2 Conquest of Asia Minor

As soon as his authority was firmly established in Greece Alexander set out on his grand expedition, in May of 334 B.C. He cannot have foreseen how remarkable it would become, and yet his ambition was clear in his first acts. He began by sacrificing to Protesilaurus, traditionally the first Greek to land in Asia on the expedition against Troy some 750 years earlier. He then saw to it that he was himself the first to land on this occasion. He visited the site of Troy and sacrificed at the tomb of Achilles, greatest of all the Greek heroes, whose example he proposed to follow. At the temple of Athene he dedicated his own armour, receiving in return a shield and weapons said to date back to the Trojan War. We know the value of propaganda nowadays; so did Alexander.

Meanwhile his army too had crossed to Asia and was ready to seek out the enemy. The Persians only had their locally based forces, with Memnon, the commander of their fleet, advising them. They toyed with adopting a scorched-earth policy while they fell back to join Darius, their king. But they did not yet see why they should go onto the defensive against an invader of their country, and so they decided to give battle. The line of the river Granicus seemed to offer an ideal position, and here we shall take up the story with Arrian. Notice Alexander’s personal example—not to mention how close he came to death, and so the ruin of everything, in the very first encounter—and see how skilfully he conducted events after the battle, and used his booty, to strengthen his bond with the army, and so to achieve a propaganda as well as a military success.

Alexander was now advancing towards the river Granicus with his army in battle formation. He had drawn up the heavy infantry in a doubled phalanx, posted the cavalry on the wings, and ordered the baggage columns to follow on behind. To scout out the enemy position Hegelochus was leading a party consisting of the cavalry lancers and about five hundred light infantry. Alexander was not far from the Granicus when riders from the scouting party galloped up at full speed to report that the Persians were drawn up for battle on the far bank of the river. Alexander began at once to make his arrangements to give battle, but Parmenio came to him and put the following argument:
‘Your majesty, in the present situation I really think it is best to encamp as we are, on the river bank. I do not believe that the enemy, with far fewer infantry than ours, will dare to pitch camp near to us, and so it will be possible for our army to cross easily at dawn. We shall be across before they can get back into position. But as it is I do not think we can attempt action without risk, because we cannot take the army across the river on a broad front. We can see that there are many deep pools, while the banks themselves are very high and in some places quite sheer. We will scramble out of the river in disorder and in column, which is the weakest formation; the enemy cavalry, drawn up in massed formation, will then fall upon us. A failure in our first action will at once have serious consequences, and will put at risk the result of the whole war.’

Alexander replied, ‘I know that, Parmenio. But I would be ashamed if I could cross the Hellespont easily and then found that this little stream’ (that was the scornful way he spoke of the Granicus) ‘could prevent us from crossing just as we are. I do not agree that this is right for the reputation of the Macedonians, and it does not fit in with the way I usually react when I meet danger. I think the Persians will gain in confidence and believe themselves to be as good fighters as the Macedonians if they manage to avoid suffering the sort of disaster which they are now afraid of.’

So saying he sent off Parmenio to take command of the left wing, and himself moved over to the right. Philotas, Parmenio’s son, had been put in command of the extreme right, with the Cavalry Companions, the archers and the Agrianian spearmen. Posted along with him was Amyntas the son of Arrabaeus, with the cavalry lancers, the Paeonians and Socrates’ squadron. Next came the Guards under Parmenio’s son Nicanor, and then the companies of Perdiccas the son of Orontes, Coenus the son of Polemocrates, Craterus the son of another man called Alexander, Amyntas the son of Andromenes and Philip the son of Amyntas. On the extreme left were posted the Thessalian cavalry under Calas the son of Harpalus, with the allied cavalry next under Philip the son of Menelaus and then the Thracians commanded by Agathon. After them came the infantry, the companies of Craterus, Meleager and Philip, extending to the centre of the whole line.

The Persian cavalry numbered about twenty thousand, and they had almost as many foreign mercenaries serving on foot. They had formed up their cavalry extending along the river bank
The battle at the river Granicus

in a long, solid line, while the infantry were behind the cavalry. The ground stretching back from the bank rose steeply. Where they could see Alexander himself (and he was clearly identifiable by the splendour of his armour and the close attentions of those around him) facing their left wing, they had massed their cavalry squadrons more closely on the bank.

For a while the two armies stood on the river bank, shrinking from what was to come, and there was deep silence on both sides. The Persians were waiting for the Macedonians to begin the crossing, so that they could attack them as they reached dry land. But Alexander leapt on to his horse and called to his bodyguard to follow him and to show what they were made of. He ordered Amyntas son of Arrabaeus to advance into the river with the scout cavalry, the Paeonians and one company of infantry. In front of them he sent Ptolemaeus the son of a man called Philip with Socrates’ squadron, which happened to be the leading cavalry squadron on that day. He himself advanced into the river leading the right wing, to the blast of trumpets and with war cries raised to the God of Battle. He kept his troops at an angle to the
current so that the Persians could not attack him from the flank as he landed, and so that he himself could come to grips with them in the closest possible formation.

Where the troops with Amyntas and Socrates were the first to reach the bank, the Persians shot down onto them from above, some throwing javelins into the river from the full height of the bank, others coming down onto the lower ground by the water’s edge. Then there was a hand-to-hand cavalry struggle as the one side tried to get clear of the water and the others tried to stop them; there were constant volleys of Persian javelins, while the Macedonians fought back with thrusting-spears. But the Macedonians, heavily outnumbered, suffered badly in their first attack; their footing was insecure and they were fighting from a lower position in the river, while the Persians had the height of the bank in their favour, and in particular they had the pick of their cavalry posted at this point, Memnon’s sons and Memnon himself facing the danger with them. The first of the Macedonians who came to grips with them were cut down, despite their bravery, except for those who fell back to Alexander as he approached. For he himself was now almost there, leading the right wing; and indeed he was the first to charge the Persians at the point where the whole mass of their cavalry and the officers as well were posted. Around him a fierce struggle developed, while rank after rank of Macedonians were now crossing without difficulty. Although the battle was fought on horseback it was more like an infantry battle. Horse pushed against horse and man grappled with man, the Macedonians struggling to drive the Persians once and for all from the river bank onto level ground, the Persians to stop the enemy getting clear of the water and to drive them back into the river. But already Alexander’s men were getting the upper hand, through their strength and experience, and because they were using lances of cornel wood against short javelins.

At that moment Alexander’s spear was broken in the battle. He called to Aretis, one of the royal grooms, for another spear, but he also was struggling with a broken spear and fighting bravely with the stump. He showed it to Alexander and told him to ask someone else. Demaratus, a Corinthian and one of Alexander’s bodyguard, gave him his own spear, which Alexander seized; then seeing Mithridates, Darius’ son-in-law, riding well ahead of the others, leading a detachment of cavalry in wedge formation, he also galloped forward in front of his companions, struck
Mithridates in the face with his spear and knocked him off his horse. At that Rhoisaces charged Alexander and struck him on the head with his curved sword; this cut off part of the helmet, which nevertheless checked the blow. But Alexander struck him down, driving his spear through his breast-plate into his chest. Spithridates had actually raised his sword to strike Alexander from behind, but Cleitus the son of Dropides anticipated him, struck him through the shoulder of his sword arm and cut it off. Meanwhile those of the cavalry who were managing to get clear of the river continued to join the group with Alexander.

The Persians were now under pressure from all sides; men and horses were being struck in the face with spears, they were driven back by the cavalry and suffered a great deal of harm from the lightly armed troops who had mingled with the cavalry. They cracked first at the point where Alexander was leading the attack. But once their centre had given way both wings of the cavalry also broke, and there was a total rout. About a thousand of the Persian cavalry died, but the pursuit was not pressed because Alexander turned against the foreign mercenaries. Their massed ranks remained where they had first been posted, more in dismay at the unexpected result of the battle than from any firm decision. Alexander advanced his phalanx against them and ordered the cavalry to attack from all sides. Thus he soon surrounded and slaughtered them, and none escaped unless any were unnoticed among the corpses, but about two thousand were taken alive . . .

On the Macedonian side about twenty-five of the Companions died in the first attack. Bronze statues of them were set up at Diom, made on Alexander’s orders by Lysippus, who was also chosen to make a statue of Alexander. Of the other cavalry more than sixty died, and about thirty infantry. On the following day Alexander had them buried with their weapons and other equipment. He gave to their parents and children exemption from local taxes and from all other personal obligations and property taxes. He also showed great concern for the wounded. He himself visited each one, looked at their wounds asking how they had suffered them, and even allowed them to exaggerate the story as they told it. He had the Persian officers buried, and the Greek mercenaries who had died fighting on the side of the enemy. But those whom he had taken prisoner he bound in chains and sent to hard labour in Macedonia because, although they were Greeks, they had fought on the side of foreigners against Greece, quite contrary to normal Greek sentiment. He sent to Athens three hundred suits of