

Porus and Alexander: The Battle of the Jhelum 327-326 BC

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I. Prelude

He had wanted to conquer the world and now as his troops, tired though they were from the constant battles that they had fought over two continents, flooded onto the plains of India, Alexander seemed to have come within sight of his aim – an aim that could potentially make him the undisputed master of the ‘known’ world.

In front lay the river Jhelum, known to him and his command staff as the Hydaspes. Already the signs were favourable. The Indian sub-continent - at that time - was a fragmented political entity. Various kings ruled their principalities and fought against each other maintaining an uneasy political equilibrium. One such king, Ambhi (Omphis to the Greeks) of Taxila, had submitted to the might of Alexander’s reputation and had made common cause with him expecting a ‘reward’ for his efforts. It seemed that the young conqueror was the wild card that seemingly threatened to upset this delicate balance of politics that stretched across the vast sub-continent.

Directly in his path lay two obstacles – the first was the river and the second was a local Indian king, known to the Greeks as Porus (Puru) of the House of the Pauravas. The year was 326BC (some say, 327BC) and this was the final leg of the young conqueror’s martial adventures.

The dynamics of the emerging situation, from the perspective of Puru, was fluid. He recognized that the sanctity of his kingdom was at stake. With the onset of the rains and brimming with confidence in his large army, Puru felt momentarily safe – yet he also recognized that he would have to deal with the perceived treachery of his neighbour, the King of Taxila and do battle with the young foreign interloper.

On the Battlefield

The eventual showdown between Puru and Alexander was preceded by two events. First, Alexander demanded and received tributes from some of the minor principalities adjacent to Puru’s kingdom – an action which marginally added to his forces - and the second was the reply Puru sent to Alexander through the envoy that the latter had sent. Demanding the usual tribute from Puru in the name of Alexander, the Greek envoy was startled to hear the challenge issued by Puru as a response. “Certainly”, Puru replied, “I will meet him and tribute I shall bring...of armed men...indeed my entire army!”

Marching 110 miles due east, Alexander brought his forces to bear down upon Puru at the banks of the Jhelum at a location that is probably near modern-day Haranpur. From the western banks of the river, Alexander and his troops saw the river now swollen by the

prelude to the monsoons and beyond – on the eastern bank - stood the forbidding outlines of Puru’s army.

The Geography

At Haranpur, the Jhelum flows fast and is about half a mile wide. The land is flat and the edges of the banks are normally sandy. However, the intermittent rains had rendered the forward edges of the bank muddy and wet. The general lay of the land, however, was flat as depicted in the image below.



Puru was correct in appreciating that Alexander would not be able to ford the Jhelum opposite his army, especially given the swollen nature of the river. Sensing Alexander’s intent, he sent his son (also name Puru) a few miles down the river to the most likely place where Alexander could possibly attempt a fording. Puru’s assessment was accurate but the pre-emptive force that he had sent under the command of his son was inadequate.

II. The Battle

The Opening Moves

Alexander, it is said, spent a couple of weeks pacing the western banks of the Jhelum. But it was not a wasteful activity. He had decided to conduct a detailed reconnaissance of the banks of the river and also had determined to use an innovative technique to attempt to create a sense of lull in Puru.

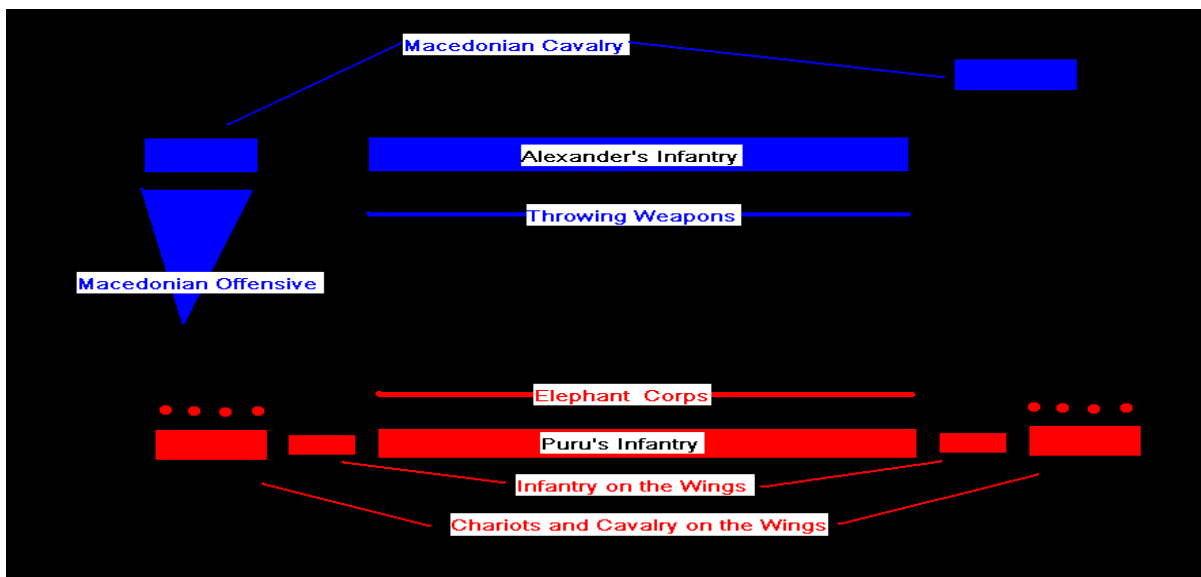
He spread the word in his camp, which he suspected of being infiltrated by Puru’s spies, that he was considering withdrawing his army and returning when the level of the river would be more manageable for a crossing. It is reputed that only a few select generals in Alexander’s army actually knew his plan, which was to initiate combat as soon as possible.

The rains began to intensify and under the cover of a dark and stormy night, Alexander sent a core group of battle-hardened Macedonians under the command of Craterus with strict instructions to find a point of crossing where he would be unopposed by the elephants fielded by Puru. Craterus, with his battle-group, managed to ford the river and Puru's son - who had been sent to intercept just such a possibility - met and engaged the Macedonians. The Indian contingent under Puru's son was annihilated. The Macedonians had turned Puru's flank. At this point it is unclear whether Alexander followed Craterus with the main Macedonian force leaving a holding party in front of Puru's position. What is clear is that the main Macedonian force did cross the Jhelum despite the hardships caused by the rains and faced Puru's army.

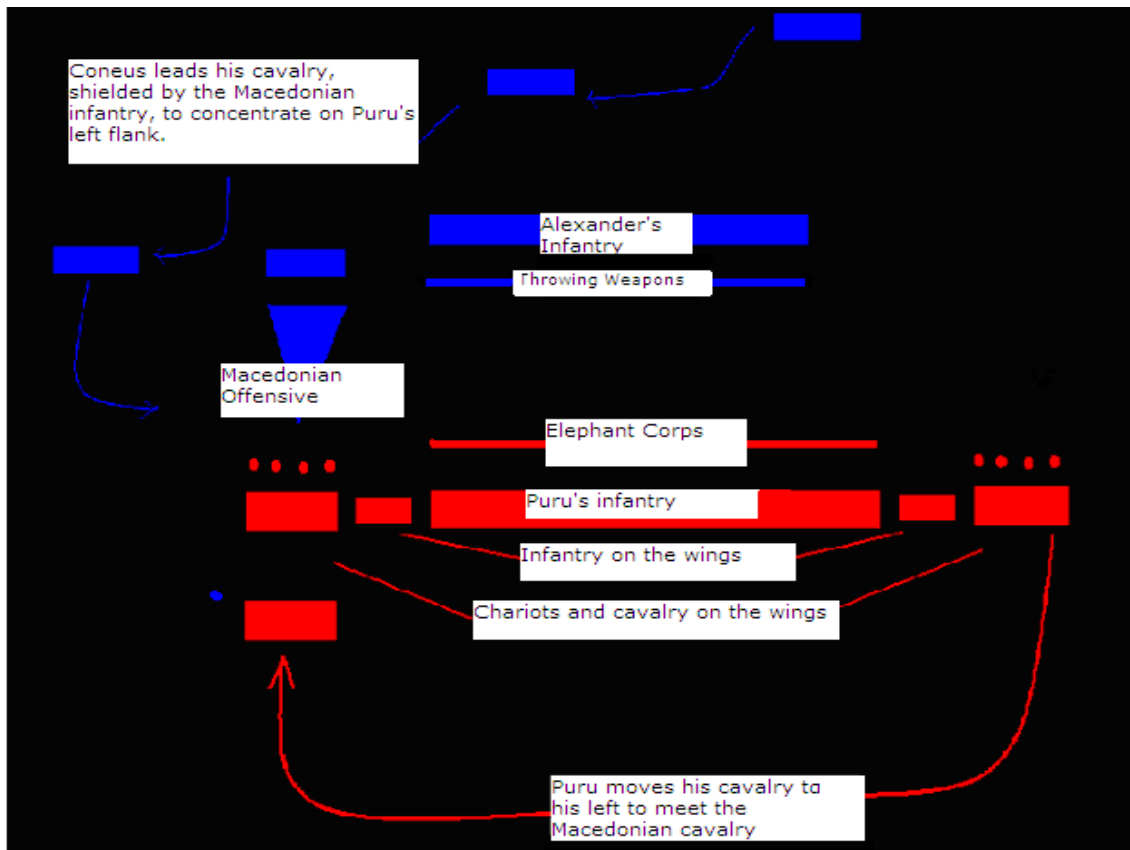
Positions on the Field

Alexander's army had faced elephants in the recent past and it is suggested that it did have a small contingent of elephants, which had been presented to him by Ambhi, however, they were too far away to be used in the upcoming battle. Also significant was the fact that the Macedonian cavalry, in many ways the strongest arm of the Macedonian army, had yet to get used to facing elephants in battle.

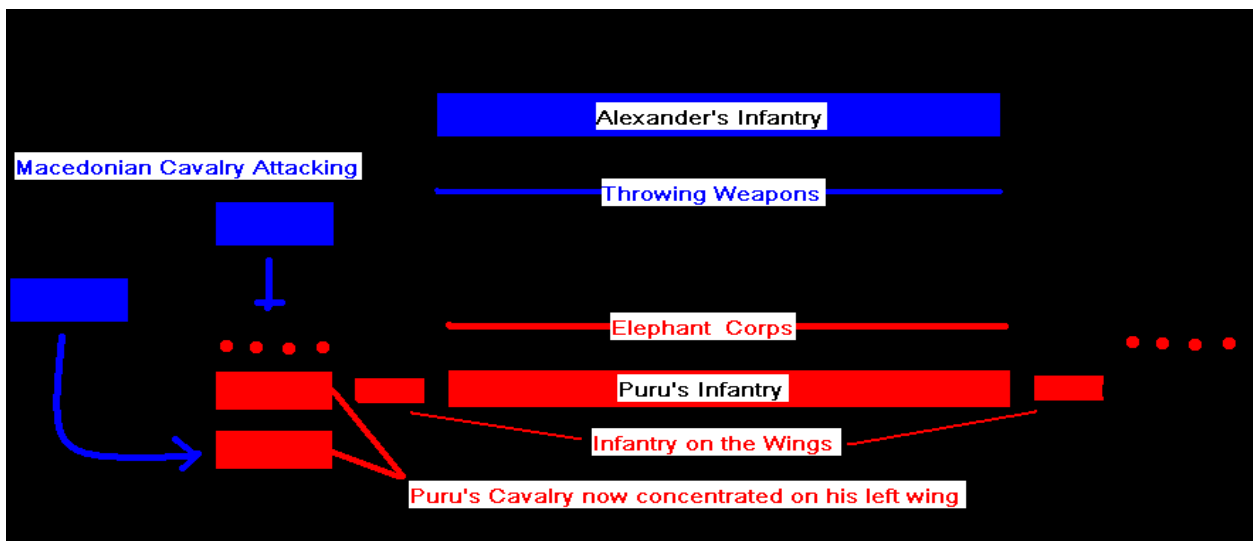
Puru was aware of this and thus had positioned his elephant corps in the middle of his forward line. According to Arrian, Alexander avoided attacking Puru at the center opting instead to initiate a flanking attack from his right wing. The initial confrontation was sharp and indecisive.



Seeing the Macedonian offensive developing on his left flank, Puru transferred the cavalry on his right flank to the left leaving the chariots as a defensive screen. By doing this he imagined that not only would he be able to meet the Macedonian attack, but he would also be able to lend more weight to a counter-offensive that he imagined could develop against the Macedonians.

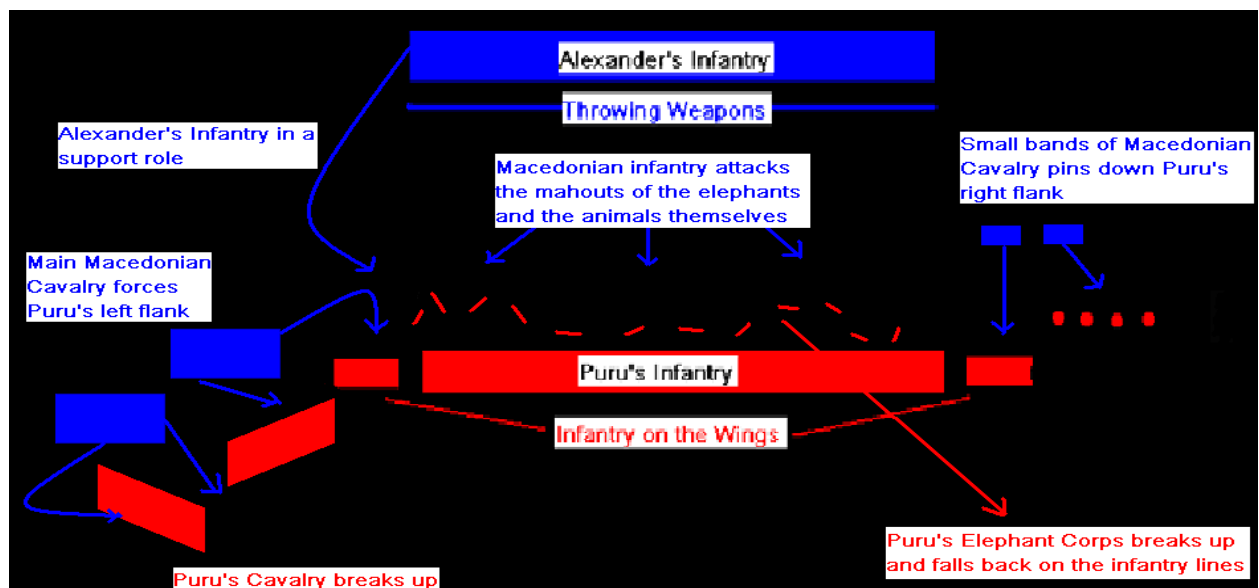


By this time Alexander's infantry had begun their advance. Behind the line of infantry, hidden from the line-of-sight of Purus, Alexander had also ordered Coenus to transfer the mass of the Macedonian cavalry to his right flank. In the process, Coenus was able to interdict Puru's cavalry just as they were about to get into position, thus catching them off-balance.



Meanwhile Puru's elephant corps began to wreak havoc in the now advancing Macedonian lines. Seeing this, Alexander, ordered the Macedonian archers, who were more mobile than their Indian counter-parts, to target the mahouts of the elephants. Simultaneously, he also ordered elements from his phalanx to begin targeting the legs and trunks of the animals. With Puru's infantry behind the line of elephants, they were unable to interdict the desperate measures that the Macedonians had adopted to break the combat capabilities of Puru's elephant corps. Maddened with pain and by now mostly without their mahouts, the elephants began to fall back onto Puru's infantry line, which panicked and broke.

With this the structure of Puru's army also disintegrated. A ruthless advance made by the Macedonian phalanx virtually annihilated the Indian infantry. On the flanks, the Indian chariots, being of a heavy variety, began to feel the ill effects of the soggy ground. They found their wheels getting repeatedly stuck in the soft and wet ground and were destroyed in detail by elements of Alexander's Companions.



The battle was, by now, almost over.

Puru, wounded badly in his shoulder, carried on valiantly till the last remnants of his army fled. Only then did he consider withdrawing from the field.

Some accounts say that Alexander sent Ambhi to ask Puru to surrender. Puru allegedly engaged Ambhi in combat in which Ambhi was forced to retreat. But by now wilting under the ill effects of his serious wound, Puru was soon encircled and brought before Alexander.

III. Some Details

It is interesting to note that most popular accounts have put forth the view that Puru's army was of a larger size than that of Alexander's. According to Plutarch, however,

Puru's army consisted of 22,000 infantry, cavalry and chariots and 200 elephants (this being corroborated by Aarian), while Alexander fielded an attack force of 35,000 and a further 11,000 under the command of Craterus.

The battle between Puru and Alexander was not an easy one for the Macedonian. Diodorus mentions that at the river crossing and in the first contact with Puru's force, Alexander lost close to 280 cavalry and 700 infantry, to which if battle statistics are applied would imply a cumulative loss of 10-12,000 on the Macedonian side. The number of casualties to Puru's army remains unknown, but given that Alexander remained in control of the battlefield, it can be surmised that the number was very high and very few of Puru's army survived the battle.

The most significant result of the battle between Puru and Alexander was the deterrent effect that Puru's actions had on Alexander's strategic aim. Alexander's army, already reluctant to advance further to the east, now refused to go any further and after some desultory actions, Alexander gave the order to withdraw and went back to the Indus with a view to returning to Macedonia.

Puru, after the famous exchange with Alexander, in which he asked to be treated like a king was left in charge of his own kingdom.

It should also be noted that some historians have posited that the battle between Alexander and Puru resulted in the actual military defeat of Alexander, but this remains speculative.

This then was one of the first recorded violent contacts between a foreign invading army and Indian forces.

NOTE: This account will soon be revised to add more details of the battle and a list of references and acknowledgements where applicable.