

Battle of Hydaspes

The Battle of Hydaspes was a decisive battle fought between the armies of Alexander the Great and the King Porus (also known as Poru, Paurava) in 326 BC.

It ended in a victory for Alexander's Macedonian Army. The battle is significant for opening up the Indian subcontinent to Ancient Greek political and social influences.

This article will give details about the Battle of Hydaspes (modern-day Jhelum river) within the context of the Civil Services Examination.

Candidates can read about important battles in the history of India from the links mentioned below:

Background of the Battle of Hydaspes

After Alexander defeated the last of the Achaemenid Empire's forces in 328 BC, he began a new campaign to further extend his empire towards India in 327 BC. After fortifying Bacteria (Modern-day Afghanistan) with 10,000 men, Alexander commenced his invasion of India through the Khyber Pass

Whilst possessing a much larger army, at the battle, an estimated 40,000 infantry and 5,000 cavalry crossed the river in time to engage the enemy. During this battle, Alexander suffered heavy losses compared to his earlier victories.

The primary Greek column entered the Khyber Pass, but a smaller force under the personal command of Alexander went through the northern route, taking the fortress of Aornos (modern-day Pir-Sar) along the way—a place of mythological significance to the Greeks as, according to legend, Herakles had failed to occupy it when he campaigned in India.

In early spring of the next year, Alexander formed an alliance with Taxiles (also known as Ambhi Kumar), the King of Taxila. They combined their forces against Taxiles's neighbour, the King of Hydaspes, King Porus, who had chosen to spurn Alexander's command for him to surrender and was preparing for war.

Events during the Battle of Hydaspes

Alexander fixed his camp in the vicinity of the town of Jhelum on the right banks of the river. In the spring of 326 BC, Porus drew up on the south bank of the Jhelum River to repel any crossing. The Jhelum River was deep and fast enough that any attempt at a crossing would probably doom the attacking force.

Eventually the two forces met and arrayed themselves for the battle. The Indians were poised with cavalry on both flanks, fronted by their chariots, while their center comprising infantry with war elephants stationed every fifty feet in front of them, to deter the Macedonian cavalry. The Indian war

elephants were heavily armoured and had castle-like howdahs on their back carrying a trio of archers and javelin men.

The Pauravan soldiers were dressed in flamboyantly hued outfits with steel helmets, bright scarves and baldrics, and wielded axes, lances and maces. Porus, eschewing the usual tradition of Indian kings fighting from a chariot, was mounted atop his tallest war elephant. This animal in particular was not equipped with a howdah, as the king was clad in chain mail armour and hence had no need of the additional protection of a tower.

Alexander, noticing that Porus's disposition was strongest in the center, decided to attack with his cavalry first on the flanks, having his phalanx hold back until the Indian cavalry had been neutralized. The Macedonian heavy infantry phalanx were outnumbered 1:5 against the Indian infantry. However the latter were at significant disadvantage in close combat due to their lack of armour and the long reach of their opponent's sarissas. Even their heavy armour-piercing bows were inaccurate because of the slippery ground, though the muddy ground was also an advantage to the lighter-armored Indians.

The war elephants now advanced against the Macedonian cavalry, only to be confronted by the Macedonian phalanx. The powerful beasts caused heavy losses among the Macedonian foot, impaling many men with their steel-clad tusks and heaving some of them into the air before pulverizing them, and trampling and disorganizing their dense lines.

Nevertheless, the Macedonian infantry resisted the attack bravely, with light infantry who tossed javelins at the elephants' mahouts and eyes while the heavy infantry attempted to hamstring the elephants with the two-sided axes.

Finally, the Macedonian infantry locked their shields and advanced upon the confused enemy mass, while the Macedonian cavalry charged from the rear in a classic "hammer and anvil" manoeuvre, putting the entire Paurava army in rout.

Aftermath of the Battle of Hydaspes

Following the battle, King Porus was brought before Alexander and was asked how he wished to be treated, Porus replied "Treat me as a king would treat another king". Impressed, Alexander indeed treated him like a king, allowing him to retain his lands.

In 326 BC, the army of Alexander approached the boundaries of the Nanda Empire. His army, exhausted from the continuous campaigning and concerned at the prospect of facing yet another gigantic Indian army, demanded that they should return to the west. This happened at the Hyphasis (modern Beas).

Historians do not consider that this action by Alexander's troops represented a mutiny but called it an increase in military unrest amongst the troops, which forced Alexander to finally give in. Instead of

immediately turning back, however, he ordered the army to march south, along the Indus, securing the banks of the river as the borders of his empire.

During the later rule of the Maurya Empire, Chanakya took the Battle of the Hydaspes as a lesson and highlighted the need for military training before battle. The first Mauryan emperor, Chandragupta, maintained a standing army where chariots played a lesser role in battle