
UNIT 14 ALEXANDER'S INVASION OF THE NORTHWEST*

Structure

- 14.0 Objectives
- 14.1 Introduction
- 14.2 Sources
- 14.3 Alexander of Macedonia
- 14.4 Arrian's *Indike*
- 14.5 Alexander's Successors and Seleucus Nicator
- 14.6 Impact of Alexander's Invasion
- 14.7 Summary
- 14.8 Key Words
- 14.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 14.10 Suggested Readings

14.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, you will know about:

- Alexander's invasion of the north-western India;
- The different sources about Alexander and their significance;
- Alexander's battle with various principalities of India including Porus;
- Arrian's *Indike*;
- The impact of Alexander's invasion on India; and
- Megasthenes, who was a Greek ambassador to Chandragupta Maurya's court.

14.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit you learnt about the *Janapadas* and *Mahajanapadas* which emerged in northern India in the sixth century BCE. In this unit we will focus on the north-western region of the Indian subcontinent and learn how it became a vibrant seat of activity due to events related to Alexander's invasion in the fourth century BCE.

14.2 SOURCES

The period of Alexander is well attested by a number of sources. At first instance, these sources seem impressive and remarkable. There are full length histories of the reign by Arrian and Curtius Rufus, a formal biography by Plutarch, a whole book of Diodorus Siculus' *Bibliotheca*, and substantial passages in the later books of Strabo's *Geography*. However, despite giving an impression of being substantial, their value as primary sources is put to question as they are all late. For instance, Diodorus's works are dated to the third quarter of the first century

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BCE; Plutarch and Arrian in the second century CE. Thus, there is a gap of two to three centuries between Alexander's death and the first connected narratives of his reign. Some of these works are accused of being imaginatively fictitious, preoccupied with rhetoric, full of trivial details, grossly exaggerated, and are without checks to test their authenticity. Despite all these handicaps, scholars have been able to sift significant information that is both credible and useful in the context of India. Arrian's account is the most sober rendition of Alexander's reign. Arrian was a simple soldier who paid his tribute to the memory of Alexander by selecting the best possible sources and reproducing them faithfully. His seven-book '*History of Alexander*' was based on the accounts of Ptolemy, Aristobulus, Nearchus and Eratosthenes. Ptolemy, Aristobulus and Nearchus were all eyewitnesses to the campaigns of Alexander and were sometimes active participants. The companion work *Indike* deals with India and the voyage of Alexander's fleet in the Southern Ocean and is based on the sources such as Eratosthenes, Megasthenes and Nearchus.

Some Prominent Classical Figures Associated with Alexander

Quintus Curtius Rufus- (probably 1st century CE). He is the author of the only extant Latin monograph on Alexander the Great, usually called *Historiae Alexandri Magnii*, the liveliest account of Alexander's exploits in Asia.

Plutarch- Plutarches in Greek (born 46 CE), was a biographer and author whose works strongly influenced the evolution of history writing in Europe from 16th-19th century.

Strabo- (Born 64 BCE). He was a Greek geographer and historian whose '*Geography*' is the only extant work covering the whole range of peoples and countries known to both Greeks and Romans during the reign of Augustus (27 BCE-114 CE)

Aristobulus of Cassandreia. He accompanied Alexander on his campaigns. He served throughout as an architect and military engineer.

Diodorus Siculus- (1st Century BCE) Greek historian

Nearchus- (d. 312 BCE). He was officer in the Macedonian army under Alexander, who on Alexander's orders, sailed from the Hydaspes river in western India to the Persian Gulf and up the Euphrates to Babylon.

Eratosthenes- Full name- Eratosthenes of Cyrene (b. 276 BCE) was a Greek scientific writer, astronomer and poet.

14.3 ALEXANDER OF MACEDONIA

In the sixth century BCE, India's northwest was a site of conflict between various principalities. Kambojas, Gandharas and Madras fought with each other. Since there was an absence of an overarching powerful kingdom, the principalities of the north-west could not be organized into one kingdom. Due to its political disunity, the Achaemenian kings of Persia were attracted to this region. In 516 BCE, the Achaemenian ruler Darius invaded the north-west and annexed Punjab, west of the Indus, and Sindh. At this time Iran had a total of 28 *satrapies* of which India's northwest constituted the twentieth province. The Indian *satrapy* included the Sindh, the north-west frontier and part of the Punjab that lay to the west of the Indus. It paid a hefty tribute in gold which accounted for one-third of

the total revenue Iran received from its Asian provinces. Indian provinces provided mercenaries for the Persian armies fighting against the Greeks in the fifth century BCE. This part of the Indian territory continued to be a part of the Iranian empire till Alexander invaded it in 330 BCE.

Iranian invasions paved for the development of cultural exchanges between Iran and the northwest. A new script was introduced by the Iranian scribes called the Kharoshthi script. It was written from right to left like the Arabic. It was derived from Aramaic, then current in the Achaemenid empire. Trade also existed between the two regions as corroborated by the finds of Persian type of coins in the North West Frontier Province.

Macedonia

There was a distinction in the ancient Greek world between those who lived south of the Mount Olympus and those who lived to its north. The people who lived to the north of the mountains were called the Macedonians. The latter were called 'Makedones', a Greek word in origin. As late as by the end of the fourth century BCE, the Greeks referred to them as 'Barbarians' indicating that they did not see them as Greeks.

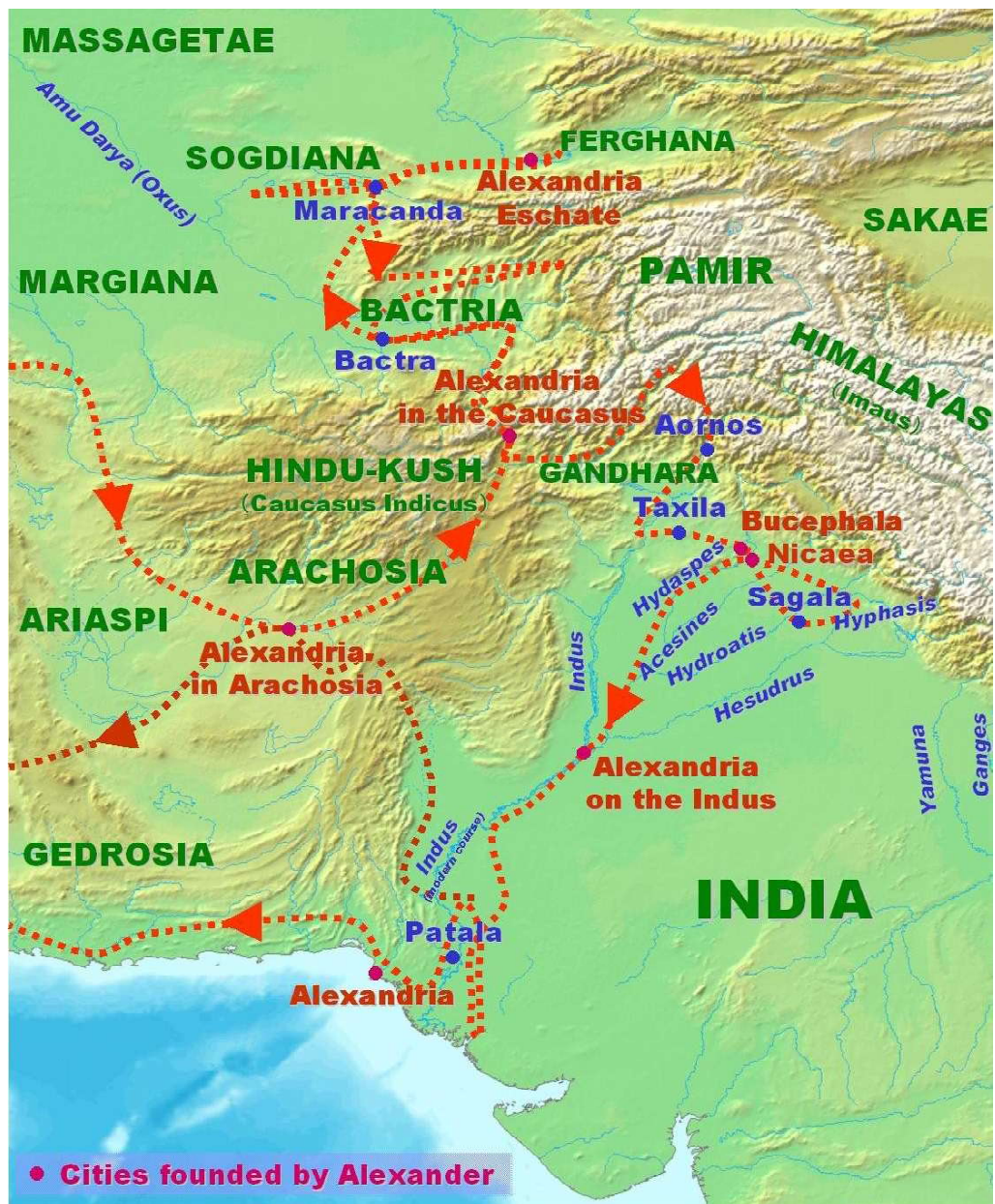
Macedonia is sometimes called Macedon. It was an ethnically mixed region in the ancient past, surrounded by Greek states to the south and tribal kingdoms in other directions. In the north and the west, the mountainous terrain of the Balkans defined the landscape, while the southern region was fertile alluvium. Both these regions were mired in conflict with each other and it was Philip, the father of Alexander, who united the territories for the first time. In the fourth century BCE, Macedonians and Greeks were engaged in ethnic rivalry. The two people were distinct and separate. It was Philip II who consolidated his control over the Greeks in 337 BCE. Though Alexander mistakenly is referred to as a Greek, he was not! He was always wary of the Greeks. The Greeks were more sophisticated than the Macedonians and did not share the same cultural heritage.

Alexander was born in July 356 BCE. He was the son of Philip II, the ruler of Macedonia. By 337 BCE Philip II had consolidated his control over the Greeks by creating a union of Greek states called the League of the Corinth. The Union was bound together under the hegemony of the Macedonian king and owed allegiance to the League. Among his many exploits, his campaigns in Persia are noteworthy. Philip announced his intention to invade Persia in order to avenge on behalf of the Athenians for having faced sufferings and destruction to their temples during the Persian war and to liberate the Greek cities of Asia Minor. He was assassinated in 336 BCE. Upon his death the Greek states revolted from the Macedonian rule. These were suppressed by Alexander after his accession. Alexander invaded Persia in 334 BCE with a mighty army and defeated king Darius of Persia.

A. K. Narain citing Tarn's work says that since India was part of the Iranian empire, Alexander's interest in India was the inevitable result of his completion of his conquest of the Persian Empire. However, Arrian says that Alexander was more ambitious than that and he harboured a zeal to conquer India. Had it not been so, he would not have crossed the Indus as the Indus river was the boundary between India and Ariana (a possession of Persia). Ariana was situated to the

west of India and at this time was under the possession of Persians. River Indus was the eastern most boundary of Darius I's empire.

Among his many victories, Alexander's campaigns in India are the most noteworthy. In 327 BCE, Alexander marched from Bactra through the Hindukush and advanced towards the plains of the Indus. One section of his advancing force secured the communication route of the Hindukush and the other section under his own control entered Swat. He subjugated Swat after fighting fierce battles with the people of these mountain tracts. In 326 BCE, the two forces met at the Indus and after crossing the Indus he marched to Taxila. The political condition in the north-west was suitable for Alexander as it was divided into small independent monarchies and tribal republics. Among the more famous was Porus, who ruled a kingdom between the Jhelum and the Chenab. The communication between Porus and Alexander when they met has become legendary. Coming back to the Indus, Alexander crossed it and was met by Ambhi, the prince of Taxila. Both Ambhi and Porus together could have defeated



Map 14.1: Conquests of Alexander in India. Credit: The Loeb Classical Library, Arrian Anabasis of Alexander'. Source: Wikimedia Commons

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alexander_Conquests_In_India.jpg

Alexander but they could not put up a joint front. Ambhi did not oppose Alexander and welcomed him with lavish gifts. Alexander decided to leave his kingdom in peace but appointed Phillipus as a *Satrap* and left a garrison there. Alexander was keen to meet Porus who had refused to submit to him and proceeded to Jhelum (Hydaspes). The weather conditions were very unfavourable as the entire region was covered under snow. He faced great adversity but managed to cross the Jhelum and mounted an attack on Porus' army which was stationed at the opposite bank.



Fig.14.1: 'Alexander and Porus'. A Painting by Charles Le Brun Depicting Alexander and Porus (Puru) during the Battle of Hydaspes. Credit: <http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/le-brun/>, Source: Wikimedia Commons

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Le_Brun,_Alexander_and_Porus.jpg

Porus was wounded and retreated (Figure 14.1). Alexander was very impressed by his military prowess and persona and decided to reinstate Porus who then became his ally. Alexander's victory was momentous, and he celebrated it by the founding of two cities-Nicaea and Bucephala (Map 14.1). The latter was founded after his horse Bucephalus who had died due to exhaustion following the battle. Alexander also issued a commemorative coinage at a mint in Babylon (Figure 14.2).



Fig.14.2: Victory Coin of Alexander the Great minted in Babylon in c. 322 BCE, following his Campaigns in the Indian Subcontinent. Obverse: Alexander being Crowned by Nike. Reverse: Alexander attacking King Porus on his Elephant. Silver. Credit: British Museum. Source: Wikipedia Commons.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alexander_victory_coin_Babylon_silver_c_322_BCE.jpg

Alexander continued his march into the Indian subcontinent and crossed the Chenab and Ravi (Acesines and Hydraotes). He defeated many principalities and fought a fierce battle with the Kathas of Panjab. The Kathas did not submit easily and fought valiantly. Alexander was able to capture Sagala, the hill fortress of Kathas and razed it to ground. Thereafter he was informed by a nearby king about the might of the Nandas, east of Beas. His information was corroborated by Porus too. Alexander wanted to proceed but his troops refused to advance (Figure 14.3).



Fig. 14.3: Alexander's Troops Beg to Return Home from India. Plate 3 of 11 by Antonio Tempesta of Florence, 1608. Credit: "alexanderstomb.com". Source: Wikimedia Commons. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alexander_troops_beg_to_return_home_from_India.jpg)

Hence, he was forced to return to Jhelum. He handed all the country between Jhelum and Beas to Porus and sailed down Jhelum for his return journey. Below the confluence of Jhelum and the Chenab, he fought his last important campaign against the Malavas (Malloi). The republican states of Malavas and Kshudrakas wished to form a confederacy against Alexander but the latter was successful in preventing Kshudrakas from joining with the Malavas. The Malavas fought bravely but were defeated. The Kshudrakas also could not stand anywhere before Alexander.

It is believed that during the last days of Alexander in Babylon, Chanakya and Chandragupta Maurya along with Porus attempted to unify the Punjab. Later the Mauryas established themselves by bringing a major onslaught upon the Nandas of the Ganga valley.

Three years after his campaigns in India, in 324 BCE, Alexander was back at Susa in Persia. In the following year he died at Babylon. Upon being asked at his death bed as whom his empire should be bequeathed to, he supposedly replied 'to the strongest'. Thereafter ensued a long series of struggles between his generals and governors for the control of his vast empire. The struggle among the Diadochi, the successors, was a prelude to the establishment of the Hellenistic suzerainty in the region. By 317 BCE, even the Greek outposts in India were given up.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Write a note on the sources which have been used to reconstruct Alexander's invasion of India.

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- 2) Write a few lines about Alexander's invasion of the Northwest India.

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Fig.14.4: Ptolemy Coin with Alexander, Wearing an Elephant Scalp, Symbol of his Conquests in South Asia. Credit: Marie-Lan Nguyen (2011). Source: Wikimedia Commons https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tetradrachm_Ptolemaeus_I_obverse_CdM_Paris_FGM2157.jpg

Arrian

Lucius Flavius Arrianus or Arrian, as he is usually called in the English language – was born in Nicomedia, one of the Greek towns in the Roman empire, between 85 and 90 CE. It is important to remember that all accounts about Alexander date from three centuries after the death of Alexander. All these accounts are based on now lost primary accounts which are flawed and biased to begin with. For the events between 334- 323 BC, scholars depend on Arrian's account.

Arrian was a commander of a large army in the service of the Roman Empire. He had literary leanings and authored texts on hunting, cavalry tactics and wrote the biography of Alexander. He claimed that for his work on

Alexander, he had relied on the most trustworthy of the primary sources viz. Ptolemy and Aristobulus, who were part of the Alexander's staff in his campaign to the east. He authored *Anabasis* ('Journey up country') of Alexander, which consisted of seven books. *Indike* (his book on India) was a shorter companion work of *Anabasis*.

Source: Alexander the Great. Selections from Arrian, Diodorus, Plutarch and Quintus Curtius. Edited by James Romm. Hackett Publishing Co. Inc. Indianapolis/Cambridge

14.4 ARRIAN'S INDIKE

Arrian described himself as a philosopher, a statesman, a soldier and a historian. He is best known for the Asiatic expedition of Alexander; whose narrative is remarkable in accuracy and clarity. His work on India, *Indike*, is written in the Ionic dialect. It consists of three parts: the first part gives a general description of India, based chiefly on the accounts of India by Megasthenes and Eratosthenes. The second is an account of Nearchus' journey on the Indus and the third contains proofs showing that the southern parts of the world were not suited to habitation due to excessive heat.

The first part of *Indike* has been translated by J W Mc Crindle and is richly supplemented with notes regarding history, geography, archaeology and the identification of Greek proper names with Sanskrit originals.



Map 14.2: Asia in 323 BCE. The Nanda Empire in relation to Alexander's Empire and neighbours. Credit: Talessman at English Wikipedia. Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Asia_323bc.jpg)

Based on the accounts of Megasthenes and Nearchus, Arrian manages to weave succinct and interesting details about India. He begins by describing the boundaries of 'India Proper' which he tells lies to the east of the Indus. He delineates the boundary of the lands of India by mentioning Hindukush in the north, river Indus in the west and Pattala in the south. (Alexander Cunningham identifies Pattala with Nirankol or Haidarabad. The old name was Patasila. He says that Patala is the designation bestowed by the brahmanas on all the provinces in the west, in antithesis to Prasiaka [the eastern realm] in the Ganges land. For Patala is the mythological name in Sanskrit of the underworld and consequently of the land of the west)

Mc Crindle feels that the measurements given by Strabo are more accurate than those of Arrian. However, Cunningham remarks that Arrian's measurements are in close agreement with the actual size of the country and this is very remarkable as it shows that the Indians, even at that early date in their history, had a very accurate knowledge of the form and extent of their native land.

His account of the different tributaries of Indus and Ganges, tribes of India, castes of India has been borrowed from Megasthenes' description. Arrian writes much detail on rivers, mentions the barbarous Indians of old times, their dependence on nomadism; how Dionysos, the conqueror of India who came even before the mighty Alexander, taught the Indians agriculture, introduced them to the plough and laws.

Arrian also spends some time in describing Pataliputra which he calls 'the greatest city of Palimbothra'. (Alexander Cunningham says that Strabo and Pliny agree with Arrian in calling the people of Palibothra by the name Prasii which modern writers have referred to as the Sanskrit *Prachya* or 'eastern'. But Cunningham feels that *Prasii* is the Greek form of *Palasa* which is the actual and well-known name of Magadha, of which Palibothra was the capital)

Arrian writes about the absence of slavery in India, modes of hunting elephants, and of course of gold-digging ants which he himself is not sure about since Megasthenes' account of gold-digging ants was based on hearsay.

14.5 ALEXANDER'S SUCCESSORS AND SELEUCUS NICATOR

Alexander after his retreat from India and Persia did not organise his conquests in any systematic fashion. As part of his arrangements, most of the conquered states were restored to their rulers who accepted his authority. His territorial possessions were divided into three parts and placed under Greek governors. Soon destabilisation and anarchy marked the period. Successor kingdoms emerged under the various *satraps* and Macedonia lost its importance.

At Alexander's death, the number of *satrapies* was twenty. By 308 BCE they terminated all contacts with Macedonian kingdom and coalesced into three separate groupings under Antigonus, Seleucus and Ptolemy. Seleucus Nicator was at the helm at the *satrapy* of Babylonia. After being thrown out of Babylon by Antigonus, Seleucus reclaimed it and was successful in expanding his dominions right down to the Indus, placing all the eastern *satraps* under his sway. In the meantime, Chandragupta Maurya was busy capturing the Ganga

plains. He proceeded to the north-west to exploit the power vacuum created by Alexander's departure. Once he reached the Indus, he came face to face with Seleucus Nicator, who had a stronghold in that region. The battle between the two was won by Chandragupta as evident from the terms of the treaty of 303 BCE. The Seleucid territories of eastern Afghanistan, Makran and Baluchistan were ceded to Chandragupta. In return Seleucus obtained 500 elephants. Seleucus also gave his daughter in marriage to Chandragupta. With this victory, the routes and important regions of northwest region came under Mauryan control.

Friendly relations seem to have been established between Sandracottos, as Chandragupta was referred to by the Greeks, and the Seleucids. Seleucus's envoy Megasthenes spent time at the court of Chandragupta and left an account entitled *Indica*. The original account is lost, and paraphrases of this text are preserved in the writings of later writers such as Diodorus, Strabo and Arrian. Friendly relations were carefully cultivated between the two. Several Greek ambassadors visited the court such as Megasthenes, Daimachos, Hegesandros.

14.6 IMPACT OF ALEXANDER'S INVASION

As mentioned earlier, Alexander's campaigns in India were not as significant as Alexander would want to believe. In fact, R. K. Mukherjee believes that Alexander's campaigns in India were not an example of brilliant military achievement as he did not come face to face with any powerful Indian monarch. The effects of his campaigns were at best indirect. According to A.K. Narain, the people of the northwest realized that small states and principalities were no match to the disciplined and organized campaigns of Alexander. Chandragupta was quick to realise the importance of erecting a huge empire. He went about to unite the whole of Punjab and later, northern India after overthrowing the Nandas. He not only added the southern states but also integrated the four *satrapies* of Aria, Arachosia, Gedrosia and Paropamisadae which were ceded by Seleucus to Chandragupta after the demise of Alexander.

Friendly contacts were maintained between the Greeks and Indians. According to a Greek writer, Athenaeus, an Indian ruler Amitrochates wrote to Antiochus I of Syria to send him sweet wine, figs and a sophist to which the Syrian king replied that he would happily send sweet wine and figs, but a sophist cannot be sold in Greece. Stabo refers to the sending of Deimachus to the court of Allitrochades, son of Sandrokkottos; Pliny mentions another envoy, Dionysius, from Ptolemy II of Egypt. Besides this, Ashoka also maintained close relations with the *yavanas* of West Asia and Egypt. His thirteenth rock edict, the version of which has been found in Greek at Kandahar, refers to his *Dhammavijaya* in the kingdoms of Antiochus II of Syria, Ptolemy Philadelphus II of Egypt, Antigonos Gomatas of Macedonia, Magas of Cyrene and Alexander of Corinth. Ashoka is also supposed to have arranged for the medical treatment of cattle and men in the kingdom of Antiochus II and his neighbours. Not only does his description of himself as *Devanampiya Piyadassi* reflect the practice of deification current among Greek kings in the Hellenic west, but also the style of his edicts were influenced by the edicts of Darius. Kautilya and Megasthenes both refer to a state department looking after the welfare of the foreigners who were mostly *Yavanas* and Persians. Taxila, Sarnath, Basarh and Patna have yielded terracotta motifs with distinct Hellenistic influence.

Alexander's invasion also allowed for the establishment of Greek paramouncy in Bactria, and in the regions that are called today as Afghanistan and Pakistan. Some forty-one rulers of *Yavana* descent are known from coins. Strabo refers to these kings as someone who subdued large number of tribes, more than that by Alexander. Menander and Demetrius, son of Euthydemus, the king of Bactrians, were the most notable. The Indo Greek kings were equally influenced by Indian religion and culture. Many of their coins carried Indian legends. An inhabitant of Taxila, Heliodorus, son of Dion, was an envoy from the court of Antialcidas, an Indo-Greek king, to the court of Indian king Bhagabhadra. The details are known from the Heliodorius Besnagar Inscription (Besnagar near Bhilsa in Madhya Pradesh), which mentions that he was a follower of the Bhagawat sect of Hinduism. Some of the coins of Menander carry the image of wheel which scholars believe is the Buddhist emblem of *Dharmachakra*, the wheel of righteousness.

Alexander's campaigns in the north-west India brought this part of the world in direct contact with the Greek world. Land and routes by sea opened up through which Greek merchants and craftsmen came to have access to these faraway lands. Greek settlements were established in this region for example, Alexandria in the Kabul region, Boukephala on the Jhelum, Alexandria in Sindh. Alexander also initiated geographical explorations of the harbours and coast from the mouth of the Indus to that of Euphrates. His historians have left valuable information of geographical merit. Besides providing a corrective to Indian chronology, Greek accounts tell us about Indian practices such as the *sati*, sale of girls in the market place by poor parents and good breed of oxen. In fact, some 2, 00,000 oxen were sent from India by Alexander to Macedonia. The Greeks also found that Indians excelled at the art of carpentry and they built chariots, boats and ships.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Write a few lines about Arrian's *Indike*.

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- 2) What was the impact of Alexander's invasion on India?

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14.7 SUMMARY

In this Unit, we learnt that India's northwest was a region which attracted the attention of invaders quite early in Indian history. After the Achaemenid invasions, Alexander conquered the principalities and kingdoms of the north-western India.

He was successful in subjugating the Indian powers despite the valiant struggle that was put against him. He was able to cross Hydaspes (Jhelum) at night and met Porus who was defeated but was so impressed by his valour that he allowed Porus to retain his kingdom. Alexander was not able to go beyond Chenab and Ravi (Acesines, Hydraotes) as his troops refused to march any further. We also learnt that the Arrian's accounts are the main source of Alexander's campaigns. Arrian has left in his *Indike* some factual, some fanciful account of India which is based on the account of other travellers. Among Alexander's successors, the most notable was Seleucus Nicator who fought with Chandragupta Maurya but was defeated. He sent Megasthenes, a Greek Ambassador, to Mauryan king's court, who has left an interesting account of his reign in his *Indica*.

14.8 KEY WORDS

- Achaemenids** : Achaemenian dynasty who are also called Achaemenids. (Persian- Hakhamanishiya) (559-330 BC). Ancient Iranian dynasty whose kings founded and ruled the Achaemenid empire.
- Diadochi** : According to the English Oxford Dictionary, diadochi refers to the six generals of Alexander the Great- Antigonos, Antipater, Cassander, Lysimachus, Ptolemy, Seleucus among whom his empire was eventually divided after his death in 323 BCE. It is derived from the Greek word *diadokhoi*, meaning, 'successor'.
- Hellenistic** : Comes from the word 'Hellazein' which means 'to speak Greek or identify with the Greeks'. The word pertains to ancient Greece.
- Satrapy** : Governors of the provinces of the ancient Persian empire.
- Yavanas** : In early Indian literature refers to either a Greek or another foreigner.

14.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) See Section 14.2
- 2) See Section 14.3

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) See Section 14.4
- 2) See Section 14.6

14.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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