

Coercive Diplomacy and the Battle at Hydaspes

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Abstract

A study of the battle at Hydaspes in 326 B.C. between Alexander the Great and Porus the Indian King suggests that Alexander had expected his fame and reputation to prevent the battle. This expectation is commonly associated with “coercive diplomacy” which was used in that period of time. This is obvious by the initial envoy dispatched to meet with Porus and the conversation between the two leaders after the battle according to Curtius.

Coercive Diplomacy and the Battle at Hydaspes.

“Treat me as a King ought.” “For my part, your request shall be granted.”¹ This exchange between two great leaders is the essence of ancient diplomacy. The statements alone show a strong sense of mutual admiration and respect. Alexander the Great, upon defeating Porus at the battle at Hydaspes, asked Porus how he wanted to be treated. Porus asked for nothing more than to be treated as he was, a king. This was despite the fact that a diplomatic solution was first attempted before the battle and lives were lost. Alexander granted Porus his wish and a mutual respect between the two men was forged, “The dignity of these words gave Alexander even more pleasure, and he restored to Porus his sovereignty over his subjects, adding to his realm other territory of even greater extent. Thus he did indeed use a brave man as a king ought, and from that time forward found him in every way a loyal friend.”²

In searching the indexes of books about Alexander the Great, the term “diplomat” or “diplomacy” is in most cases absent. Does this mean that Alexander was not considered a diplomat? Although he did conquer many countries and territories, Alexander did exercise diplomacy as it was practiced during that time period. During the course of his reign, his reputation and fame caused many confrontations to come to a peaceful end before a battle was even fought. A study of several conflicts between Alexander and his many adversaries suggests that he had an expectation that his reputation would coerce others into surrendering. Alexander started early in his career to build a reputation of diplomacy but also of being a brutal military force against those who opposed him. Three primary conflicts highlight Alexander's desire to enact coercive diplomacy in order to prevent an armed conflict: the destruction of Thebes, the

1 Arrian. *The Campaigns of Alexander*. Trans Aubrey de Selincourt. London: Penguin Classics, 1971. p 281.

2 Arrian. 281.

siege at Tyre, and the battle of Hydaspes.

As a note, this paper draws from several different biographers each of which has a slightly different history. An attempt is made to present the different histories accurately and in chronological order. The primary biographers referenced are Arrian, Quintus Curtius Rufus, Justin, and the *Metz Epitome*. It is believed by many that the account by Arrian is the most reliable for the events during and proceeding the battle of Hydaspes, however a study of each history is important.³ One modern biography is also referenced, however, it is based on a compilation of the original biographies.

The concept of diplomacy in ancient Greece in the third and fourth centuries B.C. was based in part on “coercive diplomacy.” It was common practice that the strongest side would frighten the weaker side into agreeing to terms without a battle taking place. The aggressors reputation or size of army would be made known to the enemy in an attempt to gain submission. The difference between using brute force and coercive diplomacy is that diplomacy attempts to initiate voluntary behavior resulting in agreeing to terms.⁴

The majority of studies regarding Greek diplomacy deal with embassies sent between Greek cities. Studies have been done to determine the size of these embassies and how their size would differ based on their purpose. For instance, a study by Derek Mosley indicates that delegations between Greek states during this time period typically consisted of two, three, five, or ten men. However, no state adhered to any standard.⁵ The records indicate that this practice of sending embassies was practiced by Alexander while dealing with other countries. Although

3 Hamilton, J.R. “The Cavalry Battle at the Hydaspes.” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*. 76 (1956). p26.

4 Missiou-Ladi, Anna. “Coercive Diplomacy in Greek Interstate Relations.” *The Classical Quarterly*. New Series, 37.2 (1987). p337.

5 Mosley, Derek. “The Size of Embassies in Ancient Greek Diplomacy.” *Transactions and Proceedings for the American Philological Association*. 96 (1965). p255.

there are no numbers specified in the size of the embassies while dealing with the Indian rulers, it is clear that envoys were dispatched.

The histories of Alexander show that he expected his reputation to precede him and force his adversaries to come to terms without a battle being fought since early in his career as ruler. Alexander started to develop his reputation early after taking the throne. As will be suggested by Plutarch, he intentionally built his reputation as being heavy handed so as to force future enemies into submission by his mere reputation.

One of the earliest conflicts of Alexander's reign was between Alexander and the Thebans in 335 B.C. "Certain persons" within Thebes asked several exiles to enter the city under the cover of darkness. These men incited a revolt enhancing it by suggesting that Alexander had died:

They then presented themselves in the Assembly and incited the Thebans to rebel against Alexander... made their appeal more attractive to the Thebans in general by insisting that Alexander had died in Illyria.⁶

The news of this revolt immediately spread and when Alexander was apprised of it, he was deeply concerned and started to march on Thebes.

Alexander gave the Thebans several opportunities to stand down. "He halted by the enclosure of Iolaus, waiting there in order to give the Thebans time to think things over..."⁷ The next day, Alexander moved closer to Thebes, but once again held position:

Here, still refraining from an assault upon the city's defenses, he took up a position not far from Cadmeia, to provide support for the Macedonians who were holding it.... Alexander, however, made no move, but continued to wait; for he

6 Arrian 54-55.

7 Arrian 56.

still hoped to remain on terms with the Thebans and to avoid action against them.⁸

It is obvious that he is hoping for a diplomatic solution to this conflict. Whether he is expecting the Thebans to step down due to his reputation or simply to come to reason is unclear.

Plutarch actually suggests that Alexander used the Theban revolt to set the stage for future coercion with other Greek territories hoping to gain the submission of Greece. According to Plutarch, when Alexander came to Thebes after the rebellion, he offered to accept the Theban's repentance. However, he asked for two people to be handed over to him, Phoenix and Prothytes whom are believed to have started the revolt. The Thebans in return demanded two of Alexander's men and all of those that pledged liberty to Greece. Alexander immediately attacked the Thebans and razed the city.

When he came to Thebes, to show how willing he was to accept of their repentance for what was past, he only demanded of them Phoenix and Prothytes, the authors of the rebellion, and proclaimed a general pardon to those who would come over to him. But when the Thebans merely retorted by demanding Philotas and Antipater to be delivered into their hands, and by a proclamation on their part invited all who would assert the liberty of Greece to come over to them, he presently applied himself to make them feel the last extremities of war.⁹

Plutarch puts the number of those executed at six thousand and some thirty thousand sold as slaves.¹⁰ Plutarch states that Alexander had hoped that what he did to the Thebans would spread and force Greece into obedience: "Alexander's hope being that so severe an example might terrify the rest of Greece into obedience..."¹¹. Alexander was setting the stage for the future use

8 Arrian 56 - 57.

9 Plutarch 13.

10 Plutarch 13.

11 Plutarch 13.

of coercion. He was hoping that his reputation would precede him as being diplomatic and extending a hand of mercy, but if that failed, then his wrath could be deadly. This would force submission.

Another account of the Theban conflict by Justinus, although short, confirms Alexander's initial attempt to spare the Thebans:

He then directed his march towards Thebes, intending to show similar indulgence, if he found similar penitence. But the Thebans had recourse, not to prayers or intreaties, but to arms, and, being conquered, suffered the severest hardships of the most wretched state of subjugation.¹²

The accounts of Arrian, Plutarch, and Justinus bring to light different aspects of the conflict between Alexander and the Theban's. However, the one thing that remains constant is the fact that Alexander did attempt diplomacy initially, but failed. The history according to Plutarch suggests that Alexander had hoped that his punishment of the Thebans would coerce the other Greek states into submission. It is not clear however that Alexander expected his reputation to prevent the attack on Thebes and quell the revolt. Plutarch's account possibly eludes to that conclusion, but it is not for certain.

Another example of Alexander's expectation of submission is at the siege of Tyre in 332 B.C. Tyre was a very strategic location and Alexander felt it was important to control it or destroy it. This is evident during a speech he gives to his men:

Friends and fellow soldiers, I do not see how we can safely advance upon Egypt, so long as Persia controls the sea; and to pursue Darius with the neutral city of Tyre in our rear and Egypt and Cyprus still in enemy hands would be a serious

12 Justinus, Marcus. *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus*. Trans. Rev. John Watson. London: Henry G. Bohn, York Street, Covenant Garden, 1853.

<<http://ancienthistory.about.com/b/2006/02/25/trogus.htm>>. Book 11, Chapter 3, Verse 6.

risk...¹³

Alexander expected Tyre to submit to his wishes because an emissaries were dispatched out to meet him. He was met by representatives of the town who stated that they had determined to surrender to Alexander: "...was met on the way by representatives from the town, who had been sent by it's government to say that they had determined to abide by any instructions..."¹⁴ This pleased Alexander and he stated that he wished to enter the town and make sacrifice to Heracles. The representatives returned to the town and later returned to Alexander and told him that they were willing to comply with Alexander's wishes except for one thing:

In general they were willing enough to accede to Alexander's wishes, but there was one thing which they firmly refused to do – and that was to admit any Persian or Macedonian within the walls of the town. This, they felt, was not only the most dignified attitude at the present juncture, but would also be the most likely to ensure their future safety, as the outcome of the war was not yet by any means assured."¹⁵

The Tyrians wanted to remain neutral between the Persians and Macedonians and not take sides until the outcome of the war was determined. They were concerned that by allowing Alexander to sacrifice in the temple it "it would have signified their acceptance of Alexander's sovereignty."¹⁶

¹⁶ They did not have an issue with him sacrificing on the mainland. This was reported to Alexander who was very angry and dismissed the envoys at once.¹⁷ It is clear from his reaction that he expected to gain submission from the Tyrians.

Curtius' account of the attempt at diplomacy in Tyre is different. Curtius states that

¹³ Arrian 131.

¹⁴ Arrian 129.

¹⁵ Arrian 129.

¹⁶ Rogers, Guy. *Alexander: The Ambiguity of Greatness*. New York: Random House, 2004. p81.

¹⁷ Arrian 131.

Alexander sent emissaries to the Tyrians but that they killed them and tossed the bodies into the sea: "...he sent heralds to urge the Tyrians to accept peace terms; but the latter, violating international conventions, killed them and threw their bodies into the sea."¹⁸ This account indicates that the Tyrians had no desire at all to comply with Alexander's request. Arrian's account at least suggests that Alexander was successful to some degree in coming to a potential diplomatic solution. However, it is obvious that according to Curtius, Alexander does make the attempt at diplomacy and that Alexander expected submission. The price for failing to submit was large for the Tyrians:

Alexander had ordered all but those who had fled to the temples to be put to death and the buildings to be set on fire. Although these orders were made public by heralds, no Tyrian under arms deigned to seek protection from the gods.¹⁹

Alexander's attempt at coercive diplomacy in this instance failed and many Tyrians lost their lives as a result.

The destruction of Thebes was the catalyst for Alexander's desire to build a reputation so as to force submission of future adversaries. Plutarch reports that Alexander had hoped that the destruction of Thebes would force the other Greek states into submission. The siege at Tyre suggests that Alexander did in fact expect submission from the Tyrians. Whether it was due to his reputation or not is not clear, however, Alexander's final major battle against Porus the Indian King at the Hydaspes river is a clear case of Alexander's expectation of submission.

Alexander's trek into India took almost two years, proportionally longer than other campaigns.²⁰ In the spring of 327 B.C., prior to crossing the Indus into India, Alexander had

18 Heckel 147. Curtius.

19 Heckel 152. Curtius.

20 Narrain, A.K. "Alexander and India." *Greece & Rome*. 2nd Ser., 12.2 (Oct 1965). p156.

called on the Indian rulers including a man named Taxiles to meet with him at their convenience. The rulers agreed to the meetings bringing with them gifts from their respective territories as well as offering elephants that they had with them. After the agreements were made with the rulers, Alexander split his army and dispatched them toward the Indus. He gave instructions to take over towns between the Cophen and the Indus river either by force or by agreement and to make ready the Indus for crossing.²¹

Upon Alexander's arrival at the Indus, Taxiles had waiting for Alexander gifts including 200 talents of silver, 3,000 oxen, and 10,000 sheep for sacrifice at the other side of the river. He also provided 700 cavalry for Alexander's army.²² According to the *Metz Epitome*, Taxiles was originally named Mophis. Mophis presented these gifts to Alexander on the other side of the river and had assembled an army. Alexander proceeded to Taxila, one of the largest cities between the Indus and Hydaspes rivers. During a conversation, Alexander asked Mophis why he had assembled an army. Mophis told Alexander that he was ready to do whatever Alexander wished and also that two of his neighbors, Abisares and Porus, were preparing to forge war against him. Alexander thanked Mophis and stated that he should change his name to Taxiles. He gave Taxiles additional lands to rule.²³

Coercive diplomacy appeared to be successful with Taxiles. It is indicated that Alexander sent an embassy to Taxiles prior to his arrival at the Indus, but there is no indication as to the size or composition of the embassy. The fact that he had gifts waiting for Alexander suggests that the discussions were successful. Taxiles was apparently nervous by Alexander's presence because he

21 Arrian 239-240.

22 Rogers, p189

23 Heckel, Waldemar and John Yardley, eds. *Alexander the Great: Historical Texts in Translation*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004. p137. *Metz Epitome*.

continued to shower him with gifts.²⁴ It can be presumed that either Taxiles was aware of Alexander's reputation prior to being approached by the envoy or was happy to have Alexander on his side to fight two of his enemies.

While in Taxila, Alexander dispatched emissaries to Abisares and Porus.²⁵ It would appear, according to Curtius, that Alexander had expected Porus to surrender just as easily as Taxiles: “Believing that Porus could also be pressed into capitulation by the spreading of fame of his name, Alexander sent Cleochares to him to instruct him to pay tribute and meet the king at the point of entry into his territory.”²⁶ This would play into the concept of reputation playing a part in “coercive diplomacy.” This attempt at diplomacy failed. Porus was angered by this and had Cleochares lashed and also passed a letter on to Alexander:

Porus, King of India, has this to say to Alexander: No matter who you are – and I am told that you are a Macedonian – it is better for you to remain at a distance and to reflect upon your own misfortunes rather than envy another... so imbecile, don't give me orders! Just set one foot in my territory with hostile intent and you shall soon learn that I am king of India... I shall do only one thing that you demand – to be ready and waiting for you, in arms, at my borders.²⁷

This angered Alexander and he immediately gathered his army and proceeded to the Hydaspes. Alexander's reaction suggests that he didn't expect this level of resistance, perhaps based on the easy submission of the other Indian rulers.

The time frame for the surrender of Abisares varies among the biographers. The actual timing of the submission is important in determining the effectiveness of the emissaries. Curtius

24 Rogers 189.

25 Bosworth, A.B. *Conquest and Empire: the Reign of Alexander the Great*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988. p126.

26 Heckel 131. Curtius.

27 Heckel 138. *Metz Epitome*.

and the *Metz Epitome* indicate that the submission was made prior to the battle with Porus.²⁸

Curtius suggests that Abisares' envoy came the day after Alexander's arrival at the Hydaspes:

“The next day ambassadors of Abisares came to the king. As they had been instructed, they made a total submission to Alexander and, after pledges had been exchanged, they were sent back to their king.”²⁹ If this is the case, then it would indicate that Alexander's reputation prior to entering India was the main factor for the submission. The other explanation would be that although they were enemies of Taxiles, Abisares realized an alliance had been formed with Taxiles and a larger army now opposed him. Either way, this plays into the role of “coercive diplomacy” as it was forced out of fear or intimidation.

However, according to Arrian, Abisares made two visits, but both appear to have been the same envoy. The first appearance of a visit was prior to Alexander proceeding to the Hydaspes:

“He was also visited by representatives from Abisares, King of the Indian hill-tribes, with his brother and other distinguished personages among them... All of them brought presents.”³⁰

There is no indication of submission during this initial visit, however, the presentation of gifts indicates some sort of respect being shown. However, Arrian states that the surrender of Abisares hadn't taken place until after the battle at Hydaspes: “...Alexander was visited by a delegation from Abisares offering the surrender of himself and his territory, and this in spite of the fact that before the battle on the Hydaspes his intention had been to join Porus. His own brother was among the envoys.”³¹ These two different entries are confusing. The first only indicates that Abisares met with Alexander prior to the battle. Arrian doesn't specify exactly

28 Heckel 131, 138. Curtius, *Metz Epitome*

29 Heckel 131. Curtius.

30 Arrian 266.

31 Arrian 283.

what was agreed to. However, both entries indicate that Abisares' brother was present at both meetings. If this submission was made after the battle, then it was the defeat of Porus that was the determining factor and Alexander's emissaries and his reputation were not effective, but instead it was the witnessing of the power of Alexander that forced the submission in the end. This can still be considered coercive in the sense that after demonstrating his strength, Abisares felt compelled to surrender.

Porus' army was estimated anywhere from twenty thousand to thirty thousand infantry, two thousand cavalry, and about eighty five elephants.³² Because of the fact that horses would not charge elephants, this concerned Alexander although his current army stood at about seventy five thousand.³³ Alexander proceeded to the river and once he arrived, Porus was observed on the other side in a defensive position making good on his promise to meet Alexander in arms.³⁴

The battle of Hydaspes was a great victory and example of Alexander's success as a commander. It is largely considered one of Alexander's most interesting victories. It was the first time Alexander had to cope with elephants.³⁵ It along with Gaugamela are considered by some to be his two masterpieces and Hydaspes his last great victory.³⁶ Once the final battle was over, depending on the historian, Porus had suffered losses between twelve thousand and slightly fewer than twenty three thousand. Alexander had suffered losses of about eighty infantry and about three hundred cavalry.³⁷

At the end of the battle, Porus, realizing that his cavalry had been cut down, did not

32 Heckel 128. Arrian.

33 Rogers 191.

34 Arrian 267.

35 Hamilton 26.

36 Burn, A.R. "The Generalship of Alexander." *Greece & Rome*. 2nd Ser., 12.2 (Oct 1965). p150,154.

37 Heckel 130, 139. Arrian, *Metz Epitome*.

retreat like Darius: "...his behaviour was very different from that of the Persian King Darius: unlike Darius, he did not lead the scramble to save his own skin, but so long as a single unit of his men held together, fought bravely on."³⁸ There are two different stories of the surrender of Porus. Arrian presents the account that after Porus had received a wound to his right shoulder, "Alexander, anxious to save the life of this great and gallant soldier, sent Taxiles the Indian to him... But Taxiles was an old enemy of the Indian King, and Porus turned his elephant and drove at him, to kill him with his lance."³⁹ Taxiles was able to avoid the lance and left the battlefield. Alexander sent several other envoy's out to approach Porus to gain his surrender, but it wasn't until a man named Meroes approached Porus that he listened: "...the last of whom was an Indian named Meroes, a man he been told had long been Porus' friend."⁴⁰ Porus agreed to meet Alexander and proceeded to him. The exchange of words between the two at this stage are very well know. According to Arrian, the conversation was as follows:

Alexander was the first to speak. 'What,' he said, 'do you wish that I should do with you?'

'Treat me as a king ought,' Porus is said to have replied.

'For my part,' said Alexander, pleased by his answer, 'your request shall be granted. But there is not something you would wish for yourself? Ask it.'

'Everything,' said Porus, 'is contained in this one request.'

The dignity of these words gave Alexander even more pleasure, and he restored Porus his sovereignty over his subjects... thus he did indeed us a brave man as a king ought, and from that time forward found him in every way a loyal friend.⁴¹

This account clearly shows Alexanders respect and admiration for Porus. Even though

38 Arrian 280.

39 Arrian 280.

40 Arrian 281.

41 Arrian 281, 282.

diplomacy failed prior to the battle, Alexander clearly saw the importance of keeping Porus alive to rule the territories that were his. It was a diplomatic solution in the end to maintain a respectable man in a position of power which would continue to benefit Alexander.

The other account of the conversation between Alexander and Porus comes from Curtius. One difference in the stories is that the brother of Taxiles had been sent as an envoy to Porus and not Taxiles himself. Porus recognized him and attacked him and “flung at him the one javelin which by chance had not fallen from his hands. It passed through his chest to emerge at the back.”⁴² Alexander demanded no mercy be shown and the battle intensified. Porus slipped from his elephant and ordered the elephant to kneel. All of the other elephants kneeled as they were trained as well and this brought the enemy to the hands of Alexander. Believing Porus dead, Alexander ordered his body stripped, but his elephant defended him and placed Porus back on it's back. After Porus was eventually subdued, Alexander had the following conversation with him:

Then Alexander saw him lift his eyes. Moved by pity, not hatred, he said to him: 'What folly forced you, knowing as you did the fame of my achievements, to try the fortunes of war, when Taxiles served as an example of my clemency towards those who surrender, an example so close to you?'

'Since you ask,' replied Porus, 'I shall answer you with the frankness your inquiry has granted me. I did not think there was anyone stronger than I. Though I knew my own strength, I had not yet tested yours, and now the outcome of the war has shown you to be stronger. Even so, being second to you brings me no little satisfaction.'

...Alexander felt obliged to treat him not only with mercy but with respect
 ...Alexander made him one of his friends and, shortly afterwards, bestowed on him an

42 Heckel 136. Curtius.

empire larger than he had formerly had.⁴³

This account supports several assumptions made in this paper. The idea that Alexander expected his fame to force Porus into submission is verified when Alexander asks Porus “What folly forced you, knowing as you did the fame of my achievements” Alexander had obviously hoped that “coercive diplomacy” would work in this case based on his reputation. The response that Porus gave showed Alexander that Porus was worthy of respect and he made him his friend. In the end, Alexander showed the trait of a true king and diplomat by recognizing the importance of keeping Porus in power over his own territories. This would likely prevent any further conflict in that the citizens would still see their own ruler in power and not feel the desire to fight.

This study of the battle at Hydaspes suggests that Alexander had expected his fame and reputation to prevent the battle, an expectation associated with “coercive diplomacy” which was commonly used in that time period. This is obvious by the initial envoy dispatched to meet with Porus and the conversation between Porus and Alexander after the battle according to Curtius. “Coercive diplomacy” was the common practice during this time period. Diplomacy can save lives and time. Even in today's world, “coercive diplomacy” is a common factor in world conflicts. However, every once in a while, you get small groups or countries that believe they are stronger than their larger aggressor and they choose to fight. It often times results in large numbers of casualties and in the end, the same result is achieved as would have been if they would have submitted in the first place.

43 Heckel 137. Curtius.

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