

[Topic] Second musical competitions of Alexander the Great on the river Hydaspes (Jhelum, Pakistan)

[Source] Arrianus, *India* XVIII 11-12

[Period] 350–300 BC (326 BC, early November)

[Text] (11) ὡς δὲ ταῦτα ἐκεκόσμητο Ἀλεξάνδρω, ἔθυε τοῖς θεοῖσιν ὅσοι τε πατριοὶ ἢ μαντευτοὶ αὐτῷ καὶ Ποσειδῶνι καὶ Ἀμφιτρίτῃ καὶ Νηρηῖσι καὶ αὐτῷ τῷ Ὠκεανῷ, καὶ τῷ Ὑδάσπῃ ποταμῷ, ἀπ' ὅτου ὠρμᾶτο, καὶ τῷ Ἀκεσίνῃ, ἐς ὄντινα ἐκδίδοι ὁ Ὑδάσπης, καὶ τῷ Ἰνδῷ, ἐς ὄντινα ἄμφω ἐκδίδουσιν· (12) ἀγῶνές τε αὐτῷ μουσικοὶ καὶ γυμνικοὶ ἐποιεῦντο, καὶ ἱερεῖα τῇ στρατιῇ πάσῃ κατὰ τέλεα ἐδίδοτο.

[Translation] (11) When Alexander had made all these dispositions, he sacrificed to his ancestral gods and those designated by oracle, to Posidon, Amphitrite, the Nereids, to Ocean himself, to the river Hydaspes, whence he started, to the Acesines, into which the Hydaspes runs, and to the Indus, into which both run; (12) and he instituted musical and athletic games, and victims for sacrifice were given to all the army, regiment by regiment. [transl. by P. A. Brunt]

[Comment] Although brief, this passage clearly outlines both the geographical and the chronological context within which these musical competitions took place. The specific references to each of the rivers indicate that Alexander the Great was on the river Hydaspes and ready to sail toward the Acesines and subsequently into the Indus, with the ultimate aim of reaching the Red Sea. It is exactly to this moment that refers the whole Chapter XVIII of the *Indika*, from which the present passage is extracted. Immediately preceding this passage, we are informed: (1) that the fleet was at this moment already prepared on the Hydaspes; (2) that Alexander had appointed both the crews and rowers (chosen from among the Phoenicians, Cypriots, and Egyptians) and the ship commanders (chosen from among the Macedonians and the Greeks, with just one exception, a single Persian ship commander, the renowned Bagoas; (3) that Alexander had placed Nearchus in overall command as admiral; and (4) that Onesicritus was the helmsman of the ship on which Alexander himself was to embark, while his ship's secretary was Evagoras.

Thus, we are at the beginning of the second of the three phases of Alexander the Great's retreat from India, namely the phase leading him to the mouth of the Indus, at which point he would part from the fleet to continue his overland return march through Gedrosia and Carmania. More precisely, the preparation of the fleet must be dated to early October, and its departure to early November 326 BC: by the first days of October, Alexander had presumably reached the Hydaspes following the mutiny of the army at the Hyphasis at the end June; by the first days of November 326 BC, he set out from the Hydaspes, since—according to Strabo, on the authority of Aristobulus (Strabo 15, 1, 17 C692)—the fleet journey “began not many days before the setting of the Pleiades,” that is, at the end of October in any given year [Brunt 1983, 456–457, 465–466; Sisti 2004, 518].

Unfortunately, we have no further information about these musical contests on the Hydaspes beyond what this passage records. They took place within the context of a sacrificial ceremony intended to secure divine favour for the impending departure, which was imminent but had not yet occurred. Indeed, even at the moment of the actual departure, which followed shortly thereafter, Alexander the Great performed sacred rituals, as described by Arrian (*Anabasis of Alexander* VI 3, 1–6). The sacrifices immediately preceding the departure were offered to all the deities associated with the waterways the expedition was to traverse, i.e. Poseidon and his consort Amphitrite, the Nereids, Ocean, and the three rivers Hydaspes, Acesines, and Indus. They were also directed to the “ancestral gods,” in relation to Alexander and the Macedonians, as well as to “those (i.e. gods) indicated (i.e., to Alexander) by the oracles.” According to Arrian (*Anabasis of Alexander* VI 3, 1–6), concerning the actual departure, these gods included at least “Heracles the progenitor, Ammon, and the other deities

to whom he was accustomed to offer sacrifices” [Sisti 2004, 522–523; Biffi 2000, 178; Dognini 2000, 121–122]

Given this context, and bearing in mind that Alexander was engaged in a sort of retreat, it seems unlikely that the contests organized on the Hydaspes involved professional athletes, and were therefore particularly solemn or demanding from an organizational standpoint. More probably they were competitions of the type customarily held by the Macedonian kings in connection with sacrificial rites, either as acts of thanksgiving (for example, following a victory) or – as in this case – to propitiate a forthcoming undertaking, namely the departure from the Hydaspes toward the Red Sea [Biffi 2000, 178].

These musical contests held on the Hydaspes in early November 326 BC were the second such competitions organized by Alexander on this river. The first took place for the *Dionysia* on the Hydaspes, whose precise chronology cannot be determined, except within a broad span of five months (between May and October 326 BC). These were the *Dionysia* during which the satyric drama *Aghén* was performed, as attested by Athenaeus (*Deipnosophistae* XIII 68, 595d–596b) [see specific entry].

[Essential Bibliography] EDITIONS AND COMMENTARIES: *L’Indiké di Arriano*, introduzione, testo, traduzione e commento di N. BIFFI, Bari 2000, 65 (translation) and 171, 177-178 (comment); Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander*, books V-VII. *Indica*, with an English translation of P. A. BRUNT, Cambridge, Mass. – London 1983, 456-457, 465-466 (Appendix XVII, 14 e 24); C. DOGNINI, *L’Indiké di Arriano. Commento storico*, Torino 2000, 116-117, 121-122; Arriano, *Anabasi di Alessandro*, vol. II: libri IV-VII, testo critico e traduzione a cura di F. SISTI, commento a cura di F. SISTI e A. ZAMBRINI, Fondazione Valla, Verona-Milano 2004, 518-519 and 522-523 (comment to Arrianus VI 1, 1 e VI 3, 1)

[Keywords] Alexander the Great, musical games, athletic games, sacrifices, ancestral gods, Posidon, Amphitrite, Nereids, Ocean, river Hydaspes, river Acesines, river Indus

[Saulo Delle Donne]