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Alexander's Cruelty

On the Motives of the Rebels in Central Asia according to Curtius Rufus

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1. Introduction

Curtius Rufus' narrative of the uprising in Central Asia is situated in the seventh and eighth books of his *Histories of Alexander the Great* after the conquest of much of the Achaemenid-Persian Empire had already been related (Curt. 7,5–8,4). It ends with Alexander's marriage to Roxana, an episode with which most readers might be familiar. She was a princess from Sogdiana, a region on the north-eastern edge of the former Achaemenid Empire, in what is today Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. The historic uprising, along with its narrated counterpart in Curtius Rufus, was centered there. Following both history and its narrative representation, the revolt also spilled southwards into Bactria in modern-day Afghanistan. As historians have argued, the actual marriage was very much linked to the revolt, as it was intended to appease the rebels after military means proved insufficient in ending the uprising.[1] The narrative of the war in Central Asia in the *Histories* has received surprisingly little attention by literary scholars. Atkinson's commentary, for instance, breaks off before reaching this section of the *Histories*.[2] A notable exception may be seen in the discussion on the Scythian envoys' speech to Alexander (Curt. 7,8,12–30),[3] as well as in Bettenworth's article on the destruction of the city of the Branchidae (Curt. 7,5,28). Yet, she pointed out how this episode had almost exclusively drawn the attention of historians trying to understand the events.[4] The same verdict may be extended to Curtius' entire narrative of the war in Central Asia. The present analysis of this topic will therefore cover ground largely unexplored by classical philology. As was argued by Baynham and extended by Müller, the *Histories* center on the theme of Alexander's *fortuna*. At the beginning of the narrative, fortune was, generally speaking, on Alexander's side, associated with various virtues such as *fortitudo, moderatio* and *clementia*. Yet, once his *fortuna* had reached its zenith in book 5, after he had conquered much of the Achaemenid Empire,

[1] Bosworth (1980) 11; Vacante (2012) 113.
[2] Atkinson (1994).
[3] Baynham (1998) 87–90; 185; Ballesteros Pastor (2003).
[4] Bettenworth (2016) 192.

it began to corrupt his character, leading to *licentia, luxuria, ira* and *superbia*,[5] the war in Central Asia being depicted in the second section of the work. It should be noted, however, that this general narrative frame is counteracted by numerous small turnings of fortune, from virtue to vice and back again, or high points and low points, as Müller called them.[6] The visit to Siwah (Curt. 4,7,6–32) for instance, marked a particular low point of Alexander's virtue when he arrogantly declared himself to be the divine son of Ammon. However, this only served as a contrast to the display of excelling fortitude at the battle of Gaugamela (Curt. 4,8–16), as Alexander had by that point reclaimed his lost virtue.[7] Unfortunately, we cannot relate anything with certainty about Curtius Rufus or his social context. The *Histories* are commonly dated to the first century CE and are assumed to share a common source with Diodorus, Justin, and the Metz Epitome in their accounts of Alexander, based on similarities.[8] In contrast to Arrian, who clearly stated the origin of his information, we have no reliable knowledge of what these sources might be (Arr. *Anab.* 1,1). However, it has been argued that Curtius Rufus was more of an original author than has usually been acknowledged.[9] Similarly, due to his tendency toward romanticization, Curtius Rufus is considered less precise.[10] Nevertheless, Rapin has emphasized the significance of Curtius Rufus concerning the reconstruction of the historical events in Central Asia.[11] Regarding the events narrated, a particular paradox lies in the virulent strength of the resistance encountered after the occupation of Central Asia, whereas the conquest itself was met with only minimal opposition.[12] Vacante's following opinion may summarize current historical views on the matter: "Unfortunately, because of the inexplicable vagueness of Arrian and Curtius (or their sources?), we know little about the reasons for the revolt of Spitamenes and Catanes or the effective potential of the rebels."[13] This supposed silence has resulted in various conjectures on the possible motivation of the rebels, which remain somewhat speculative since they are not based on a literary analysis of our main sources.[14] However, as will be argued, Curtius Rufus is actually very clear about what he saw as the motivation of the rebels in Central Asia. Whether the narrative in the *Histories* should be regarded as fictional or not, is up to the reader to decide and will not be discussed here. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, historically speaking, what our sources are trying to tell us matters a considerable amount. The upcoming literary analysis

[5] Rutz (1986) 2334f.; Baynham (1998) 134; Müller (2016).
[6] Müller (2016) 26.
[7] *ibid.* 29f.
[8] Atkinson (2000) 319.
[9] Bosworth (2003) 193f.
[10] Baynham (1998) 85–90; Bosworth (2003) 168; Rapin (2017) 41.
[11] Rapin (2014) 186.
[12] Holt (2005) 176.
[13] Vacante (2012) 103.
[14] Holt (1988) 56; Bloedow (1991) 31; Howe (2016) 171; Schachermayr (1973) 242; Heckel (2020) 181; Iliakis (2021) 38.

aims therefore to contribute to a richer understanding of Curtius Rufus' *Histories* and to aid historians in developing a better grasp of the events narrated.

2. Escalation

Curtius Rufus recounts several episodes in Central Asia leading up to the rebellion, starting with the sack of the town of the Branchidae, described as the former Greek inhabitants of a community in the territory of Miletus. According to Curtius Rufus, they willingly surrendered the treasures of their sanctuary, the Oracle of Didyma, to Xerxes and were subsequently relocated to Central Asia (Curt. 7,5,28). Though they happily greet and peacefully surrender to Alexander, the king personally orders the inhabitants to be killed as traitors to the Greek cause and as punishment for their ancestors' misdeeds. Curtius Rufus does not fail to characterize these actions twice as a sign of *crudelitas*,[15] thereby clearly condemning the violence as cruelty. The following destruction is related by Curtius Rufus in a very colorful language:

> *[…] Lucos sacros non caedunt modo, sed etiam extirpant, ut vasto solitudo et sterilis humus excisis etiam radicibus linquerentur.* (Curt. 7,5,34)
>
> "They not only cut down their sacred groves, but even pulled out the stumps, to that end that, since even they burned out, nothing but a desert waste and sterile ground was left." (trans. Rolfe)

As outlined in the beginning, historical debates have focused on the veracity of the episode,[16] yet Bettenworth remains the only serious literary examination of the topic.[17] As she argued, the destruction of the town of the Branchidae can be read as an established *topos* within the debate on the merits of revenge for historic misdeeds, since this episode was taken up by Plutarch in the context of such a discussion (Plut. *De Sera* 12). Therefore, Curtius Rufus chose to comment on this debate on historic injustices when his narrative arrived in Central Asia. However, the demise of the Branchidae also holds a direct significance in the narrative context of the *Histories*. In this chapter, it will be argued that a process of escalating violence was initiated long before the outbreak of the actual uprising. The process was notably started by Alexander's personal decision to murder the inhabitants of the town. Thus, by making Greeks the first to suffer, Curtius Rufus compels his readers to sympathize with Alexander's victims and opponents more than they otherwise would have. Soon, Alexander's main enemy Bessos the murderer of the former Persian king Darius III, is surrendered to Alexander by his followers (Curt. 7,5,36f.). The conquest of Central Asia is, as it seems, complete.

[15] Curt. 7,5,33; 35; Bettenworth (2016) 193.
[16] Parke (1985) 62; Holt (1988) 74; Hammond (1998) 339–344.
[17] Bettenworth (2016) 205f.

Yet, immediately after, 20.000 bandits ambush the Macedonian army (Curt. 7,6,2). An apology for wounding Alexander is rendered: *cum dis enim pugnare sacrilegos tantum* (Curt. 7,6,6).[18] Apparently, first and foremost, a divine Alexander is meant. However, in my opinion, it also contains a motivation for their resistance and a warning. The bandits were appalled by the violence and the sacrileges committed by Alexander's army during the destruction of the town of the Branchidae. If the Macedonians continued to act with *crudelitas*, they would meet resistance accordingly. Subsequently, the occupation of Maracanda, modern-day Samarkand, is narrated. Surrounding villages are pillaged and burned (Curt. 7,6,10). Again, the army acts pre-emptively without any provocation on part of the inhabitants. As the full-scale revolt in Sogdiana and Bactria commences soon after, its leader Spitamenes uses a pretext to arouse anti-Macedonian sentiment. Supposedly, Alexander was summoning the Bactrian nobility in order to execute them. The leaders of the revolt go on to claim:

> *Non magis saevitas Alexandri, quam Bessi parricidum ferre potuisse. Itaque sua sponte iam motos metu poenae haud difficulter ad arma concitaverunt.* (Curt. 7,6,15)
>
> "That they had been no more able to endure savage cruelty of Alexander than the parricide of Bessus. Therefore, they aroused to arms without difficulty those who were already of their own accord alarmed by fear of punishment." (trans. Rolfe)

The pretext should not blind us to the fact that unprovoked acts of violence by the Macedonians meant that the *metus poenae* was not a mere delusion, but a fear grounded in the established reality of Alexander's cruelty, which had been evident since the murder of the Branchidae. The conflict escalates further as another Sogdian town is destroyed, plundered, and all the combatants are executed (Curt. 7,6,16). The use of the verb *diripere* in this context is particularly noteworthy, as it evokes the image of a savage animal ripping apart its prey. Thereby, Alexander's character trait of *saevitas* is further reinforced. The king consigns Cyropolis to the same fate next, acting in *ira*, anger, a major characteristic of Alexander in the *Histories*.[19] Again, the same verb *diripere* is utilized to describe the destruction of the site (Curt. 7,6,21f.). The siege of Cyropolis is usedbetween two episodes concerning the tribe of the Mamaceni. First, the Macedonian messengers killed their hosts in sleep while they were enjoying their hospitality (Curt. 7,6,18). Secondly, Alexander, who felt enraged (*ira*) during the following siege, destroys - justly, in his opinion (*haud iniuria*, Curt. 7,6,21) - the city (Curt. 7,6,23). By placing the second episode after the destruction of Cyropolis, Curtius Rufus constructs a

[18] "For only impious men would fight with gods" (trans. Rolfe).
[19] "Das Zornesmotiv, die Neigung zu Zornesausbrüchen, ist schließlich so eng mit der Alexandergestalt verbunden, dass es auffällt, wenn er ihr nicht nachgibt." Rutz (1986) 2346.

causational string of interdependent actions of Alexander and his opponents escalating the conflict. Aristotle's ideals of the probable or necessary sequence of events in a narrative plot come to mind.[20] As Alexander reaches the Tanais, he is confident about his abilities to subdue the Scythians who live beyond the river as well, relying on his own royal *felicitas* (Curt. 7,7,28). This belief, however, is unfounded, since it is based on the *superstitio* of soothsayers and therefore framed as a pinnacle of arrogance. As Müller pointed out, Alexander even blames the gods for his setbacks (Curt. 7,7,8).[21] The largest Macedonian defeat of the entire war is ominously placed in this narrative context, as a detachment is ambushed by Spitamenes in the area around Maracanda, which had revolted (Curt. 7,7,34–39). Contrary to Alexander's own opinion, *fortuna* has apparently left him at this point.

3. Peripety

At this pivotal moment, Curtius Rufus pauses to let Scythian envoys deliver a fairly lengthy monologue on the frailty of Alexander's fortune (Curt. 7,8,12–30), a very common trope with roots in Herodotus and Stoic or Cynic philosophy.[22] The Scythian explicitly draws a historical parallel to Cyrus by recounting how his people had defeated the Persian king (Curt. 7,8,18). More precisely, as has been argued, it is rather an intertextual reference to Herodotus' episode on the death of Cyrus,[23] since its historicity is rather doubtful. The trope of the tragic or wise warner is likewise Herodotean, appearing in numerous ancient texts.[24] Further Herodotean themes have been analysed by Baynham and Ballesteros Pastor.[25] In any case, the Persian king's arrogance in crossing the river, wanting to rule both Asia and Europe and thereby the entire world, and his subsequent demise is evoked to serve as a warning for Alexander.[26] Interestingly enough, Alexander seems to heed the advice, as he restrains from further conquest after an initial successful battle against the Scythians. In Curtius' opinion, the example of the victory had ended the rebellion (*Haec expeditio deficientem ex parte Asiam fama tam opportunae victoriae domuit*, Curt. 7,9,17). Alexander releases all Scythian prisoners of war without ransom, out of mercy, which is also significant for ending the rebellion (*moverat eos regis non virtus magis, quam clementia in devictos Scythas*, Curt. 7,9,18). To say that an example of martial virtue and clemency had ended the uprising by this

[20] Aristot. *poet.* 9,1451a; Liveley (2019) 36.
[21] Müller (2016) 35.
[22] Bosworth (1996) 147; Baynham (1998) 48; 53; 86f.; 185; Ballesteros Pastor (2003) 33f.; On the *topos* of the just barbarian in Curtius Rufus in general cf. Behrwald (2016) 266–268; on the Scythes in Curtius Rufus in particular cf. Baynham (1998) 123; Ballesteros Pastor (2003) 28f.
[23] Hdt. 1,214,4; Ballesteros Pastor (2003) 25f.; Bosworth (1996) 149–151. On the parallel between Herodotus' Cyrus and Curtius Rufus' Alexander cf. Müller (2016) 38.
[24] Bischoff (1932) 56; Ballesteros Pastor (2003) 94; regarding the use of the tragic warner in Curtius Rufus cf. Müller (2016) 20–25.
[25] Baynham (1998) 89; Ballesteros Pastor (2003) 27–32.
[26] Lateiner (1985) 84–100.

point is an obvious exaggeration, especially because more military confrontations are to follow. However, it indicates that a decisive dramatic peripety within the narrative of the war in Central Asia has been reached. Müller has questioned the sincerity of this turning point, referring to Alexander's decision to send the beautiful youth Elpinicion as an emissary to the Scythians, who did not live up to the standards of masculinity (*haud sane virili par non erat*, Curt. 7,9,19), this being a sign of sexual permissiveness and moral depravity.[27] Without doubt, this is the impression Curtius Rufus wanted to give. However, it is a bit far-fetched to deny the existence of a turning point at this juncture due to this remark. We should keep in mind that the entire narrative of the war in Central Asia is placed in the second half of the *Histories*, after the central turning point in book 5, as outlined in the introduction. Therefore, the smaller peripety towards clemency and mercy at the Tanais does not offset the conceptual frame of the entire work. Rather, Curtius Rufus chose to add a vice to the virtuous clemency. The importance of *clementia* seems to be reinforced by a natural reference point in the *Iliad*. It is during the end of this epic so central to the Greek cultural sphere that the hero Achilles handed over Hector's corpse back to his father Priam, which he had excessively mutilated to avenge his friend Patroclus (Hom. *Il.* 24,571), thereby supplying a very prominent example of the de-escalation of a conflict in the Greco-Roman tradition.[28] Furthermore, parallels between Alexander and the mythical hero Achilles are abundant within the ancient literature and are, most importantly, also found twice in the *Histories* themselves:[29] First, at the siege of Gaza, Curtius Rufus compares how Alexander mistreated the enemies' leader Betis by dragging him by the end of his chariot all around the city to Achilles' mutilation of Hector's body.[30] This is explicitly characterized as a reference to events later in the *Histories* (*nova subeunte fortuna*, Curt. 4,6,29), among them, surely, the rebellion in Sogdiana. Secondly, Curtius returns to this theme at the end of the narrative in Central Asia, comparing the marriage with Roxana to Achilles' relationship with Briseis (Curt. 8,4,26). The importance of this reference can be strengthened by a few connecting *comparanda*. The reason for Achilles' violence had been revenge for Patroklos' death in battle (Hom. *Il.* 19,74–89). Likewise, Alexander's streak of savage deeds had started as retribution for the historic treachery of the Branchidae. Achilles' cruelty ended after Priam's spirited appeal in Achilles' tent to retrieve Hector's mutilated (Hom. *Il.* 24,485–670). Similarly, Alexander starts to act with clemency as he receives the embassy of the Scythians in his tent and hears their arguments. Furthermore, according to Curtius Rufus, Alexander finds himself at the junction between Europe and

[27] Müller (2016) 35.
[28] Most (2003) 50–75.
[29] For instance: Arr. *Anab.* 7,14,4; Diod. 17,97,3; Plut. *Alex.* 5,5; regarding the allusions between Alexander and Achilles in ancient literature in general cf. Maitland (2015) 5f.; 16f.; Heckel (2015) 29f.; in Curtius Rufus exclusively cf. Rutz (1986) 2344–2346.
[30] Curt. 4,6,29, Hom. *Il.* 24,395–404.

Asia,[31] as he receives the Scythian embassy at the Tanais, a point which the envoys do not fail to stress.[32] Similarly, Troy was located at the Hellespontus, at the border between the continents. Herodotus' Xerxes had sacrificed there, at the alter of Athena Ilion, before crossing over to Europe[33] - an act of arrogance that would ultimately lead to his downfall.[34] Within Curtius Rufus' narrative, this is the second time Alexander crosses the borders of Europe and Asia: he came to Asia at the Hellespontus and returns to Europe at the Tanais. Curtius Rufus alludes to this epic and historical matrix of references encapsulating Europe and Asia, the Trojan, Persian, and Alexander's war, and the texts of Herodotus and Homer, to characterize this sequence of events as a pivotal moment in his narrative. Therefore, Curtius Rufus' narrative follows strict Aristotelian principles of the tripartite plot structure, with complication in the escalation, resolution in the upcoming chapter on the de-escalation and peripety. The scene with the Scythian embassy could even be interpreted as an *anagnorisis*, a critical discovery leading to the peripety, with Alexander realizing he has become a hubristic tyrant like Cyrus or Xerxes.[35] Whether or not Curtius Rufus read Aristotle's *Poetics* is an interesting question. It is possible that he adopted these principles for structuring a plot from his peers without knowing their origin, just as it is conceivable that he decided to follow them after reading Aristotle. Since we know very little about the author of the *Histories*, this question must remain unanswered. However, his scheme does correspond to the turnings of fortune and a low point in Müller's terminology outlined in the introduction.

4. De-escalation

As a first step after the Scythian expedition, Alexander orders the destruction of the area around Maracanda - in retribution for the terrible defeat which the Macedonians suffered here earlier (Curt. 7,9,22). He pardons thirty captured noblemen who were sentenced to death. The reasons they give for their resistance against Alexander confirms those previously given by Curtius Rufus:

> *Illi numquam se inimicos ei, sed bello lacessitos hostes fuisse respondent* (Curt. 7,10,8f.).
>
> "They replied that they had never been unfriendly to him, but that when provoked to war, they were enemies of their foe." (trans. Rolfe)

[31] *Bactrianos Tanais ab Scythis, quos Europaeos vocant, dividit. Idem Asiam et Europam finis interfluit*, Curt. 8, 7,1; Rapin (2014) 155f.
[32] *Ab Europa petis Asiam, ex Asia transis in Europam. Curt. 8,8,13, Ceterum nos et Asiae et Europae custodes habebis*, Curt. 8,8,30.
[33] Bowie (2012) 269–286.
[34] Bridges (2015) 45–75.
[35] Aristot. *poet.* 10,1452a18–21; Liveley (2019) 38.

This motivation is mirrored in a later speech of Alexander to Macedonian conspirators:

> *Qui superbe habiti rebellassent. [...]. Si habere Asiam non transire volumus, cum his communicanda est nostra clementia.* (Curt. 8,8,12).
>
> "if they had been treated with arrogance, they would have rebelled. [...] If we wish to hold Asia, not merely pass through it, our clemency must be shared with the people." (trans. Rolfe)

Consequently, their earlier rebellion is explained with Alexander's *superbia* in lieu of *clementia*. Henceforth, resistance is isolated, and motivations are restricted to personal contexts. The defenders of a fortress on a rock led by the Sogdian Arimazes are described as responding in arrogance to Alexander (*superbe multa respondit*, Curt. 7,11,5). This causes Alexander to once again be enraged, though it is phrased indirectly, with his spirit being "set aflame" (*accendere animum*, Curt. 7,11,6). After the fortress has been taken, Arimazes and his entourage are flogged and crucified. Apparently, the de-escalation of violence should be seen as a process that takes time, much like the escalation did before. A revolt of a couple of thousand exiled Bactrian noblemen is described at a later stage of the narrative, who had to cede their territory due to previous resistance. They were able to ambush a small Macedonian detachment. Even though this particular resistance was subdued (Curt. 8,1,6), it re-emerges later (Curt. 8,2,1). Though having revolted twice, the rebels are pardoned (*venia*, Curt. 8,2,18), a sure sign of the new course of clemency. Next, the satrap Sisimithres eventually surrenders his fortress due to Macedonian military superiority, trusting in Alexander's forgiveness (*venia*, Curt. 8.2.30), though his wife had urged him to reject the initial offer of surrender. Unlike his resisting compatriots, he is reinstated in his position of power (Curt. 8,2,32) and his sons are incorporated into Alexander's entourage (*militaturos sequi*, Curt. 8,2,34). The rebel leader Spitamenes is murdered by his wife, who hands over his decapitated head to Alexander. Yet, she is not rewarded due to the act's cruelty (*atrocitas*, Curt. 8,3,15). The satrap Oxyartes surrenders soon after. He is reinstated, and three of his sons are sent to fight alongside Alexander (*secum militarent*, Curt. 8,4,21). Most importantly, Alexander marries his daughter Roxana. All of these four episodes involving aristocrats in Sogdiana, Arimazes, Sisimithres, Spitamenes and Oxyartes, shall be discussed together Note the parallels between Sisimithres and Oxyartes: both surrender and their sons join Alexander's troops; the parallel is stressed with the similar language *militare*. A second parallel between Arimazes and Spitamenes is, likewise, of interest, both resisting and meeting a dishonoring fate by execution and treacherous decapitation respectively. An antithesis can be observed between the stories of Spitamenes and Sisimithres, as their wives play opposite roles. Spitamenes' wife grants Alexander victory

by treachery, Sisimithres wife almost obstructs her husband's surrender. Both Sogdian marriage scenes set the stage for Alexander marrying a Sogdian bride himself in the last episode. The episodes correspond to each other.[36] Surrender is rewarded with mercy, resistance punished. However, as Müller and Baynham have argued, the marriage between Roxana and Alexander is cast in a very unfavorable light, as it is motivated by sexual licentiousness. The Macedonians are offended by this conduct, but are silenced by Alexander's tyrannical behavior (Curt. 8,4,30).[37] The episodes about the war in Central Asia cast a dire shade on the nature of Alexander's reign.

5. Conclusion

Curtius Rufus describes the motives of the rebels in Sogdiana and Bactria in rich detail. Alexander is cast as the protagonist: it is his decision between cruelty and clemency on which the Aristotelian tripartite scheme escalation, peripety and de-escalation rests. Responding to Alexander, the local actors sometimes escalate the conflict further. The apparent paradox between almost no resistance during the conquest and the virulent uprisings afterwards is, according to Curtius Rufus, non-existent, as the rebellion is caused by actions after the occupation of Central Asia. Episodes like the destruction of the Branchidae's town, the Scythian envoy's speech, and Alexander's marriage to Roxana should no longer be interpreted in isolation. Rather, they need to be read against the backdrop of their place and function within Curtius Rufus' larger narrative framework.

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[36] On the commenting function of parallelism cf. Belknap (2016) 26f.
[37] Baynham (1998) 166; 190; Müller (2016) 36.

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