

BATTLE REPORT:  
THE BATTLE OF CHAERONEA 338 BC

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The Wars of Ancient Greece and Macedonia – HIST612 A001 Win 14  
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In 338 BC<sup>1</sup>, the Macedonian army, led by King Philip II (c. 382–336) and his young prince Alexander III, marched against a coalition of Greek city-states led by Athens and Thebes. The site of this clash was near the Boeotian city of Chaeronea, which guarded the entry into the northern plain of Boeotia.<sup>2</sup> Thebes, the rising power in Greece since defeating the Spartans decisively at Leuctra in 371, allied itself with Athens to oppose Philip’s effort to become master of Greece. This battle was the culmination of Philip’s military campaign during the years 340–338 to build a coalition of loyal Greek cities through various “settlements,” which ultimately led to the League of Corinth (the Hellenic League) against Persia.<sup>3</sup> At Chaeronea, Philip’s superior leadership, experience, tactics, bold ambition, and his clever son Alexander outmatched the Greek allies. The result was a resounding defeat for Greece, which led to Macedonian hegemony and set the stage for Alexander’s eventual conquest of the Persian Empire.

The details of this pivotal battle are difficult to find, and even more difficult to verify due to the lack of reliable sources. The principal source is Diodorus Siculus (c. 90–30 BC), whose *Bibliotheca Historica* or *Library of History* describes the battle as well as the events preceding and following it. Unfortunately, however, Diodorus lived over two centuries after Chaeronea, so while Diodorus is our “primary” source for this battle, his *Library* in fact constitutes an unverifiable secondary source since it relied on eye-witness accounts which are now lost. Other sources, some of them with a mere mention of the Battle of Chaeronea of 338, include *Historiae Alexandri Magni* or *History of Alexander the Great* by Quintus Curtius Rufus (c. 20–90 AD), *Stratagems* by Frontinus (c. 40–100 AD), biographies of Alexander and Pelopidas in *Parallel*

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all dates are BC.

<sup>2</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica Online, s. v. “Chaeronea,” <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/104255/Chaeronea> (accessed March 15, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Carl Roebuck, “The Settlements of Philip II with the Greek States in 338 B.C.,” *Classical Philology* 43, no. 2 (Apr., 1948): 73, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/265833> (accessed March 11, 2014).

*Lives* by Plutarch (c. 46-120 AD), the *Anabasis Alexandri* or *Campaigns of Alexander* by Arrian (c. 86-160 AD), the *Description of Greece* by Pausanias (c. 110-180 AD), *Stratagems* by Polyaeus (c. 100-170 AD), and *Epitome of the 'Philipic History' of Pompeius Trogus* by Justin (c. second or third century AD). It is likely that some of these sources borrowed information from each other, further compounding the problem of the paucity of reliable sources. Despite the disadvantages the lack of sources creates, historians can still attempt to reconstruct the events of the Battle of Chaeronea and gain an understanding of its enduring historical impact.

Following the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War, Greece continued to be a battleground in both the martial and political sense. Sparta's defeat of Athens allowed Thebes to expand its influence in the region. Sparta's attempt to check Theban power failed miserably at Leuctra in 371, leaving Sparta weaker and Thebes even more emboldened. Meddling from Persia, first supporting one city-state and then another, also affected the balance of power in Greece. Philip, king of Macedon in the region north of Greece known as Macedonia, also gained in strength and influence at about the same time. Macedonia was in the midst of a time of relative political stability and economic prosperity during Philip's rule, and Philip sought to take advantage of such good circumstances for the betterment of his kingdom and legacy. Over a period of several years, he subjugated much of Thrace and won over the support of several northern Greek city-states.

Having secured Macedonia, Philip decided to expand his influence southward throughout Greece. According to the historian Justin, the riches "of all the [Greek] cities put together" caused Philip to make war on all of Greece.<sup>4</sup> Whatever his reason for setting his sights on Greece, he attempted to build a coalition of the willing, when possible, and used the threat of

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<sup>4</sup> Justin *Epitome of the 'Philipic History' of Pompeius Trogus* 9.3 (trans. John Selby Watson, 1853).

force when necessary. As Diodorus recounted, Philip “having won most of the Greeks over to friendship with him, was ambitious to gain the uncontested leadership of Greece by terrifying the Athenians into submission.”<sup>5</sup> This threat was acutely noticed by the Athenian statesman Demosthenes, who cautioned other Athenians against giving themselves over to Macedonian control. In a series of impassioned oratories, Demosthenes painted Philip as a major threat, conducting “sudden raids” on the northern city-states.<sup>6</sup> Demosthenes blamed the Greeks for inaction against him, stating, “Philip has not grown great through his own unaided strength so much as through our carelessness.”<sup>7</sup> Demosthenes further chastised his fellow Athenians by stating, “Personally I am surprised that none of you, Athenians, is distressed and angry to find that at the beginning of the war our aim was to punish Philip, but at the end it is to escape injury at his hands. But surely it is obvious that he will not stop, unless someone stops him.”<sup>8</sup> According to Justin, some of the Greek city-states were persuaded by Demosthenes to join Athens against Philip, “but the dread of a war induced some to go over to Philip.”<sup>9</sup> Philip tried to use this threat to woo the Thebans over to his side, but being unsuccessful, he decided he had no choice but to use coercive force against both Athens and Thebes.<sup>10</sup>

At the dawn of battle at Chaeronea, the disunited and disaffected Greek city-states hobbled together an army from Athens, Thebes, and some small contingents from other city-states. Such was the Greek response to the Macedonian threat. The Macedonians under Philip consisted of at least 30,000 infantry and 2,000 cavalry.<sup>11</sup> Only Diodorus, however, provides this

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<sup>5</sup> Diodorus Siculus *Bibliotheca Historica* 16.84.1-2 (trans. C. Bradford Welles, 1963).

<sup>6</sup> Demosthenes “First Philippic” 17 (trans. J. H. Vince, 1930).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>9</sup> Justin 9.3.

<sup>10</sup> Diod. 16.85.5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

number of Macedonian soldiers at Chaeronea, so the true number of soldiers cannot be known with much certainty.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, there is no known accounting of the number of Athenian and Theban soldiers; however, Justin did write that the Athenians were “far superior in numbers” to the Macedonians.<sup>13</sup> Even if Justin’s appraisal is accurate, it is unclear how the phrase “far superior” translates numerically. What does appear certain is that Thebes had at its disposal the Sacred Band of 300. This battle-tested group of soldiers is believed to have been composed of 150 pairs of male lovers. It was called “sacred,” according to Plutarch, “for the same reason that Plato describes the lover as a friend ‘inspired by God.’”<sup>14</sup> This crack group of warriors had never been defeated in battle and represented a great asset to the Athenian and Theban offensive, but they may have been the only asset. Diodorus reported that the best Athenian generals were already dead. Therefore, Athens was left with Chares, who was “no better than any average soldier,”<sup>15</sup> Lycicles, Stratocles, and Theagenes of Thebes, the commander of the Sacred Band. Thus, according to Diodorus, Philip had the decisive leadership advantage.<sup>16</sup> Philip also had his brilliant young son, Alexander, whose quick thinking was to prove pivotal.

The battle formation attests to Philip’s seasoned military wisdom. He placed Alexander on the left wing with Macedonia’s “most seasoned generals” to take on the Sacred Band and the other Boeotians. It remains uncertain whether Alexander commanded a phalanx or a cavalry unit, as Diodorus and the other ancient sources are rather vague about this issue. Philip assumed a

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<sup>12</sup> Exemplifying this uncertainty is Diodorus’ apparent inflation of battle deaths in his description of the Battle of Leuctra. At Leuctra, Diodorus reported 300 Theban deaths and over 4,000 Spartan deaths (15.56.4), while Xenophon reported a much smaller number, almost 1,000 Spartan deaths (*Hellenica* 6.4.15). Pausanias, centuries later, appears to have used Xenophon’s total of 1,000 Spartan deaths and added that there were about forty-seven Theban deaths (*Description of Greece* 9.13.12), a much lower number than the 300 Theban deaths reported by Diodorus.

<sup>13</sup> Justin 9.3.

<sup>14</sup> Plutarch *Parallel Lives* “Pelopidas” 18.4 (trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert and Timothy E. Duff, 1973).

<sup>15</sup> Diod. 16.85.6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.85.7.

command position on the right wing, at the head of “picked men” and likely the flower of the Macedonian phalanx and the cavalry. Philip was positioned in opposition to the commanding Athenians.<sup>17</sup> The other allies of Athens and Thebes assumed positions in the center. While it may never be known for certain, Chaeronea may have been the first battle in which Philip armed his phalanx with sarissa, the long pike that became a hallmark of the Macedonian phalanx under Alexander.<sup>18</sup> Minor M. Markle, III makes a compelling case against Philip’s use of sarissa, stating that Philip may not have employed sarissa-bearing heavy infantry on the right wing due to the topography of Chaeronea. Citing topographical studies that place the Greek left, and therefore Philip’s Macedonian right, along the western slope of hilly terrain, a sarissa-armed phalanx might have developed unwanted gaps in its line.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, Paul A. Rahe refutes Markle’s claim, explaining that here is “ample precedent for arming footsoldiers with long trusting spears.”<sup>20</sup> Such a military technology, if indeed employed at Chaeronea, may have neutralized the “far superior” number of soldiers Athens and Thebes had if Justin’s accounting was accurate.

According to Diodorus, the battle was hotly contested at first, and could have gone either way.<sup>21</sup> To break the stalemate, Philip made a “sham retreat.” According to Polyaeus, the Athenian general Stratocles ordered his men to push forward against the Macedonian right. Philip ordered his phalanx to “keep close and firm, and to retreat slowly, covering themselves

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<sup>17</sup> Diod. 16.86.1-2; see also footnote 2 of Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, Books 16.66-17, trans. C. Bradford Welles, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 79. In later campaigns, Alexander led his cavalry on the right, which may have been the traditional position for Macedonian kings. If so, it is likely that Philip would have commanded the cavalry at Chaeronea from his position on the right.

<sup>18</sup> Minor M. Markle, III, “Use of the Sarissa by Philip and Alexander of Macedon,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 82, no. 4 (Autumn, 1978): 484, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/504637> (accessed March 11, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 488.

<sup>20</sup> Paul A. Rahe, “The Annihilation of the Sacred Band at Chaeronea,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 85, no. 1 (Jan., 1981): 85, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/504975> (accessed March 11, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Diod. 16.86.2.

with their shields from the attacks of the enemy.”<sup>22</sup> Frontinus, from whom Polyaeus may have gleaned his information, wrote that Philip prolonged the engagement knowing that his soldiers were “seasoned by long experience, while the Athenians were ardent but untrained, and impetuous.”<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, Alexander succeeded in rupturing the Boeotian right’s front line and struck down many of the enemy. His success created gaps in the enemy line that Alexander forced his way through. At that moment in the battle, Alexander’s heart was “set on showing his father his prowess and yielding to none in will to win.”<sup>24</sup> According to Plutarch, Alexander was said to have been the first to break the line of the Sacred Band of Thebes.<sup>25</sup> Having achieved this, the tide of the battle quickly swung in favor of the Macedonians. The corpses began to pile up and the Boeotians began to retreat. Then, as soon as Philip was in a good position on level terrain following his false retreat, he “encouraged his troops to a vigorous assault” and won the victory.<sup>26</sup>

The battle was a disaster for Athens, Thebes, and their allies. More than 1,000 Athenians were killed and over 2,000 captured. Of the Boeotians, “many” were killed and “many” were taken prisoner (Diodorus failed to record the actual number).<sup>27</sup> There is no extant record of Macedonian casualties, but the flow of the battle indicates that casualties were probably light. The Theban Sacred Band was devastated. Pausanias wrote of the common grave for the Theban dead with no inscription, but it was “surmounted by a lion, probably a reference to the spirit of men.”<sup>28</sup> Diodorus wrote that Philip raised a trophy of victory, yielded the dead for burial, offered

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<sup>22</sup> Polyaeus *Stratagems* 4.2.2 (trans. R. Shepherd, 1793).

<sup>23</sup> Frontinus *Stratagems* 2.1.9 (translation information unavailable), online at LacusCurtius, [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Frontinus/Strategemata/2\\*.html#1](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Frontinus/Strategemata/2*.html#1) (accessed March 15, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Diod. 16.83.3.

<sup>25</sup> Plut. “Alexander” 9.2.

<sup>26</sup> Poly. 4.2.2.

<sup>27</sup> Diod. 16.86.5-6.

<sup>28</sup> Pausanias *Description of Greece* 9.40.10.

sacrifices to the gods for victory, and rewarded his men according to their valor.<sup>29</sup> Pausanias contradicts Diodorus here, writing that no trophy was erected because “Macedonians were not accustomed to raise trophies.”<sup>30</sup> Another instance of contradiction at the conclusion of the battle involves Philip’s posture after the victory. Diodorus recorded that Philip initially gloated and jeered at the captives, only later changing his attitude and releasing all the Athenian prisoners without ransom. He then sent envoys to Athens to conclude a treaty of “friendship,” under duress of course. General Lysicles was condemned to death, while Chares, lucky enough for him, escaped prosecution. Philip also concluded peace with the Boeotians at Thebes, but maintained a garrison there.<sup>31</sup> Plutarch, in his biography of Pelopidas, described a very different view of Philip after the battle. Rather than gloating and jeering, Philip wept at the sight of the dead band of lovers, saying, “A curse on those who imagine that these men ever did or suffered anything shameful!”<sup>32</sup>

As the dust settled, Philip used the victory and the “settlements” which followed as a means of expanding his influence throughout Greece. According to Paul Cartledge, “The freedom of the Greek cities, it has been claimed or lamented, died on the field of Chaeronea.”<sup>33</sup> Cartledge may have been referring to just such a claim written by Justin, “This day put an end to the glorious sovereignty and ancient liberty of all Greece.”<sup>34</sup> Now that Greece’s will to resist Philip had been crushed, Philip needed to find a way to establish himself as ruler of Greece with the least possible chance of rebellion. Therefore, rather than proclaiming himself king of Greece, he referred to himself as general plenipotentiary. His plan was to make war on the Persians in

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<sup>29</sup> Diod. 16.86.6.

<sup>30</sup> Paus. 9.40.7.

<sup>31</sup> Diod. 16.87.3.

<sup>32</sup> Plut. “Pelopidas” 18.5.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Cartledge, *Alexander the Great: The Hunt for a New Past* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004): 86.

<sup>34</sup> Justin 9.3.

behalf of Greece to punish Persia for profaning Greek temples, meddling in Greek affairs, and other wrongdoings during the Persian War and the intervening years since.<sup>35</sup> The League of Corinth (also known as the Hellenic League) was born. According to Carl Roebuck, Philip designed the League to create a peaceful and legal avenue to exercise hegemony over Greece.<sup>36</sup> What Philip's actions also did was to set the stage for his son Alexander's eventual conquest of the Persian Empire.

Paving the way for his son to conquer Persia was likely very far from Philip's motives following Chaeronea. In fact, quite the opposite may have been the case. Instead of strengthening a Macedonian dynasty, the Battle of Chaeronea created a rift between father and son. One could argue that it was Alexander's keen observation of the gaps in the enemy line and quick thinking to exploit the gaps that won the battle for Macedonia. Alternatively, it could also be argued that it was Philip's use of the delaying strategy that caught the Athenians on the enemy left off guard, luring them forward with a false sense of security while Alexander devastated the Theban right. Diodorus wrote that Philip advanced "well in front and not conceding credit for the victory even to Alexander."<sup>37</sup> Philip's refusal to give credit to Alexander for his valor and cunning at Chaeronea portended dire consequences in the years to come. Perhaps out of jealousy of his son's military prowess or fear of a future power struggle with his own son, Philip began to distance himself from Alexander. The rift came to a head at the wedding banquet of Philip and a young girl named Cleopatra. The girl's uncle, Attalus, spouted off in a drunken haze that the union of Philip and Cleopatra might produce a legitimate heir to the throne. Alexander, enraged at the blatant insult, hurled a drinking cup at Attalus. At this, Philip drew his sword against

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<sup>35</sup> Diod. 16.89.1-3; see also Justin 9.4.

<sup>36</sup> Roebuck, 74.

<sup>37</sup> Diod. 16.86.4.

Alexander, but stumbled due to his inebriation. Seeing this, Alexander jeered, “Here is the man who was making ready to cross from Europe to Asia, and who cannot even cross from one couch to another.”<sup>38</sup> Such was the end of a potentially great military dynasty. Years later, after having conquered the Persian Empire, Alexander showed his bitterness by disparaging Philip’s record, taking credit himself for the victory at Chaeronea. Alexander claimed that the credit for the victory was stolen by Philip through “ill-will and jealousy.”<sup>39</sup>

In 336, Philip was murdered and Alexander succeeded him. Whether or not Alexander was connected to his father’s murder, it was Alexander, not Philip, who carried out the League of Corinth’s mission to make war on Persia. Alexander took the mission a giant leap further by conquering all of Persia and more, a grand accomplishment the mighty Philip may not even have imagined possible. The Battle of Chaeronea was one of the most important battles in world history because it created a chain of events that led to Alexander’s conquests and the Hellenization of the lands stretching from Macedonia to India. The battle ended Greek autonomy, yet set the stage for the spread of Greek culture far beyond the Mediterranean Sea region. Had Philip been defeated in 338 at Chaeronea, Alexander “the Great” may never have been.

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<sup>38</sup> Plut. “Alexander” 9.6-10.

<sup>39</sup> Quintus Curtius Rufus *History of Alexander the Great* 8.1.23.

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