

# The Battle of The Hydaspes

## The Crossing

“Only three hundred rafts? It’ll take us all night!” Peithon exclaimed.

Coenus nodded vigorously and shrugged. His lips were pressed tightly together and his nostrils flared with each breath.

“It’ll take at least five or more trips back and forth for each raft. Your men had better start work.”

“It’s still light,” spat out Coenus and his exasperated expression momentarily silenced Peithon.

Tension makes different people react in different ways. For some like Peithon, it loosens the tongue and gives rise to an irresistible need to talk, joke, and speculate. Others, it drives into silence. Coenus was clearly of the second type.

The two of them stood at the feet of the huge cliffs that rose straight off the sides of the riverbank. Scattered among the reeds and bushes around them, were the bits and pieces of a vast riverine armada. Sections of the huge oared galleys, boats cut into

two, and skin floats stuffed with hay were everywhere, along with Coenus's men who squatted patiently among the bushes in groups of twos and threes. They were waiting for night to fall, after which, they would drag the separate sections to the clear, sandy strip along the riverbank, and get to work on putting them back together.

Peithon took it all in with a sense of disbelief. Coenus appeared particularly jumpy, his neck twisting this way and that, his mouth opening and closing, as he mumbled soundlessly to himself. Tension precluded all conversation, till Peithon couldn't stand it any longer.

"Well, you still managed to get enough hay for the rafts, eh?" he started again.

Coenus now turned sharply upon him.

"It's going to be a hell of a task," he said through gritted teeth. "Look, do me a favour, will you? Send one of your men up and send us down, maybe say six more *lochos* of infantry—we'll need more men."

"I'll see to it myself," said Peithon and saluted. It gave him something to do and kept the uncertainty of it all from getting to him.

Besides, he knew when he was not wanted. He had come down to the riverbank to check out the situation for himself and calm his nerves, but his friend wasn't helping. So Peithon took his anxiety elsewhere.

Meanwhile, the huge number of men and horses waiting on the other side of the cliffs, grappled with the same problem in different ways. They were sprawled all over the headlands of Mangal Dev, hidden from view of the opposite bank by the rising cliffs in front, as they waited patiently under a rapidly darkening sky. Most congregated together in groups, compulsively exchanging jokes and rumour, while others preferred the company of their own thoughts. Some of the steely-nerved veterans had even stretched out on the ground, rolled up in their cloaks and gone to sleep. Others were not as lucky.

They sprawled, sat, or stood around, all over the gently sloping hillside, jammed tightly together for as far as the eye could see.

Messengers picked through this thronging mass, setting off a volley of curses and exclamations everywhere they went. Above them, the sky was covered with dark, heavy clouds. Loud peals of thunder rolled across the heavens and a lively breeze started blowing. Not a single raindrop had fallen, but it looked as if a terrific storm was brewing. The superstitious lost themselves in prayer.

Lying sprawled out on the grass, along with the rest of his unit, was Private Philotas. His cuirass and helmet were undone and his sarissa, the huge twenty-one-foot spear of the Macedonian Phalanx, lay unscrewed in two sections by his side. Philotas was chewing cud and fantasizing about the eggplant and chickpeas stew his mother used to make. He could almost taste it, smell it even.

Truth be told, he had grown heartily sick of the never-ending war, the strange Indian food, the relentless rains, and the stubborn, irrational bellicosity of the numerous Indian tribes. He was sick of it all, and was afflicted with a terrible bout of homesickness. Thoughts of cheese and fish, lamb cooked with quince and unwatered wine, now consumed him.

Saliva collected in his mouth and he swallowed. With a sigh, he turned over on his side and closed his eyes, trying to drown out the distressing memories of Greek dishes that seemed to have come to life.

He was just drifting off to sleep when he heard the *lochagos*, Karanos's voice.

"Hey you, Philotas! Come on, you lump of lard! Get your gear—we're going down to the shore."

"Come on, up with you! Get your gear boys—get your gear and follow me," hollered Karanos again and again, as he moved up and down the lines.

That 'country bumpkin' Karanos! He was so much younger than most of the men in the unit and yet, since having been promoted, he insisted on calling them all 'boys'! Philotas sighed to himself. It was always the same old story for a private—get up, get your gear, march for miles on end, lie down, wait, march again, and then fight and die. He tightened his cuirass and rushed off after the others.

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Coenus could not believe the idiocy of the Persian standing in front of him. It was pitch dark, and all around him was utter chaos. The embarkation points were choked with troops, horses, and vessels of all shapes and sizes. On top of that, the rain was like a thick sheet of water, driven horizontal by the wind. Gusts of wind lashed the river into violent waves, which sent the rafts crashing against each other or spun them out of control, and sent them hurtling downstream. The mother of all storms had broken out. Brilliant flashes of lightning lit up the entire landscape like mid-day, and terrific claps of thunder made them jump every other minute.

Yet, the Persian, who was a royal messenger, was unperturbed.

“The emperor wishes to ascertain how much more time it will take. He is anxious to embark. What message should I take back with me, General?” he shouted above the violence of the storm.

“Do you see? Can you see this? It will take time. Tell him,” and he was off, stumbling and slipping through the driving rain towards the hillside from where an unending line of Companion Cavalry was streaming down. “Oye, stop, stop! Stop you fucking oafs!” he bellowed at them.

He grabbed hold of one of the cavalry who was leading his horse down. The man was a Bactrian and had long, thick hair, which kept falling like a wet mop over his face.

“Tell them to stop! There’s not enough space!”

“What? Stop?!” the man shouted back.

“Do you want the horses to break their necks? Ask them to stop back there. Who’s your officer?”

There was not an inch of space on the riverbank. The horses coming down the slope kept knocking into each other, with some of them slipping on the steep, muddy path. The riverbank itself had been churned into a deadly morass of mud, with the men and horses that were waiting to embark.

The officer was found. He immediately recognized the General, saluted and went off to stop the long procession of horses that was making its way down.

“What may I report to His Excellency, the Emperor?” persisted the Persian, still sticking at his heels.

“Tell him, I will send a messenger when it’s time for him to embark. Tell him, I will get everybody across before morning.” He noticed the Persian hesitating and bellowed into his face, “You are getting in my way, Artabazos! I will deal with our King if he is angry, now go!”

He was soaked to the skin and his fingers had become like shrunk prunes. Yet, these were the types of situations in which Coenus naturally thrived. His nervousness, violence, and energy seemed to find a perfect outlet in such tension. It was precisely because of these qualities that he was often entrusted with tricky assignments like the current one.

He turned towards the riverbank where the cavalry was embarking. The need for secrecy meant that they were working without any torches, but Coenus’s eyes had adjusted to the light. He saw a huge wave displace one of the wooden rafts and shake it loose. The soldier who had been holding it, lost his foothold and fell splashing back into the water, while the horse which had been getting onto the raft, panicked and jumped into the river.

Coenus strode into the water, brushing past a number of his own men who were fighting to steady the raft. He reached out and caught the unlucky private. Philotas came up spluttering and thrashing about for a foothold. Their unit, instead of being the first to embark as he had anticipated, had instead been called up to help with the work.

“Steady, steady, hold it son!” bellowed the old General over the sound of wind and water.

The cavalryman, who had been getting on the raft, was struggling with his animal and a number of hands now reached out to hold him as he guided his horse back.

Coenus, sunk almost up to his knees in the mud, with water coming up till his chest, and struggled along with Private Philotas, to hold the raft steady as the horse was coaxed onto it.

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On the other bank of the Vitasta, was a small cottage, which was used as a lookout post by Maharaj Puru's soldiers. It was a tight, cramped space with a thatched roof that leaked continuously and threatened to give way under the fierce winds. Outside, the sky thundered and roared, and sudden, brilliant flashes of lightning threw the insides of the hut into bold relief. Neither the elevated platform on which the cottage had been built, nor the thick overhanging thatch that projected outward from the roof, seemed effective against the driving sheets of water. A continuous spray splattered against the porch, and puddles of water formed on the floor inside the hut, as more and more of it seeped in through the open doorway.

Inside, two soldiers huddled over a fire and talked, while three of their comrades lay sprawled out on the floor. On one side, leaning against the wall, were their weapons, an assortment of khadgas, spears, bows, and arrows. Dense white smoke from the fire permeated the entire hut, filling it with a pungent smell. The two soldiers who sat before it, coughed from time to time, as the smoke caught in their throat. Vinda and Udaya were deep in conversation.

"The Javapacamana's speed is unmatched, otherwise why would people pay so much for it?" said Udaya who was the younger of the two.

Vinda snorted.

"In this world, not everything that is priced higher is better. People are just sheep, going after anything foreign; but let me tell you my friend, the horses of our Matsya Janapada are much better—they're the best," he said.

“They’re so small and anyway, all the races are always won by the Javapacamanas, aren’t they?”

“Arre, so what? Have you ever been in a battle? Javapacamanas are just showpieces, that’s all! They can only race. But in a battle, you need stamina and our Matsya horses are much hardier. They last better.”

Udaya mulled over this for a moment. He didn’t want to challenge his senior partner.

“Do you think we should put out the fire?” he asked. His eyes were burning.

“Upto you,” Vinda got up, stretched out his limbs and let out a huge yawn, “Think I’m going to lie down for a bit. Wake me up when you get tired and I’ll take over from there.”

Udaya looked at him in dismay. Being the youngest in the group, he was always being taken advantage of. Theirs was one of the many five-man units that had been posted as lookouts all along the riverbank. At least two of them were supposed to stay awake every night and patrol the bank, but as usual, Vinda had left it all up to him. He looked uncertainly towards the doorway.

“Do you think we should take a round before you sleep?”

“Naah . . . no need. You’ll get mud all over. Besides,” and Vinda let out another jaw-shattering yawn before pointing towards the doorway. “You must be crazy.”

It was true. There was no way the Yavanas could cross the river on a night like this, he thought to himself. Besides, everyone knew that the Yavanas were settling in for the monsoon.

A huge clap of thunder interrupted his thoughts, making him cringe.

“Vinda, Vinda?”

“Hmm . . .”

“Do you think it’s true that the Yavanas eat humans?”

“Naah . . . don’t be stupid,” murmured Vinda. It was the last thing he said and soon the faint sounds of his snoring were added to the panoply of sounds that filled the night. Udaya was left alone with his thoughts.

By the third prahar of the night, the storm had quietened down. The winds abated and the rain was reduced to a steady drizzle. Udaya drifted in and out of a light slumber, all the while sitting with his back against the wall. For the umpteenth time, his head nodded forward, falling into nothingness and he awoke with a jerk. His eyes were heavy with sleep and his mind confused. All was quiet inside the hut—the fire had died down along with the thunder and lightning outside. Through senses dulled by sleep, he heard faint sounds that seemed to be floating across the river.

Udaya was a very superstitious young man and miscellaneous, unidentified sounds in the middle of the night always had the power to snap him awake. He stopped in mid-breath, stared into the darkness, every muscle in his body tense as he waited for the sounds to repeat themselves. When he did hear the sounds again, they made his skin crawl.

He rushed outside, went over to the banks of the river and peered into the pre-dawn darkness. Strange sounds, the clanking of metal, and shouts and curses in a strange language came floating up to his ears. Ghostly silhouettes, numberless shadows seemed to be wading through the waters towards him. They stretched across the water for as far as he could make out.

It was Alexander's army. They had crossed over the flooded river at night, only to find that the wooded banks, which they had taken to be the other side of the river, were actually those of an island. With no time to drag the boats and vessels over the island, they had found a ford, and were now wading across through chest-deep waters.

It was this huge column of men, horses, and supplies that Udaya saw. For a moment, he was too shocked to react; his legs seemed to be rooted to the spot. Then he suddenly found his legs, and with his hand clapped over his mouth, ran back full tilt, towards the cottage.

The Yavanas had arrived!