

**Reconsiderin Alexander’s Campain East of the Jhelam :Geography,  
Archaeology and the Limits of Macedonian  
Authority**

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***Abstract:**The Battle of the Hydaspes (326 BCE) is commonly described in Greek historiography as a decisive victory that secured Macedonian dominance in the Punjab. This article re-examines that interpretation by placing classical narratives alongside regional geography and archaeological evidence. It argues that once the campaign narrative moves east of the Hydaspes (modern Jhelum), the surviving sources display increasing uncertainty in river identification, routes of movement, casualty figures, and descriptions of political authority. These textual inconsistencies correspond with a clear archaeological imbalance. While Gandhara and Taxila have yielded substantial evidence of Macedonian and later Hellenistic presence, no securely identifiable remains east of the Hydaspes can be attributed to Alexander’s campaign. Even locations traditionally associated with the expedition, such as Boukephala, remain archaeologically unconfirmed. The article further reassesses Alexander’s withdrawal and the renewed eastward movement during the return campaign, suggesting that Macedonian authority east of the Hydaspes was limited, situational, and politically constrained rather than institutional. The Hydaspes thus emerges as the practical eastern limit of sustained Macedonian control in South Asia.*

***Keywords:** Alexander the Great, Battle of Hydaspes, Porus, Punjab, Taxila etc.*

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**Introduction**

Alexander III of Macedon (356–323 BCE), commonly known as Alexander the Great, occupies a central position in ancient history because of the unprecedented geographical scope of his campaigns. Between 334 and 323 BCE, he dismantled the Achaemenid Persian Empire and extended Macedonian military operations from the eastern Mediterranean across Anatolia, the Levant, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Iran, and into Central and South Asia.<sup>1</sup> Greek and later European historiography has traditionally portrayed

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Alexander as an undefeated commander and an exceptional military genius, an image shaped largely by Greco-Roman literary traditions composed in the centuries following his death.<sup>2</sup>

Alexander's Asian expedition began with the crossing of the Hellespont in 334 BCE and reached its easternmost extent with the invasion of the Indian subcontinent in 326 BCE. Ancient authors suggest that this advance was motivated not only by strategic considerations but also by Greek cosmological ideas that placed India near the eastern edge of the inhabited world (oikoumene).<sup>3</sup> Yet Greek knowledge of India before Alexander was limited and often speculative, derived from earlier travelers' accounts, Persian imperial information, and indirect reports transmitted through the Achaemenid world.<sup>4</sup> These limitations complicate the interpretation of the Indian campaign as presented in the surviving sources.

In the early phase of the Indian expedition, Macedonian forces encountered a political landscape in which several regional rulers opted for alliance rather than resistance. The cooperation of Ambhi (Taxiles) of Taxila provided Alexander with logistical support and a base of operations in the northwestern subcontinent.<sup>5</sup> While ancient narratives describe this period as one of rapid advance and consolidation, modern historians have emphasized that Macedonian authority in these regions was provisional and dependent upon negotiated political arrangements.<sup>6</sup>

The most significant military confrontation of the campaign occurred at the river Hydaspes (modern Jhelum), where Alexander faced King Porus of the Punjab. The Battle of the Hydaspes (326 BCE) is described in the surviving accounts of Arrian, Curtius Rufus, Diodorus Siculus, Plutarch, and Justin, all of whom rely on earlier, now-lost sources.<sup>7</sup> Although these narratives agree on the outcome of the battle, they differ considerably in their accounts of troop deployments, casualty figures, tactics, and political consequences.<sup>8</sup> Despite these discrepancies, the battle has been widely treated as the decisive engagement that secured Macedonian dominance in the region.<sup>9</sup>

Alexander's Indian campaign unfolded within the complex geography of the Punjab, a region defined by a dynamic river system that includes the Hydaspes (Jhelum), Acesines (Chenab), Hydraotes (Ravi), and Hyphasis (Beas). Ancient authors frequently refer to these rivers as markers of movement and strategic decision-making, yet their accounts often reveal uncertainty in river identification and spatial sequencing, particularly east of the Jhelum.<sup>10</sup> Modern scholarship has highlighted the difficulties involved in correlating Greek river nomenclature with South Asian geography and has drawn attention to the limitations of ancient cartographic knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

Archaeological evidence provides an additional perspective on Alexander's presence in the region. West of the Jhelum, particularly in Gandhara and Taxila, substantial material evidence confirms Macedonian and later Hellenistic activity,

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including urban remains, coinage, architectural features, and cultural layers dating from the late fourth century BCE onward.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, archaeological investigations in eastern Punjab have not produced comparable material remains that can be securely attributed to Alexander’s campaign or to a sustained Macedonian administrative presence.<sup>13</sup> Scholars have therefore stressed the importance of integrating archaeological data with literary and geographical evidence when assessing the extent and character of Macedonian activity in the Indian subcontinent.<sup>14</sup>

Given the reliance on later literary traditions, the geographical complexity of the Punjab, and the uneven archaeological record, the events surrounding and following the Battle of the Hydaspes merit renewed examination. This study reassesses Alexander’s campaign east of the Jhelum through a combined analysis of classical historical texts, regional geography, and archaeological evidence, in order to evaluate the nature and limits of Macedonian authority in South Asia.<sup>15</sup>

## **I**

Classical historians Arrian, Curtius Rufus, Diodorus Siculus, Plutarch, and Justin broadly agree that King Porus was defeated at the Battle of the Hydaspes and subsequently restored to his kingship. Following this encounter, the Macedonian army is described as advancing eastward into the Punjab, encountering resistance at Sangala beyond the Hydraotes, and eventually reaching the Hyphasis (Beas), where the troops refused to proceed further. Ancient authors attribute this refusal to exhaustion, prolonged campaigning, and reports of powerful kingdoms farther east, particularly the Nanda Empire.

After this refusal, Alexander is said to have reversed his eastward advance and begun his withdrawal. From the banks of the Hydaspes, the army turned south and proceeded along the course of the river. At the junction of the Hydaspes and the Acesines, however, the sources record a renewed eastward movement involving campaigns against the Siboi and the Malloi near the Hydraotes, before the army finally turned through the Indus river system toward the ocean. This sequence advance, refusal, withdrawal, renewed advance, and riverine return forms the basis of conventional reconstructions of Alexander’s Indian campaign. Closer examination, however, reveals significant contradictions that complicate this narrative.

## **Boukephala**

Ancient authors disagree on the location of Boukephala. Plutarch places it on the eastern bank of the Hydaspes, while Strabo, Arrian, and Diodorus Siculus locate it on the western bank, indicating an early divergence within the classical tradition.<sup>16</sup> Despite its

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prominence in the narratives, Boukephala remains archaeologically unidentified. No excavated site can be securely associated with a Macedonian foundation dating to 326 BCE.<sup>17</sup>

Proposed locations along the west bank of the Jhelum, particularly near modern Jhelum city, rely primarily on textual interpretation rather than material evidence. Early reconstructions by Alexander Cunningham were based on distance calculations preserved in Greek sources, but these proposals lack confirmation from inscriptions, coinage, fortifications, or urban remains datable to Alexander’s campaign.<sup>18 19</sup> This absence contrasts sharply with the archaeological record of Taxila and the wider Gandhara region, where Hellenistic and Indo-Greek material culture is well documented.<sup>20</sup> The available evidence suggests that Boukephala, if founded at all, was likely short-lived or symbolic rather than a durable administrative center.<sup>21</sup>

### **Sangala And The Eastern Campaign**

The problem of Sangala further illustrates geographical instability in the eastern campaign narrative. Arrian places Sangala east of the Hydraotes, whereas reconstructions by Cunningham, Bimala Churn Law, and Max Müller situate it to the west, based on regional geography.<sup>22</sup> This discrepancy raises doubts about the spatial coherence of the campaign as transmitted by the literary tradition.

Uncertainty is also evident in casualty figures. Only Arrian and Curtius Rufus provide numerical estimates, and these differ substantially, while other authors omit figures altogether.<sup>23</sup> Such variation limits the reliability of quantitative claims and suggests that later historians were working with fragmentary or inconsistent source material.

Descriptions of regions beyond the Hyphasis diverge even more sharply. Curtius Rufus portrays arid and inhospitable terrain, whereas Arrian describes fertile and densely populated lands.<sup>24</sup> Similar disagreement surrounds the eastern limit of Alexander’s advance. Arrian and Justin place it at the Hyphasis, Curtius Rufus and Diodorus Siculus suggest the Sutlej, and Plutarch associates the ultimate limit with the Ganges.<sup>25</sup> Confusion is compounded by uncertainty in identifying the Hyphasis itself, which Arrian at times appears to associate with the Hydraotes, further blurring the river system of the Punjab.<sup>26</sup>

### **Operational Uncertainties And Narrative Instability**

Geographical uncertainty extends to key operational details. Curtius Rufus reports the death of Coenus near the Acesines, while Arrian places it at the Hydaspes.<sup>27</sup> The point of embarkation for the return voyage also varies among the sources: Curtius Rufus, Justin, and Diodorus Siculus name the Acesines, whereas Arrian names the Hydaspes.<sup>28</sup> These

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inconsistencies reflect broader tendencies toward exaggeration and imprecision in Greek descriptions of India. Bunbury’s critique of inflated figures for cities and tribes highlights the limited reliability of transmitted geographical knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

The tradition of Alexander’s Altars further illustrates this instability. Arrian describes twelve monumental altars near the Hyphasis, yet other authors express skepticism or provide vague references. No archaeological evidence supports the existence of such monuments east of the Jhelum. In the absence of material confirmation, the altars are best understood as symbolic markers within the narrative rather than securely attested constructions.<sup>30</sup>

### **Was The Hydaspes A Political Boundary?**

If Alexander had secured unrestricted and sustained control east of the Hyphasis, it would be reasonable to expect that the river corridor representing the shortest route would have been used for the return march. Instead, the classical accounts describe Alexander abandoning the Beas axis and retracing his route westward to the Hydaspes before proceeding south. This strategic choice assumes greater significance when considered alongside hesitation at the Hyphasis and the absence of archaeological evidence for prolonged Macedonian activity east of the Jhelum.

Archaeological investigations have not produced confirmation of sustained Macedonian presence, administrative organization, or urban foundations beyond the river, nor do the geographical descriptions of ancient authors provide a coherent picture of secure movement in the region. These patterns are consistent with the interpretation that the Hydaspes functioned as a practical limit to effective Macedonian control. This does not imply that Alexander was unable to cross the river or operate temporarily east of it; rather, it suggests that his freedom of movement and capacity for sustained control were constrained, possibly by the continued political authority of Porus or by logistical and administrative limitations.

### **Renewed Eastward Movement And Archaeological Asymmetry**

The renewed eastward movement at the junction of the Hydaspes and Acesines presents a further puzzle. After refusing to advance beyond the Hyphasis, the army altered its course and moved eastward again toward the Hydraotes, rather than continuing its southward withdrawal. This deviation is difficult to reconcile with explanations based solely on exhaustion or fear of stronger eastern powers. Its occurrence near the apparent southern

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boundary of Porus's territory raises the possibility that Macedonian access east of the Hydaspes was politically constrained and that passage through Porus's domain may not have been freely available.

A clear asymmetry characterizes the archaeological and geographical evidence. West of the Jhelum, archaeological remains at Taxila and across Gandhara confirm sustained Macedonian and later Hellenistic presence, and the geography aligns closely with classical itineraries.<sup>31–33</sup> East of the river, no securely identified Macedonian cities, administrative centers, or inscriptions datable to Alexander's campaign have been discovered. Proposed sites for Boukephala or the altars rely almost entirely on literary reconstruction, while ancient descriptions of the region remain confused and inconsistent.<sup>34 35</sup>

Taken together, the literary contradictions and the archaeological imbalance support the interpretation that the Hydaspes, rather than the Hyphasis, marked the effective eastern limit of sustained Macedonian control in the Indian subcontinent.

## Conclusion

A reassessment of Alexander's campaign east of the Jhelum (Hydaspes), grounded in a combined analysis of Greek literary traditions, regional geography, and archaeological evidence, calls into question the conventional portrayal of the Battle of the Hydaspes as a decisive and transformative act of Macedonian conquest. While the classical sources uniformly present Alexander as victorious in battle, closer scrutiny reveals significant limitations in the extent, coherence, and durability of Macedonian authority beyond the river.

First, the literary tradition becomes increasingly unstable once the narrative moves east of the Jhelum. Disagreements over river identification, routes of movement, casualty figures, and descriptions of terrain particularly in relation to the Hydraotes and Hyphasis suggest uncertainty, compression, and retrospective reconstruction rather than precise geographical knowledge. These inconsistencies contrast sharply with the relative clarity of accounts west of the Jhelum and undermine confidence in claims of sustained or systematic Macedonian control in eastern Punjab.

Second, the political settlement following the battle with Porus does not conform to a model of decisive imperial subjugation. Although Porus is described as defeated, he retained his kingship and, according to several accounts, received additional territory. Such arrangements are more consistent with a negotiated accommodation or a constrained political relationship than with direct incorporation into the Macedonian imperial system. The continued prominence of Porus within the narrative further suggests

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that Macedonian authority in the region depended upon local political structures rather than replacing them.

Third, the archaeological record reinforces this interpretation. West of the Jhelum, particularly in Gandhara and Taxila, substantial material evidence attests to Macedonian and later Hellenistic presence, including urban remains, coinage, and administrative activity. East of the river, however, no securely identifiable archaeological remains cities, fortifications, inscriptions, or administrative installations—can be attributed to Alexander’s campaign. While absence of evidence cannot in itself constitute proof of absence, the stark asymmetry between the two regions strongly suggests that Macedonian activity east of the Jhelum was limited in duration, scope, or institutional depth.

Finally, Alexander’s strategic choices during withdrawal further illuminate the constraints under which his army operated. The abandonment of the Hyphasis corridor in favor of a longer and more complex return via the Hydaspes, combined with the renewed but hazardous eastward movement toward the Hydraotes, is difficult to reconcile with assumptions of unrestricted access and secure dominance beyond the Jhelum. These movements are more plausibly interpreted as responses to political, logistical, or military constraints rather than as actions taken from a position of unchallenged authority.

Taken together, the cumulative weight of literary inconsistencies, geographical ambiguities, archaeological silence, and strategic anomalies supports the conclusion that the Hydaspes, rather than the Hyphasis, marked the effective eastern limit of sustained Macedonian authority in the Indian subcontinent. The Battle of the Hydaspes is therefore best understood not as a decisive conquest resulting in durable imperial control, but as an encounter that exposed the practical limits of Alexander’s eastern expansion. Recognizing these limits not only clarifies the internal contradictions of the classical narratives but also underscores the necessity of integrating textual, geographical, and archaeological evidence when assessing the historical realities of Alexander’s campaign in South Asia.

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