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978-1-108-07760-6 - On Alexander's Track to the Indus: Personal Narrative of Explorations on the North-West Frontier of India Carried Out Under the Orders of H.M. Indian Government

M. Aurel Stein

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

AN OLD TRANSBORDER GOAL

I SHALL not soon forget the joyful excitement with which, early in December 1925 on arriving at Delhi after a long and busy stay in England, I found awaiting me a letter from Sir Norman Bolton, an old Frontier friend and at that time Chief Commissioner of the North-West Frontier Province, telling me that a goal which I had for many years desired was now at last within my reach. This was the great transborder tract of Upper Swāt and the adjacent valleys, which, by their historic past and the many reported vestiges thereof, had attracted me ever since as a young student, thirty-eight years before, I first came to work on India's ancient soil.

At that time the turbulent independence of Pathān tribes barred the way across the picturesque boldly serrated range that divides the great valley drained by the Swāt river from the open plain of the Peshawar district. The Chitrāl campaign of 1895 had, indeed, opened a route cutting through the lower end of the main Swāt valley, and in the narrow strip of tribal territory thus brought under 'political' control, the friendly interest of Colonel Sir Harold Deane, that lamented Warden of the Marches, had allowed me, in the course of rapid tours both before and after the great Frontier rising of 1897, to examine ruins of Buddhist times. After the latter fanatical upheaval I had had an opportunity of seeing parts of Bunēr, the southernmost tract of this region, while accompanying General Sir Bindon Blood's Field Force on the short punitive expedition of 1898. But when the fighting was ended, the fascinating ground beyond the administrative British border became as much closed as ever to European exploration.

What drew my eyes so eagerly towards Swāt was not

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merely the fame that this region, the ancient Uḍḍiyana, had enjoyed in Buddhist tradition, nor the traces that early worship and culture were known to have left there in numerous as yet unsurveyed ruins. Nor was it only the wish to find myself again on the tracks of those old Buddhist pilgrims who travelled from China to the sacred sites of Swāt, and whose footsteps I have had the good fortune to follow in the course of my expeditions through the desert wastes of Innermost Asia and across the high ranges of the Pāmīrs and Hindukush. May the sacred spirit of old Hsüan-tsang, the most famous of those pilgrims and my adopted 'Chinese patron saint', forgive the confession: what attracted me to Swāt far more than such pious memories was the wish to trace the scenes of that arduous campaign of Alexander which brought the great conqueror from the foot of the snowy Hindukush to the Indus, on his way to the triumphant invasion of the Panjāb.

In the autumn of 1904 arrangements made with the neighbouring tribes by Sir Harold Deane, then my chief, had made it possible for me to visit Mount Mahāban, where the south-eastern portion of Bunēr approaches the Indus, ground not previously reached by any European. There I could survey the height on which, by a conjecture widely accepted for half a century, it had been proposed to locate the rock stronghold of Aornos, the scene of the most famous exploit of that campaign. But a careful examination of the topographical features had shown that they could not be reconciled with essential details recorded in the Greek accounts of that celebrated siege. It was a purely negative result, and the state of 'tribal politics' at the time and for nearly two decades afterwards precluded any attempt to search for the true site of Aornos higher up near the right bank of the Indus, in an area to which various considerations then pointed.

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[More information](#)

CH. I ATTEMPTS TO REACH UPPER SWĀT 3

It was not until after my return from my third Central-Asian expedition (1913–16), and after calm on the North-West Frontier had followed the stress of the war and the subsequent Afghān aggression, that I was able to resume my attempts to reach this goal. In December 1921 I made a rapid tour along the border of the Hazāra District where it approaches the left bank of the Indus, and tried to gather information bearing on a suggestion first made to me by my lamented friend Colonel R. A. Wauhope, R.E. Thirty years before, on one of the hard-fought Frontier campaigns of which the Black Mountains have been the scene, he had sighted from afar a high spur descending from the Swāt watershed to the right bank of the Indus, and there he thought that a likely location of Aornos, the 'Rock' Alexander had captured, might possibly be looked for. But it was only by actual exploration on the spot that the suggestion could be tested, and my hope of securing a chance for this was frustrated for several years by the political situation, more than usually disturbed, which had then arisen in that transborder region.

The great fertile valley of Swāt, now occupied by Pathān clans from the point where the great glacier-fed river breaks through the alpine gorges of Tōrwāl, can rarely have been long free from internecine feuds since the time, about the fifteenth century, when its present masters conquered it from the original inhabitants of Dard stock. But early in the last century a great Muhammadan saint, the famous Ākhund of Swāt, arose in the land. The spiritual authority exercised by him, until he passed away at a great age, was strong enough to moderate the usual fighting between the rival clans and to unite them whenever aggression threatened, whether from those ruling the plains of Peshawar or from the chiefs who for the time being were masters of the adjacent territories to the east or west. But since the great

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Ākhund's death in the seventies, aggravated dissension between the several tribal sections of Upper Swāt had steadily weakened whatever authority was exercised by the Miānguls, the descendants of the saint, and the inheritors, as guardians of his tomb, of a kind of spiritual supremacy.

The opportunity offered by this internal division was seized by neighbouring hill chiefs to gain control over the rich lands of Swāt. The ambitious ruler of Dīr, who held the valleys between Swāt and Chitrāl, was gradually overrunning the fertile tracts on the right bank of the river. The Nawāb of Amb and Darband, independent chief on the right bank of the Indus, was invading Bunēr and threatening to absorb the main valley of Swāt from the south-east. By a lucky chance my visit to Darband on the previously mentioned tour of 1921 had allowed me to become acquainted with the Nawāb's son-in-law 'Abdul Jabbār Khān, the descendant of a once influential family driven out of Swāt, just as he was setting out to lead the van of the inroad into Bunēr. A previous attempt of this adventurous young man to establish himself as the Nawāb's cat's-paw in the uppermost tract of Swāt had, indeed, ended in failure. But it had made him acquainted with that mountain spur higher up on the right bank of the Indus in which I was interested, and the information he was thus able to give me proved useful enough in the end.

But fortunately for the modern destinies of Swāt, and incidentally for my own plans of antiquarian exploration, the few years following that chance meeting saw the rise to power in Swāt of a very capable ruler in the person of Miāngul Gul-shāhzāda, the elder of the two surviving grandsons of the great Ākhund. He managed to attach firmly to himself some of the more dependable heads of clans and to organize a kind of feudal force, provided with adequate transport for food-supplies and thus capable of

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prolonged operations, an unusual thing in Pathān tribal warfare. Thus, after hard struggles, in the course of which his younger brother was killed, he ultimately succeeded in driving out both invaders.

Having thus become undisputed master of Upper Swāt he was soon able to extend his sway to Bunēr, always closely linked by tribal relations with Swāt, and also to the valleys that descend beyond the watershed range towards the Indus. It was not long before the Miāngul, now sole heir to the name, became known to the people by the simple designation of *Bādshāh* or 'ruler'. The new kingdom that his energy and sagacity had built up was soon extended to its proper geographical limits by the annexation of Tōrwāl, the alpine portion of the Swāt valley in which the original Dard population of the country, though converted to Islām, had maintained its independence and distinct language.

The peaceful consolidation of what had been won by the Bādshāh's successes had since been greatly facilitated by the close and friendly relations that he wisely fostered with the administration of the North-West Frontier Province. But even this fortunate concatenation of events might not have sufficed to enable me to realize my long-cherished plan of exploration, had not a kindly Fate during those years placed the Government's diplomatic relations with the new ruler of Swāt in charge of my old and ever helpful friend Colonel E. H. S. James, then Political Agent for Dīr, Swāt, and Chitrāl.

In the summer of 1925 I had written from England to Sir Norman Bolton, Chief Commissioner of the North-West Frontier Province, submitting my proposal. Acting under the instructions kindly given by him, Colonel James succeeded, largely through his personal influence with the ruler, in obtaining his consent to my visit to his territory and to my intended explorations. That I was to be allowed

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to extend them over the whole of his country instead of the comparatively small area to which my original proposal had applied made me feel still more grateful for the enlightened spirit in which my request had been met by the Bādshāh.

Once assured of his generous welcome, I felt confident that all necessary assistance would likewise be available from the British side, and it was soon forthcoming with a promptness that earned my warm gratitude. The Government of India, on the recommendation of Sir John Marshall, Director-General of Archaeology, readily sanctioned my employment on the proposed tour, together with a grant of Rs. 2,000 to meet incidental expenses. Colonel W. J. Keen, another valued old friend just then officiating at the head of the North-West Frontier administration, greatly encouraged me by his kind personal interest in the enterprise. The Survey of India, which had so often helped to make my travels geographically fruitful, readily agreed to facilitate the survey of a region that was for the most part practically unmapped or very imperfectly known from native route reports, by lending the services of one of its trained Indian Surveyors, together with all necessary instruments.

All this contributed to keep my spirits buoyant during the few months which had to be allowed to pass before the actual start. I knew well that climatic conditions would, until towards the close of winter, greatly hamper or altogether prevent operations on the comparatively high ground to which our explorations were to be extended. On the other hand, I could not altogether keep my thoughts from the risk involved in delay. For who that knows something of 'tribal politics' on the Frontier, could ever feel quite assured that conditions would remain quiet for some months ahead in that volcanic belt beyond the border? How often

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has it seen the abrupt rise and fall of chiefships, like waves suddenly thrown up by a submarine convulsion!

Fortunately, to Colonel Keen's experienced eye, the 'political barometer' on that side of the Frontier stood at 'fair' for the time being, and his encouraging report lessened the strain of waiting. Moreover, there was plenty of work to keep me occupied during those few months at the capital of New Delhi. Patiently I had to wade through hundreds and hundreds of large proof pages of *Innermost Asia*, the detailed account of my third Central-Asian expedition, and with equal patience to watch the steady progress made in the setting up, photographic reproduction, &c., of all the mural paintings that I had succeeded in bringing away from ruined Buddhist shrines in distant Turkestan.

But great was the relief when by the middle of February I was free to shake the dust of the new Indian capital off my feet—and of its overabundant office files off my mind—in order to gain Kashmir, the familiar base of all my archaeological enterprises. It was cheering to find myself once again at Srinagar, even though the great valley had shed all its verdure for wintry bareness, and though those old friends, the great surrounding snow-covered mountains, were hidden by low clouds and mists during most of my stay. After a year and a half spent in 'civilization', whether Western or its Indian imitation, many practical preparations were needed to get my camp ready for field work. But the kindness of my old friend Dr. Ernest Neve, the distinguished head of that great institution, the Church Missionary Society's Hospital, had provided warm and spacious quarters, and I had the ready assistance of old retainers. So after a fortnight's toil, in which office *paperasses* still had a large share, I set out on March 4th for the Frontier.

A day's motor drive of nearly two hundred miles by the Jhelam Valley Road down to Rawalpindi brought welcome

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rest and warmth. There, at the great military centre of the Panjāb, I was met by Tōrabāz Khān, the hardy Surveyor whom Colonel R. H. Phillimore, Director of the Frontier Circle of the Survey of India, had kindly helped to select for topographical work on my journey. There, too, I was able to secure the loan of the modest armament, four army revolvers, which had suggested itself as a desirable complement to our outfit, in view of the tribal *milieu* I was about to enter. The necessary indent order duly applied for at Delhi had, through some red-tape misadventure, failed to reach the Rawalpindi Arsenal in time. But fortunately a kind friend, Major M. A. L. Gompertz, then on the staff of the Northern Command, was prepared to act as *deus ex machina*, and the issue was duly obtained. So the eyes of my orderly, Shehra Khān, a demobilized veteran from the Salt Range, glistened with pride as he moved off with us to the station in charge of the precious 'small arms and ammunition' to take the train for Peshawar.

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CHAPTER II

THE START FOR SWĀT

THEY were a delightful three days that I was able to spend at the Frontier capital after my arrival from Kashmīr. Haunts familiar from the years that I had been stationed there looked doubly attractive in the glorious sunshine that followed the pouring rain in which I had travelled from Rawalpindi. Nor could I have wished to see the bare but beautiful hills that surround the great valley from more pleasant quarters than those which I enjoyed, thanks to Colonel Keen's hospitable welcome to Government House (Fig. 2). They were busy days, too; for in succession came Afrāz-gul Khān, my old travel companion; next Corporal 'Abdul Ghafūr, my new 'handy man' lent from the 1st King George's Own Sappers and Miners; and lastly Tōrabāz Khān, the Afrīdī Surveyor. There was plenty to discuss and arrange at this little mobilization. It was hard for Afrāz-gul, who as a youngster had won his spurs on my third Central-Asian expedition, to renounce his eager wish to join me once more. But he was already under orders to start with Major K. Mason on his Karakoram explorations and could now help only in so far as his own brave example and its rewards would *encourager les autres*.

Nor was it easy to find time for the discussion of all the points connected with my projected tour, first with Colonel Keen, and then also with Mr. H. A. F. Metcalfe, the Political Agent for Swāt, Dīr, and Chitrāl, who was directly concerned with the preparatory arrangements. Mr. Metcalfe had opportunely come down from his post on the Malakand partly for 'political' business and partly, I venture to think, to let Mrs. Metcalfe benefit by the little distractions of the 'Peshawar week' just then in progress. After a recent year of exile at the Kābul Legation they had both thoroughly

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earned the change. To add to the pleasant impressions of my short stay, there arrived for one night Sir Francis Humphrys, H.B.M.'s Minister at Kābul, and Lady Humphrys, both friends of old Frontier times, on their way through to the Viceroy at Delhi.

So it was almost like a rest when, after all my impedimenta had been dispatched and carpets for distant friends in England bought and packed, I myself, on the morning of March 9th, was whirled off in Mr. Metcalfe's comfortable car for the Malakand. Right through the width of the big Yusufzai plain it took me past Nowshera, now a big Cantonment, and pretty tree-girt Mardān. Those picturesque hills of classical form and bareness, rising like rocky islands above the plain, greeted me once again as they had in April 1906, when I was starting on my second expedition to Chinese Turkestan. How I wished that I had more time to feast my eyes upon them and the verdant expanse of fertile land below! Two hours had sufficed to bring us to Dargai, where the railway, now developed to full broad gauge, aptly ends within the walls and wire entanglements of a prim and somewhat bleak fort.

Then up to the pass the car rushed by that serpentine road which I well remembered seeing in the year that it was built, immediately after the Malakand had been fought for and taken in 1895. But there was a notable change in the landscape. In the valley below, once so barren, a new river leapt and foamed: the Upper Swāt Canal, which, brought through the range by a tunnel over two miles long, now carries fertility to the eastern half of the Yusufzai plain, an emblem of the Pax Britannica. Now that I saw this wonderful canal for the first time 'in being', I did not wonder that its fame had reached so far away as the foot of the T'ien-shan, where in 1908 I had heard honest Turkī cultivators inquiring about it with incredulity.

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1. VIEW FROM POLITICAL AGENT'S HOUSE, MALAKAND FORT, TOWARDS LOWER SWAT VALLEY.

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