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978-0-521-20008-0 - The Seleucid Army: Organization and Tactics in the Great Campaigns

Bezalel Bar-kochva

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

The history of the Seleucid army embraces a period of more than 200 years during which the kings carried on campaigns of different kinds against competitors in the Hellenistic world such as Lysimachus and the Houses of Ptolemy and Antigonus, barbarian invaders like the Galatians, rebels like Hierax, Molon, Achaeus, and Timarchus, subject nations like the Jews and the Persians, and the two rising powers, the Romans in the west and the Parthians in the east, who finally divided the Seleucid domain between them. Some of these conflicts had far-reaching historical implications: the victory over Antigonus destroyed all hope of unifying the Hellenistic world and weakened its ability to meet challenges; the battles at Thermopylae and Magnesia heralded the shift in power in the Mediterranean from east to west; and the abortive attempt to suppress the Jewish religion deeply influenced the evolution of new religious beliefs and standards which left their mark on western civilization for many centuries.

The two outstanding features of the Seleucid army were, on the one hand, its quantitative and qualitative superiority over other Hellenistic armies, and, on the other, its inability to withstand the Roman army. In order to understand the first phenomenon, one must examine the organization of the Seleucid army, trace its sources of manpower, and ascertain the way in which its availability and military standards were maintained. These factors, in conjunction with the tactics and operations of the armies on the battlefield itself, may reveal the defects of the best of the Hellenistic armies when compared with the Roman legions.

The study of the organization and tactics of the Seleucid army first of all provides a lesson in military history and answers a number of questions. How did the Hellenistic armies develop after the meteoric rise of Alexander? Did they carry on his glorious tradition, developing and renewing it, or did they retrogress?

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What distinguished the Seleucid army from its contemporaries? The answers also provide social, historical, and religious information as we learn how the Seleucid army was used as a military, social, and cultural instrument to impose the rule of the dynasty over the vast regions of the Empire, how it helped to shape Hellenistic society in the east, what caused Roman military success, the flexibility and the efficiency of the maniple system over the phalanx, the rigorous Roman discipline as contrasted with the laxer, more liberal Hellenistic military regulations, or perhaps their defects in command and planning on the battlefield which eventually stopped Antiochus III at the decisive moment and paved the Romans' way to Asia Minor, and finally, behind the rhetorical phrases of Jewish sources, how the performance of the Hasmoneans against the Seleucid armies should be evaluated. Was it, as has been commonly believed, a campaign involving a few zealots who tried by force of religious enthusiasm to stand up to an army far larger and better equipped, but which had degenerated from the military point of view? Or was it a contest between a numerically large, but relatively ill-equipped and inexperienced Jewish force, and one of the best armies of the time, well acquainted with all the secrets of the art of war?

The discussion is divided into two parts: the first, 'Organization', is devoted to an analysis of the army, its numerical strength, sources of manpower, the various contingents, its chain of command, training and discipline. The second, 'The Army in Action', is an attempt to throw light on the disposition of the troops on the battlefield itself, and on the tactical planning and performance. In it I shall discuss in chronological order most of the Seleucid battles that have been recorded in some detail. As the determination of the disposition and tactics is dependent on the discovery of the exact location of the battlefield, on clarification of the enemy's disposition, and sometimes also on identification of the routes taken by the armies to the battlefield or on the quality of the accounts preserved and their sources of information, frequent deviations into such questions cannot be avoided.

Unlike the Ptolemaic army, for whose organization there is abundant papyrological evidence, the Seleucid army is referred to

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in only a few epigraphical documents, which shed little light, while most of the information has to be drawn from the accounts of the battles themselves and incidental references by ancient historians. With regard to Seleucid tactics we are somewhat more fortunate: about a dozen important literary sources provide considerable detail on battles in addition to half a dozen siege campaigns, as well as some minor military operations, far more than for any other Hellenistic army.

Unfortunately these accounts are unevenly distributed over 150 years, which makes it difficult to follow tactical developments. As against Antiochus III, for whom a relatively large number of battle accounts survive, the intensive military activity of the first Seleucids, especially of the founder of the dynasty, remains almost unreported, while the period between the victory over the Galatians in 273 B.C. and the expeditions against Molon in 220 B.C. is covered only by brief allusions to various military operations. Similarly, Seleucid tactics in the century after Magnesia are illumined only by the battles against Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers, some of which are recorded rather briefly and contribute hardly anything to the understanding of the Seleucid army. Nevertheless, an attempt to sketch general outlines and stages of development in organization as well as in tactics is not unrewarding, although the scantiness of evidence and the length of the period under consideration must constantly be borne in mind.

I could not have undertaken the writing of this monograph on the Seleucid army without the invaluable contributions of scholars who have dealt with particular aspects of the subject. First and foremost there are Bickerman's survey of the military organization in *Institutions des Séleucides*, many references in Launey's monumental *Recherches* on the Hellenistic armies, and Tarn's admirable lectures on the tactical development in the Hellenistic period. For more specific questions, Kromayer's analysis of the battles of Thermopylae and Magnesia, Walbank's useful notes on the Seleucid army in his commentary on Polybius, and Pédech's contribution concerning the topography of the battle against Molon and Antiochus III's expedition to the eastern satrapies, as well as Abel's pioneer works on the battlefields of Judaea, Griffith's discussion on the Macedonians and mercenaries in the Seleucid army,

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and Bengtson's notes on the military commanders, have been of inestimable help. If I have preferred to depart from their views in some cases, it is only because a comprehensive survey of all the questions of organization and tactics over the whole period is likely to produce somewhat different conclusions from discussions concentrated on particular topics.

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PART I: ORGANIZATION

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1: THE NUMERICAL STRENGTH OF THE SELEUCID ARMIES

Estimates of the numerical strength of armies are of doubtful validity in ancient historical literature and indeed in accounts of modern warfare even as late as the eighteenth century.

Commanders-in-chief and official chroniclers have combined to obscure the truth by underestimating the number of their own troops and overestimating that of the enemy's.¹ Greek historians from Thucydides onwards achieved admirable precision and objectivity in estimating the number of troops on their side, which is in striking contrast to the utterly unreliable figures given in oriental literature, but even they are of little value whenever there is reference to the Persian armies, whose size is wildly exaggerated even by the trustworthy and experienced eyewitnesses of Alexander's anabasis. The modest figures quoted for Greek armies during Classical times increase abruptly with Alexander's expedition and become still larger in the armies of the Diadochs, but this is explained by the dimensions of the undertakings, the economic resources then available, and the system of recruitment. Alexander won the day at Gaugamela with 40,000 infantry and 7,000 cavalry (*Arr. Anab.* 3.12.5), but by the time of the battle of Ipsus a record had been set with approximately 80,000 on either side (*Plut. Demetr.* 28.3),² and, as will be seen later, the tendency towards ever greater numbers of soldiers was more prevalent in the Seleucid armies than among their contemporaries.³ Nevertheless, since the figures quoted for the Seleucid campaigns are not always derived from first-class sources, they require careful examination.

Where numbers are recorded, we must distinguish between the armies for which constituent units are listed and enumerated in detail, and those for which only the total number of troops has been preserved. The first group, which includes the battles of Raphia, Magnesia, and the festival of Daphne, was reported by Polybius, who presumably based his account, directly or indirectly, on official documents. The total figures for Raphia and Daphne,

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62,000 infantry and 6,000 cavalry, 46,000 infantry and 4,500 cavalry, respectively, are beyond dispute, for they tally with the detailed lists of the troops (5.79; 30.25, and see p.227 n.107 below on the cavalry at Daphne). Moreover, as Polybius' version of Raphia probably originated in a Ptolemaic source (p.128 below), and the Egyptian side is reported to have had considerable numerical superiority in heavy troops (p.132 below), there is no reason to doubt its reliability.

The battle of Magnesia, which according to Livy (based on Polybius) involved 60,000 Seleucid infantry and 12,000 cavalry (38.37.9),⁴ raises some difficulties. H. Delbrück, who describes these figures, as he does the whole account of the battle, as a Phantasie, stressing the biased and pro-Roman character of the sources, has pointed out the great discrepancy in numbers between the huge Seleucid army and the modest Roman force totalling just 30,000 men. In his essay on numbers in history he adopts the view that an army would not venture to join battle with a force markedly superior in manpower, and that all accounts of this sort should be regarded as sheer propaganda or attributed to an understandable desire to enhance the victory.⁵ But this view ignores the fact that the same source ascribed to the Romans an overwhelming numerical superiority over Antiochus III at Thermopylae (Livy 36.17.10; App. Syr. 17(71,75), both dependent upon Polybius).

An examination of the list of the various units reported in Livy does, however, at first sight cast some doubt on the reliability of the number given as the total. The cavalry numbers just under 12,000, but the infantry does not exceed 45,200.

Kromayer assumes that Livy had ignored 3,000 troops who were guarding the camp, an unknown number, probably about 800-1,000, of light guard attached to the elephants, and above all 10,000 light skirmishers of the front line.⁶ The first part of the proposed solution does make sense: Thermopylae, lost mainly because the 'baggage' (*aposkeuē*) was threatened (see p.162 below), would have taught Antiochus to strengthen the defence of his camp.⁷ The light troops attached to the elephants should be estimated rather at around 3,000 - the 54 elephants would each have carried four archers on their backs (Livy 37.40.4) and the standard flank guard of 50 'lights' (see p.82 below) would have followed them. But the

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omission of the skirmishers is hardly acceptable. Livy himself lists some thousands of light troops, whom he assigns, certainly erroneously, to the extreme flanks, and an analysis of the sources, the battlefield, and the disposition of both armies suggests that these troops were operating as front line skirmishers (see p. 166-7 below). Even if this theory is mistaken, and these troops were in fact posted on the flanks, it is hard to believe that Polybius would have ignored the light promachoi had they taken part in the battle and yet listed in detail the light troops of the flanks whose impact on the battle would, in any case, have been slight. It seems preferable to identify the missing 10,000 troops with the argyraspides, the infantry Guard,⁸ who are listed as being on the right flank but with no precise figure given (Livy 37.40.7).⁹ This contingent usually numbered 10,000, and a study of the disposition of the troops together with tactical considerations makes it quite evident that roughly the same number figured also at Magnesia (see pp. 168-9 below).

The second group of campaigns, which consists of the expeditions of Antiochus III and Antiochus Sidetes to the upper satrapies, Thermopylae, and some of the campaigns against the Jews, is the subject of much dispute.¹⁰ In contrast to the figures which are available for the first group of campaigns, the information on these other battles, with the exception of Thermopylae, comes from second-rate sources in which much less trust can be placed. An examination of these campaigns must be based, in the first place, on the availability of troops. In the next chapter, which is devoted to the sources of Seleucid manpower, an attempt is made to trace the provenance of recruits and to estimate their numerical strength. The conclusions, based chiefly on the figures of Raphia, Magnesia, and Daphne, will be a guide in assessing the availability of troops. They suggest that the military settlements could provide 44,000 heavy troops, 3,000 semi-heavy infantry and 8,000-8,500 cavalry, who were reinforced by 10,000-16,000 mercenaries and a highly fluctuating number of allies, vassals, and subjects (see pp. 42, 51 below). In applying these figures to the various campaigns one must take into account the territorial changes, the political and military circumstances (would it, for instance, have been possible for all the available

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troops to be deployed in the battle under consideration?), and the special character and military requirements of each undertaking, allowing always for the traditional tendency of the Seleucids to employ large numbers of soldiers. Attention must be paid also to the general reliability and special character of the sources, though this should be only a secondary consideration.

The anabasis of Antiochus III to the east, which lasted six years and took in Media, Hyrcania, Bactria, and even India, is recorded in several fragments of Polybius, who, though he describes the Seleucid army as exceptionally large (10.28.1), unfortunately makes direct allusion only to the 10,000 infantry and 2,000 cavalry selected for the forced march in Bactria (10.49.3-4). Justin's total of 100,000 infantry and 20,000 cavalry (41.5.7) is generally regarded as completely unreliable,¹¹ but, while these figures have obviously been rounded upwards, I am not convinced that they should be wholly discredited. Antiochus III, unharassed by his rivals in Egypt and Macedon or by internal disquiet, was able at this stage to put almost all his resources into the eastern expedition,¹² as the sheer geographical dimensions of his undertakings suggest. In view of the resistance he was likely to face in the east, he would naturally recruit exceptionally large numbers of light troops from his oriental allies and auxiliaries, whose numbers were almost unlimited, to supplement his regular army. No less vital was the need of extra manpower to garrison the recovered territories, as revealed in the high figures reported for Alexander's Indian expedition.¹³ If 60,000 infantry and 12,000 cavalry took part at Magnesia against a modest Roman force after a substantial number of some 18,000 troops had been lost at Thermopylae (see below), there is no reason to suspect Justin, or rather whoever was the source for Pompeius Trogus, of excessive exaggeration. We do not know how this enormous number was maintained and fed, nor how many internal crises it may have undergone. The anabasis of Antiochus III, unlike that of Alexander, was not privileged to be perpetuated by enthusiastic chroniclers, but this is not sufficient argument for underestimating its importance and numerical strength.

Even more obscure is the expedition of Antiochus VII Sidetes in 129 B.C., planned as a final attempt to recover the eastern