

THE RISE AND FALL OF GREEK MILITARY TACTICS
AND THEIR FAILURE AT CHAERONEA

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The Wars of Ancient Greece and Macedonia – HIST612 A001 Win 14

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From the Bronze Age conquest of Troy to the Battle of Chaeronea in 338 BC, Greek military tactics changed a great deal. The Greeks built on their successes and learned from their failures to build a fighting force that repelled a much larger Persian army in the early fifth century BC. The Greek city-states followed that victory by turning on themselves in the Peloponnesian War (c. 430-404 BC), where warfare shifted from a part-time, seasonal affair to a nearly continual engagement. This disastrous civil war created an opportunity for Philip II (382-336 BC) of Macedon to exploit. Adopting the best aspects of Greek warfare, the product of hundreds of years of military and cultural evolution, Philip added his own modifications to produce a military machine that the fragmented and war-weary Greeks could not withstand. Much of the blame for their failure was the loss of cohesive unity between the city-states that had existed during the Persian Wars (499-449 BC). Other factors contributed as well, such as war weariness, a changing political and economic climate, and the demise of the citizen soldier in favor of the mercenary.

When Philip and his son Alexander took the field at Chaeronea in 338 BC, they faced a Greek force that was a mere shadow of what it was before the tribulations of the Peloponnesian War. While the Greeks adopted a few military innovations in the post-war years, Philip exceeded them. His innovations were clever, sophisticated, and more numerous. The Thebans and Athenians, while perhaps wielding a more diverse, specialized, and more nimble fighting force than they had a century earlier, lacked the fortitude requisite to repel Philip. He clearly had the “eye of the tiger” that the Greeks sorely lacked.¹

¹ The phrase “eye of the tiger” represents a winning attitude, a drive to succeed, and a competitive edge. It is a reference to the phrase as used in the movie *Rocky III*, written and directed by Sylvester Stallone, United Artists, 1982.

Wealthy landowners who had money to buy their own weapons and armor dominated Bronze Age warfare in Greece. Due to the mountainous geography, the javelin and spear were more widely used than the bow and arrow, a more common weapon for flatland civilizations such as the Assyrians and Egyptians. As a result, Greek conflict was typically short-range. In such conflict, commoners with little armor fared poorly while the wealthier and more heavily armed soldiers had a better chance of survival. This may have given rise to the belief that these armored men were great heroes, when actually they were simply better armed and more likely to survive multiple conflicts. Homer's *Iliad* presents numerous examples of such perceived heroism. In book 11, Agamemnon knocked Pisander off his chariot and stabbed him in the chest with a spear. His brother, Hippolochus, tried to escape, but Agamemnon used a sword to slash off his arms and cut off his head, leaving the torso rolling.² Agamemnon, who killed men so easily according to Homer, was a great hero.

Homeric heroes such as Agamemnon, Menelaus, Hector, Achilles, and Odysseus may have shown great valor in battle, but their elite status certainly aided their efforts. They likely had the best training, armor, and weaponry available. Common soldiers had no such advantages, making their success in battle less likely and their life expectancy much shorter. In many ways, Philip and Alexander exemplified Homeric heroes. Being wealthy, they had excellent armor, weapons, and training. Their commanding presence on the battlefield reassured the Macedonians that success was possible, if not assured. Success after success against Macedonia's enemies gave Philip the confidence to take on the best Greece had to offer in 338 BC. Alexander carried a similar heroic confidence with him throughout his campaign into Asia. A great benefit Philip and

² Homer *Iliad* 11.166-170.

Alexander had over the Homeric heroes was the weaponry and armor of the men in the Macedonian army. Only the most elite Homeric warriors would have possessed such armaments.

After the collapse of the Bronze Age and the rebirth of civilization in Greece, warfare shifted from heroic duels between well-known aristocrats to group warfare between less well-known citizen-soldiers. Hoplites began to dominate Greek warfare. While only wealthy heroes like Agamemnon wore bronze armor and wielded a spear and sword during the Bronze Age, the growth of city-states put those armaments into the hands of citizen-soldiers during the seventh and sixth centuries BC. The hoplite fought to protect his land, family, and the way of life the city-state provided. Hoplites of this new era still used the spear as a primary weapon. They also used a slashing sword as a secondary weapon.³ This combination harkened to what Agamemnon used to kill Pisander and Hippolochus centuries earlier. Hoplites, in contrast to the Bronze Age heroes, were group fighters who coalesced into a defined infantry formation, the phalanx.

The Spartans built a professional army around the hoplite, providing soldiers with armor and weaponry. This not only leveled out some of the differences between aristocrats and proletarians in the phalanx, but it also helped Sparta amass the most powerful fighting force in Greece. Ruled by a monarchy and supported by a huge number of helot slaves, Sparta used its hoplite phalanx to dominate the Peloponnese. In Athens, changing values continued to shift the government from tyranny to democracy, deemphasizing the role of aristocrats and emphasizing a spirit of community, making the hoplite desirable there as well. The difference in Athens was that the hoplite had to provide his own armor, making the infantry phalanx an aristocratic organization in the years before the Persian Wars. Poorer people made do with what they could procure, light armor and inferior weapons. Thus, they served a supporting role to the phalanx.

³ Diodorus Siculus *Library of History* 15.86.2; see also Michael M. Sage, *Warfare in Ancient Greece: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1996), 30.

Philip later used a similar arrangement to defeat the Greeks at Chaeronea. Aristocrats served as his “companions” and had important roles in the elite infantry and the cavalry. Troops of lesser importance, mercenaries and the like, served in supporting roles as light-armed troops.

Whether the hoplites were from Sparta, Athens, or the other blossoming city-states of the sixth and fifth centuries BC, the men fought to defend and promote their *poleis*. Thus, they fought pitched battles that limited the number of casualties and, just as important, limited the amount of disruption to the culture and economy of the city-states involved. There was simply too much to lose from unrestrained fighting bent on total destruction of the enemy. The enemy might reciprocate someday, and that could mean death, slavery, and/or the end of the accustomed way of life. By the time Philip met the Greeks in 338 BC, in the post-Peloponnesian War era, the goals of fighting had changed. Rather than an engagement designed to secure an objective with minimal disruption or loss of life, Philip wanted to punish Thebes and Athens for resisting. He also wanted to terrify other Greeks into submitting to his leadership.⁴ Therefore, Philip and Alexander devastated the Thebans, killing all the members of the Sacred Band.⁵ Citizen-soldiers from the early hoplite era would likely not have committed such an act.

As the Persian Wars began in the early fifth century BC, the Spartan hoplite phalanx was the strongest army in Greece. Civic duty and devotion to the warrior ethos instilled during the “upbringing” made Spartans ferocious fighters. Athens too had developed its hoplites, though their motivations were somewhat different. At this critical time, tyranny was on its way out as democracy took shape. Athenian hoplites were citizen-soldiers who fought to preserve the freedoms democracy provided. Unfortunately for aristocrats, an Athenian citizen-soldier hoplite no longer needed to be a member of a prominent, wealthy family. Hoplites in the phalanx were

⁴ Diodorus 16.84.1-2.

⁵ Plutarch *Parallel Lives* “Pelopidas” 18.5.

cogs in the machine, which greatly deemphasized class distinctions. Therefore, to maintain status, aristocrats gravitated toward the cavalry. While still in a secondary specialty role along with light-armed troops, the cavalry slowly became a more important part of the Athenian military force. By Philip's time, the cavalry and light-armed troops were indispensable components of the military force, garnering crucial roles.

The Persian Wars and the years that followed were a time of great change for the Greek military. Thanks to Themistocles, the navy took on a more important role. This ushered in an era of naval dominance for Athens, allowing it to build a great maritime empire. However, while the Athenian navy won the war at sea for the Greeks, the spear-wielding hoplites won the war on land. The Spartan commander Dienekes shrugged off the Persian boast at Thermopylae (480 BC) to block out the sun with arrows, perhaps knowing that his hoplite armor would protect him well enough to allow his phalanx to damage the Persian force in close combat.⁶ Barbarians shot arrows indiscriminately from afar, but citizen-soldier hoplites fought in a civilized way as a phalanx.

The Persians, having vastly superior numbers throughout the Persian Wars, had no successful answer to the Greek phalanx. At Plataea (479 BC), the Greeks used their knowledge of the terrain and a bit of deception to stymie the Persians under Mardonius. Tactics became more complex during the Persian Wars, and successful implementation of the phalanx proved to be at least as important as heroic valor. Philip learned this lesson from his military training and his combat experience before Chaeronea. His tactics, and those of Alexander, proved to be the decisive ingredient for success against Thebes and Athens, who mistakenly met the Macedonians

⁶ Herodotus *Histories* 7.226.1.

in a head-on phalanx confrontation. Philip knew Greek tactics well, having adopted and modified them for his own army, and he was ready for the challenge.

The Peloponnesian War ushered in another round of great changes to Greek warfare. Perhaps the most important was the change from seasonal warfare to nearly continuous conflict. Thucydides regularly included a phrase in his chronology such as, “So ended the winter and with it the [*number*] year of the Peloponnesian War of which Thucydides wrote the history.”⁷ It is clear from his account, however, that the end of a year did not indicate an end in fighting. The seasonal fighting that had been a part of Greek warfare for hundreds of years disappeared, replaced by conflict fought anytime and anywhere. This undoubtedly put a strain on the citizen-soldier, who needed downtime to work his fields and tend to his family. As a result, full-time professional soldiers and mercenary troops slowly replaced the seasonal hoplite. Perhaps because many of the mercenaries were light-armed troops, this demise of the seasonal hoplite may account for the low number of large-scale hoplite battles in the Peloponnesian War. In fact, the only major hoplite battles were Delium (424 BC), First Mantinea (418 BC), and the Athenian attack of Syracuse during the Sicilian Expedition (415-413 BC).⁸

Athens reaped considerable sums from its tributary empire. Thus, it could afford to pay professional soldiers and mercenaries to fight its battles. Athens hired Thracian peltasts to help during the attack on Syracuse in 413 BC. Paid a drachma per day, the 1,300 peltasts exemplified the considerable expense Athens incurred for this new type of warfare.⁹ Athens had a large treasury, so it could afford to outfit professional soldiers and hire mercenaries. Countering this, Persian money flowed into Sparta and its allies, allowing them to also pay for professional

⁷ Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.103.

⁸ Sage, xx.

⁹ Thuc. 7.27.

soldiers and hire their own mercenaries. Therefore, the Peloponnesian War bore witness to a dramatic shift in warfare toward today's modern, full-time professional armies. In later years, the Greeks established mercenary marketplaces, where armies could recruit the type of mercenaries they needed.¹⁰ Philip capitalized on this shift in warfare by using his vast fortune from the gold and silver mines under his control to equip a full-time professional army and hire mercenaries. Clearly, since Philip planned to cross over into Asia, he needed professional soldiers who would not need to return to plant or harvest crops. Alexander took this to a completely new level in his campaigns, traveling for over a decade.

The increased use of paid troops drove a wedge between the ideas of “citizen” and “soldier” that the hoplite represented. The hoplite ethos of defending the homeland and protecting the freedoms provided by the city-state still existed, but the link between military service and citizenship became much weaker. As a result, battles that were once quick, decisive affairs with few casualties faded away in exchange for longer, more drawn-out conflicts with heavy casualties. The fourth century BC also witnessed an increase in creative tactics, more creative than part-time citizen-soldiers had time to design. At the Battle of Leuctra in 371 BC, for example, specialized full-time soldiers and mercenaries allowed Epaminondas of Thebes to defeat the nearly invulnerable Spartan phalanx using a creative formation. Epaminondas loaded his left side fifty rows deep against the eight deep Spartan phalanx, killing Spartan king Cleombrotus and smashing the Spartan phalanx.¹¹ Casualties were great, and the defeat was humiliating for Sparta.

¹⁰ Diod. 18.21.1-2; Sage, 156.

¹¹ Xenophon *Hellenica* 6.4.12.

Philip and Alexander, who no doubt studied Leuctra and other Greek battles, used such strategies against their opponents. At Chaeronea, Philip made a sham retreat, luring the Athenian general Stratocles to push forward against the Macedonian right.¹² This opened a gap through which Alexander and his cavalry forced his way, eventually breaking the line of the Sacred Band of Thebes.¹³ Then, as soon as Philip was in a good position on level terrain following his false retreat, he attacked and won the victory.¹⁴ The level of expertise the Macedonian troops exhibited, as the Theban troops did at Leuctra decades earlier, may have been the result of increased specialization and extensive training made possible by having a full-time professional army containing mercenaries. As Michael Sage points out, the substitution of mercenaries for citizen-soldiers allowed for specialization and prolonged training that would not have been possible with citizen-soldiers alone.¹⁵ Philip had the money and the expertise to put together the correct mix of Macedonians and mercenaries, phalanx and cavalry, short-range and long-range troops, and other specialty groups that had a combined superiority over armies that were more monolithic.

The Thebans and Athenians who fought at Chaeronea represented the evolution of Greek warfare that began with Agamemnon, Achilles, and Odysseus at Bronze Age Troy and continued through battles such as Marathon (490 BC), Salamis (480 BC), First Mantinea (418 BC), Aegospotami (405 BC), and Leuctra (371 BC). The Greek soldiers were well trained and specialized. Their failure to defeat Philip, however, may have been rooted in motivation. The Greek soldiers under Agamemnon during the Trojan War found motivation in devotion to their king, the quest for riches through plunder, and revenge (if we can believe Homer's story of

¹² Polyaeus *Stratagem*s 4.2.2.

¹³ Plut. "Alexander" 9.2.

¹⁴ Poly. 4.2.2.

¹⁵ Sage, xxii.

Helen's abduction). Such motivation propelled Philip's, and especially Alexander's, soldiers. The Greek soldiers during the Persian Wars found motivation in the preservation of the collective civilization of Greek city-states. Survival of one's very way of life is an effective motivator. Sparta fought to protect its autonomy and Athens fought to protect its democracy. Against Philip, the Greek soldiers found that they lacked sufficient motivation. While their survival was clearly at stake, their efforts were too little, too late.

The loss of the citizen-soldier divorced military service from citizenship in Athens. Thus, citizens contributed to wars with their money, not their lives. Exacerbating this problem, Athens used tribute from its empire to fuel its army, further divorcing military service from citizenship. As a result, many of the soldiers who took the field for Athens at Chaeronea likely lacked the same motivation they had during the Persian Wars. In addition, Athens had been a leader in Greece from its victory at the Battle of Marathon to its defeat at Aegospotami, a period of eighty-five years. At Chaeronea, the commanding Thebans relegated Athenian troops to a secondary role, a slap in the face to the greatness Athens once possessed. The Spartans, who dealt the Athenian Empire its deathblow at Aegospotami, faced their own humiliating defeat at the hands of Thebes at the Battle of Leuctra fewer than thirty years later. With Athens only a shell of what it once had been and Sparta licking its wounds from defeat at Leuctra and at Second Mantinea (362 BC), Thebes held hegemony over Greece. The result of decades of Greek city-states embroiled in destructive civil war was a newcomer (Thebes) and a has-been (Athens) up against a well-financed and well-armed powerhouse (Macedonia).

The new political order in Greece in the mid-300's BC did little to stop Philip's advances. Perhaps Thebes was overconfident about its newfound position as hegemon. Perhaps blame resides in a domino effect: Athens subjugated city-states to build its empire, Sparta defeated

Athens, and then Thebes defeated Sparta. Demosthenes of Athens (384-322 BC) lived in the aftermath of these changes and recognized the folly of inaction. He lamented and criticized the careless attitude with which Philip's advances were treated.¹⁶ His chiding convinced Athens to join with Thebes at Chaeronea, but the hesitant city of Athens had little to contribute by 338 BC.

Philip, like the Theban and Athenian soldiers he faced, knew about the heroic bravery of Bronze Age Greece, the united patriotic determination of Greece during the Persian Wars, and the destructive innovation of the Peloponnesian War. He borrowed knowledge from the Greeks about close-up fighting with spears and swords, about hoplites, their armor, the phalanx, the use of mercenaries, the role of light-armed troops and cavalry, and how to use terrain as an advantage. Philip took what he learned and improved on it. He made hoplite armor lighter and more maneuverable. He also made the shield smaller, suspending it by a strap to free up the hands. This made it possible to add an 18-foot pike to the list of hoplite armaments.¹⁷ Known as a *sarissa*, it made his phalanx akin to an angry porcupine. Distance weapons such as arrows struggled to find their mark thanks to the hoplite armor, while close-range weapons such as swords struggled to penetrate the rows of long pikes. In addition to these technical innovations, Philip expanded the role of his cavalry, making it more than merely a supplement to the phalanx. This innovation set the stage for Alexander's use of cavalry during his conquest of Asia.

The Greek army that faced Philip at Chaeronea in 338 BC was the culmination of hundreds of years of military evolution, but it lacked the requisite motivation to gain victory. From heroic duels to hoplites, the Thebans and Athenians embodied lessons learned from the Trojan War, the Persian Wars, and the Peloponnesian War. Unfortunately, the civil war that tore Greece apart in the decades preceding Chaeronea left the Greek army physically weak and

¹⁶ Demosthenes "First Philippic" 11.

¹⁷ Sage, xxiv.

lacking in spirit. Athens no longer had a democracy to protect, Sparta was humiliated and battered, and most of the other city-states failed to take the field. Thebes, the new hegemon, lacked the unified backing Athens enjoyed during the Persian Wars. One could argue that Greece was all but finished before the battle began. Philip used his victory at Chaeronea to build the League of Corinth (also known as the Hellenic League), which essentially made him ruler of Greece. After Philip's premature death, Alexander used the path his father paved to launch his conquest of the Persian Empire, spreading Greek culture along the way.

Bibliography

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