ALEXANDER'S ROUTE AND STEIN: MASSAGA TO ORA

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Piecing together the past from the evidence of place names, found highly abraded by the gusty winds of time, is an exercise both risky and rewarding. Names may be changed and forgotten, and in unfamiliar hands may be mispronounced and misrecorded. But on the other hand popular names show in general a tendency to persist over longer periods of time than one can imagine and thus become source of light in areas where human memory has failed us altogether. And yet it is this evidence of place names that Sir Aurel Stein heavily depended upon for his delineation of Alexander's route during his Indian campaign. Classical writers do mention the names localities stormed or visited by Alexander, but due to the lapse of a considerable stretch of time, it is difficult now to identify these sites.

Alexander's Indian campaign really started at Nicaea (Victorious City), perhaps near the present Jalālābād in estern Afghānistān, where the army broke up into two divisions. One of these was placed under the joint command of Hephaestion and Perdiccas, two of his trusted generals, and ordered to take the shortest route to the river Indus and make preparation for the army to cross over to the other side (see M'Crindle 1896:59). This division was accompanied by the rājā of Taxila[1] and some other Indian chiefs and reached the Indus without facing any serious problem.

The other division Alexander took under his personal command, and moved along, as Arrian syas, a 'hilly and rough road' that lay along the 'course of the river Khoes' (Majumdar 1960:7). It may be noted that Arrian is not specific about the direction of the movement. Neither is his reference to the road as 'hilly and rough', and that it 'went along the river Khoes', any helpful in determining which way Alexander moved, for, no river now flowing in Afghānistān bears the name Khoes. Now, had Alexander opted, one may say, for a southern route across the Sufed Koh and down into Kohāt, he would have found the road even more 'hilly and rough'. But Strabo's (xv. 697) reference to the northern route has greatly helped in unfolding this riddle. Alexander was told, Strabo remarks, that the northern route is more fertile as compared to the southern one and that it is easier to cross the rivers towards their sources. Alexander therefore decided to take the northern route (M'Crindle 1896:60). Given this certainty and given also the fact that Alexander did not descend into the Peshāwar valley before reducing the hill fortresses of Arigaeum, Massaga, Bazira and Ora[2], our knowledge of topography makes it absolutely clear that the route lays along the Kunaṛ for a considerable distance. On reaching Bajaur it turned east and then across the Panjkhora entered the rich and fertile valley of the river Swāt.

The rivers mentioned on his route are the Khoes[3], khoaspas[4], Euaspla[5] and Guraeus[6]. The river Khoes has been identical with the joint stream formed by the junction of the Alishang and the Alingar which join the Kābul on the left above Jālālābād (M,Crindle 1896: 61). If this is true, then Koaspes and Euaspla must represent the Kunaṛ. It is interesting to note that the first two names begin with the syllable *Kho* – and the third with *Eu* – As *Eu* in Greek means good, *Kho* is evidently a Greek transcription of the word 'good' in the language of the Aspasians, or at any rate in the Iranian usage of that part of the Persian Achaemenian empire (Caroe 1958: 37) The word *Aspes* is definitely related with the Persian *asp* meaning 'horse'. Thus Khoaspes is 'river of the good horse'. The river Guraeus is generally identical with Gauri of the sixth book of the *Mahābhārata* where it is mentioned along with the Suvāstu (Swāt).

The people living in the vast stretch of land between the Kunaṛ and Swāt are called Aspasians, Guraeans and Assakenians. The Aspasians lived in Kunaṛ and Bajaur. Their neighbours in the Panjkhora valley were Guraeans. Beyond them to the east lived the Assakenians. The Aspasians are

mentioned by strabo, in his list of the tribes which occupied the country between the Kophēs (Kābul) and the Indus, as Hippasioi, obviously a Greek transcription of the original Aspasioi (M'Crindle 1896:333). As *asp* in Persian means 'a horse', so does *hippos* in Greek. It seems the Greeks were aware of the literal meaning of this word and found it easier to translate it in their own language. The etymological significance of the words Aspasian and Assakenian is therefore the same. The former reflects the Achaemenian Persian and the latter the Indian way of pronouncing the word for 'horse'. Thus *aspa* (Persian) and *Aśva* (Sanskrit) – both meaning horse – refer to one and the same people known for their superior breed of horses or their own qualities of horsemanship. In the territory under the influence of Persian, they were designated as Aspasians. The area of this influence seems to have terminated at the river Kunaṛ Beyond that the people were known as Aśvakas recorded by classical writers as Assakenians, meaning 'cavaliers'.

Moving along the Kunaṛ, the first city Alexander encountered has not been named by any Greek writer. Arrian mentions in some detail the siege of the city and its reduction saying that Alexander, along with two of his generals named Leonard and Ptolemy, son of Lagus, was wounded in the attempt. Having levelled up the unfortunate city[7], Alexander advanced to the town called Andaka which surrendered on capitulation. Where precisely these cities were located is not known. Leaving behind Krateros to mop up pockets of resistance and to settle the affairs of the district in the best possible way, he advanced to the river Euaspla, where the Aspasian chief lived (Arrian in M'Crindle 1896:62). The capital of this chief was known probably as Gorys[8]. Having learnt about Alexander's movement the inhabitants of the city set fire to their houses and fled to the safety of mountains. Some of them were however spotted and engaged. They fought with utmost determination but the Macedonians succeeded in pushing them off to the mountains.

Alexander then crossed a mountain through apparently the Nāwā pass and descended to a city named Arigaeum. On reaching there he found that the inhabitants had burnt down the place and taken to flight. Leaving Krateros behind to rebuild the city, Alexander advanced to a place where the Aspasians had gathered in great numbers. A sharp conflict ensued in which the Aspasians suffered a defeat. The victors took a heavy toll: 40,000 men were taken prisoners while 230,000 oxen of great beauty and size[9] were captured (M'Crindle 1896:65).

The exact position of Arigaeum is not known. The fact however that from his position in the Kunaṛ valley where he had been operating, Alexander had to cross a mountain, clearly suggests that Arigaeum was located in Bajaur not far from the Nāwā pass the only route of some importance which connects Bajaur with the Kunaṛ valley (M'Crindle 1896:64). Arigaeum itself is therefore generally identified with Nāwagai[10]. Now, the valley in which Nāwagai occupies an important place show numerous ancient sites on the hill slopes and is locally known as Alingār also pronounced Aringār, a name which bears close resemblance with Arigaeum (Lutf-ur-Rahman 1996:7-11). While in Bajaur Alexander had two options. He could turn south and through the present Mohmand Agency reach the Peshāwar valley by the route now marked by the Ghalanai-Shabqadar road, or, turns east and takes the longer but more well-frequented road running through the fertile valleys of Panjkora and Swāt. Most scholars[11] in the past believed that Alexander took the former route and therefore the sites for the towns such as Massaga, Bazira and Ora, which Alexander had yet to conquer after defeating the Aspasians of Bajaur, were looked for in the Peshawar valley. But Sir Aurel Stein, who picks up the story at this point, is in favour of the second route (see Stein 1975:41-43) and in this regard closely follows Arrian who says:

> Alexander himself then proceeded to attack the Assakenians… He passed through the country of the Guraeans, where he had to cross the Guraeus, the river named after that country. The passage was difficult on account of the depth and swiftness of the stream (M'Crindle 1986:65-66)

The river Guraeus has long been firmly identified with the Panjkhora as indicated above. It is this river that Alexander had to cross on his way to Massaga, the scene of his next fight. Once the river is crossed to the east, it must be kept in mind, one is left with no alternative but to pass through the Tālāsh Valley in order to avoid the lower Panjkhora and Swāt gorges, and so cross the Katgala pass into the Adīnzai valley and arrive at the right bank of the river Swāt at Chakdara[12]. There is no other way. The Chakdara crossing had been as important a strategic point in the past as it is at present.

Leaving the Aspasians of Kunaṛ and Bajaur, and the Guraeans of Panjkhora behind, Alexander now entered the territory of the Assakenians as Aśvakas whose chief cities were Massaga, Bazira, and Ora. Stein therefore attempted to identify the sites of these cities in the Swāt rather than the Peshawar valley. The first Aśvakas stronghold on this route was Massaga which in Sanskrit would appear as Māśaka. In the grammar of Pāṇini, a native of Gandhara, in which the Assakneians were comprised, the word Māśakavati occurs as the name of a river and a district (M'Crindle 1896:334-35). Strabo says that it was the capital of the King Assakenos. The exact position of this important town is not known. Stein makes no attempt to locate it saying that it should be somewhere in lower Swāt. Curtius who calls it 'Mozaga' describes the site as:

> Barred on the east by an impetuous mountain stream with steep banks on both sides, while to the south and west nature, as if designing to form a rampart, had piled up gigantic rocks, at the base of which lay sloughs and yawing chasm (Majumdar 1960:109)

Sir Olaf Caroe was inclined to identify this site with Katgala pass between the valleys of Tālāsh and Adīnzai, about 8 miles north of Chakdara on the present road to Dīr (Caroe 1958: 52). The site no doubt shows the ruins of a fort but good enough onlyto accommodate the house of a nobleman rather than the palaces, markets, bazaars and barracks of a city.

Another archaeological site in this area, many times bigger than Katgala is Gumbatūna, meaning 'the domes'. The name is of course recent and was given to the ruins of a great fort because of the existence of some Buddhist stupas. The site is hidden behind Ziārat in the Tālāsh valley in a naturally fortified glen. It is enclosed on the west by Saparūna hill, on the east and north east by Dhob hill and on the south by Tātogai hill. This natural fortification has been strengthened here and there by high stone walls showing late diaper masonry. The north-western side to which entire sub-valley slopes is blocked by a massive stone wall. Connecting his naturally circumvallated area with Ziārat, the nearest village, is a path which runs first through a graveyard then a deep ravine which during rains swells to enormous dimensions. The path is flanked by numerous structural remains now used as embankments for terraced fields. Within this fortified area on the highest point are the remains of a palace showing rows of interconnected rooms. This point is locally known as Stargo Māṇe (the eye-palace). It was here that a fragment of an inscribed marble block showing early Śāradā characters was found by the present writers (see Abdur Rahman 1979: 279). We do not know the ancient and actual name of this site. It, however, answers the description of Curtius in a much better way than Katgala does.

It is not our purpose here to give details of the siege of Massaga. Arrian's description of the scene shows that in spite of their best efforts the Macedonians could not make any headway for the first few days when a chance missile hit the Assakneian chief and killed him. The unnamed Assakenian chief was a man of great valour and vision. Mindful of the Macedonian plunder of Bajaur, he had enrolled a considerable force of mercenaries obviously from other valley of Gandhāra. But his sudden death demoralized his successor who lost heart and decided to sue for peace. The city eventually capitulated on agreed terms. It was agreed that the mercenaries would quarters. They therefore came out of the city and encamped close to the Macedonian army. On a second thought however, Alexander went back on his words and cut the mercenaries to pieces during the night. The next day Alexander stormed the defenseless city and took it without much struggle (M'Crindle

1896: 69). This attack on the city when it had already capitulated on terms, M'Crindle says, admits of no justification. Alexander's slaughter of the mercenaries is condemned by Plutarch as a foul blot on his military fame (Majumdar 1960: 195).

Having occupied Massaga Alexander was convinced that the rest of the Assakenian cities, demoralized as they must have been, would readily submit on his approach. He therefore dispatched two armies: one, under the command of Koinos, to Bazira, and the other, under Attalos, Alketas and Demetrios, to Ora (M'Crindle 1896:69). We do not know where Bazira and Ora were.

Arian's remarks about Bazira that 'it stood upon a lofty eminence' and that 'it was strongly fortified on every side', do not help in fixing its position. But Stein has most convincingly unravelled this mystery by identifying Bazira with Barikot in middle Swāt on the left bank of the Swāt River (Stein 1975: 47). A branch road here shoots off to Kaṛākaṛ pass and leads on to Buner. Restoring the present name Barīkoṭ to Bīr-Koṭ, its original form, Stein remarks[13]:

> This name (i.e., Bīr-Koṭ) preserves in it first part the direct phonetic derivation of the ancient local name which the Greek form Bazira, was intended to transcribe… The Greek letter *Zeta* was commonly used to denote the semivowel *y* and the palatal *j*, two sounds common to Indo-Aryan languages, but not known to Greek alphabet… Thus the gradual phonetic change of the restored indigenous form *Bajira* or *Bayira* into *Baira* and then into *Bir* is fully accounted for.

Stein also refers to the form Beira as given by Curtius to this stronghold in support of his philological interpretation of the name. As to the termination koṭ, he says, that it is very common in the North-West and appears to be a recent addition. In a Śāradā inscription of the 10th century A.D. found in the ruins of an ancient building upon a hill not far from Barīkoṭ, we find the name *Vajirasthān* (Sahni 1938: 298-99) of which the first part *vajira* shows a striking resemblance with *Bajira* or *Bayir.* Is the form *Vajira* as old as *Bajira* or which of the two is older, is difficult to say.

Arrian's narration of events after the fall of Massaga shows that Alexander first set out for Bazira, but then, having come to know that a neighbouring prince named Abisares was trying to send reinforcements to Ora, he changed his mind and reached Ora first. He also instructed Koinus to mask Bazira with a force sufficient to keep the people from undisturbed access to their lands, and join him at Ora.

Once again we are faced with a similar problem as noted above. Where was this Ora situated? Stein draws attention to a ruined stronghold above Uḍigrām, a few miles higher up the Swāt valley above Barīkoṭ, as the probable site (Stein 1975: 60). In the term Uḍigrām, the termination grām is merely a prakrit form for a village (Sanskrit grāma). Regarding the first part of this name Stein remarks:

> This first part *Uḍe-*, also heard as *Uḍi,* is pronounced with that cerebral *ḍ* which to Europeans ears, in classical times as now, always sounded like an *r* and often undergoes that change to *r* in modern Indian and Dardic languages. Thus the temptation is great to recognize in Arrian's Ora the Greek rendering of an earlier form of this Uḍe, and to derive the name itself from the ancient Sanskrit name of Swāt, Uḍḍiyāna. The phonetic changes that such a derivation assumes in the history of the name can all be fully accounted for….

Sir Olaf Caroe (1958:54) however feels that this identification cannot be accepted as final. He thinks that 'having gone up the Swāt valley as far as Bīr-koṭ, (Alexander) would have turned south from there and then crossed the Kaṛākaṛ pass into Buner'. The site of Ora, he thinks, should therefore be look for in Buner, and not in Swāt, and even that possibly close to Daggar, the present provincial headquarters of the district.

Now contrary to what Stein believed Uḍigrām may not have given its name to the entire valley but we are still left with enough evidence to show that Uḍigrām is an ancient site, earlier certainly than the fourth century BC when it was presumably visited by Alexander. Its ruins have been extensively probed by the Italian mission in Pakistan, who, besides the fortified area on the hillside already known to Stein, have uncovered another site called 'Bāzār' meaning 'market' or 'down town' (Faccena 1964). An inscription found in the ruins of the castle shows that the place was a provincial headquarters as late as the eleventh century AD (Nazir Khan 1985:153-66).

Even more important in this regard is the evidence of some Kharoshṭhi inscriptions which clearly mention several Oḍi rājās and paint them as zealous patrons of Buddhism (Abdur Rahman 1999: 13-18). Some of these rājās were contemporary with the early Kushan rulers (Bailey 1980: 21-29). The Oḍis seem to have ruled Gandhāra for centuries, very often as sub-kings. In the Peshawar valley there still exists a strong oral tradition mentioning a certain Hoḍi (Oḍi) rājā from whose hands the rule of Gandhāra was snatched by Maḥmūd of Ghazna (Abdur Rahman: 2004). The Oḍis are no more there in Gandhāra but they have left behind several villages bearing the characteristic designation 'Oḍigrām' (Oḍi village). The one is Swāt was apparently the most important among them as it stands in close proximity to the ruins of a castle called 'Rāja Gira', a corrupted form of Rājagaṛh, meaning the 'Capital'. The Oḍis gave their name to the land in which they were concentrated. Thus Swāt came to be known as Oḍiyāna or 'Oḍi Land'.

The siege of Ora did not cost Alexander much Labour, for he is said to have captured the place at the first assault and got possession of all the elephants which were left there. It is very strange, although the classical writers would like us to believe, that inspite of the reinforcements from neighbouring princes, which must have enormously augmented the defence capability of Ora and bolstered the courage of its inhabitants as effectively as they did at Massaga, and also of the natural strength of its fortification wall, it fell an easy prey to the Macedonians[14].

The next important event in Alexander's Indian campaign was the capture of Aornos identified by Stein with Ūṇa-Sar on Pīr-Sar mountain high up the Indus right bank, above the side valley's of Kānā and Ghorband. This is how Stein (1975:152) puts it:

> There is definitely philological evidence to show that in the modern name Ūṇa (Ūṇṛa) pronounced with that peculiar *n.* sound which in Pashtu spelling also figures as *ṇṛ.,* we may safely recognize a direct phonetic derivative of an earlier from *Avarna*, the assumed original of Aornos… that a name Ūṇa has a wider application can safely be inferred from the fact that the application Ūṇa-Sar, 'head of Ūṇa', and not merely Ūṇa, is used for the highest portion of the massive.

Sir Olaf Caroe (1958:55) considers this identification as Stein's most fascinating work. But it may be noted, philologically at least, the identification has no legs to stand upon. Ūṇa-Sar, mistranslated by Stein as 'head of Ūṇa' is a composite Pashtu word of which the first part means 'a tree' and the second 'a peak'. Thus Ūṇa-Sar literally means 'hill peak marked by a tree'. There are many such peaks and therefore many Ūṇa-Sar in Swāt. As deforestation of Swāt is unfortunately progressing fast many of these peaks face the danger of being very soon stripped of their vegetational cover. When that happens we shall be having, in Pashtu terminology, many 'Barband-Sars' (Naked Peaks) instead the Ūṇa-Sars. Since we know for certain that Pashtu is a late entrant on the scene and was definitely not spoken in Gandhara in the forth century BC, no cogent philological relationship can be established between Ūṇa-Sar and Aornos.

Notes

[1] The rājā of Taxila called Taxilēs by Arrian was named Omphis as noted by Curtius (VIII. 14).

[2] See below for discussion regarding these hill fortresses.

[3] Mentioned by Arrian (M'Crindle 1896:61).

[4] Mentioned by Curtius (Majumdar 1960:109).

[5] This name occurs only in Arrian (M'Crindle 1896:62).

[6] See M'Crindle 1896:66.

[7] Curtius says that having massacred all the inhabitants, Alexander vented his rage even upon the buildings (see Majumdar (1960:107).

[8] See M'Crindle 1896:63) note 1.

[9] Arrian says that Alexander selected the best among them with a view to send them to Macedonia.

[10] Spelt 'Naoghi' in M'Crindle 1896:64, note 1.

[11] Such as A. Cunningham and his contemporaries (see Cunningham 1871:49-66).

[12] The present fort near the bridge stands upon an ancient site called Shah-dheri (king's mound). Below the bridge on the right bank of the river Swāt are the ruins of a fort spreading upon the river side face of a hill of which the peak is now occupied by a signal post known as Churchill point.

[13] For another inscription of the Ghaznavid period found in Swāt see Abdur Rahman, 1998:35-39.

[14] For Ora in Baluchistān see M'Crindle 1896:169. This town has been identified with *Haur* mentioned by Idrīsī.

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