

# Maracanda

Where legends once met  
by Christian Höfgen © 2012

Major concern began to creep into General Ptolemy's mind. They were already a day and a night running from their relentless pursuers, a small horde of Bactrian bandits. The bandits had chosen the small Macedonian reconnaissance detachment as prey, which tried to outrun them by fleeing to the north, leaving the Oxus river far behind. Ptolemy had hoped that fear of the Scythians, who ruled these lands, would be too great for the pursuers.

But it seemed they didn't believe the legends about the cruel warriors who, long before King Alexander, had defeated the Persian invasion.

Now the Macedonians galloped across the steppe, still fleeing. Ptolemy was not a coward, but he did not want to waste his life in an obscure, pointless skirmish with some infamous bandits as long as his King and half-brother, Alexander, needed him. He only fled to save his future services for his ruler.

Just before his anger got the upper hand, and he was about to order his faithful Macedonians to turn and fight to preserve their honor, Ptolemy noticed a massive dust cloud ahead of them – a swift and mighty cavalry: The Scythians! There came a certain death. Soldiers of Alexander the Great had never been cowards and Ptolemy gave his men the signal to draw their swords.

"Today is a good day to die!!!!" he cried out to them with a solemn grin, and the veterans understood only too well what was coming.

But about a hundred yards ahead of them the leader of the Scythians signaled to his men by rising and waving his bow high in the air. The Scythian formation parted before them, passing the Macedonians on both flanks with a surprising speed that Ptolemy had never seen before. It was like a passing hurricane. The Scythians had not even bothered to look at them, aiming instead toward the pursuing bandits.

Only their leader continued to ride alone, directly toward the Macedonians, as if aiming for Ptolemy in the middle. He was so fast that he just sped right through them, before any Macedonian cavalryman had a chance to react.

Ptolemy thought he had briefly glimpsed the face of a young woman, but this was impossible, surely an hallucination, brought on by the stress of battle. The female face he had seen had been radiant with joy, while she rode through the ranks of his men, or rather, shot like an arrow right through their midst, and preparing her bow for action.

It was certainly a handsome young man, the General said to himself, admiring his riding and the nature of his incredible courage. They were more fearsome than any enemy he had ever encountered. Such an enemy was only to be greatly admired. But were they an enemy?

Ptolemy signaled his troops to halt, and turned back towards the Scythians. He could see now how their pursuers quickly turned their horses, panicked and screaming. The Scythians encircled their prey, and by rapid fire shot arrow after arrow at close range into their victims. They shot with incredible speed and accuracy and, although they were fewer in number than Ptolemy's own party, there were, after a few moments, no more living pursuers. Dead bodies covered the steppe, and riderless horses were left to tend for themselves.

Finally, one of the Scythians rode back to the Macedonians. It had to be their courageous commander. His courage reminded the General of his half-brother, whose famously daring ambition was also not unknown. He gave his men a sign to sheath their swords. This man was, for whatever reason, a friend.

Suddenly, however, Ptolemy gaped in total astonishment at the stranger, as the Scythian warrior took off his helmet and long red hair flowed down his shoulders. The young man was a woman and she was most lovely. He rode up to meet her halfway.

"This day might have been your last one, Macedon!" she called to him, while laughing.

"Yes, indeed. Thanks! Who are you? Am I perhaps already in Hades with my men, while Artemis plays a trick on me?" Ptolemy asked with a respectful and friendly voice.

The woman, bowed forward on her horse from laughing, laughed even harder now. She certainly noticed with great amusement his surprise as she examined his puzzled face.

She enjoyed his confusion. She was wonderful, and Ptolemy, almost immediately, fell deeply in love with her.

Her big green eyes sparkled with wit and grace.

"You are still alive. Among the Scythians some women are also trained warriors. In the steppe all must fight or die. That's an unwritten law, which all follow," she explained to him.

"I am princess Roxane of Maracanda, Macedon, and who are you?"

"General Ptolemy, forever in your debt, Living Legend."

Ptolemy bowed slightly on his horse in front of her.

"You thought Herodotus only dreamt his reports of Amazons while drunk from too much wine?" she laughed.

Ptolemy was speechless now.

"Return to your king. I've heard enough of him to know that he will soon march against Maracanda. But I'm the commander of the army which will defend the city of my father and you just have seen that I am braver than your so-called conqueror of Persia," she boasted.

Now she displayed a wide and knowing grin and raised her head proudly.

"Tell him for me that I expect him and that his death is certain. But I'm going to spare you. You will live."

What an incredible display of arrogance, noticed the amazed Ptolemy, but she was perhaps better than Alexander. She was at least equal to him. What a woman! His report was certainly going to spur his half-brother to order forced marches towards Maracanda. When these two met in battle, it would be suicidal, and probably not one single Macedon would ever see his home again. But they would be remembered until the end of time. Was this not what Achilles had meant by reason enough to risk everything and fall?

King Alexander responded to Ptolemy's report on his adventure across the Oxus with electrified action, breaking off his encampment and leading a forced march to Maracanda. The great King always had his head full of legends, like the vaunted Iliad, who he wanted to surpass. Had not Heracles himself fought against beautiful and merciless Amazons in a terrible struggle?

So Alexander went out to battle Roxane, who seemed, like him, to despise death.

Darius had been a disappointment as an opponent. Now for the first time since he and his men had crossed the Granicus, a formidable general was opposing them.

Beyond the Oxus they did not meet the expected vanguard of the Scythians, and they marched on unopposed.

Finally, they looked upon the incredibly old, rich and beautiful Maracanda, which controlled the Silk Road: Home of the brave Roxane.

For the first time during a campaign, Ptolemy felt uncomfortable. The brave beauty had saved his life. He prayed not to have to cross his blade with hers. He was resolved not to raise his sword against her.

That day his heart became a slave to her magic green eyes. Why did no one warn them they were young soldiers that the enemy could become so beautiful, lovely, honorable and courageous? But he kept his thoughts to himself and wondered how Alexander, who adored all beauty in his private life, would react to Roxane.

Certainly, thought his loyal General, ambition and heart would be fighting a fierce battle within his half-brother, Alexander.

Outside the city, the Macedonian army deployed with the routine of skilled veterans to face the Scythians, who deployed only cavalry in response, and Ptolemy knew that, with their perfect mastery of horse archery, their numerical inferiority would be irrelevant. But he also knew that Alexander would never avoid the fight, no matter Ptolemy's advice.

After both sides were ready to fight, a single warrior detached himself from the Scythian levy and Ptolemy immediately suspected his identity. It could be only Roxane. She rode up halfway between both armies and Alexander rode forward alone to meet her.

As she sat there on horseback facing the king, she took off her helmet and the effect was similar, as with Ptolemy previously, only with the major difference that Alexander was already forewarned,

and therefore betrayed no expression of astonishment.

They eyed each other and recognized the same wildness in each other's eyes. Both smiled, because they already knew by their gazes what the following words would only reaffirm.

"He has arrived, the great conqueror of mighty Persia!" Roxane spoke to him with a proud voice.

"Soon to be the conqueror of Maracanda!" replied the Macedonian King, no less proud.

Roxane laughed loudly and shook her pretty head. Her red hair fluttered like a standard in the winds of the steppe.

"Win my city in a duel! Do you dare to fight me, a weak, delicate woman?" she mocked, and this intoxicated the Macedonian infinitely.

She enchanted him. Nevertheless, his duty was war and even now he would cross his blade with this embodiment of Aphrodite and Artemis combined. Secretly however, he decided to spare her - he wanted her alive. She was very special and he felt clearly that she was his destiny.

"It shall be decided by our swords, here and now. Let the gods decide," he replied gravely.

"Who knows, maybe I win all of Persia in a few minutes from now," she mocked him again, accompanied by a wide smile.

She was not only lethal with weapons, Alexander realized. This was the woman he always sought, the companion who he almost gave up ever finding. With her at his side he could truly conquer the whole known world. He made up his mind that the challenge had to be left undecided, as both rode apart to start the duel.

Loud cheering broke out in both armies as they began to recognize the honorable intentions of their respective commanders.

Both eventually turned their horses sharply. Dust swirled up and during her turn Roxane decided that Alexander was too handsome and brave to kill. She also made up her mind to spare the enemy, not knowing that he had the very same intention.

Nevertheless, the attack of both parties was serious in every detail, and they rushed towards each other on their horses in a gallop, both leaving a swirl of loose dust behind them, their drawn swords in hand.

Shortly before they met for the first exchange of blows, Roxane ducked quickly and struck Alexander's sword-wielding hand with a cunning blow, while his blow, which was aimed too high, missed her entirely. She intentionally led the blow with the broadside of her sword to disarm him without a scratch. Alexander's sword flew high in an arc through the air, and fell on the dusty ground. Now the great King was stunned, and he gaped at her in total amazement.

The two then raced side by side for the sword, and Roxane, the better rider, finally won and sat on her horse over the weapon that had defeated so many brave generals and kings.

She smiled at him in triumph.

Alexander did not attack further. He could have thrown his dagger at her. Instead, he dismounted, went to the winner with a grin, held his outstretched hand to her, saying: "Give me your hand in marriage, Roxane. Become the Queen of the vanquished. Instead of storming Maracanda, my Macedonians shall happily celebrate our wedding together with your people. Become the Mistress of the world."

Roxane was now truly surprised and agreed in joy to this thrill. She loved adventure, and where Alexander was, the adrenaline rush was omnipresent. In addition, he was very handsome, with his fiery brown eyes and wavy blond hair. A King from crown to sole.

"I gladly accept, my husband," she replied, beaming at him, and he felt like a child who just took possession of a bowl of sweets.

Two kindred souls had simultaneously conquered each other. Roxane dismounted, and they embraced each other. Cheering flared up again in both armies as they surmised the reason for the embrace.