoi made a deliberate choice not to fight one big battle but to defend each city separately. Alexander simply took them one at a time, faster than they could react.
- **Siege engineering nobody in India had.** Torsion catapults, siege towers, movable bridges, mining. Indian fortifications were built to resist Indian armies, and Indian armies did not have this equipment.
- **The feigned retreat.** A trick as old as war and it still worked: pull the defenders away from their own walls, then turn.
- **He led from the front** — and paid for it in wounds — which meant his army would attempt things other armies would not.

WHY THE ASSAKENOI LOST

- **They divided their forces on purpose.** Arrian says they had 20,000 cavalry and over 30,000 infantry and “*dispersed one by one to their various cities.*” Concentrated, that army could have fought a real battle. Split between a dozen towns, each garrison was too small to win and too big to save.
- **Walls without relief.** A siege is survivable only if somebody is coming. Nobody was coming.
- **They hired mercenaries whose loyalty ran out.** The 7,000 negotiated separately for themselves the moment their employer was killed.
- **No answer to siege machinery.** Nothing in their military tradition had prepared them for engines that threw stones over walls.

The Queen Who Kept Her Throne

When the Assakenian king was killed, his widow took command. The Greeks called her **Cleophis**.

What happened next depends entirely on who you read, and the versions are so different that they are a lesson in themselves.

Curtius says she came to Alexander with the noble women of the city carrying golden vessels of wine, placed her young son at his knees, and was pardoned and allowed to keep the title of queen — then adds, poisonously, that *“some believed it was granted more to her beauty than to pity.”*

Justin goes much further: she *“recovered her throne from him by admitting him to her bed; saving by her charms what she had been unable to secure by her valour.”* He says the Indians afterwards called her the *royal harlot*, and that the son she bore was named Alexander and later sat on an Indian throne.

Diodorus says simply that she was captured and reinstated in her kingdom.

And Arrian — the best source, working from Alexander’s own officers — does not mention her at all. He records only that Alexander captured “the mother and daughter” of the dead king.

So: was she a queen who saved her people by negotiation, a woman coerced into a king’s bed, or a footnote inflated by Roman gossip-writers? **We cannot know.** But it is worth noticing which version is the juiciest, which is the earliest, and how completely a real woman can disappear underneath other people’s storytelling.

The Rock of Aornos

CERTAIN

WON BY

Alexander — by building a bridge out of a mountain

WHEN

Spring 326 BCE (the operation ran on from the winter).

WHERE

A flat-topped massif above the Indus gorges. **Aurel Stein identified it as Pir-Sar** in 1926; others argue for Mount Ilam in Swat. Unresolved.

WHO

Alexander against refugees and fighters from all the towns he had already taken.

WHY

Partly military, mostly personal: legend said **Herakles had tried to take the rock and failed.**

What happened

Aornos was not just a fort. It was a mountain with a flat top, farmland and springs on the summit, and cliffs falling into the Indus. It could feed itself indefinitely. Everyone Alexander had driven out of Swat had gone there.

1. **Local guides came in and offered to lead him to the weak point.** Diodorus says it was an old man with his two sons. Curtius adds the price: **80 talents, with one son held hostage.**
2. **Ptolemy went up first** by a rough hidden road with the light troops, seized a position the defenders had not covered, dug in behind a stockade and ditch, and **lit a beacon fire** so Alexander could see it from below.
3. Alexander advanced next day and could not get through. The Indians, seeing that, turned on Ptolemy's stockade instead and fought hard at it until nightfall.
4. **Alexander then sent an Indian deserter through the enemy lines at night carrying a letter** ordering Ptolemy to attack downhill at the exact moment Alexander attacked from below — so the defenders would be hit from two sides at once.
5. **And then the engineering.** There was a ravine between Alexander's hill and the rock. He ordered **every single soldier to cut one hundred stakes**, and began filling the ravine — building a mound across it, wide and high enough to bring archers and catapults within range of the summit. He supervised in person, praising the men who worked hard and punishing the slow. They made a stade — about 180 metres — on the first day.
6. When the mound reached them and the engines came into range, the defenders offered to surrender — but meant to slip away by night. They did. **Alexander let them go and then attacked them.** He took 700 guards,

was the first man up the rock, and the Macedonians hauled each other up behind him. Many of the defenders were cut down; others threw themselves off the precipices.

WHY ALEXANDER WON

- **He refused to accept the terrain as a fact.** The rock could not be assaulted, so he changed the shape of the ground until it could.
- **He bought the map.** Eighty talents for a guide is a bargain compared with a six-month siege.
- **Coordination at distance.** A written order carried by a defector through hostile ground, timing two attacks to the same moment, is genuinely sophisticated command work.
- **He did the work himself.** Curtius says Alexander threw the first tree-trunk into the ravine with his own hands, so that the soldiers would be ashamed not to.

WHY THE DEFENDERS LOST

- **They trusted a place instead of a plan.** “Impregnable” is a description of the past, not a strategy.
- **They left a back door uncovered** — the rough path Ptolemy climbed.
- **They fought the wrong enemy.** Turning on Ptolemy’s stockade used up their strength on a diversion instead of the mound, which was the thing actually killing them.
- **Faking a surrender was fatal.** It cost them their negotiating position and gave Alexander a free hand.

THE STORY WORTH REMEMBERING — BRAVERY

Charus and the Other Alexander

Curtius preserves a small episode from the cliffs of Aornos that has nothing to do with strategy and everything to do with why men fight.

Thirty picked young men were sent up the rock face. Boulders came down on them, and many fell into the river far below. Two of the dead are named. One was a soldier who happened to share the king’s name — **Alexander**. The other was his friend, **Charus**.

When the younger Alexander was killed in hand-to-hand fighting, Charus “*charged the enemy, heedless of everything except revenge.*” He killed several men. Then he was killed too, and fell across his friend’s body.

They are two of the very few ordinary soldiers in this entire campaign whose names survive. They survive because they died together, on a rock above the Indus, in a battle fought to beat the record of a god.

The Battle of the Hydaspes: Alexander Against Porus

CERTAIN

The hardest battle Alexander ever fought, on the bank of the Jhelum, in the rain, against two hundred elephants.

WON BY

Alexander — who then handed the kingdom back to the man he beat

WHEN

May 326 BCE — Arrian dates it by the Athenian calendar to the month Munychion. Many historians doubt that date, because the battle is fought in monsoon conditions; July is the common alternative.

WHERE

The **Hydaspes = the Jhelum**, in Pakistani Punjab. The crossing was about **17 miles upstream** of the main camp. The exact site is unknown — the river has moved.

WHO WON

Alexander, with perhaps 11,000–16,000 men in the crossing force.

WHO LOST

Porus (Sanskrit probably *Paurava*) — 30,000 infantry, 4,000 cavalry, 300 chariots, **200 elephants**.

Why it happened

Alexander crossed the Indus and came to **Taxila**, where King **Ambhi** (the Greeks called him Omphis or Taxiles) surrendered without a fight — and it is important to understand why, because it explains the whole shape of this war.

Ambhi had sent envoys to Alexander **while Alexander was still in Central Asia**. He *invited* him. He was boxed in between two enemies: **Abisares** in the hills to the north, and **Porus** across the Jhelum to the east — and one Indian tradition says Porus had killed Taxila’s previous ruler. Alexander was Ambhi’s solution to a local problem.

So the Battle of the Hydaspes is not simply “Greece against India.” **It is one Punjabi king using a foreign army against his neighbour.** That is a pattern you will see over and over in this book, and it almost never ends well for the man who invites the foreigner in.

THE GIFTS, AND THE JOKE THAT FOLLOWED

Ambhi handed over 200 talents of silver, 3,000 oxen, over 10,000 sheep, 30 elephants and 700 Indian horsemen (Curtius gives different figures). Plutarch preserves the exchange:

Taxiles: *“Why must we war and fight with one another, Alexander, if you have not come to rob us of water or of necessary sustenance?”*

Alexander: *“Can you think that after such words of kindness our interview is to end without a battle? No — you shall not get the better of me.”*

They then competed in generosity until Alexander gave Ambhi **a thousand talents**. That night at dinner, an officer named **Meleager**, drunk, congratulated Alexander loudly on having *“at last found in India a man worth a thousand talents.”* Alexander swallowed the insult and said only that envious men are their own tormentors — he had learned something since killing his friend Cleitus in a drunken argument two years before.

The problem: a river, a monsoon, and two hundred elephants

Porus lined the far bank of the Jhelum and waited. The obstacles were stacked:

- **The river was in flood.** Arrian: *“all the Indian rivers were flowing with swollen and turbid waters and with rapid currents.”* Himalayan snowmelt plus the first monsoon rains. In winter it would have been fordable — Porus fully expected Alexander to wait for winter.
- **Every crossing point was guarded.** Porus had detachments on every practicable ford and his main army opposite the camp.
- **And the real obstacle was not water. It was elephants.** Curtius says the banks were crowded with herds deliberately maddened to produce a horrific shrieking. **Horses will not go near elephants.** Any cavalry force landing on that bank would be useless before it formed up.

The deception plan — the finest of Alexander’s career

1. **He brought a navy overland.** The galleys he had used on the Indus were **cut into sections, carted across country, and reassembled on the Jhelum.**
2. **He stockpiled grain in the main camp** — visibly, ostentatiously — so that Porus would conclude he had settled in to wait for the winter.
3. **He filled skins with hay** to make float-rafts.
4. **He wore Porus out with noise.** Night after night, detachments marched up and down the bank shouting war-cries; fires were lit along the whole length of it; Ptolemy rode about with cavalry threatening crossings. **At first Porus shadowed every movement with his elephants. Then he stopped responding.** That was the entire purpose — a deliberate programme to dull the enemy’s reaction time, run for weeks, and it worked exactly as designed.
5. **He left a double in his own tent.** This is the best detail in the battle, and it comes from Curtius alone: Alexander left his royal tent and regalia at the main camp and dressed **Attalus**, a young man of similar build, in the king’s robes, *“to give the appearance that the king himself was still presiding on that bank.”*
6. **Craterus stayed at the camp with conditional orders** — and their precision is worth reading: do not cross while Porus faces me with his whole force. If Porus takes only part of his army and leaves the elephants —

hold. **If Porus takes all the elephants against me and leaves infantry in camp — cross at once.**

Alexander's stated reason: *"it is the elephants alone which render it impossible for the horses to land on the other bank."*

The crossing

Seventeen miles upstream Alexander found a wooded headland where the river bends, with a wooded island opposite — both thick enough to hide an army. He marched the crossing force away from the bank by night so it would not be seen or heard.

Then the weather did him a favour that no plan could have arranged: **a furious thunderstorm broke and lasted most of the night**, with lightning and whirlwinds. It drowned out the noise of thousands of men embarking.

Alexander went over in a thirty-oared galley with Perdiccas, Lysimachus and Seleucus. Once past the island the boats were spotted and Porus's sentries *"rode off as fast as each man's horse could gallop."*

And then the plan nearly died. Alexander landed, formed up his cavalry, and discovered he had come ashore *"on ground which was not a part of the mainland, but an island, a large one indeed."* He had crossed one channel of a braided river, not the river. There was another channel to go — and the night's rain had swollen it past the ford. They went through anyway: **"where the water was deepest, it reached higher than the breasts of the infantry; and of the horses only the heads rose above the river."**

The son who arrived too late

Porus sent his son to the landing. Arrian, weighing his sources, follows Ptolemy: **2,000 cavalry and 120 chariots**, arriving after Alexander was already fully across. The horse-archers shattered them. **Porus's son was killed.** Every chariot was captured — **bogged down and useless in mud made by the same rain that had hidden the crossing.**

A WINDOW INTO HOW HISTORY GETS MADE

Arrian gives three versions of this small fight, and then argues. Aristobulus says the prince came with only 60 chariots and simply *drove past*, making the crossing safe. Another tradition says there was a real battle in which Alexander was wounded and **Bucephalus was killed by Porus's son**. Ptolemy says 2,000 horse and 120 chariots, arriving late.

Arrian picks Ptolemy — and his reason is proper military criticism: 60 chariots are *"too many to be sent out as a reconnoitring party, and not adapted for speedy retreat,"* and far too few to stop a crossing. The number makes no sense for any purpose. **That is how a good historian works, and Arrian was doing it 1,900 years ago.**

The line Porus drew up

Porus now had to choose: stay and face Craterus, or turn and fight Alexander. He chose to fight. He picked ground *"no clay, but... all level and hard"* — chosen deliberately so his cavalry and chariots could move.

Then he arranged his army in a formation designed for one purpose: **to make a frontal attack impossible.**

- **200 elephants in a single line across the front**, spaced about a hundred feet apart.

- **Infantry behind**, pushed forward into the gaps between the elephants.
- More infantry on both wings beyond the elephant line.
- **Cavalry on both flanks**, with the **chariots in front of them**.

The line “looked very much like a city, for the elephants resembled towers, and the soldiers between them curtain walls.”

Diodorus 17.87

Porus himself rode the largest elephant, in gold-and-silver-inlaid armour, towering over everything. He was, the sources agree, an exceptionally large man.

How Alexander took it apart, step by step

1. **He stopped and let his men breathe.** Seeing the Indian line, he halted the cavalry until the infantry caught up and rested, *“not wishing to hand over his men exhausted with fatigue and out of breath, to the barbarians who were fresh and untired.”*
2. **He refused the centre completely.** Looking at the wall of elephants, *“he resolved not to advance against the centre.”* Porus had built a fortress out of animals; Alexander declined to attack a fortress.
3. **He put nearly all his cavalry on one wing** — massed against the Indian left.
4. **He sent Coenus the long way round.** Coenus, with two cavalry regiments, was sent round toward the Indian right, with orders to follow the Indian horse and take them in the rear the moment they concentrated.
5. **He held the phalanx back.** Explicit orders: do not engage until you see the enemy thrown into disorder by the cavalry.
6. **He opened with a thousand horse-archers.** Missile cavalry hit the Indian left first, to shake and disorder it before the heavy charge. This is the tactical key of the battle.
7. **The trap closes.** The Indians pulled cavalry from everywhere to meet Alexander’s mass — and Coenus appeared behind them. They had to split, facing two ways at once, and the manoeuvre needed to do that threw their formation into confusion. **Alexander charged at precisely that moment.**
8. **Broken, the Indian cavalry fled to their own elephants for shelter** — using them, Arrian says, “as a friendly wall.”

What the phalanx did to the elephants

The mahouts now drove the beasts forward, and the Macedonian infantry came on to meet them. This is the most technically interesting fighting in the ancient world, because nobody in Europe had ever solved this problem before.

- **Kill the driver first.** Light infantry threw javelins at the mahouts and at the elephants’ eyes. An elephant without a driver is not a weapon; it is a panicking animal in the middle of your own army.
- **Use the pike.** The Macedonian *sarissa* was 15 to 18 feet long. Curtius has Alexander tell his officers beforehand that *“our spears, excessively long and strong”* were ideal against beasts and riders — and that killing the crews was the priority.

- **Go for the legs.** Curtius names the weapon: the *copis*, a heavy curved chopping sword “like a sickle,” used to cut at the elephants’ feet.
- **Open lanes.** The phalanx opened gaps in its files to let charging elephants run *through* rather than receiving them head-on.

And then the thing Porus had never planned for happened. Penned into ground too tight for them, their drivers shot down, wounded in the flanks, the elephants turned:

“Rushing forward at friends and foes alike, they pushed about, trampled down and killed them.”

Arrian 5.17

Diodorus gives it in close-up: men “trodden under foot, armour and all,” others “lifted on high, dashed back down to the ground again, dying a fearful death” — and then “the wounded elephants turned upon their own ranks and trampled friendly troops.” Arrian’s final image is quieter and somehow worse: the exhausted elephants simply **backing away, trumpeting, “like ships backing water.”**

Alexander then ringed the whole Indian mass with his cavalry while the infantry **locked shields into one dense body** and pushed forward. Hammer and anvil. And at that moment **Craterus crossed from the main camp with fresh troops** and took over the pursuit from Alexander’s exhausted men.

The bill

LOSSES	ARRIAN (FROM PTOLEMY)	DIODORUS
Indian dead	~20,000 infantry and 3,000 cavalry	over 12,000 dead, over 9,000 captured
Elephants	all survivors captured	80 captured
Named Indian dead	Two sons of Porus; the local governor Spitaces; all the elephant, chariot and cavalry commanders	
Macedonian dead	~310	~980

WHICH NUMBERS TO BELIEVE

On the Indian side the two traditions probably agree: Diodorus’s 12,000 dead plus 9,000 captured is about 21,000, and Arrian’s total is about 23,000 — Arrian very likely counted prisoners as casualties.

On the Macedonian side they do not agree at all, and here Arrian is almost certainly wrong. **310 dead in a battle Arrian himself calls the hardest of the campaign is not credible.** The military historian J. F. C. Fuller judged Diodorus’s figure of roughly a thousand far more realistic — higher than Alexander’s losses at Gaugamela, which is exactly what you would expect from a battle against elephants.

WHY ALEXANDER WON

- **He attacked the one part of the line that was not defended by elephants.** The whole battle is that single decision.
- **Weeks of fake alarms bought him a free crossing.** Deception was not a trick here; it was a sustained campaign of its own.
- **Combined arms.** Horse-archers to disorder, heavy cavalry to break, pikes to hold, light infantry to kill mahouts, fresh troops to pursue. Every arm did the job it was best at, in sequence.
- **He turned the enemy's best weapon into the enemy's worst problem.** Two hundred elephants killed a great many Indians that day.
- **Craterus's conditional orders** meant the army on the wrong bank could still act correctly without being told what was happening.

WHY PORUS LOST

- **A static defence against a mobile enemy.** Porus had to guard everywhere; Alexander only had to cross somewhere.
- **He let himself get tired out by noise.** Reacting to every alarm for weeks and then ceasing to react is precisely the trap that was set for him.
- **His formation had no reserve and no flexibility.** A single line, however terrifying, can only fight forwards. When his cavalry was destroyed on the wings, the “city” of elephants had no way to turn.
- **Elephants are a weapon that can be turned around.** No other weapon in history so reliably kills the side that brought it.
- **Chariots in the monsoon.** Three hundred chariots, on ground made soft by rain, contributed nothing and were captured.
- **His allies did not come.** Abisares was four hundred furlongs away and never arrived. That absence may have mattered as much as any tactic on the field.

THE STORY WORTH REMEMBERING — THE GREATEST SURRENDER IN INDIAN HISTORY

“Treat Me As a King Treats a King”

Porus did not run. Arrian is explicit that he behaved “*not only as a general but also as a valiant soldier*” — and points out, pointedly, that **he did not flee as Darius had done**. He kept fighting from his elephant while his cavalry was destroyed around him and riderless elephants rampaged through his own line. Only after taking a wound in the right shoulder did he begin to withdraw.

Alexander wanted him alive and sent **Ambhi of Taxila** to talk to him. It was a serious misjudgement. Arrian says that Porus, seeing his old enemy riding up to accept his surrender, **wheeled his elephant round and raised a javelin to strike him** — and would have killed him if Taxiles had not spurred out of range. (Curtius has a bloodier version in which the cast goes home, killing Taxiles' brother.)

Alexander then sent **Meroes**, an old friend of Porus. Overcome with thirst, Porus dismounted, drank, and agreed to be taken to Alexander.

Curtius preserves the scene at the end. Porus was barely conscious, his limbs failing. His mahout saw it and **ordered the elephant to kneel** so the king could get down — and every other surviving elephant, trained to follow the lead animal, **knelt too**. When Macedonian soldiers began stripping the wounded king's armour, **his own elephant turned on the looters and drove them off**, until it was brought down by missiles.

Then the exchange that everybody remembers. Plutarch's version is the sharpest:

Alexander: How do you wish to be treated?

Porus: *"Like a king."*

Alexander: And have you nothing else to say?

Porus: *"All things are included in my 'like a king.'"*

Curtius gives a longer version in which Alexander asks what madness made him fight, knowing Alexander's reputation, and Porus answers that he had thought no man stronger than himself; the battle taught him otherwise; and he is not unhappy to be second to Alexander. Asked what should be done with him, he says: ***"What this day advises you."***

Why Alexander gave the kingdom back

He did not just spare Porus. He **restored him and enlarged his kingdom**, treating his wounds, Curtius says, *"no differently than if he had fought on his side."* Arrian says Porus ended up ruling seven nations and over two thousand cities; Plutarch says fifteen nations and five thousand cities.

Admiration was real. But so was arithmetic:

- **Alexander had no Macedonians to spare.** Garrisoning Punjab was impossible; he needed a local ruler.
- **A king who owes you his throne, his life and an enlarged kingdom is the cheapest instrument of control there is.**
- **And he needed a counterweight to Ambhi.** He formally reconciled the two enemies and left them balanced against each other — each one's ambition checked by the other's. It is a piece of political engineering as careful as the battle plan.

BUCEPHALAS

Alexander's horse died at the Jhelum. Arrian, quoting Onesicritus, says he died *"not from having been wounded by any one, but from the effects of toil and old age; for he was about thirty years old."* Plutarch says most writers claim wounds. The name means "ox-head," from a mark on the horse.

Alexander founded two cities: **Nicaea** ("Victory") near the battlefield, and **Bucephala** at the crossing — conventionally identified with modern **Jhelum** city, with Jalalpur Sharif traditionally shown as the horse's grave. Plutarch adds that he also founded a city named after his dog, Peritas.

Sangala and the Fort Made of Wagons

CERTAIN

WON BY Alexander — and the city was erased

WHEN Later in 326 BCE, after crossing the Ravi.	WHERE Disputed. Candidates: Sangla Hill (Cunningham), Sialkot (the majority view), or east of the Ravi near Gurdaspur.
WHO The Kathaioi (Kathas) and allied free tribes, against Alexander with Porus’s Indian troops alongside him.	THEIR RECORD They had already beaten Porus and Abisares together — the two greatest kings of the Punjab — and sent them home with nothing.

Who the Kathaioi were

These were not a kingdom. They were one of the free tribal republics of central Punjab — the *ayudhajivin sanghas* we met in Part One, “corporations that live by weapons.” Arrian says they were “*very daring and skilful in war*”, and he gives the proof: **Porus and Abisares had campaigned against them with a great army and “were forced to retreat without effecting anything.”**

Crucially, Arrian adds that **the Oxydracae and the Mallians were “in the same temper” as the Kathaioi**. The free tribes of the Punjab were coordinating. That coordination becomes the story of War Ten.

The wagon fort

The Kathaioi did something Alexander had not seen in India. They drew up on a hill in front of their city and **ringed it with three rows of wagons** — a laager, a fort made of carts.

1. **Cavalry failed immediately.** The defenders would not come out to meet horsemen; they climbed onto the wagons and shot down from them. Alexander recognised the problem instantly — this was infantry work. **He dismounted and led the phalanx up himself.**
2. **The first ring fell easily.**
3. **The second ring was much harder.** The defenders packed into a smaller circle, which made it *stronger*, not weaker. And they used a tactic Arrian singles out: **crawling underneath the wagons and stabbing out through the gaps between them.**

4. **The third ring was never contested.** The defenders ran for the city and shut the gates.

The siege

Alexander could not surround the whole wall — the circuit was too long for his infantry. On one side lay a lake, which he found was **shallow**, so he posted cavalry all round it.

Twice the defenders tried to break out at night. The first time they came down off the walls in the second watch and ran straight into the cavalry pickets; finding the lake guarded too, they went back inside. Alexander then built a **double stockade**.

The second attempt was betrayed by deserters. Alexander put **Ptolemy** at the lake gap with hypaspists, Agrianians and archers, told him to block the escape and **signal with a bugle**, and ordered every other commander to advance the moment they heard it — promising, *“Nor will I myself withdraw from the action.”* Ptolemy dragged the abandoned wagons across the escape route and had his men throw up earth mounds. At the fourth watch the Indians opened the lake gate and ran into it. About 500 died.

Then **Porus arrived with his remaining elephants and 5,000 men** — fighting for Alexander now.

The siege engines were brought up but never needed. **The wall was mud-brick, so the Macedonians simply undermined it and went up on ladders all round.** Then Alexander **razed the city to the ground** and gave its territory to the Indians who had submitted voluntarily.

THE NUMBERS DO NOT WORK

Arrian gives **17,000 Indians killed and over 70,000 captured**, against fewer than 100 Macedonian dead and 1,200 wounded.

Curtius describes the fighting differently — linked chariots rather than a ring of wagons — and says the Indians lost **8,000** men before retreating into the town. (He names neither the city nor the tribe, and his figure covers only that first battle outside the walls, not the storming.)

Seventy thousand captives is not believable for a single Punjabi town. Estimates put the town's whole population at roughly 80,000, which would mean Alexander carried off essentially everybody and killed 17,000 more on top. The realistic reading is that Arrian's figures are round numbers covering the town and all its dependent countryside.

Neither writer is giving a headcount.

WHY ALEXANDER WON

- **He changed arm immediately.** The moment cavalry failed he got off his horse and made it an infantry battle. Most commanders take a day to admit that.
- **He blocked the exit before pushing the door.** The lake, the stockade, Ptolemy's bugle plan — the whole siege is about closing escape routes first.
- **He read the building material.** Mud-brick walls do not need catapults. They need spades. He saved days by noticing.
- **He now had Indian allies.** Porus's elephants and men were fighting on his side four months after the Jhelum.

WHY THE KATHAIOI LOST

- **The wagon fort was the wrong answer to the wrong enemy.** It was a superb device against Indian cavalry armies — which is exactly how they had beaten Porus. Against disciplined heavy infantry it was a wall that could be walked over.
- **They fell back into the city.** Once inside, all their mobility and all their advantages were gone.
- **Their allies never came.** The Mallians and Oxydracae were "in the same temper" but did not march.
- **They were betrayed from inside.** Deserters gave away the second breakout.
- **They were beaten by their own last victory.** Having crushed Porus with the same tactics, they had every reason to trust them. That is how good armies lose.

THE STORY WORTH REMEMBERING

The Handsomest Man Is King, and the Dog That Would Not Let Go

The Greeks were fascinated by the Kathaioi, and the details they recorded — through Alexander's own naval officer Onesicritus — are unlike anything else in the campaign.

They chose their king by looks. Strabo says flatly that the Kathaioi "*choose the handsomest person as king.*" More disturbingly, he says a child was judged in public two months after birth as to whether it had "the beauty of form required by law and is worthy to live." And the men "*dye their beards with many most florid colours for the sole reason that they wish to beautify themselves.*"

And Strabo records something else — one of the two earliest datable Western descriptions of *sati*, the burning of widows — the other also comes from Alexander's expedition, reported by Aristobulus at Taxila. He gives the Kathaioi's own explanation for the custom: it existed, they said, because wives had sometimes poisoned their husbands, and Diodorus independently reports the same origin story. Whether or not that is how it began, it is a real piece of evidence about how the practice was explained in the Punjab in 326 BCE.

And then, from the neighbouring kingdom of **Sopeithes**, comes the best animal story in ancient literature. The king gave Alexander **150 fighting dogs** and offered a demonstration. A lion was released, and the dogs went in. One got a grip and would not let go. To prove the breed, a man began **cutting off the dog's own leg, slowly**. Diodorus: "*The dog uttered neither yelp nor whimper, but continued with his teeth clamped shut until, fainting with loss of blood, he died on top of the lion.*"

Curtius reports the story and then adds the single most useful sentence any ancient historian ever wrote: "***plura transcribo quam credo***" — **I write down more than I believe.**

The Battle Alexander Lost — On the Bank of the Beas

CERTAIN

He was never beaten in a battle. He was beaten in an argument, by his own soldiers, in Punjab.

WON BY

Alexander’s own army — the only force that ever stopped him

WHEN Around July 326 BCE.	WHERE The Hyphasis = the Beas, in Indian Punjab. This is the furthest east any Macedonian soldier ever stood.
WHO Alexander against the Macedonian army, with Coenus son of Polemocrates speaking for the men.	WHAT WAS AT STAKE Whether the Macedonian empire would swallow the Ganges valley as well.

Why they refused

Diodorus explains the state of the army, and it is worth reading slowly:

“Alexander observed that his soldiers were exhausted with their constant campaigns. They had spent almost **eight years** among toils and dangers.”

“The hooves of the horses had been worn thin by steady marching. The arms and armour were wearing out, and **Greek clothing was quite gone**.”

“This was the season also... of the heavy rains. These had been going on for **seventy days**, to the accompaniment of continuous thunder and lightning.”

Diodorus 17.94

Seventy days of monsoon. Leather rotting, iron rusting, men in borrowed Persian clothes because nothing from home could reach them. Curtius puts the whole thing into one line that ought to be carved somewhere: “**Victors in everything, we are destitute of everything.**”

And what was on the other side of the river

Twelve days of desert, then the Ganges. Beyond that, the empire of the **Nandas** under a king the Greeks called Xandrames — that is, **Dhana Nanda** of Magadha. The reported strength:

SOURCE	INFANTRY	CAVALRY	CHARIOTS	ELEPHANTS
Diodorus	200,000	20,000	2,000	4,000
Curtius	200,000	20,000	2,000	3,000
Plutarch	200,000	80,000	8,000	6,000
Arrian	<i>Gives no numbers at all — only that the people were “good agriculturists, and gallant in war” with “a much greater number of elephants than the other Indians,” of “surpassing size and courage.”</i>			

Alexander's men had just fought **two hundred** elephants and found it the hardest day of their lives. They were now being asked to march twelve days into a desert and then face somewhere between three and six *thousand*.

THE BEST ANCIENT CRITICISM OF ANCIENT NUMBERS

Curtius puts the sceptical case in Alexander's own mouth: nobody could keep herds of elephants larger than other countries keep herds of cattle, and *“rumour never reaches pure truth; those reporting make everything greater than fact.”*

He was right to doubt it, and the doubt did not help him at all. **What matters in a mutiny is not what is true but what the soldiers believe.**

Coenus speaks

Alexander called an assembly and made the case for going on. The officers said nothing. Then **Coenus** — one of his best generals, a man who had commanded the flanking move that won the Hydaspes — stood up.

Curtius describes what happened first, and it is the finest moment in his whole account: the officers stood mute, staring at the ground; then a murmur rose; then groans; then weeping broke out across the assembly — **and Alexander himself could not keep his eyes dry**. His anger turned to pity. Only then did Coenus step forward and **take off his helmet**, the proper way to address a king.

He was careful. He established that he spoke for the men and not for himself — *“we have already carried off the rewards of our labours”* — and then made his argument:

- **The arithmetic of attrition:** *“how many Macedonians and Greeks started with you, and how few of us have been left”* — dead in battle, crippled by wounds, killed by disease, or scattered in garrisons across Asia.
- **The precedent:** you sent the Thessalians home when you saw they had had enough. Do the same for us.
- **The quiet accusation:** some Greeks had been settled in the new eastern cities *“not indeed all of them of their own free will.”*

- **The human argument:** they wanted to see their parents, wives and children, and to come home “*as great men, whereas they departed small.*”
- **The warning:** “*Do not lead us now against our will; for you will no longer find us the same men in regard to dangers.*”
- **The practical alternative — and this is the part usually missed.** Curtius has Coenus propose that if Alexander must go further into India, he should go *south*, where it is narrower, and reach the ocean directly: “*Why seek by a detour a glory that lies to hand?*” **That is exactly what Alexander then did.**
- **And the line that landed:** “*Self-control in the midst of success is the noblest of all virtues, king.*”

Three days in the tent

Alexander dismissed the assembly, annoyed at Coenus’s plain speaking and at the silence of everyone else. The next day he announced he would go on and would compel no Macedonian — *those who wished could go home and tell everyone they had deserted their king.* Then he shut himself in his tent and admitted nobody for three days (Curtius says two).

Nobody came. The army did not break.

So he offered sacrifice to cross the river, and the omens were unfavourable. That is the mechanism of the climbdown, and it is a masterpiece of face-saving. A king cannot be seen to be overruled by his soldiers. A king may be overruled by the gods. He announced they were turning back.

“*There arose a loud shout such as you would expect from a large and joyful multitude, and many of them wept*” — and they blessed him “***because by them alone he suffered himself to be conquered.***”

Arrian 5.28

WHY THE SOLDIERS WON

- **They held the only thing he could not replace.** Alexander could get money, food, elephants and allies in India. He could not get another Macedonian phalanx.
- **They asked, they did not rebel.** Nobody drew a weapon, nobody named a rival king. It was impossible to punish and impossible to refuse.
- **Coenus was the right man.** Senior, decorated, personally loyal, with nothing left to gain. A junior officer saying the same words would have been executed.
- **They offered him a way out** — go south to the ocean instead. He could yield and still be conquering something.
- **They waited him out.** Three days of royal silence and not one man cracked.

WHY ALEXANDER LOST

- **Eight years without a proper rest.** Every army has a limit and he had found his.
- **He had no answer on supply.** No replacement equipment, no clothing, no remounts, 5,000 km from home in a monsoon.
- **His own success had made the next war unimaginable.** They had beaten 200 elephants; they had been told there were 4,000 more.
- **He had nothing left to offer.** The men were already rich. You cannot bribe a soldier who wants to go home with more money.
- **And he could not threaten them,** because “go home then and say you deserted your king” only works if somebody blinks. Nobody did.

The Camp Built for Giants

Before he turned back, Alexander did two things on the bank of the Beas.

First he built **twelve enormous altars** to the twelve gods — Arrian says “as high as the biggest towers,” Diodorus says fifty cubits, about seventy-five feet — as thank-offerings and as monuments to how far he had come. Plutarch says that long afterwards the Indian kings of the east still went to them and *offered sacrifices in the Greek manner*.

Then he played a joke on the future.

He marked out the ground for a camp **three times the size of the one his army actually used**, with a ditch fifty feet wide and forty feet deep. Inside it the infantry built huts containing **beds five cubits long** — over two metres. The cavalry built **mangers twice the normal size**. Plutarch adds oversized armour, higher horse-mangers and heavier bridle-bits, all left scattered about.

The purpose, says Diodorus, was “*to make a camp of heroic proportions and to leave to the natives evidence of men of huge stature, displaying the strength of giants*.” Curtius names it exactly: a ***fallax miraculum*** — a false marvel, manufactured for posterity.

Alexander could not conquer the Ganges. So he left behind the furniture of an army of giants, so that the people of Punjab would tell their grandchildren that giants had come to the Beas and turned back of their own accord. **It is one of the earliest deliberate attempts on record to fake the physical evidence for future generations — and it was done in Punjab.**

TWO HONEST FOOTNOTES

On Coenus. He died of illness about two months later, just before the fleet sailed. Curtius has Alexander remark bitterly that Coenus had made so long a speech “*as if he alone would see Macedonia again*.” Every modern insinuation of poisoning grows from that one royal quip — and Curtius himself does not make the accusation. The sources say illness.

On whether it was a mutiny at all. This is live scholarship. Timothy Howe and Sabine Müller argue there was no mutiny: Alexander had reached the eastern boundary of the old Persian Empire, which was his actual objective, and stopped because he had finished — and that the “mutiny” framing was borrowed by later Roman-era writers from Tacitus. Elizabeth Carney points out that the word *mutiny* assumes an army built on absolute obedience, which Macedonian armies were not. Waldemar Heckel: “*their words were not those of mutineers but of men who begged their king*.”

Something real happened — an army that would not go on and a king who did not make it. Whether to call that a mutiny is a fair question, and this book leaves it open.

The Mallian War: The Arrow at Multan

CERTAIN

The largest tribal alliance Punjab ever raised — and it fell apart before it fought.

WON BY

Alexander — who very nearly died doing it

WHEN November 326 – February 325 BCE, on the march down the rivers.	WHERE Central and southern Punjab, between the Chenab and the Ravi. The final citadel is usually placed at Multan.
WHO The Malloi (Sanskrit <i>Malava</i>) and the Oxydracae (<i>Kshudraka</i>) — the two great free republics of the Punjab.	THEIR STRENGTH Reported at 80,000–90,000 infantry, 10,000 cavalry, 700–900 chariots.

The alliance that should have worked

The Malavas and Kshudrakas were old enemies. Facing Alexander, they made peace — and they did it in the most serious way available to them. Diodorus says they sealed it by “**giving and receiving ten thousand young women**” in marriage between the two peoples.

Think about the scale of that. Ten thousand marriages to bind an alliance. This was not a handshake; it was two nations fusing themselves together to face one man.

And then Diodorus adds the sentence that decides the war:

*“Even so they did not come out to fight together but **fell into a dispute over the command** and retired into the neighbouring cities.”*

Diodorus 17.98

The greatest coalition in Punjab’s history collapsed because **they could not agree who would be general**. If that sounds familiar, it should — you read the same story on the banks of the Ravi in Part One, where ten kings lost to one.

The desert march

Alexander gave them no time to reconsider. He took the hypaspists, archers, Agrianians, javelin-cavalry and half the Companions, camped near the Chenab, rested the men, and **ordered every man to fill his water containers.**

Then he marched the rest of that day and all night — **about 45 miles in roughly 24 hours, across waterless country.**

At daybreak he was at a Mallian city. Arrian says it plainly: **the Mallians had not believed an army could cross the desert.** Most of them were outside the walls and unarmed. They were killed where they stood. With his infantry still strung out behind him, Alexander *“made use of his cavalry in place of a stockade”*, ringing the walls with horsemen until the foot came up.

What followed was a methodical destruction, city by city: about 2,000 killed at the first; a second town found abandoned and its people run down in flight; a third stormed by Peithon; a fourth — a Brahmin town — where the defenders **set fire to their own houses and died in the flames**, and about 5,000 were killed. Then the main Mallian force, perhaps 50,000, was caught and broken at a river crossing.

The citadel, the ladder, and the arrow

The survivors packed into their strongest city. And here Alexander did the thing that no other commander in history has done.

1. The Macedonians broke a small gate and got inside the outer wall. The Indians abandoned it and packed into the inner citadel.
2. **Perdiccas's column was late** — because many of his men had not even brought ladders, assuming from the empty walls that the place was already taken.
3. Alexander, furious at the slowness of the ladder-bearers, **snatched a ladder out of a man's hands himself, put it against the wall, and climbed it under his shield.**
4. Three men followed: **Peucestas**, carrying the sacred shield Alexander had taken from the temple of Athena at Troy; **Leonnatus**, his bodyguard; and **Abreas**, a soldier on double pay for distinguished service, on a second ladder.
5. Alexander reached the battlements and cleared his stretch of wall. The hypaspists below, terrified for him, surged up after him — and **their combined weight snapped the ladders.** Nobody else could get up.
6. He was now standing alone on an enemy wall, shot at from the towers on both sides, *“conspicuous both by the brightness of his weapons and by his extraordinary display of audacity.”*
7. **So he jumped down inside.** Arrian even gives us his reasoning: to stay was to be shot for nothing; but if he leapt into the fort *“he might perhaps by this very act strike the Indians with terror”* — and if not, he would *“die not ignobly after performing great deeds of valour.”*

Inside, with his back to the wall, he killed several men including the Indian commander, and drove others off with thrown stones, until the defenders stopped approaching and simply shot at him from all sides.

Abreas was shot through the forehead and killed. Then an arrow went “*under the breast through his breastplate into the chest.*” Ptolemy’s report gives the clinical detail that settles what happened: “**air was breathed out from the wound together with the blood.**” His lung was punctured.

He fought on “*as long as his blood was still warm,*” then went dizzy and fell forward onto his shield. **Peucestas stood over him with the shield from Troy; Leonnatus covered the other side. Both were wounded.** Curtius says Peucestas was struck by three javelins and “*protected the king rather than himself.*”

Outside, the army went berserk. Men broke their remaining ladders in the rush; some drove pegs into the mud-brick to climb; **some made human ladders of one another.** Others smashed a gate with axes. And when they got in:

“*Neither the old, nor women, nor infants were spared.*” — Curtius

“*The Macedonians killed all whom they met and filled the city with corpses.*” — Diodorus

THE ARROW ITSELF

Plutarch says the arrowhead was **three fingers broad and four long**, lodged against a rib, and that the wooden shaft had to be **sawn off** before the head could be cut out. Curtius calls it a two-cubit arrow and names the surgeon **Critobulus**, who was afraid to operate in case he was blamed — until Alexander reassured him: “*Won’t you be innocent, since the wound I have received is incurable?*” The barbed head had to be widened out of the flesh.

Arrian gives two versions of who did it: a physician of Cos named Critodemus, or **Perdiccas, with his sword, at Alexander’s own order**, no doctor being present. Either way “*there was such a copious effusion of blood that Alexander swooned again — and the effect of the swoon was that the effusion of blood was stanch.*” He fainted, and fainting saved his life.

WHY ALEXANDER WON

- **He attacked before the alliance could assemble.** The entire campaign is one long exercise in arriving too early.
- **He crossed ground they had ruled out.** 45 miles of waterless desert in a day was, to the Mallians, simply not a thing that armies did.
- **He split them and beat them separately** — which is only possible because they had already split themselves.
- **His army’s attachment to him personally.** Men who make ladders out of each other’s bodies to reach a wounded king are not a normal army.

WHY THE MALLOI AND OXYDRACAE LOST

- **They could not agree on a commander.** Everything else follows from this. Ten thousand marriages could not solve what one general would have solved.
- **Two free republics, two sets of leaders, no way to make a decision fast.** The very thing that made these societies admirable made them helpless against one man with total authority.
- **They fell back on their cities.** Their strength was numbers in open country; they shut themselves in walls instead.
- **They ruled out the desert route** and therefore did not watch it.
- **They fought a war of separate last stands** — brave, and militarily hopeless.

THE STORY WORTH REMEMBERING

The Army That Would Not Believe He Was Alive

The main army was four days away at the river confluence when word arrived that Alexander was dead. A letter came saying he lived. **They did not believe it.** They assumed the generals had forged it to hold the army together — and they were terrified: leaderless, in a hostile country, five thousand kilometres from home, with no idea how to get back.

So Alexander, with a hole in his lung, had himself carried to the riverbank and put in a boat to sail down to the camp — **and ordered the awning cut away from the stern so that he could be seen.**

They still did not believe it. Arrian says they supposed “*that Alexander’s corpse was being conveyed on the vessel*” — until he lifted his hand to the crowd. Then a great shout went up, and men wept.

The guards brought a litter to carry him from the boat to his tent. **He refused it and called for his horse.** When they saw him get into the saddle, Arrian says, the whole army clapped so loudly that “*the banks of the river and the groves near them reverberated with the sound.*” Near the tent he got down and **walked**, so they could see him walk. The men crowded in, “*touching his hands, others his knees, others only his clothes*”, and threw garlands and flowers over him.

Afterwards his friends reproached him for fighting in the front rank like a private soldier instead of a general, and he was visibly annoyed at it. Then an **old Boeotian soldier**, whose name nobody bothered to write down, came up and said in a broad country accent:

“Alexander, it is the part of heroes to perform great deeds!”

— and quoted a line of poetry to the effect that **the man who does anything great is fated to suffer for it.** He was the king’s favourite from that day on.

AND THE SURRENDER THAT FOLLOWED

The Oxydracae sent their city leaders, their provincial governors and 150 of their most notable men with full powers to make a treaty. Their explanation for not submitting earlier is one of the proudest statements in ancient literature: they had held out because “*they excelled other races in the desire to be free and independent*” — and **their freedom had been secure “from the time Dionysus came into India until Alexander came.”**

Alexander demanded a thousand of their best men as hostages. They sent “*the thousand best and tallest men*” — and, without being asked, **500 chariots with charioteers.** He returned the hostages and kept the chariots.

Seven Years, and Then Nothing CERTAIN

Alexander went on down the Indus, fought his way through Sindh, sent his fleet home along the coast under Nearchus, and marched the army through the Gedrosian desert — where he lost more people than in any battle of his life, most of them soldiers' wives, children and camp followers. He died at Babylon in June 323 BCE, aged 32.

Now watch what happened to his Indian conquest.

326 BCE	The satrap west of the Indus — probably Nicanor , though Arrian does not name him — is killed in a revolt in Swat , while Alexander is still in India.
325 BCE	Philip , the satrap of the Punjab, is murdered by his own mercenaries . Alexander writes to Ambhi and to a garrison commander named Eudemus telling them to hold the province <i>“until I send a satrap.”</i> No satrap is ever sent.
323 BCE	Alexander dies at Babylon. His generals confirm the existing arrangements in India because none of them can reach it.
c. 322–319	Chandragupta Maurya overthrows the Nandas and takes Magadha — the very empire Alexander's army refused to face.
c. 318–317	Eudemus murders Porus and seizes his elephants.
316 BCE	Eudemus marches west with 120 of Porus's elephants to join a war in Iran, loses, and is executed. The last Macedonian troops leave. Greek rule east of the Hindu Kush is over.
c. 317–305	Chandragupta takes the Punjab — annexing everything Alexander's satraps had held.
305–303 BCE	Seleucus tries to take it back and fails. He gives up Arachosia, Gedrosia and the Paropamisadae — the whole Afghan and Punjab frontier — and receives 500 war elephants and a marriage alliance in exchange.

Alexander's conquests east of the Indus lasted about seven years, and no surviving source describes a single battle in which the Macedonians lost them. They simply walked away, and Chandragupta walked in. Twenty years after the Hydaspes, a Macedonian king came back to reclaim the ground and had to buy his way out of the attempt with four provinces.

THE STORY WORTH REMEMBERING — AND A CORRECTION

The Printer's Mistake That Created a Famous Story

You will read almost everywhere that **young Chandragupta Maurya met Alexander, insulted him, and had to run for his life.** Half of that story is a typing error.

Here is what the ancient sources actually say.

Plutarch says only this: *“Androcottus, when he was a stripling, saw Alexander himself”* — and later remarked that Alexander *“narrowly missed making himself master of the country,”* because the reigning Nanda king *“was hated and despised for the baseness of his origin.”* That is a vague claim about having seen Alexander. It is chronologically possible and completely unverifiable.

Justin is where the dramatic version comes from. Early printed editions of Justin read that Sandrocottus gave offence to *“Alexandrum”* and fled for his life. That looked like independent confirmation, and the story took off.

But the manuscripts do not say “Alexandrum.” They say “Nandrum” — the Nanda king. The German scholar Alfred von Gutschmid established the correct reading in the 19th century, McCrindle printed it in 1893, and Thomas Trautmann had to re-establish the point in 1971 against historians who had quietly revived the misprint. Chandragupta offended **Dhana Nanda**, was condemned to death by *him*, and fled from *him*.

A famous scene in Indian history rests on a 16th-century typo.

And yet the underlying point survives, and it is a sharp one. Alexander’s army stopped at the Beas partly out of fear of 200,000 Nanda infantry and thousands of elephants. Within five years, a young Indian adventurer overthrew that same army — using the very unpopularity of its king that Alexander’s own informants had described to him at the riverbank. **The Nandas were beatable. Alexander was told so. He just could not get his men across the river to find out.**

The Whole Chapter on One Page

c. 545–530 BCE	Cyrus the Great comes east. The trans-Indus peoples begin paying tribute. No battle is recorded. Won by Persia — probably.
c. 519–516 BCE	Scylax sails down the Indus on Darius's orders. Thirty months of survey.
c. 515 BCE	Darius annexes the Indus. It becomes the empire's richest province, paying about a third of all imperial revenue. Won by Darius I.
480–479 BCE	Punjab's soldiers march into Europe. They help burn Athens and fight at Plataea. Won by the Greeks.
331 BCE	Gaugamela. Indian troops and 15 elephants in the last Persian army. Won by Alexander.
327–326 BCE	The mountain war. Aspasioi, Massaga, the massacre of the 7,000, Queen Cleophis. Won by Alexander.
spring 326 BCE	The Rock of Aornos — taken by filling a ravine. Won by Alexander.
May 326 BCE	The Battle of the Hydaspes. The Jhelum, in a storm, against 200 elephants. Won by Alexander — who then restored Porus.
326 BCE	Sangala. The Kathaioi's fort of wagons. The city is razed. Won by Alexander.
July 326 BCE	The Beas. The army refuses to go further. Twelve altars and a camp built for giants. Won by Alexander's own soldiers.
326–325 BCE	The Mallian war. The great alliance splits; Alexander leaps alone into a citadel and takes an arrow through the lung. Won by Alexander.
316 BCE	The last Macedonian troops leave Punjab. Won by nobody — they simply walked away.
c. 317–305 BCE	Chandragupta Maurya takes the Punjab. <i>Part Three begins here.</i>

Five patterns to carry into Part Three

1. **The coalition problem, again.** In Part One, ten kings lost to one on the Ravi. Here, the Malavas and Kshudrakas bound themselves together with ten thousand marriages and then *could not decide who would command*. Alexander destroyed the largest alliance Punjab ever assembled without it ever fighting as one. This is the single most reliable pattern in Punjab's military history, and it will decide Panipat, Chillianwala and Sobraon.
2. **Somebody always invites the invader in.** Ambhi of Taxila did not lose to Alexander; he *hired* him, to solve a quarrel with his neighbour Porus. That decision opened the door to the whole campaign. You will meet Ambhi

again under different names — Jaichand, Adina Beg, and others — for the next two thousand years.

3. **Rivers decide everything.** Part One's great battle was won by breaking a dyke. Part Two's is won by a night crossing in a thunderstorm. The five rivers are not scenery in this book; they are the main tactical fact of the entire region.
4. **Punjab is where the momentum runs out.** Alexander conquered from Greece to the Indus without ever being stopped. He was stopped on the Beas. Not by an army — by distance, weather, exhaustion and the plain refusal of tired men. The same thing will happen to invader after invader.
5. **Conquering Punjab is easy. Holding it is not.** Persia held it for two centuries by taxing lightly and interfering little. Alexander held it for seven years by force and lost every satrap he appointed. That difference is worth remembering every time an empire in this book marches in.

COMING NEXT — PART THREE

Mauryas, Greeks, Sakas, Parthians and Kushans, 322 BCE – 250 CE. Chandragupta and Chanakya throw the Macedonian garrisons out of Punjab and build India's first empire on top of them. Seleucus tries to take it back and trades four provinces for five hundred elephants. Then the Greeks come back the other way under Demetrius and Menander, and after them the Sakas, the Parthians and the Kushans — four foreign dynasties in four centuries, all of them ruling Punjab, all of them eventually becoming Indian. And at the end of it, the armed republics of the five rivers rise up and throw the greatest of them out.

Words Used in This Part

Achaemenid

The name of the Persian imperial dynasty founded by Cyrus the Great, ruling from about 550 to 330 BCE.

Satrap / satrapy

A Persian provincial governor, and the province he governed. Roughly equivalent to a viceroy.

Gandara / Gandhara

The Persian and Indian name for the country around Peshawar and Taxila.

Hindush

The Old Persian name for the Indus province — from the same root that gives us *Hindu*, *India* and *Sindh*. It began as a river name.

Sattagydia

A Persian province of the north-west, probably around Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan. It vanishes from the records after about 480 BCE and nobody knows why.

Behistun inscription

A vast trilingual text carved into a cliff in Iran around 520 BCE on Darius I's orders. It is the single most important document for dating the Persian conquest.

Talent

An ancient unit of weight, roughly 26 kilograms. Used for measuring tribute in silver or gold.

Hydaspes, Acesines, Hydraotes, Hyphasis

The Greek names for the **Jhelum**, **Chenab**, **Ravi** and **Beas**. You will see them constantly in Greek sources.

Phalanx

The Macedonian heavy infantry formation — a dense block of men carrying pikes, fighting as a single body.

Sarissa

The Macedonian pike, 15 to 18 feet long. Held in both hands, it out-reached every hand weapon in the world at the time.

Hypaspists

Alexander's elite infantry guard — lighter and faster than the phalanx, used for assaults and difficult ground.

Companion cavalry

The Macedonian heavy cavalry, Alexander's personal strike force and the arm he usually led himself.

Agrianians

Light infantry javelin troops from the Balkans, used by Alexander for mountain and skirmishing work.

Mahout

An elephant driver. In battle, killing the mahout was the fastest way to neutralise the elephant — and often to turn it against its own side.

Laager

A defensive ring made of wagons. The Kathaioi used three of them at Sangala.

Stade / stadion

A Greek unit of distance, roughly 180 metres. Ancient distances in this chapter are usually given in these.

The vulgate

The historians' name for the Alexander tradition that runs through Diodorus, Curtius and Justin — all downstream of a writer called Clitarchus, who was not present and wrote to thrill. Arrian, drawing on eyewitnesses, is generally the better source, but not always.

Kharoshthi

The script of ancient Gandhara, clearly derived from the Aramaic used by Persian administrators. Uniquely among Indian scripts, it runs right to left. It is the Persian Empire's most lasting gift to Punjab.

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A NOTE ON DISAGREEMENT

The main open questions in this part are: whether Cyrus ever campaigned east of Afghanistan at all; where Caspatyrus was and whether Scylax's voyage happened as described; whether Alexander's massacre at Massaga was premeditated or a response to a broken truce; the true casualty figures at the Hydaspes and Sangala; where Sangala actually was; and whether the events on the Beas should be called a mutiny. Where scholars differ, this part follows the mainstream reading and says so.

And one thing to keep in mind on every page. Every word we have about Alexander in Punjab was written by his own side — mostly by officers who served him, and by Roman-era writers copying them. Not one line survives from an Indian who watched him come. When you read that 17,000 died at Sangala, or that 70,000 were carried off, remember who is counting.