

Demythifying Alexander's First Battle in Asia:
The Granicus, 334 BC

by R.L. Porter

In the standard interpretation of Alexander's first pitched battle with the Persians at the Granicus river in N.W. Asia Minor in 334 BC, the account of Botsford and Robinson's *Hellenic History* is not far from the usual. The older, now challenged, account of the battle runs something like this:

Alexander approaches the river in the early afternoon only to find the far bank strongly held by Persian cavalry backed by Greek mercenary infantry. In even earlier modern versions of this battle the Persians are said to outnumber the Macedonian force by a large factor, though by 1938, date of Botsford and Robinson's revised edition, they only outnumber the Macedonian cavalry 4 to 1. Today's accounts actually, and more realistically, have the Macedonians outnumber the Persians overall, about 47,000 Macedonians to 40,000 Persian soldiers. It's bad theater when David is taller than Goliath, and the Alexander myth clearly takes a knock here.

Upon arriving at the river, Alexander is advised to wait until the next day to attack so that the steep-banked stream could be crossed without resistance in a pre-dawn crossing. Old Parmenio, his second-in-command's advice is rejected as timid and unheroic by the hot-headed glory bound Alexander. He will attack immediately and although unnecessarily assaulting a strongly held position he will bull his way through to glory with superior feats of arms.

Because Alexander had a reputation for some tactical sense in antiquity, and was never later classified with those bone-headed frontal assault generals of World War I, he was depicted as cleverly maneuvering in this cross-river assault. It's hard to believe that there could be any place for fancy tactical dancing with the enemy jammed tight with his cavalry holding one bank while Alexander's mixed packed line of infantry and cavalry held the other. Nevertheless, Alexander supposedly began the fight by having units from his center right make an assault diagonally to the right crossing the river in front of Alexander's heavy cavalry strike force which anchored his right wing. Supposedly this action drew Persian forces into that fight with the advance assault troops thus thinning their line to Alexander's immediate left. Into this thinned-out formation the heroic Macedonian now triumphantly charged. After a heated fracas in which Alexander personally dueled with the Persian leadership and was almost killed, the Greeks prevailed, the Persian cavalry fled and their infantry was later slaughtered or captured.

This account makes little sense and there is good evidence that what really happened was that Parmenio's advice was actually followed. Alexander did not likely attack that afternoon but instead crossed the river in a pre-dawn assault catching the Persians somewhat by surprise. Peter Green, *Alexander the Great*, 1970, rightly has the whole battle fought on the same side of the river.

R.L. Fox, *Alexander the Great*, 1980, makes an interesting addition to our understanding of this battle by the following revelation. The traditional account of this battle as a late-afternoon river crossing comes from Arrian's *Anabasis* via sources sympathetic to Alexander and having an interest in magnifying Alexander's achievements and heroism in this first grand battle. Cleitarchus, writing in c. 310 BC, whose account of this battle finds its way into a late historian of the Roman period, Diodorus Siculus, had no reason to harass Alexander whatsoever, and probably preserves a much truer picture of what actually happened. When the gloss of aggrandizement is removed, the battle makes Alexander look much less heroic and perhaps a little more real and sensible. The basic problem here is that the early version is much more dramatic and much better theater. So much for truth in history.