

ALEXANDER AND THE ARAL¹

IN his illuminating discussion of 'the Caspian question'² Sir William Tarn, basing his case mainly on Aristotle, *Meteorologica*, 2. 1. 10 and Strabo, 11. 7. 4, argued that Alexander knew of the existence of the Aral Sea. Tarn's conclusion, however, was soon challenged by Professor Lionel Pearson,³ who disagreed in particular with Tarn's interpretation of the passage in Strabo. But, although he undoubtedly succeeds in showing that some of Tarn's arguments are not valid, Pearson fails, as it seems to me, to disprove his main contention. Indeed, Pearson misunderstands the line of Strabo's argument and is led to propose an unnecessary emendation of the text.

First, then, the Strabo passage. On his expedition Alexander had not advanced beyond the R. Jaxartes (Syr Darya), except for a brief foray across the river. He had left unconquered, as Strabo says, a large part of Asia between the Caspian Sea and the R. Tanais (Don), the established boundary between Europe and Asia.⁴ But, according to Strabo, some of the historians of Alexander devised a 'stratagem' which enabled them to claim that the king had conquered the whole of Asia—*εἰς ἐν ὃν συνήγον τὴν τε Μαιώτιν λίμνην τὴν δεχομένην τὸν Τάναϊν καὶ τὴν Κασπίαν θάλατταν, λίμνην καὶ ταύτην καλοῦντες καὶ συντετρησθαι φάσκοντες πρὸς ἀλλήλας ἀμφοτέρας, ἑκατέραν δὲ εἶναι μέρος τῆς ἑτέρας*, 'they combined Lake Maeotis (Sea of Azov), which receives the Tanais (Don), with the Caspian, which they also called a lake, saying that the two were connected and that each formed part of the other'.⁵ We may note at this point that Strabo believed that the Jaxartes flowed into the Caspian. In fact, it has always flowed into the Aral.

Strabo then goes on to relate the part played in the 'stratagem' by Polycleitus, a minor historian and geographer who accompanied Alexander's expedition.⁶

Πολύκλειτος δὲ καὶ πίστευσι προσφέρεται περὶ τοῦ λίμνην εἶναι τὴν θάλατταν ταύτην (ὅφεις τε γὰρ ἐκτρέφειν καὶ ὑπόγλυκυ εἶναι τὸ ὕδωρ), ὅτι δὲ καὶ οὐχ ἑτέρα τῆς Μαιωτιδος ἐστὶ, τεκμαιρόμενος ἐκ τοῦ τὸν Τάναϊν εἰς αὐτὴν ἐμβάλλειν· ἐκ γὰρ τῶν αὐτῶν ὁρῶν τῶν Ἰνδικῶν, ἐξ ὧν ὁ τε Ὠχὸς καὶ ὁ Ὠξὸς καὶ ἄλλοι πλείους, φέρεται καὶ ὁ Ἰαξάρτης ἐκδίδωσί τε ὁμοίως ἐκείνοις εἰς τὸ Κάσπιον πέλαγος, πάντων ἀρκτικώτατος· τοῦτον οὖν ὠνόμασαν Τάναϊν. καὶ προσέθεσαν καὶ τοῦτω πίστιν, ὡς εἴη Τάναϊς, ὃν εἴρηκεν ὁ Πολύκλειτος· τὴν γὰρ περαιάν τοῦ ποταμοῦ τούτου φέρειν ἐλάττην καὶ οἷστοις ἐλατίνοις χρῆσθαι τοὺς ταύτη Σκύθας, τοῦτο δὲ καὶ τεκμήριον τοῦ τὴν χώραν τὴν πέραν τῆς Εὐρώπης εἶναι, μὴ τῆς Ἀσίας· τὴν γὰρ

¹ I am most grateful to Mr. G. T. Griffith and Professor E. Badian for reading an earlier draft of this article and for making many stimulating criticisms.

² *Alexander the Great* (Cambridge, 1948), ii. 5-15.

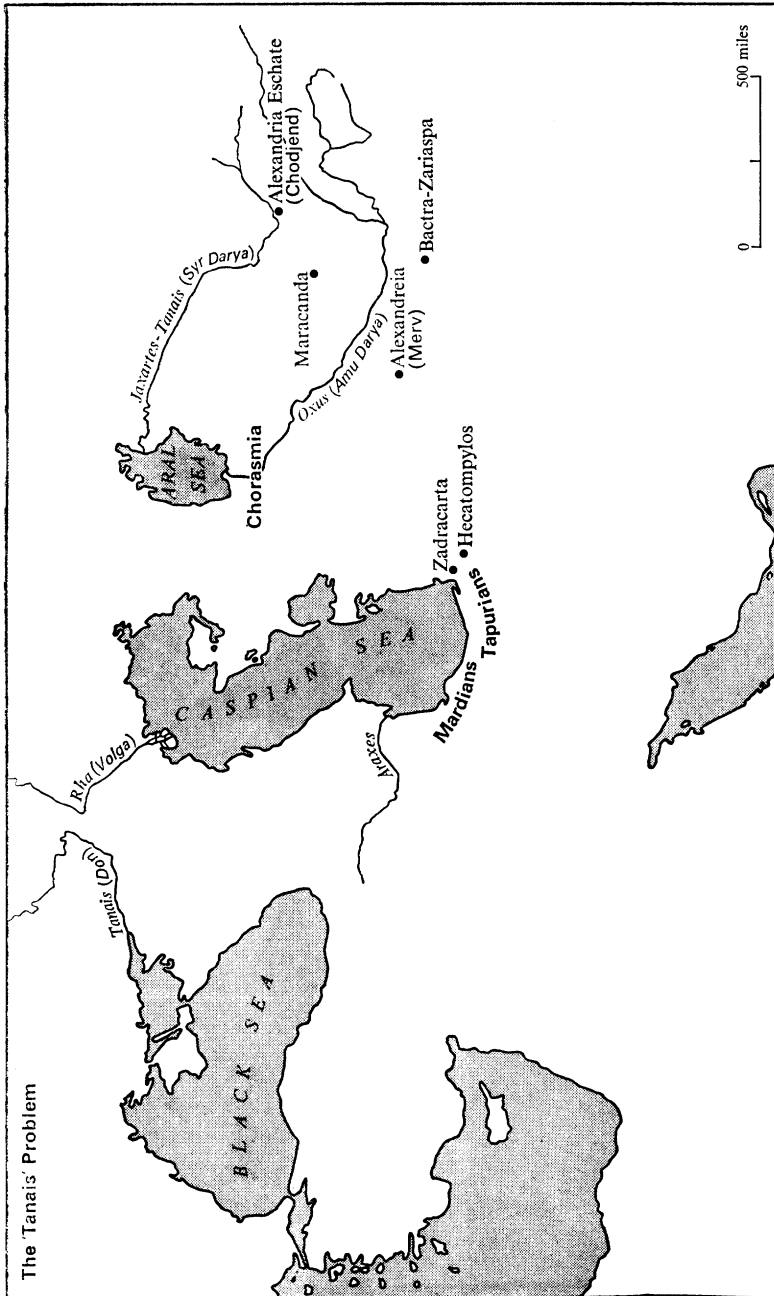
³ *CQ* n.s. i (1951), 80-4.

⁴ See J. O. Thomson, *History of Ancient Geography* (Cambridge, 1948), 59.

⁵ Possibly 'connected by an underground passage', as H. L. Jones translates in the

Loeb edition. Aristotle (*Meteorologica*, 1. 13) had thought of an underground connection between the Caspian and the Black Sea.

⁶ For the few surviving fragments see F. Jacoby, *F. Gr. Hist.* 11B, no. 128. They do not help to decide whether Polycleitus was likely to have contributed to the 'stratagem' or not. There is an excellent discussion of the fragments in L. Pearson, *The Lost Histories of Alexander* (1960), 70-7.



Ἀσίαν τὴν ἄνω καὶ τὴν πρὸς ἔω μὴ φύειν ἐλάτην. Ἐρατοσθένης δέ φησι καὶ ἐν τῇ Ἰνδικῇ φύεσθαι ἐλάτην καὶ ἐντεῦθεν ναυπηγήσασθαι τὸν στόλον Ἀλέξανδρον.¹

Pearson² considers that this text does not correctly describe the inference made by Polycleitus. 'His argument', he maintains, 'must have been :

- (1) the Jaxartes flows into the Caspian, the Tanais into the Maeotis.
- (2) I believe the Caspian is a lake and none other than the Maeotis.
- (3) Therefore I infer that the Jaxartes is the Tanais.'

He holds therefore that the text is corrupt, and suggests that it should read *τεκμαιρόμενος ἐξ ἄρκτου τὸν Τάναϊν εἰς αὐτὴν ἐμβάλλειν*.

But the correctness of the text in the first sentence can be established by a comparison with the (third) sentence beginning *καὶ προσέθεσαν*. The construction of the two sentences is exactly parallel, as may readily be seen when they are set out in parallel columns.

<i>Πολύκλειτος δὲ καὶ πίστει προσφέρεται περὶ τοῦ λίμνην εἶναι τὴν θάλατταν ταύτην</i>	<i>καὶ προσέθεσαν καὶ τούτῳ πίστιν ὡς εἶη Τάναϊς ὃν εἵρηκεν ὁ Πολύκλειτος</i>
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<i>ὄφεις τε γὰρ ἐκτρέφειν καὶ ὑπόγλυκυ εἶναι τὸ ὕδωρ</i>	<i>τὴν γὰρ περαιάν τοῦ ποταμοῦ τούτου φέρειν ἐλάτην καὶ οὔστοις ἐλατίνοις χρησθαι τοὺς ταύτη Σκύθας³</i>
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<i>ὅτι δὲ καὶ οὐχ ἑτέρα τῆς Μαιώτιδος ἐστι, τεκμαιρόμενος ἐκ τοῦ τὸν Τάναϊν εἰς αὐτὴν ἐμβάλλειν.</i>	<i>τοῦτο δὲ καὶ τεκμήριον τοῦ τὴν χώραν τὴν πέραν τῆς Εὐρώπης εἶναι, μὴ τῆς Ἀσίας· τὴν γὰρ Ἀσίαν τὴν ἄνω καὶ τὴν πρὸς ἔω μὴ φύειν ἐλάτην.</i>
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With *τεκμήριον . . . εἶναι* we must supply a verb of saying, viz. *ἔφασαν*, from *πίστιν προσέθεσαν*, as H. L. Jones does in the Loeb edition: 'and *they say* that there is also evidence that the country . . .' There is no suggestion that the 'flatterers' adduced a 'proof', as Pearson would have us believe. Similarly with *ὅτι . . . ἐστι* we must supply λέγει from *πίστει προσφέρεται*. We might express *τοῦτο δὲ καὶ τεκμήριον . . . ἐλάτην* as (λέγουσιν) *ὅτι δὲ καὶ ἡ χώρα ἡ πέραν τῆς Εὐρώπης ἐστὶ, τεκμαιρόμενοι ἐκ τοῦ τὴν Ἀσίαν τὴν ἄνω καὶ τὴν πρὸς ἔω μὴ φύειν ἐλάτην*. Alternatively, the first sentence might be expressed as *τοῦτο δὲ καὶ τεκμήριον τοῦ ταύτην οὐχ ἑτέραν τῆς Μαιώτιδος εἶναι· τὸν γὰρ Τάναϊν εἰς αὐτὴν ἐμβάλλειν*.

In the first sentence Polycleitus first establishes by 'proofs' (the presence of snakes and fresh water) that the Caspian is a lake; then, using this fact, he infers that, since the Tanais flows into it, the Caspian is no other than the Maeotis. In the third sentence the 'flatterers' establish by a 'proof' (the presence of firs north of the river) that Polycleitus really *was* talking of the Tanais; then, using this fact, they infer that, since firs do not grow in Asia, the country north of the river is a part of Europe.

Strabo does not suggest, as Pearson maintains, that Polycleitus argued with 'proofs' for the identity of the two seas, or that the 'flatterers' argued with 'proofs' that the land north of the river is part of Europe. In the first instance,

¹ I accept the punctuation suggested by L. Pearson (*CQ*, 1951, 81 n. 1). For a possible emendation of the text see below.

² *CQ*, 1951, 81.

³ To be consistent editors ought to print this clause in brackets, as they do *ὄφεις τε γὰρ κτλ.*

Polycleitus *infers* the identity of the two seas from the fact that the Jaxartes/Tanais flows into them; in the second, the 'flatterers' *infer* that the land north of the river is part of Europe from the fact that firs grow in this region, but not in Asia. There is no need to suppose that Polycleitus *infers* the identity of the two rivers. On the contrary, Strabo states plainly that the name Tanais was arbitrarily given to the Jaxartes—*τοῦτον οὖν ὠνόμασαν Τάναϊν*—quite dishonestly in his opinion, as part of the 'stratagem' to enhance Alexander's reputation.

The existing text, therefore, presents no difficulties of interpretation, and Pearson's emendation is unnecessary. Still, it is true, as he remarks,¹ that 'Strabo does not distinguish Polycleitus from other writers as clearly as we should like; in fact his transition from singular to plural subject (*τεκμαίρομενος . . . ὠνόμασαν*) is rather disconcerting'. However, it is likely, as Professor Badian has suggested to me, that what Strabo wrote was not *τοῦτον οὖν ὠνόμασαν Τάναϊν* but *τοῦτον οὖν ὠνόμασε Τάναϊν*. This phrase rounds off what Strabo has been saying about Polycleitus, as the punctuation advocated by Pearson makes clear, and in the next sentence Strabo goes on to deal with other writers. The change from singular to plural may well have been caused by the presence of the following *προσέθεσαν*. The part played by Polycleitus in the 'stratagem', according to Strabo, was to call the Jaxartes 'Tanais' in order to be able to infer that the 'Caspian' (proved to be a lake), into which the 'Tanais' flowed, was no other than the Maeotis.² For everyone knew, of course, that the Tanais flowed into the Maeotis. Later writers 'proved' that Polycleitus was correct in identifying the two rivers, and that consequently Alexander *had* conquered all Asia.

Was Strabo correct in thinking that there was a 'stratagem'? And, if there was one, was Polycleitus involved in it? The answer to the first question is almost certainly 'yes'; at any rate none of Alexander's followers can have been ignorant of the existence of firs in Asia. There were fir-trees in plenty in Sogdiana, and Alexander's fleet on the Hydaspes (Jhelum) was built principally of fir.³ But it is much less certain that Polycleitus was dishonest. There can be no doubt that Pearson is correct in maintaining, against Tarn, that Strabo did not distinguish Polycleitus from the 'flatterers', and that he thought him dishonest.⁴ It is also true that 'Strabo certainly knew more about Polycleitus than we can ever hope to know',⁵ but Strabo had one grave, indeed fatal, disadvantage. Like all his contemporaries, he believed that the Caspian was a *gulf* of the Ocean.⁶ It was *inevitable*, therefore, that he should think Polycleitus dishonest in

¹ Op. cit. 83.

² It is not possible to deduce from Strabo's criticism exactly what Polycleitus said about the two lakes, but it is not impossible that he thought not of the two lakes being identical, but of the 'Caspian' as forming part of the Maeotis. Plutarch's description of the Caspian as an overflow (*ἀνακοπή*) from the Maeotis may well derive from Polycleitus. Ephorus (fr. 78, Mueller) writes that the Tanais had two mouths, and Polycleitus may have thought that one mouth entered that part of the lake known as the Caspian and the other that known as the Maeotis.

³ See Arrian, *Anabasis*, 4. 21. 3 and Strabo,

15. 1. 29 (from Aristobulus). Cf. Strabo, 11. 7. 2 (Aristobulus) for the abundance of firs in India.

⁴ Pearson, op. cit. 82-3; Tarn, op. cit. ii. 14.

⁵ Pearson, op. cit. 83.

⁶ This view is as old as Hecataeus (fr. 291 Jacoby = Athenaeus 2. 70 A). It was expressly contradicted by Herodotus (1. 202), and Aristotle (*Meteorologica*, 2. 1. 10), perhaps following him, also gave the correct version. But after Patrocles, the admiral of Antiochus I, in 284 or 283 B.C. 'explored' the Caspian and pronounced it a gulf, this erroneous view prevailed until the geographer Claudius Ptolemy restated the truth

saying that the Caspian was a *lake* and in identifying it with the Maeotis. He was bound too to believe that the identification of the Jaxartes with the Tanais had been made simply for the purpose of the 'stratagem'.

But there are good grounds for thinking that Alexander and his followers genuinely believed that they had reached the Tanais / Don. The 'Gazetteer', a list of satrapies compiled in 324/3 B.C.,¹ refers to the Jaxartes by this name, as does Aristobulus, who accompanied Alexander and must have known the truth.² It is, indeed, hardly surprising that the two rivers should have been identified, when we consider what Herodotus and Aristotle had thought of the Jaxartes. For Herodotus³ had written of the Araxes (he obviously means the Jaxartes) as flowing east from the Caspian and forming with it the boundary between Europe and Asia, while Aristotle⁴ had described the Araxes (again the Jaxartes is meant) as rising in the Parnasos (i.e. the Parapamisus or Hindu-Kush) and possessing a branch called the Tanais which flowed into the Maeotis. Moreover, as the name 'Tanais' is derived from a native word meaning 'water', it is easy to see how Alexander and his followers, conversing through interpreters, might obtain the name 'Tanais' for the Jaxartes.⁵ Other factors, too, may have predisposed Polycleitus to identify (or link) the Caspian with the Maeotis. Polybius, for example, writes that the Maeotis was 'fresher than the Black Sea', while all ancient writers think of the Maeotis as much larger than it actually is and consequently as extending further east than it does.⁶

Polycleitus, then, gave proof that the 'Caspian' was a lake, and inferred that it was no other than the Maeotis, since the Tanais (i.e. the Jaxartes) flowed into it. As the Jaxartes flows into the Aral Sea and has always done so, we must now ask whether Polycleitus, when he wrote 'Caspian', meant the Aral or our Caspian. Tarn thought the former alternative was correct, and adduced in support the passage in Aristotle's *Meteorologica* where he discusses inland seas.⁷ There Aristotle clearly thinks of *two* seas, the Hyrcanian and the Caspian. As Tarn rightly points out,⁸ the use of the plural participles puts this beyond

in the second century A.D. The 'gulf theory', however, soon prevailed again and held the field, with a few exceptions, until the fourteenth century. For references see Thomson, op. cit. 127-8, 163, 293-4, 390.

¹ See Tarn, op. cit. ii. 7, and for the date, ibid. ii. 309-18. This document is preserved by Diodorus 18. 5. 4, who most probably (*pace* Tarn) took it from the reliable Hieronymus of Cardia.

² Aristobulus *ap.* Arrian, *Anabasis* 3. 30. 7. See also Plutarch, *Alexander*, 45. 6, τὸν Ὀρεξάρτην διαβὰς ποταμὸν ὃν αὐτὸς (sc. Ἀλέξανδρος) ᾤετο Τάναϊν εἶναι, derived, as the form Ὀρεξάρτης shows, from Aristobulus.

³ 1. 202, 4. 40.

⁴ *Meteorologica*, 1. 13. 15.

⁵ See Herrmann in *RE*, 2. Reihe, iv. 2, 2162, s.v. 'Tanais'. Mr. Griffith had already suggested to me that 'Tanais' was comparable, for Scythians, to Avon for Celts. See also *J.R.S.* 57 (1967), 1-8, esp. 3-4, where Dr. A. H. McDonald argues convincingly that at Livy 38. 38. 4 we should retain the reading of the best MS., 'cis Taurum mon-

tem usque ad *Tanaim* amnem', and that the 'Tanais' is the name given to the R. Calycadnus in its upper reaches.

⁶ Polybius, 4. 42. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1963 ed.) the salinity of the Maeotis is 1.1 per cent, a figure very similar to that for the Aral: see below. Herodotus (4. 86) calls the Maeotis 'not much smaller than the Black Sea', while Pseudo-Scylax in his 'Periplus', written about the middle of the fourth century, makes it half as large, and Polybius (4. 39) and Strabo (2. 125, 7. 310) rather more than a third. In fact, it is only about one-twelfth of the size of the Black Sea. It is obvious that the Greeks had only a hazy notion of the Maeotis in the time of Alexander. E. H. Bunbury, *A History of Ancient Geography* (London, 1879) 390, remarks of the *Periplus* of Pseudo-Scylax that 'his account of the northern shores of the Euxine (Black Sea) is indeed much less precise and full than that of the southern'.

⁷ 2. 1. 10.

⁸ Op. cit. ii. 6 n. 3.

doubt. But when he goes on to argue that this *proves* that Aristotle knew of the existence of the Caspian, which he called by its original name 'Hyrcanian', and the Aral, which he called 'Caspian', he goes astray. For, as Pearson has pointed out,¹ it is simply not true that the original name of our Caspian was 'Hyrcanian'. Both Hecataeus² and Herodotus³ refer to the Caspian, but, while Hecataeus calls it 'Hyrcanian', Herodotus calls it 'Caspian'. The conclusion that 'Hyrcanian' and 'Caspian' are alternative names for the Caspian is inescapable. It is, therefore, perfectly possible that Aristotle was misinterpreting earlier writers who had written 'Hyrcanian' and 'Caspian' indiscriminately.⁴

Nevertheless, it is not legitimate to say that 'Tarn's interpretation breaks down completely if his theory about Aristotle's knowledge of the Caspian is wrong'.⁵ For, as Tarn remarks,⁶ Aristotle *thought* that there were two seas, and since Alexander will have been taught this he will have expected to find another sea apart from the Caspian.

Since Tarn's argument is invalid, however, we cannot simply *assume* that Polycleitus was referring to the Aral, and Strabo's criticism does not enable us to determine whether Polycleitus meant that the 'Tanais' flowed into the Caspian or the Aral. If the problem can be settled it is only by his statement that the water in the 'Caspian' was 'nearly fresh'. The *average* saline content of the Caspian is 13 per thousand, i.e. 13 lb. of salt to 1,000 lb. of Caspian water, but the saline content in the south, the only part of which Alexander had any knowledge, is considerably greater. The average saline content of the Aral, at 10.7 per thousand, is significantly lower, and the water is certainly drinkable at the points where the Oxus and the Jaxartes enter the sea.⁷

It appears very likely, then, that Tarn is correct in maintaining that Polycleitus was referring to the Aral when he wrote 'Caspian'. Our Caspian he presumably referred to as 'Hyrcanian', situated as it was in Hyrcania. If this is correct, Tarn's suggestion, that the information about the Aral came from the Chorasmian king, Pharasmanes, whose kingdom lay on the lower Jaxartes, is surely very probable.⁸

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¹ Op. cit. 82 n. 1.

² Fr. 291 Jacoby = Athenaeus 2. 70 A.

³ 1. 202-3.

⁴ As many scholars have thought. See, e.g., Thomson, op. cit. 86, and Bunbury, op. cit. 401 n. 2.

⁵ Pearson, op. cit. 83. ⁶ Op. cit. ii. 6.

⁷ Figures from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1963 ed.).

⁸ Op. cit. ii. 8. For Alexander's meeting with Pharasmanes in Bactria see Arrian, *Anabasis* 4. 15. 4.