

# *Legacies of Alexander in colonial Sindh: Richard Francis Burton and a 'Greek pot' at Sehwan*

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**Legacies of Alexander in Colonial Sindh:  
Richard Francis Burton and a ‘Greek Pot’ at Sehwan**

**Abstract**

At Sehwan in Sindh in 1845, the British soldier and Orientalist Richard Francis Burton planted a fake ancient jar for an antiquarian to discover. Burton’s prank was designed to poke fun at British associations of Sehwan with Alexander the Great. This article examines the incident, Burton’s motivations, and the wider question of British colonial fixation on Alexander’s campaigns in Sindh.

**Keywords**

Richard Francis Burton, Sehwan, Alexander the Great, colonialism

**Introduction**

The notorious British traveller, soldier and Orientalist Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890) holds a special place in Sindh studies. As the author of voluminous works on the ethnography and geography of the region in the period immediately after the British conquest and occupation, Burton was influential in British colonial constructions of Sindh as a region apart, and ultimately in Sindh’s and Sindhis’ own conception of their identity and relationship to neighbouring regions and peoples.<sup>1</sup> Sindh, in turn, was formative for Burton in his construction

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<sup>1</sup> Uttara Shahani, "Following Richard Burton: Religious Identity and Difference in Colonial Sindh," *Philological Encounters* 7, No. 1-2 (2022): 95-128.

of his career and selfhood. Burton's writings on Sindh have been discussed from several perspectives, with especial attention being given to the classically Orientalist manner in which he constructs Sindh and the various communities resident there.<sup>2</sup> Part of Burton's appeal to modern scholars, however, is that he is a more complex character than a reading of his work solely through the lens of *Orientalism* and its various theoretical heirs might bring to the fore. As Boivin points out, Burton is "a kind of atypical Orientalist who was one of the very few to enjoy Edward Said's indulgence".<sup>3</sup>

The present study discusses another way in which Burton was atypical of his imperial peers, in his engagement with the Classical Greek and Roman sources on ancient India. As the following discussion will demonstrate, British writers Sindh in the nineteenth century frequently viewed the region through the lens of the campaigns of Alexander the Great along the lower Indus, in the 320s BC. Although the historical fact of Alexander's presence in Sindh is beyond dispute, evidence for the specifics of his journey and actions is both meagre and of highly dubious reliability. The site of Sehwan, in particular, was identified by British writers as a place fortified by Alexander himself. Burton doubted this, and what is more attempted to undermine the whole project of tracing the route of Alexander in Sindh by his actions on a visit to Sehwan. The following discussion sets Burton's visit to Sehwan within the context of British engagement with the site's historical past, and on a broader level, examines the extent to which his scepticism was an appropriate response.

### **A Greek Pot at Sehwan**

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Indira Ghose, "Imperial Player: Richard Burton in Sindh," in *Travel Writing in the Nineteenth Century: Filling the Blank Spaces*, ed. Tim Youngs (London: Anthem Press, 2006), 20-28.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Boivin, *The Sufi Paradigm and the Makings of a Vernacular Knowledge in Colonial India: The Case of Sindh (1851-1929)* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020): unpaginated ebook.

In the summer of 1846, Burton was granted sick leave from the East India Company Army to recover from an attack of cholera. He spent his convalescence in Goa and the Nilgiri Hills. In his book about the journey, Burton - indirectly - confessed to a prank that he had pulled at Sehwan in Sindh some months earlier, in December 1845:

Antiquarians are everywhere a simple race : in India “con tutto rispetto parlando,” we are almost tempted to describe them as simpletons. Who does not recollect the Athenæum sauce-jar which some wag buried in the ruins of a fort, said to have been founded by Alexander the Great at Sehwan in Scinde, and the strange theories which the Etruscan images upon that article elicited from grave and learned heads?<sup>4</sup>

In fact, hardly anyone would have remembered this incident – certainly not readers in London - which is probably precisely why Burton chose to resurrect it. An attentive reader would have noted that the attitude of Burton’s unnamed “wag” to the alleged connection of Sehwan to Alexander the Great was exactly the same as his own attitude in his book about his travels in Sindh, which appeared the same year as his Goa and Nilgiri book:

Sehwan, or as the place is more grandiloquently called, Sewistan, is, we must own, a city of some antiquity, disposed as our minds are by the exaggerations of the archaeologists to deny everything deniable. It is mentioned by the native annalists as one of the six forts which the Hindoo rulers of Sindh were careful to garrison and repair. After the thirteenth century of our era it rose to distinction by the favour of a certain saint, to whose tomb we shall presently perform the traveller’s pilgrimage. Of late years the place has declined in

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Francis Burton, *Goa, and the Blue Mountains, or, Six Months of Sick Leave* (London: Richard Bentley, 1851), 316-317.

the scale of prosperity. At present nothing can be more miserable and dilapidated than the appearance of the town. Its streets are filthy amongst the filthy, and not even Coleridge himself could define and generalize the genera and species of its nauseous odours. And Sehwan the luckless is likely to fall still lower. Formerly it was a place of some military as well as religious importance, commanding the passage of the Indus: now the river, its second great stand-by, is gradually deserting it. The climate is celebrated as the most deleterious and deadly of this miasmatic land: one glance at the hapless population is proof palpable of its effects upon the body and mind of man. And, as is the case, I believe, in all sacred places and holy cities, from Rome to Mecca, the inhabitants are a very disreputable race. ...

The centre of Sehwan attraction lies within a few minutes' walk. It is a large flat mound, based upon a rock, rising abruptly from the plain, supported by the cohesiveness of its clay, and in some places flanked by the remnants of good old brick walls, bastions, and circular towers, round which gnarled peepuls and knotty shrubs of huge growth, have coiled their snake-like roots.

Mounting the side of the mound by a natural breach in it, and striking into one of the many footpaths that ramify over it, we find the surface cut up by wind and rain, rent by yawning sun-cracks, and occasionally mined by the seekers of gold, silver, and ready-made material for building. A glimpse from the brink of one of these cavities shows that the brickwork runs down almost to the level of the road that girds the clay hill, and the excavators will inform us that when they first opened the ground they discovered and destroyed large arches.

This is one of the many remains of what are ridiculously termed "Alexander's camp" by the Anglo-Sindhian antiquary. Macedonia's great man, observe, Mr. Bull, holds in this country the architectural office assigned by you and your brethren to the Devil and Julius

Caesar in the West. That is to say, whenever a tourist of inquiring mind is shown a ruin about which that great authority, the “oldest inhabitant,” knows nothing, or will not know anything, he considers himself justified in at once deciding it to be an “Alexander’s camp.”

This Sehwan mound cannot be of Grecian origin, I humbly opine, for two reasons. The arches are Asiatic, and the broken bits of man’s handiwork found scattered about in its entrails are oriental. If we are to believe the chronicles, it was a Hindoo castle built to command a favourite ford of the Indus: in the lapse of years, as it was ruined and ruined over again, the site rose above the level of the plain, till at last it became conspicuous, and, catching the archaeologist’s eye, it received from his ready hand the honours of an illustrious origin.

The natives of Sindh, excepting only the few readers of Persian poetry and history, had never heard of “Sikandar Shah” when we first entered the country. Now they bid fair to become almost as minute and clever in pointing out the different stages of his progress through the land as our savans have proved themselves. So the Affghans, after one short year’s study of the British *gobemouche*, taught themselves to imitate the rare Bactrian coins with a skill, which, considering all their deficiencies of means, entitles them, I opine, to rank high in the scale of ingenious rascality.<sup>5</sup>

A number of important points can be drawn out of this passage. First of all, Burton had entrenched condescending and racist attitudes to Sindh, its people and its antiquities.<sup>6</sup> In yet another book – of three he published in 1851 – Burton stated that he thought of Sindh as a region in decline from its past glories, whose only merits were “its capability of improvement,

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Francis Burton, *Scinde, or, The Unhappy Valley* (London: Richard Bentley, 1851), Volume II, 216 and 227-229.

<sup>6</sup> Ghose, "Imperial Player: Richard Burton in Sindh", 22.

and its value to us as a military and commercial position”.<sup>7</sup> It should be recalled that Burton was writing only a few years after Sindh’s annexation by Napier, and largely for an audience of British soldiers and officials tasked with consolidating British control and exploitation there. For Burton, Sindh was a resource to be exploited, and its people incapable of participating in serious research into their own history and culture: “like true Orientals, [they] do their best to baffle investigation by the strange, ingenious, and complicated lies with which they meet it”.<sup>8</sup>

For Burton to write such unpleasant things about Sehwan and its inhabitants<sup>9</sup> is therefore hardly unexpected. What is perhaps more surprising is his disbelief of the association with Alexander the Great, scorn for British antiquarians, and contention that the whole connection with Alexander was a British invention, adopted by canny locals. Burton, like most Britons of his social class, knew the ancient Greek and Roman sources on Alexander the Great. He was also familiar with more obscure works, relevant to the Indian Subcontinent, like the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*.<sup>10</sup> His works contain scattered references to mentions of the places (and even peoples) he encountered in the works of Greek and Roman authors. But Burton was also a sceptic, and frequently makes fun of British antiquarian identifications of various spots in Sindh. Karachi, for example, he mentions as being identified “by some palæogeographers, with the Krokali of the Greeks”: “There is only one objection to the theory, which is, that Kurrachee was built about one hundred and fifty years ago”.<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere (in his description of Kalan Kot, near Thatta), he implicitly likens belief in the presence of Alexander the Great to belief in fairies: “Our fellow-countrymen describe it as an immense camp, said to be the work of Alexander the Great. The people have a tradition that it is the feat of fairy hands”.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Francis Burton, *Sindh, and the Races that Inhabit the Valley of the Indus: with notices of the topography and history of the province* (London: Wm. H. Allen & Co., 1851), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Burton, *Sindh, and the Races that Inhabit the Valley of the Indus*, 35.

<sup>9</sup> See also Burton, *Sindh, and the Races that Inhabit the Valley of the Indus*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Burton, *Goa, and the Blue Mountains, or, Six Months of Sick Leave*, 188.

<sup>11</sup> Burton, *Scinde, or, The Unhappy Valley*, Vol. I, 28.

<sup>12</sup> Burton, *Scinde, or, The Unhappy Valley*, 105.



An attentive reader of Burton's writings in 1851, then, would easily have been able to identify that he himself was the "wag" who planted the fake ancient jar at Sehwan. Many years later, he came completely clean, in his *Sind Revisited*. Much of the text of this book is identical to that of *Scinde, or the Unhappy Valley* – Burton was an inveterate self-plagiarist – but there are some significant additions, including in the section on Sehwan. Burton expands on his points about Afghan fakes of Graeco-Bactrian coins, with an amusing anecdote:

When Lady Macnaghten showed a peculiarly rare coin to one of these forgers, and asked him how long it would be before he could supply her with a similar article, he boldly answered, 'To-morrow morning.' Her suspicions were aroused, and she asked him why he named the next day. 'Allah! Allah!' he rejoined, 'you can't expect me to make it in less than twelve hours!'<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, Burton mentions that "Séhwan mound has supplied Greek and Bactrian coins, but of course such articles travel far".<sup>14</sup> Then, at the end of the chapter, comes his confession:

Before we leave Séhwan, Mr. Bull, I must 'make a clean breast of it,' Many years ago, in my hot youth, a credulous antiquary was digging here and finding all manner of proof that he was the headquarters of Alexander's host. On those days we affected a now obsolete article called the 'Athenæum Sauce;' and it came to us in a manner of pot rudely imitated from a painted Etruscan vase. How thoughtless and reckless is man before the age of twenty-five! To smash that pot, to treat it with fire and acid, and to bury it in the ground on the line taken by the excavator was the work of an idle day. And it was duly

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Francis Burton, *Sind Revisited: with notices of the Anglo-Indian army, railroads past, present, and future, etc* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1877), 191.

<sup>14</sup> Burton, *Sind Revisited*, 190; I am not aware of any such coins securely provenanced to Sehwan in the scholarly literature.

unearthed, washed, carried home, and presently shown to a number of wondering friends as proof positive that the Rasenna had their original homes in Sind. But before the find was described in print, I owned by offence and – I was never forgiven.

Again, when the ninth decade after A.D. 1800 was so busily employed in recovering the ‘Lost Tribes,’ a subject still not wholly devoid of attraction, I was travelling on the edge of Bráhuistán, the land of the Turanian Bráhuís, and my ugly sense of humour suggested another practical joke. To draw up a grammar and vocabulary, stolen from Parkhurst, and provided with barbaric terminations, was the work of an idle week, and the Presidency rang for nine days with the wondrous discovery. That ‘little game’ also was, as you may imagine, not to be condoned.

But I now repent in sackcloth and ashes, and my trembling hand indites, *Mea culpa! mea maxima culpa!*”<sup>15</sup>

Burton’s self-flagellation cannot but strike the reader as insincere. The hints he dropped in his 1851 book on Goa shows that he was proud of the joke, and his original work on Sindh of the same year “brims over with tomfoolery and youthful exuberance”.<sup>16</sup> In 1876, around the time he must have been writing *Sind Revisited*, Burton dictated some autobiographical notes to his wife Isabel.<sup>17</sup> These notes then formed the basis for the biography of Burton published in 1887 by Francis Hitchman,<sup>18</sup> as well as Lady Burton’s own account of the life of her husband.<sup>19</sup> These give us some further salient details on the incident of the Sehwan sauce jar. In Hitchman’s book, Burton describes how, in November 1845:

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<sup>15</sup> Burton, *Sind Revisited*, 192-193.

<sup>16</sup> Ghose, "Imperial Player: Richard Burton in Sindh," 21.

<sup>17</sup> Isabel Isabel Burton, *The Life of Captain Sir Richard F. Burton* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1893), vii-viii.

<sup>18</sup> Francis Hitchman, *Richard F. Burton, K.C.M.G. : his early, private and public life with an account of his travels and explorations* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1887).

<sup>19</sup> Isabel Burton, *The Life of Captain Sir Richard F. Burton*.

I started, with my friend Scott, for a long tour to the north of Sind. We rode by the high road through Gharra and Jarak to Kotri, the station of the Sind Flotilla, and there crossed to Hyderabad, where I found my corps flourishing. After a very jolly week we resumed our way up the right bank of the Indus, and on the extreme western frontier, where we found the Balch herdsmen in their wildest state. About that time began to prevail the now vulgar reports about the Lost Tribes of Israel (who were never lost), and with the aid of Parkhurst and Lynch, I dressed up a very pretty grammar and vocabulary which proved to sundry scientists that the lost was found at last. But my mentor (Scott) would not allow the joke to appear in print. On Christmas Day we entered ‘Sehwán,’ absurdly styled ‘Alexander’s Camp.’ Here again the spirit of mischief was too strong for me: I buried a broken and hocussed jar of ‘Athenæum sauce,’ red pottery with black Etruscan figures, right in the way of an ardent amateur antiquary: and the results were comical.<sup>20</sup>

This links the two practical jokes (the grammar of the ‘Lost Tribe’ of Israel and the Sehwan sauce jar) more directly to one another. It also tells us that Burton’s travelling companion Walter Scott (later General) was in on at least the first prank, and was a moderating influence, in not letting it go too far.

Burton was sufficiently au fait with the British-Indian scholarly scene to pull off both these jokes. He was an accomplished linguist, both practical and theoretical. In 1849, he published ‘A Grammar of the Játaki or Belohckí Dialect’, which was excellent by the scholarly standards of the time.<sup>21</sup> In the same issue of the *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, he published some ‘Notes and Remarks on Dr. Dorn’s Chresthomathy of the Pushtu or Affghan Language’. He was therefore capable of composing a plausible grammar

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<sup>20</sup> Hitchman, *Richard F. Burton*, 161-162.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Francis Burton, "A Grammar of the Játaki or Belohckí Dialect," *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 3, no. 12 (1849).

of a made-up hebraised form of Brahui that his fellow linguists might conceivably fall for. The mentions of Parkhurst and Lynch show that he had used John Parkhurst's English-Hebrew Lexicon (first edition 1762) and Patrick Lynch's works on grammar. The status of Brahui as a Dravidian 'isolate' among Indo-Aryan languages, and the fact that there was no published grammar or vocabulary of the language at that date, made it a good candidate for a prank.

The 'Athenæum Sauce' jar used by Burton was sold by the company of Crosse and Blackwell. Excavations at the site of the Crosse and Blackwell factory in Soho, London, caused by the Crossrail project, yielded thousands upon thousands of jars and bottles used by the firm in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries<sup>22</sup> – although unfortunately none for 'Athenæum Sauce'. This is because it seems only to have been produced for a very short period. There are many newspaper advertisements for it in 1844 (Figure 1; *The Catholic Directory, Almanack and Ecclesiastical Register*, 1845, 220), but none thereafter. This fits well with the date of Burton's prank in 1845. Crosse and Blackwell seem to have had high hopes for the success of their new product, which they trusted had "attained the standard of perfection":

It is not, however, upon the flavour along they base their claims for support; for, regardless of expense, they have introduced this sauce in a vase, in the Etruscan style, forming an appropriate ornament for the table or sideboard.

The firm used the gimmick of a fancy jar for other products - preserved ginger in a chinoiserie pot<sup>23</sup>; a Greek key pattern on a pickle jar<sup>24</sup> – and the name of their sauces often evoked London

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<sup>22</sup> Nigel Jeffries, Lyn Blackmore, and David Sorapure, *Crosse and Blackwell 1830-1921: A British Food manufacturer in London's West End* (London: Museum of London Archaeology, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Jeffries, Blackmore, and Sorapure, *Crosse and Blackwell*, 65.

<sup>24</sup> Jeffries, Blackmore, and Sorapure, *Crosse and Blackwell 1830-1921*, 66-67.

institutions,<sup>25</sup> like the Athenæum Club. A fake Etruscan jar, with Burton's modifications, could plausibly have been mistaken for a Greek pot by an 'antiquary' who was not very familiar with ancient ceramics.

Some important questions, however, remain unanswered. How far is Burton's account of the incident to be trusted? Who was the 'antiquary' tricked by Burton? What happened to the pot after it was unearthed?

Burton was a chronically unreliable witness to his own life. He had "a Byronic love of shocking people, of telling tales against himself that had no foundation in fact".<sup>26</sup> The Sehwan sauce jar story has enough corroborating information, however, to be credible, in broad outline: Burton mentions it not long after the event, although it takes him many years to completely come clean; Athenæum Sauce came in jars exactly as he describes, and produced around the time of the prank; and he had the knowledge and skills to pull it off. His protestations of guilt in later life are less credible: Burton clearly enjoyed the joke.

I have no firm leads on the identity of the 'antiquary' fooled by Burton, who mentions very few names of people he met on his travels in Sindh. It is even possible that it refers to Scott, as revenge for foiling Burton's earlier joke, but it seems unlikely that Burton would continue to crow over someone who was a mentor and good friend, the dedicatee of his first book on Sindh. I have examined contributors to the *Journal of the Asiatic Society, Bombay Branch*, for the 1840s, and can find no good candidates who can be placed in Sehwan in December 1845, or who published on the antiquities of the site. It seems probable that Burton's planted Athenæum Sauce jar was never published as a genuine Greek pot, evidence for the presence of Alexander at Sehwan. I would be intrigued to know what became of it, and whether it ever passed into a personal or institutional collection.

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<sup>25</sup> Jeffries, Blackmore, and Sorapure, *Crosse and Blackwell*, 68.

<sup>26</sup> Obituary in the *Athenaeum Magazine*, No. 3287, Oct. 25, 1890, 547.

## Alexander and the East India Company

This article is not about whether Alexander and his army were ever at Sehwan, because only future archaeological work can tell us more about the ancient history of the site. It is about how the story of Sehwan being the ‘fort of Alexander’ originated and was spread, by Britons and Indians, in the colonial period. In the following section, I will return to discuss whether Burton’s reasoning for Sehwan *not* being the fort of Alexander was correct, and to examine the archaeological evidence. In this section, I would like to consider why Burton already seems, in 1845, to have regarded stories of Alexander as ‘old hat’, a cliché worthy of mocking.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there was already an obsession with tracing the route of Alexander the Great in the Indian Subcontinent. The works of armchair ancient historians in Europe, and British travellers on the ground in India mutually informed one another.<sup>27</sup> The ancient Greek and Roman historical works on Alexander – such as Arrian, Plutarch or Quintus Curtius Rufus – were, moreover, widely read by British soldiers and officials of the East India Company, and not merely as dry ancient history. British writers of the time often treated the Subcontinent and its peoples as unchanging between time of Alexander and present day,<sup>28</sup> a classically Orientalist trope.

The Greek and Roman sources on Alexander and his army along the lower Indus are not contemporary to his expedition. Writers such as Quintus Curtius Rufus, Arrian, Plutarch and Strabo wrote centuries later, using eye-witness accounts that are now lost. They are therefore deeply suspect testimony to precise geographical matters, despite myriad modern attempts to

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<sup>27</sup> Phiroze Vasunia, *The Classics and Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 51-53; James Burnes, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Court of Sind: A sketch of the history of Cutch, from its first connexion with the British government in India till the conclusion of the treaty of 1819 : and some remarks on the medical topography of Bhoj* (Edinburgh: John Stark, 1831) maps Alexander’s route in Sindh, but does not make the association with Sehwan.

<sup>28</sup> Vasunia, *The Classics and Colonial India*, 57-58.

trace the route of Alexander on the ground. The name usually invoked in connection with Sehwan is the ancient Sindomana, capital of Sambos (see e.g. Strabo, *Geography* 15 1.33, Arrian, *Anabasis* 102), but none of the ancient historians give detailed enough topographical information to identify this – or any of the other towns and fortresses Alexander conquered or garrisoned – specifically as the site of Sehwan. How, then, did the association come to be made, and to be regarded as clichéd in Burton's day?

Burton views the association of Sehwan with Alexander as a foreign import, not tied to any existing local traditions – and, indeed, I have not been able to locate any Sindhi sources on the connection that pre-date the colonial period. The earliest source I have found linking Sehwan and Alexander is in a 1797 work of historical geography on the voyage of Alexander's admiral Nearchos by William Vincent (1739–1815), an English priest and headmaster of Westminster School, who certainly never visited Sindh for himself. Vincent writes:

Alexander marched against Oxykanus because he had received no embassy or acknowledgement from him; he took two of his largest cities by assault, and in one of them Oxykanus himself; the plunder was abandoned to the soldiers, and the elephants only reserved for the public service. Several other cities surrendered without resistance; for by this time, says Arrian, the spirit of all the Indians was completely subdued. Q. Curtius relates these circumstances with some shade of difference; Oxykanus, he says, was killed, and the people he calls Praesti. I desire to make but one more observation. Oxykanus was not on the river; for if he had been, Alexander need not have landed to march against him; he was near Sambus, and Sambus was satrap of the mountains. The conclusion is, therefore, that he was on the west of the Indus, and highly probable that

his territory was at the foot of that range called Lukhy, consequently that Musikanus and Oxykanus were both chiefs in the cirar of Sehwan.<sup>29</sup>

Vincent, as can be seen, makes sweeping statements about matters of historical geography, drawing conclusions on the basis of remarks by ancient historians that are sometimes tenuous. He has no personal experience of the territories he writes about, and does not take into account important matters like the changing course of the river Indus and its various branches.<sup>30</sup> What was his source of information on the geography of Sindh? He collaborated on his book with the hydrographer Alexander Dalrymple (1737-1808), who had worked for the East India Company in India and the Far East as a young man. By the time of Vincent's book, Dalrymple was in London, as chief hydrographer to the East India Company and to the Admiralty. Dalrymple was therefore most probably Vincent's source for the maps he used to trace Alexander's route.<sup>31</sup>

Some years later, the same identification was made by Henry Pottinger (1789-1865) of the East India Company, in his account of his travels in Sindh and Baluchistan in 1810-1811. Pottinger (who later became Resident Administrator of Sindh) was as interested in Alexander the Great as all contemporary Britons in Sindh seem to have been, and describes his campaigns against Oxykanos and Sambos:

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<sup>29</sup> William Vincent, *The Voyage of Nearchus from the Indus to the Euphrates: collected from the original journal preserved by Arrian, and illustrated by authorities ancient and modern, containing an account of the first navigation attempted by Europeans in the Indian Ocean* (London: Printed for T. Cadell jun. and W. Davies (successors to Mr. Cadell), in the Strand, 1797), 132-133.

<sup>30</sup> On which in more recent periods at Sehwan, see Rémy Delage and Delphine Ortis, "Les relations entre Sehwan Sharif et l'Indus dans le Sindh : histoire d'une mise à distance (Pakistan)," in *Ville et fleuve en Asie du Sud. Regard croisés*, ed. Harit Joshi and Anne Viguier (Paris: Editions, Inalco, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> In 1829, another headmaster and minister with an interest in the historical geography of Alexander's route (John Williams, *Two Essays on the Geography of Ancient Asia: intended partly to illustrate the campaigns of Alexander, and the Anabasis of Xenophon* (London: John Murray, 1829)) stated that "the capital of Sabbas could not have been very far from the modern Sehwaun, or Sebaun" (John Williams, *The Life and Actions of Alexander the Great*, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1829), 279). Williams probably drew on Vincent, and on accounts by those who had actually visited Sehwan in the meantime.



After the subjugation of one, and the death of the other of these chiefs, the Macedonian hero returned to the river and, as we are informed, built a citadel at a commodious and commanding point; from which particular notice I have no scruple in saying that it must have been at the present Sehwan, that fortress being seated on a high hill that overlooks the ferries across the Indus and Larkhanu rivers, and otherwise admirably situated to awe the surrounding tracts.<sup>32</sup>

Pottinger had read Vincent, and alludes to his ideas on Sehwan<sup>33</sup>; he may or may not have arrived at his identification without this. It seems likely, therefore that the association of Sehwan with one of the forts conquered or rebuilt by Alexander on his campaign on the lower Indus originated with Vincent (using Dalrymple's maps and testimony) and became popularised through the work of Pottinger.

Over the following decades, the identification became the accepted orthodoxy. A 'Report on the Country between Kurrachee, Tatta, and Sehwan, Scinde' published by E. P. De la Hoste, Quarter-Master General of the Scinde Reserve Force, in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1840, quoted from his 1832 journal of his travels in Sindh:

This evening we landed near the town of Sehwan, and after visiting a ruined Eadgah, which at a distance we mistook for the fort built by Alexander, or rather said to have been built by him, we discovered by the aid of two Scindians that the mound was north-west of the town, through a part of which we walked and ascended the fort. It is an artificial mound, eighty or ninety paces high ; on the top, a space of 1 500 feet by 800 surrounded by a broken wall ; we examined the remains of several old towers of brick, and I took a

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<sup>32</sup> Henry Pottinger, *Travels in Beloochistan and Scinde* (London, 1816), 384.

<sup>33</sup> See Pottinger, *Travels in Beloochistan and Scinde*, 9 and 383-384.

hasty sketch of the gateway, which is remarkably lofty. The mound is evidently artificial, and the remains of several towers visible. The brickwork seems to extend to the bottom of the mound, or at any rate to a considerable depth, as we could see down the parts washed away by the rains. A well filled up, was observed. We were told that coins and medals were frequently found on and near the place, but we were not so fortunate as to obtain any. I regret now having had so little time to devote to the examination of this fort, but think the period of its construction is not of so ancient a date as is ascribed to it.<sup>34</sup>

De la Hoste may have had his doubts about the antiquity of the fort, but he still reported the association with Alexander. A few years later, Keith Jackson included a lithograph of Sehwan (Figure 2) in his *Views in Affghaunistaun*. The caption reads:

On the north side of the town is the ruined castle or fortress of Sehwaun, by which it is completely commanded ; this is perhaps the most extraordinary building on the Indus, and no doubt existed before the invasion by Alexander the Macedonian. It consists of a natural mound sixty feet high, encased in many parts with burnt brick. In fact, the fortress and mount are so amalgamated, that it is difficult now to distinguish what portions of it are the work of art.<sup>35</sup>

In 1841, Edward Backhouse Eastwick visited Sehwan, and is one of the first, to my knowledge, to note that the changing course of the river may make the descriptions of the ancient Greek and Roman historians unreliable:

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<sup>34</sup> E. P. De la Hoste, "Report on the Country between Kurrachee, Tatta, and Sehwan, Scinde," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 9, no. 2 (1840).

<sup>35</sup> Keith Alexander Jackson, *Views in Affghaunistaun : &c. &c. &c. from sketches taken during the campaign of the Army of the Indus* (London: W. H. Allen, 1840), unpaginated.

The 26<sup>th</sup> brought us on a mile or so to Sehván, when my boatmen insisted on stopping and paying their respects to Láll Sháh Báz, the saint of the place. I did not land, the heat was so intense ; I saw nothing, therefore, of the old ruins of what is said to have been a castle built by Alexander. The truth is, one can make nothing of Arrian's account of Sindh, and it is probable that the whole course of the river is altogether changed since the days of Macedonia's madman.<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, in the guidebook to the region which Backhouse would publish many years later, he noted the association with Alexander as a point of interest to travellers:

The chief object, however, of antiquarian interest in Sehván [other than the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar] is the *fort* ascribed to Alexander the Great. This is an artificial mound, said once to have been 250 ft. high, but now only 60 ft., measuring round the summit 1,500 ft. by 800 ft., and surrounded by a broken wall. The remains of several towers are visible, but the fortifications are ruined. It is in the N.W. part of the town. There is a T. B. and a deputy collector's *banglá* in the old fort.<sup>37</sup>

Thomas Postans (1808-1846) described Sehwan as follows, with a hint of Burton's later attitude to the modern town:

Sehwun, built on the extremity of a spur from the Bilúchi range which here juts into the river, is the only portion of Sindh recognizable as described by the Greeks, and an old

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<sup>36</sup> Edward Backhouse Eastwick, *Dry Leaves from Young Egypt: being a glance at Sindh before the arrival of Sir Charles Napier* (London: J. Madden, 1849). 28.

<sup>37</sup> Edward Backhouse Eastwick, *Handbook of the Panjáb, western Rajpútáná, Kashmír, and upper Sindh : with a map* (London: John Murray, 1883), 298.

fortification that now stands had its origin probably in Alexander's expedition: it was always a place of military importance, as it commands the passage of the river; but is now much dilapidated and of trifling extent. It is held in great sanctity by pious Mahomedans, from the gorgeous tombs of a noted saint who was buried here, and whose fame is universal also throughout India and the countries adjacent to Sindh. The town is infested with religious mendicants and beggars of every description, and coupled with its sanctity it has also, inconsistently enough, a high reputation for courtezans. For heat, filth, and a disreputable population Sehwan is pre-eminently distinguished, as before observed: it is the boundary between two great divisions of the country, and is the capital of a district known as Sewistan.<sup>38</sup>

In 1843, Sindh was invaded and annexed by the British East India Company.<sup>39</sup> General Sir Charles Napier (1782-1853) makes frequent references to Alexander the Great in his journals of the conquest, comparing Alexander's campaign in Sindh to his own more than two thousand years later. In late November 1844 he visited Sehwan, something he keenly anticipated for the connection with Alexander: "To-morrow I shall reach Sehwan, where Alexander built his tower, and I shall stand where he stood, as indeed I have before, but not on the known spot".<sup>40</sup> Disappointment followed:

Sehwan, 29th.—Rode to the top of Alexander's tower, but do not believe he built it. It has circular arches of brick, and the Greeks used the flat binding: the learned doubt if they knew of the circular segment in architecture. This is however an enormous mass of

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas Postans, *Personal Observations on Sindh: the manners and customs of its inhabitants and its productive capabilities with a sketch of its history* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1843), 29.

<sup>39</sup> See further Matthew A. Cook, *Annexation and the Unhappy Valley: The Historical Anthropology of Sindh's Colonization, European Expansion and Indigenous Response*, (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

<sup>40</sup> William Francis Patrick Napier, *The Life and Opinions of General Sir Charles James Napier, G.C.B* (London: J. Murray, 1857), Vol. III, 184, journal entry for 28 November 1844.

brick ; nothing ever met my eyes before like it, so vast is the apparent solid mass; there are remains of towers on it also. To-morrow a minute examination, if well, but there is fever in my blood. I seldom complain, perhaps only when most people would be in bed. It is better that life should go sliding away, and then a sudden drop; but while it lasts let me be in harness and die with my sword by my side, like a gentleman: if in victory so best.<sup>41</sup>

Napier's expressed desire to die in victorious battle rather than in his bed, of a fever, is also an oblique reference to Alexander. The following day, as he received petitions and complaints brought to him by local people at Sehwan, he leant still further into his self-identification with Alexander, comparing his decision-making process to Alexander cutting the Gordian knot.

By the time of Burton's visit to Sehwan in 1845, then, the Alexander connection was indeed a cliché, but Burton was certainly not the first to doubt it, even if others had nevertheless found it irresistible to write about. Burton's scepticism was more stridently voiced than most, but in the following decades the same mixture of interest and vaguely-worded doubt prevailed in mentions of Sehwan by British travellers. Edward Archer Langley is typical in this regard:

At Sehwan, the capital of Sewistan, we remained just long enough to take a hasty look at that interesting old place. Here a spur of the Lukhee range runs down close to the river, and on its extremity, which juts over the water, stands the town. At this place is an old fortification, which antiquarians imagine had its origin in Alexander's expedition ; and Sehwan has always been considered a place of military importance, as commanding the

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<sup>41</sup> Napier, *The Life and Opinions of General Sir Charles James Napier, G.C.B.*, Vol. III, 84-85.

passage of the Indus. ... Alexander the Great built a tower on this spot, which commands the river, but these ruins are probably of much more recent date.<sup>42</sup>

At no point that I have found did a British visitor undertake any serious archaeological exploration of the fort in the nineteenth century, nor do any appear to have taken any interest in the knowledge or ideas of the location population of Sehwan about the pre-Islamic history of the site.

### **Was Alexander at Sehwan?**

Although he did not excavate there, Sir Alexander Cunningham visited Sehwan in 1855, and wrote about it in his *Ancient Geography of India*. His account shows that he was familiar with previous writings on Sehwan, including those discussed here, but strangely he seems to have come to the conclusion from these that the Alexander association was definitely authentic:

I agree with all previous writers on the ancient geography of this part of India in identifying *Sindomana* with *Sehwán*; partly from its similarity of name, and partly from its vicinity to the Lakki mountains. Of its antiquity there can be no doubt, as the great mound, which was once the citadel, is formed chiefly of ruined buildings, the accumulation of ages, on a scarped rock, at the end of the Lakki range of hills.<sup>43</sup>

As we have seen, this is not in fact what most previous writers had to say about Sehwan. Only ‘armchair’ historical geographers in England, who had never visited the site, were more

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<sup>42</sup> Edward Archer Langley, *Narrative of a Residence at the Court of Meer Ali Moorad: with wild sports in the valley of the Indus* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1860), 105-106.

<sup>43</sup> Alexander Cunningham, *The Ancient Geography of India. I The Buddhist Period, including the Campaigns of Alexander, and the Travels of Hwen-Thsang* (London: Trübner, 1871), 264.

confident in their identification. Cunningham seems to take these as more authoritative than soldiers and travellers who visited the site. It is also likely that his judgement is clouded by the fact that the book in which he makes these remarks is specifically about identifying places and routes associated with Alexander. James Burgess' listing of significant archaeological remains for the Archaeological Survey of Western India notes the shrine at Sehwan, but not the fort.<sup>44</sup>

The beginning of more scholarly research at Sehwan did not come until the 1920s and 1930s. Henry Cousens' work on Sindh for the Archaeological Survey of India remarked on the great archaeological potential of the site, but with scepticism – citing Burton – for its supposed association with Alexander:

On the north of the town are the remains of the great fort, or the Kāfir Qil'ah as it is generally called by the people, thereby indicating that its origin had no connection with the Muhammadans. It is, indeed, said to date back to Alexander the Great, and to have been erected by him, but nothing of the original walling, or of any subsequent fort, is now discernible upon the surface. Nothing Greek has been found here except an occasional coin. But this only proves that the coin got there, not, necessarily, the Greeks. The nearest approach to such remains was when Burton faked a Greek vase, smashed and buried it in the line of excavation being made by an enthusiastic friend, and only confessed to his trickery in time to prevent a learned disquisition upon the find being published. The fort is now an immense mound of earth, measuring, roughly, 400x200 yards, and about 60 feet high, filled with potsherds, brickbats, broken china, bones, charcoal, ash and ghosts. The retaining walls which were, no doubt, of brick, having

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<sup>44</sup> James Burgess, *Provisional lists of architectural and other archaeological remains in western India, including the Bombay presidency, Sindh, Berar, Central provinces and Haidarabad*, Archæological Survey of Western India (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1875).

disappeared, the rains of countless seasons have washed down and furrowed the sides until -it is, now, practically a shapeless and honeycombed mass. In the deeper portions of these fissures parts of brick and mud walls are seen in all positions, but they are too confused and ruinous to make anything of in a casual inspection. They are seen at different levels and probably show the rebuilding of the fort at different periods, one upon the other.<sup>45</sup>

Salim A. Ali, Assistant Curator at the Bombay Natural History Society, visited in 1928, and found it a “dusty little town ... whose chief pride at the present day lies in the dilapidated ruins of a mud-and-brick fort claiming an abstruse connection with the invasion of Alexander the Great, and in the annual fair held at the dargah of a pir long-defunct but who continues to perform his miracles notwithstanding”.<sup>46</sup> In 1938, Maneck B. Pithawalla emphasised that archaeological research in Sindh was “still in its infancy”.<sup>47</sup> He mentions Sindomana and the ancient Greek and Roman historians only very briefly with regard to Sehwan, and states that “it is the only Greek city relic in Sind today”<sup>48</sup> – but like his predecessors, did not undertake excavations at the site.

N. G. Majumdar of the Archaeological Survey of India – who was tragically killed by bandits about 50 kilometres from Sehwan in 1938 – provides the first sober and scholarly assessment of the fort at Sehwan and the chances of it being associated with Alexander the Great:

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<sup>45</sup> Henry Cousens, *The Antiquities of Sind: with historical outline* (Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publication Branch, 1929), 138-141.

<sup>46</sup> *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* 32.3/4, 460.

<sup>47</sup> Maneck B. Pithawalla, "Identification and description of some old sites in Sind and their relation with the physical geography of the region," *Journal of Sind Historical Society* 3, no. 4 (1938). 1.

<sup>48</sup> Pithawalla, "Identification and description of some old sites in Sind," 13-14.



In view of the identification of Sehwan with Sindimana accepted by Cunningham and others, it has often been contended that the ruined fort outside the modern town goes back to the time of Alexander the Great. But nothing could be more erroneous. On inspection it appeared to be the remains of a fort of Muhammadan times, in the debris of which glazed pottery and bricks of this period were lying in abundance. It is probable, however, that at this site there had existed some ancient buildings and over their remains the fort was erected. According to some visitors, pre-Muhammadan remains are occasionally found at its lower levels. It is even possible that the modern town is built on earlier Hindu ruins, but as Sehwan is a living town this could not be verified. In view of its being on an eminence it does not seem likely that the site of Sehwan has much changed since the earliest times.<sup>49</sup>

This fits well with N. M. Billimoria's wry assessment of the Greek and Roman historical sources in a lecture read at the Sind Historical Society the same year as Majumdar's study was published: "In this paper you will find several contradictory statements made, for all the authorities cannot agree on the same point".<sup>50</sup>

Majumdar's judgement of what he observed was reasonable, although more recent excavations have in fact confirmed that occupation at the site goes back to the fourth century BC,<sup>51</sup> the time of Alexander. Kervran – whose excavations at the site do not appear to have been published – is like many scholars before her sceptical about the identification of Sehwan

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<sup>49</sup> N. C. Majumdar, *Explorations in Sind: being a report of the exploratory survey carried out during the years 1927-28, 1929-30 and 1930-31*, Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1934), 46.

<sup>50</sup> N. M. Billimoria, "Identification of Some Old Place in Ancient Sindh," *Journal of the Sind Historical Society* 1, no. 1-35 (1935), 1; this is the opening statement of the article.

<sup>51</sup> Annabelle Collinet, "Chronology of Sehwan Sharif Through Ceramics (The Islamic Period)," in *Sindh through History and Representations: French Contributions to Sindhi studies*, ed. Michel Boivin (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3-4.

with Sindomana, and more generally about the enterprise of tracing Alexander's route along the lower Indus, in the face of such sparse and vague historical sources.<sup>52</sup>

I would like to conclude, however, on a more positive note for the ancient historical significance of Sehwan. Few of the nineteenth-century writers whom I have discussed in this paper knew anything much about Sehwan at all. If they had been there, it was only very briefly, and none undertook – or were remotely qualified to undertake – archaeological investigations at the site. Nor did they undertake any serious historical enquiries among people at Sehwan about the town and the fort's ancient past. There is no doubt that the fixation of these British writers with an ancient Macedonian who passed through Sehwan briefly more than two thousand years ago is colonialist and Orientalist. They would rather celebrate Alexander, with whom some of them personally identified, than look at the long and fascinating history of the site across the *longue durée*. This does not automatically mean, however, that Alexander was not at Sehwan: only that the reasons of these writers for placing him there were not sound.

Burton's arguments against the "Grecian origin" of Sehwan do not in fact stand:

This Sehwan mound cannot be of Grecian origin, I humbly opine, for two reasons. The arches are Asiatic, and the broken bits of man's handiwork found scattered about in its entrails are oriental. If we are to believe the chronicles, it was a Hindoo castle built to command a favourite ford of the Indus: in the lapse of years, as it was ruined and ruined over again, the site rose above the level of the plain, till at last it became conspicuous, and, catching the archaeologist's eye, it received from his ready hand the honours of an illustrious origin. The natives of Sindh, excepting only the few readers of Persian poetry and history, had never heard of "Sikandar Shah" when we first entered the country.

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<sup>52</sup> Monique Kervran, "Le delta de l'Indus au temps d'Alexandre. Quelques éléments nouveaux pour l'interprétation des sources narratives," *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1995), 259, 263.

The second point can be dismissed easily: there are plenty of places where Alexander was present where there is no uninterrupted historical record or folk memory of him between antiquity and the present. Burton's first point – that there is no obviously Greek material culture at Sehwan – can also be challenged.

Archaeological theory over the past few decades has successfully demolished the traditional culture-historical view (propounded by Gustav Kosinna and others) that forms of material culture can be correlated with bounded ethnic groups. In Central Asian archaeology in recent years, this means that the notion that the presence of Greeks means objects that look as though they come from the Greek Mediterranean had been widely rejected. Instead, current approaches take a much more flexible and contextual perspective on the material culture of Alexander's campaigns and the later Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms.<sup>53</sup> Although there are some archaeological sites where we may be able to identify items or constructions associated specifically with Alexander's – usually very brief – passing through,<sup>54</sup> these are the exception. Recent studies have also emphasised the continuities between the period after Alexander and that which preceded it.

So what should we expect Alexander's presence at Sehwan to look like, archaeologically speaking? Burton's modified 'Etruscan' sauce-jar was a good joke, but a painted Greek vase is emphatically not something that we should expect to turn up at Sehwan. None of the Graeco-Bactrian sites of Central Asia have yielded decorated Greek pottery. If future archaeological

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<sup>53</sup> See for example Laurianne Martinez-Sève, "À propos du temple aux niches indentées d'Aï Khanoum : quelques observations," in *Paysage et religion en Grèce antique : mélanges offerts à Madeleine Jost*, ed. Pierre Carlier and Charlotte Lerouge (Paris: De Boccard, 2010); Rachel Mairs, *The Hellenistic Far East: Archaeology, Language and Identity in Greek Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Laurianne Martinez-Sève, "Vie religieuse et imaginaire des habitants de la Bactriane hellénistique, une contribution," in *L'Orient est son jardin : hommage à Rémy Bouchard*, ed. Sébastien Gondet and Ernie Haerinck (Leuven: Peeters, 2018); Rachel Mairs, ed., *The Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek World*, Routledge Worlds (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020); Milinda Hoo, *Eurasian Localisms: Towards a Translocal Approach to Hellenism and Inbetweenness in Central Eurasia, third to first centuries BCE* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2022).

<sup>54</sup> e.g. Samarkand: Claude Rapin and M. Isamidinov, "Fortifications hellénistiques de Samarcande (Samarkand-Afrasiab)," *Topoi* 4 (1994).

excavations revealed destruction levels, or new building of fortifications, in levels securely dated to the late fourth century BC, then we might argue that this has some connection with military instability in the region at the time. But we would be highly unlikely to be able to prove who built these fortifications, whether a foreign invader or a local ruler. Like other sites in Pakistan and Afghanistan along the route possibly followed by Alexander, or in territories under the later control of Graeco-Bactrian or Indo-Greek kings, by far the most productive, and potentially rewarding, approach to Sehwan is to focus on the longer, richer history of which Alexander's campaign was only a brief episode.

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