

Doctoral (PhD) theses

MÁRTA MUNDING

**ALEXANDER THE GREAT AND HIS ENCOUNTERS WITH BARBARIAN WOMEN IN THE WORK OF  
CURTIUS RUFUS**

**AN EXAMINATION OF THE USE OF SOURCES AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE EPISODES**

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## **1. Research history, research topic**

If we compare the work of Curtius Rufus with other Greek and Latin Alexander histories, we can see that the author mentions more Persian and barbarian women (Sisygambis, Stateira, Barsine, the wife of Hystaspes, Thalestris, the wife of Sisimithres, the wife of Spitamenes, Cleophis, Roxane) in his historical work. Moreover, it is noticeable that while other sources hardly mention these women, Curtius Rufus attributes great importance and influence to them in the course of events in his narrative.

Previous research on women has mainly focused on the mother of Darius III, Sisygambis, and, to a lesser extent, on the wife of Darius III, Stateira. Further, regarding succession, the role of Roxane of Bactria and Barsine has been discussed with emphasis on their children (Alexander IV, Heracles) and the lives and the fates of their sons. There has been considerable interest in the encounter of the Macedonian ruler with the Amazon Queen, Thalestris, in order to explain the description of the mythological story in a historical context.

Thus, it is necessary to examine and contrast all surviving accounts of barbarian women in order to emphasize the similarities and dissimilarities of these descriptions. This enquiry enables us to see, whether these women could also have been mentioned in the first generation historians, and to show what role they played and what influence they had on the course of events. If their presence in the primary sources can be proved, it raises another question: why other accounts do not mention these women, or, if they do, only very briefly? What is more, it can allow us to examine why Curtius Rufus decided to attribute greater relevance and a more active role to them in his narrative.

An interesting and not negligible aspect of my investigation is the inquiry into whether Curtius Rufus had been influenced in his description of barbarian women by the stereotypical ideas widely present in other Greek and Roman sources. According to the traditional Greek and barbarian antithesis, these authors depict royal and aristocratic women as immoral, cruel, vengeful, power-mad, and exerting their influence over their husbands. It is further observable that this image had been used to describe the disorder in the Persian court, and the decadence and effeminate nature of the ruler and his court. The barbarian women in the work of Curtius Rufus have not been closely examined from this perspective yet.

My investigation can, therefore, refine our received ideas and assumptions about Curtius Rufus' representation of barbarians. It will, furthermore, discover the positive or negative

characteristics that Curtius Rufus uses for these women in connection with Alexander the Great.

Another interesting issue comes to light in relation to the question of the use of various sources. It is necessary to examine whether the stories featuring these barbarian female characters were based on real historical events or they were essentially fictitious, that is, invented by different authors.

Curtius Rufus, whose work is filled with modifications and insertions, or with references to the political events of his era, is definitely in the focus of my dissertation. Taking into consideration these aspects of his work, the author's special narrative technique in the stories concerning barbarian women will become more distinctive; the authorial intention will appear more evidently in the neglect or insertion of certain details.

## **2. The methodology applied**

In the course of this analysis, the narrative of Curtius Rufus is compared to the parallel accounts of other Alexander historians (Strabo, Diodorus, Plutarch, Arrian, Justin – who had epitomized the work of Pompeius Trogus – and the *Metz Epitome*) applying the traditional method of source criticism (*Quellenkritik*). The method is certainly not the most modern approach, however, its application has led to new discoveries.

Without source criticism, it would have been impossible to show similarities and dissimilarities between certain scenes, or to distinguish the data gathered from the primary sources. *Quellenkritik* enables us to underline the reason of the authorial intention behind the modifications and alterations of the scenes.

Throughout the investigation, I have used previous results of earlier *Quellenforschung*, however, these have been modified or completed whenever I have managed to identify differences and similarities between the accounts.

### 3. New results

The comparative examination of the episodes featuring barbarian women has shown that in most cases it is impossible to identify the primary sources followed by the extant authors. However, this does not mean that it should not or could not be attempted.

In my research, I have tried to emphasize the similarities and dissimilarities of the episodes. What is more, I have also tried to explain the reasons behind these modifications and to highlight which elements can be traced back with certainty to primary sources and which had been the invention of the authors. As far as previous research is concerned, it is established that without exception all historians modified and altered their source material using the information to their own authorial purposes and to the requirements of their chosen genre. All authors considered in my dissertation had abbreviated their accounts, had described events in less or more detail, and even omitted certain scenes as it suited best the form and their intentions in accordance with the specific criteria of their genres; Diodorus in universal history, Plutarch in biography, Arrian in historical monograph, Justin who had epitomized the universal history of Pompeius Trogus and the author of the *Metz Epitome* in the genre of *epitome*. The same also applies to the description of barbarian women.

Curtius Rufus mentions only three authors by name in his work; Cleitarchus, Timagenes and Ptolemy. After having compared his passages with the other parallel descriptions of the Alexander historians it can be considered proven that he had also indirectly or directly used and followed accounts of other primary, lost sources. Undoubtedly, however, Curtius Rufus modified the available source material to a great extent. These modifications can be explained with various reasons; the rhetorical intention, the claim to create more expressive and pictorial scenes with powerful elaboration, the profound use of the preceding literary and mythological tradition, or the deliberate use of allusions and the intentional modification of such reflections.

The variation of different places (*tabernaculum, vestibulum*), the detailed, exhaustive elaboration of descriptions that pause the plot, and the introduction of characters (Mithrenes, Medates) into the narrative who are not presented in other accounts all function as instruments to enhance tension, to clarify the background connections and motivations, and last but not least, to maintain the reader's attention.

Similar modifications can be observed when he makes references to previous or forthcoming episodes of his work; in these cases he connects some scenes that can be found in different places in the narrative by using almost the same collocations making anaphoric and

cataphoric references, or by featuring the characters in the same way. This technique can be very well identified in the reoccurring scene of the Persian royal family, which always generate sympathy. The use of this method enabled him to connect the different episodes (the capture of the Persian royal women, the pain caused by the death of Stateira, and Sisygambis' reaction to the news about Alexander the Great's death) into one unit.

In the scene depicting the wife of Spitamenes, Curtius Rufus creates a connection between several scenes by the usage of the phrase *acinaces* with the verb *stringo*. This cannot be attributed to coincidence since the characters in these analogue scenes can be linked to each other. Darius III is betrayed by Bessus and Nabarzanes, while Bessus by Spitamenes and Dataphernes, and Spitamenes – according to the account of Curtius Rufus and the *Metz Epitome* – is deceived, beheaded by his own wife, who took with her the head of Spitamenes to Alexander.

A similar solution can be seen in the composition of the descriptions of the royal and noble women (Sisygambis, Stateira, the wife of Hystaspes), in which their exceptional beauty, nobility, dignity and modesty are emphasized evoking the admiration and respect of Alexander and the Macedonians.

The banquet (*symposium, convivium*) is the setting of some episodes (the wife of Hystaspes, the wife of Spitamenes). However, this is not surprising, taking into consideration the fact that in the Macedonian society the banquet had a recreational, representational, and also a political function in order to strengthen the relationship between the ruler and the aristocracy. In the work of Curtius Rufus – just like in many cases in the real course of events – however, these occasions ended tragically or in many cases even with death.

Curtius Rufus looks back at the events in the era of Alexander at many centuries' distance in time, so he intentionally uses the means of *anticipation*. It can be seen, for example, in the scene representing the suicide of Sisygambis, in which evoking the massacre and cruelty of Artaxerxes III Ochus. Furthermore, he also alludes to the fate awaiting the daughters of Darius III and to the succession debate following the death of Alexander.

The narration of the events is influenced by the aim of highlighting *pathos*, grief, tears, also chaos, fear and unexpected reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*). Moreover, this notion is intensified by his rhetorical intention, so he writes fictive free speeches, monologues and dialogues too. Both the tragedy and the horror of the Persian women falling into the hands of their enemies and the grief over the death of Stateira as well as of Alexander are depicted in realistic and naturalistic way.

In the arrangement of various episodes, the influence of drama can be recognised when in the description of events we can see the structural elements of the tragedy. Curtius Rufus pays great attention to the psychological portrayal; searches for the motives of events and decisions with great empathy, enjoys the presentation of the instinctive psychology of the crowd. The primary aim of our author – in accordance with the rules of the tragical historiography – is the entertainment and amusement of his reader. There can be no doubt regarding the deliberate choice of the topic of his work. What is more, it would be difficult not to assume that in depicting the deeds of Alexander, who had completed expeditions of tens of thousands in reverse and exceeded all other leaders, there would be no references to current events of Curtius Rufus' era or free expression of the author's opinion on the principate. To write about a campaign against Persians and barbarians must have been relevant in the first century, especially as the Roman politics turned towards the East.

Curtius Rufus mentions considerably more barbarian and Persian women in his work than the other Alexander historians. In the course of the chapters of the dissertation it has been proved that although the most important women do appear in the works of Diodorus, Plutarch, Arrian, Justin and in the *Metz Epitome*, there is no attempt to represent their detailed and active role or to include more details about stories related to them. By contrast, Curtius Rufus pays more attention to the description of these female characters. What is more, he grants them a more influential and dominant role in the course of events. In his account all the descriptions of the characters and events are secondary and only applied in order to portray the vices and virtues of Alexander. The barbarian, Persian women are no exception to this principle either.

Curtius Rufus represents barbarians as different creatures from the Greek (Macedon) and also from the Roman world; they are represented as Others. The episodes representing the Persian women, partially also due to their topic, illustrate perfectly the real and supposed differences manifested in social practices. Burial and funerary rites, the attitude towards manual labour (the practice or refusal of weaving) are mentioned. Moreover, we can read about the simplicity of the Macedonian way of life in contrast to the luxury of the Persians, about the difference between Greek monogamy and Persian polygamy, and about real or supposed social traditions, such as children not being allowed to sit down without the permission of the royal woman, intervention of the royal (aristocratic) women on behalf of their relatives, the role of the royal women in the legitimacy process, the influential and important role of the queen mother in the Persian society, the practice of the name-changing, or the holiness of the objects of the Persian King.

However, we should not read an apparent negative criticism into the passages of Curtius Rufus; even less so, because it is supported by the description of female characters in his historical monograph.

Following the traditional concept of the Greek and barbarian antithesis, we can recognize the husband-influencing, cruel, vengeful, unruly, wild, calculating and power-mad women. A typical example of this category is the wife of Spitamenes who murders her husband, the father of her children without thinking (she decapitates him), and with his head flees to the military camp of Alexander. She could be best described as the embodiment of the barbarian *licentia* characterised by the traits of *vanitas*, *furor*, *perfidia*. In the work of Arrian and Strabo Spitamenes was murdered by his Massagetean allies, or simply by the barbarians. Like the version of Curtius Rufus, The *Metz Epitome* accuses the wife for the beheading of her husband. Curtius Rufus appears to be in tandem with the *Metz Epitome* by reason of the structure and the composition of the plot, so we can assume that they followed the same source. However, Curtius Rufus modifies the original description of the primary source (or sources). Since the author of the *epitome* does not comment the deed of the wife of Spitamenes, Curtius Rufus highlights the cruelty of the act and the barbarian origin of the wife, the horror of Alexander the Great after having learnt the details of the murder, and the moral dilemma of the Macedonian ruler: should he punish or reward the act of Spitamenes' wife.

The scholars have connected the motif of beheading with other literary or mythological stories (Comaetho-, Scylla-, Chionara-, Artaunte-, Jael-, Judith – episodes). Since these theories are more or less reliable we can suppose that the previous literary and mythological examples might have had influence on the original source of the story. From this point of view other parallel scenes can be mentioned, such as the episode of Clytaimnestra, Helen, Thebe, or the story concerning the wife of Candaules. Other related scenes would be the deed attributed to Queen Tomyris, or the story of the decapitation of Orpheus, Medusa or Pentheus.

Although tentatively, we can also mention another scene as emphasising the negative aspects of barbarian stereotype introducing the theme of *incestus*. According to native custom, the wife of Sisimithres bore her son at least two sons. Only Curtius Rufus and the *Metz Epitome* mention the wife in the scene that discusses the surrender of the Rock. It is possible, that the woman had also been present in the account of the primary source, maybe in the same manner as in the description of the *Metz Epitome*. The author of the *epitome* mentions without comment in one single sentence the fact of the *incestus* and the wife of Spitamenes. Curtius Rufus, however, criticizes the close-kin marriage. In his work, the woman displays more

courage (encouraging her husband to continue the siege) than her son. Having chosen this solution the author creates a striking contrast between the cowardice of the husband (son) and the courage and heroism of the wife (mother). Although the wife of Sisimithres exceeds his husband (son) in terms of courage; she is also the embodiment of *imprudencia* and *hybris* since with her foolish female advice and plan she almost caused the massacre of her people.

Curtius Rufus modified to a great extent the fictitious scene of the encounter between Alexander and the Amazon Queen called Thaletris. In the accounts of the other authors, this scene is unequivocally positive in terms of both its tone and its ending. The visit can most certainly be traced back to a real historical event; it might have been inspired by episodes about the visit of a local (nomad) queen, the Scythian marriage offer and the Pharasmenes episode, or maybe the Atropates story. It is also possible that the encounter is the result of a contemporary *mythopoiesis*. In this case, the episode would have been taken from the Macedonian circles. Moreover, the basis for the encounter would be Alexander's eternal rivalry (*aemulatio*) with his mythical ancestors, Heracles and Achilles. According to certain opinions, the episode can be interpreted in a symbolic way, as well. The encounter with the Amazons in this way becomes the symbol of the reconciliation between the victors and the vanquished, or on the contrary, the aim of the story is a warning to the Greeks about the oriental dangers. In my view, however, the appearance of the Amazons could be merely a literary *topos*, which is not possible to omit from a historical work about the Persian campaign. My proposal seems to be supported by the identification of the warrior women with the Others, the foreigners, the barbarians (the Persians), and by the fact that the location of the campaign is very close to the traditional regions of the Amazons.

Every detail of the scene depicting Alexander's encounter with the Amazon Queen can be found in earlier mythological and literary traditions: the representation of the social custom of the warrior women, the description of their equipment, the alliance or the amorous motif between Alexander and Thaletris, and the purpose of the queen's visit.

The accounts of Diodorus, Curtius Rufus and Justin can be traced back to a common source, Cleitarchus (or Onesicritus), and they all share identical information on locations and numbers of the Amazons. Unlike the other two authors, Curtius Rufus deprives the episode of its epic splendour. Once the story is set in its context, after the introduction of an eunuch called Bagoas, Curtius Rufus with his phraseology, terminology, with the structure of the episodes and the description of the behaviour of the queen as seductive and demanding, as well as by showing the Macedonian king as hesitant and finally fulfilling the queen's request

the author represents Thalestris as a barbarian woman, the embodiment of the typical, barbarian *impotentia, licentia*.

The description of these female characters may serve as a tool to illustrate the personal qualities of Alexander. By modifying the episodes describing the wife of Sisimithres and the wife of Spitamenes Curtius Rufus represents the Macedonian ruler as a forgiving and kind person towards his enemies, a strong leader who is worried about the morals of the Macedonian army rejecting the example of the barbarian *licentia*, and who is moderate in all aspects. The encounter between Thalestris and Alexander is an appropriate background to the criticism of the Alexander's *orientalism*; even though at the beginning the Macedonian ruler feels hesitant about the fulfilling of the queen's request, finally he complies with Thalestris' wish. In this way, Curtius Rufus doubts and cancels the king's former outstanding virtues: clemency (*clementia*), self-restraint (*continentia*), and moderation (*moderatio*).

The woman who is called Cleophis in the Latin Alexander sources – the name may be a play on Cleopatra – is also a problematic character in the works. Several accounts mention Alexander's meeting with the mother of Assacanus, so there is no doubt that this female character must have been present in the accounts of the primary sources as well and that she was indeed a real historical person. The name Cleophis that refers to Cleopatra's name might be the idea of a writer of the late Republic or early Empire, possibly Timagenes of Alexandria. Justin or his source (Pompeius Trogus) mentions as a fact the sexual relationship of Alexander and Cleophis, what is more, a boy named Alexander (see Caesarion in the case of Cleopatra). Moreover, Justin claims that Alexander himself was the father of this illegitimate son. However, this data can be also explained by considering the reason for naming the child after Alexander as an act of respect and gratitude towards the Macedonian ruler. Curtius Rufus praises and eulogizes the beauty and the dignity of Cleophis, however, placing the gossip at the end of the episode doubts the morality of both the ruler and the woman. However, in this scene there is no trace of the reluctance of Alexander as in the case of the encounter with Thalestris.

With the description of Sisygambis, Stateira and the wife of Hystaspes, Curtius Rufus continues the list of examples of beautiful, noble and virtuous women characters present in Greek and Roman literature.

The encounter between Alexander and the wife of Hystaspes, granddaughter of Artaxerxes III Ochus, can be only found in the work of Curtius Rufus. We might suppose that this scene is the invention of the author. In my view, Curtius Rufus combines the real historical elements (the genealogy of the characters) with the earlier literary standard motifs

(the leading-in of the female captives, the exceptionally beautiful appearance of the woman, the nobility and moderate behaviour as contradictory trait to the banquet, the royal question about her ancestry, and the reunification of the family members) in order to build up a story with moralizing intention. The nobility, dignity and the modesty of the wife of Hystaspes is emphasized by the author in order to highlight the negative characteristics of Alexander the Great; his corruption by Persian practices: the banquets early in the day, drinking and mad revelry throughout the night, games, women by the score. In Curtius Rufus' work, the rank and nobility of Hystaspes' wife reminds Alexander of his previous and by now lost good qualities; Alexander is able to treat the Persian prisoners of noble birth generously and kindly only after he has recovered his noble and royal qualities.

In the introduction of the Persian royal family, Curtius Rufus avoids with great care the use of the elements of the barbarian stereotype, just as he avoids the use of the word *barbarus*, as well. Due to this positive description, there is no reference to the *incestus* between Darius III and his wife called Stateira, and this is also the reason for modifying the cause of the death of Stateira. In his work, the wife of Darius III does not die in childbirth or in miscarriage, but as a result of the long and tiring journey and grief. This attitude towards Persian women can be explained, if we consider that Curtius Rufus introduced these royal women to show how noble, moderate and respectful Alexander the Great is. It is probable that this way of description had already been present in the primary sources. However, Curtius Rufus with his alterations and insertions modified the episodes and their final messages according to his authorial proposes and intentions. The stories regarding Sisygambis, Stateira, the younger Stateira, Drypetis, and the wife of Hystaspes highlight without exception the differences between the customs of the Macedonians and the vanquished, and emphasize the importance of respect towards different cultures. Most importantly they represent and recall the noble, generous, respectful and moderate behaviour (*continentia*, *clementia*, *moderatio*) of Alexander towards these female captives. These episodes could be regarded as Cyrus imitations or as a counterpropaganda to the contemporary rumour of Alexander's era doubting the modesty and clement behaviour of the Macedonian ruler towards his female prisoners.

Sisygambis, the mother of Darius III appears on various occasions in the narrative of Curtius Rufus; when the royal Persian family falls into captivity, when Leonnatus and later Alexander visits the royal women, at the death of Stateira, when she refuses her liberation, when the Macedonian ruler leaves the female relatives of Darius III in Susa, when she intervenes on behalf of the Uxians, when she learned the news of the death of Alexander. Her recurring presence can be explained by the author's profound knowledge and use of the

earlier literary tradition that attributes a great importance and influence to the role of the Persian King's mother. Curtius Rufus subjects the episodes describing the mother of Darius III to his own authorial purposes. The description of Sisygambis gives opportunity to the author to compare and contrast the Greek (Macedon) and Persian social practices and customs, to emphasize the importance and the complex nature of the mutual respect of Alexander and Sisygambis. Moreover, Alexander's positive attitude towards the mother of Darius III could symbolise the legitimate demand of the Macedonian ruler, meaning that would support his position in taking over the place of Darius III by a symbolical adoption representing Alexander as a son. However, the role of Sisygambis has great importance in other respects as well. Accepting and modifying the theory of Baynham, I strongly believe that the presence of the mother of Darius III in several scenes is an appropriate background for Curtius Rufus to a moral commentary, digression or an obituary about Alexander. In the work of Curtius Rufus, Sisygambis who bears and suffers both fortune and misfortune with dignity and nobility becomes the counterpoint on the one hand to the Macedonian ruler himself, who is corrupted by the success, fortune and Persian luxury and on the other hand to Darius III, who is brought to his senses by his defeat.

Curtius Rufus omits the description of the Alexander encounter and his sexual relationship with Barsine, the daughter of Artabazus in his third book of *Historiae*. His decision was deliberate, since he mentions Barsine and his son called Hercules at the succession debate, in his tenth book, when Nearchus proposed Heracles, the child of Barsine and Alexander as a potential heir to the throne. The proposal, however, is rejected due to the illegitimate status of the child, his semi-Persian origin, and also because of his physical absence in Babylon. The omission of Curtius Rufus can be better understood, if we consider that his purpose is to maintain the image established in the third book of *Historiae*, which emphasized Alexander's sexual restraint with respect to the Persian royal women .

As far as the use and confusion about the name of the wife of Alexander in the work of Arrian and Plutarch are concerned (Barsine or Stateira, Barsine and Stateira) we can attribute this inconsistency to mishandling of the sources, so to the mistake of Aristobulus or Arrian, or perhaps it is only an error committed while copying the text. There is however, a third explanation, too. By changing the name from Stateira to Barsine Aristobulus eliminates the relationship between Alexander and the daughter of Artabazus, in order to be able to eulogize the modesty and temperance of the Macedonian ruler, just as we have seen in case of Curtius Rufus' omission.

To conclude, we can firmly claim that Curtius Rufus applies with great knowledge and care the barbarian stereotype in connection to the barbarian female characters. What is more, he uses its possibilities wisely serving his authorial intentions. He accepts them in their full form if they serve his aims; if, however, they do not correspond to his authorial concept, he is able to modify and alter them in order to achieve his goals and in order to follow the requirements of the genre of moralising historiography.

#### **4. Publications in the subject**

Barbarian women in the work of Curtius Rufus. *Aetas* 21.2–3 (2006) 44–68.

I profili femminili nella storiografia su Alessandro Magno. In: I. RADOVÁ (cur.): *Laetae Segetes Iterum*. Brno, 2008, 69–77.

Inconsistencies in the portrayal of women in connection with Alexander the Great. In: VAJDA Z. (szerk.): *Bölcsészmuhely*. Szeged, 2009, 101–111.

The double murder of Roxane. In: CZEROVSZKI M. – NAGYILLÉS J. (szerk.): *Corollarium. Tanulmányok a 65 éves Tar Ibolya tiszteletére*. Szeged, 2010, 187–192.

Alexander and the Amazon Queen. *Graeco-Latina Brunensia*. 16.2 (2011) Masarykova Univerzita, 125–142.

Barsine: Wife or Mistress of Alexander the Great? *Hereditas* 1 (2011) 8–21.

The wife of Spitamenes: the motif of beheading in the work of Curtius Rufus. In: TAKÁCS L. (szerk.): *Szöveg és Hagomány*. Piliscsaba, 2013, 95–117.