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Edited by William Aldis Wright, Ingram Bywater and Henry Jackson

Excerpt

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THE ARMY OF ALEXANDER.

GREEK Tactics have hardly received in modern days a due proportion of that research which has often been devoted to less important phases of ancient history: and small wonder; for while the task of sifting the meagre and contradictory evidence which must be gleaned with infinite labour from second-rate authors is no light one, the final results have always been, and always will be, extremely unsatisfactory. We know almost nothing of the structure or evolutions of either an Athenian or a Theban army in the field: the fuller information we possess of the Spartan system only serves to perplex the more: and the last development of Greek tactics, the organisation of Philip and Alexander, is hardly less obscure. Time is to blame for the most part; for, if we may trust Aelian's preface, there were dissertations enough on the subject extant in his day; but the work of Pyrrhus has perished with that of Polybius, and we have only the single treatise which, in its earlier and later editions, has come down under the names of Arrian and Aelian. The later tacticians, the two Emperors Leo and Constantine Porphyrogenneta, Vegetius and the like, confine themselves, when they make mention in passing of the Macedonian army, to mere repetitions of Aelian: and in these days

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it has been found more profitable to distrust the assistance of the latter, and couple the brief notice in Polybius with the various morsels of information to be gleaned from the extant historians of Alexander the Great; and nine-tenths of these morsels fall from the table of Arrian. Not that the treatise of Aelian (to call it so for the sake of convenience) is valueless: it is often confirmed in a remarkable manner by the actual records of Alexander's actions, notably in the evolutions in the field, and in much of the nomenclature; but unless so confirmed it cannot be trusted, for its author was not competent to distinguish the later from the earlier developments of the Macedonian system, and it must be remembered that it was the former only that the Romans knew from personal experience. Armies are conservative bodies, and will keep similar names for corps of very different character and strength in successive generations, while the principal evolutions of large bodies of men must always be very similar; therefore the armies of the later Seleucidae and kings of Macedonia were doubtless replete with memories and survivals of the organisation which conquered Asia: but a work based only upon these later armies cannot be accepted as an accurate record of the earlier. The treatise in question is manifestly a record of a system, which had become 'systematised' to the last degree by ages of mechanical warfare: and there is little trace in it of the mobile army of Gaugamela and the Hydaspes.

In modern days the subject has been treated hastily by Sainte-Croix, and unsatisfactorily by Droysen: Mützell in a long note on Curtius v. 2 has dealt with it carefully, but hardly in sufficient detail: Grote merely abstracts his predecessors, and Thirlwall sums it up in two pages. Rustow and Köchly have devoted much more care and labour to the subject, but in a somewhat inaccessible form; and Admiral la Gravière does not add to his many good qualities that of a minute or critical searcher. Some valuable information is to be gathered from a translation of Aelian by Charles Bingham, sometime serving in the Low Countries in the early part of the seventeenth century: the gallant lieutenant lived in days when the pike was still in general use, and his illustrations

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and criticisms are so far profitable; and a detailed account of the battles of Granicus and Gaugamela, as well as a critique of Arrian's "Tactica," will be found in the "Antiquités Militaires" of M. Guischart, a captain in the service of the Margrave of Bade-Dourlach and the States-General of the United Provinces in the middle of the last century. His technical presentment of the battles is careful and graphic, but marred by the most unaccountable mistakes, and an ignorance of the real nature of some of Alexander's corps, for example, the Hypaspists. This is a miscellaneous, but considerable body of inquirers, and the object of the present paper will be to avoid what has been already proved by them, and to deal only with such points as are misapprehended or disputed.

Of the army of Philip apart from that of his son, we know next to nothing: it is very probable that the phalanx which so nearly came to grief at Chaeronea was a heavier and more cumbrous organisation than that which scrambled up the crumbling banks of the Pinarus in the face of the enemy: but we must be content to study it as it was in Asia, and possibly the differences were not material. It is the most famous of the Macedonian arms, this serried mass of linked shields and protruding spears, the phalanx proper, which has been described by Polybius and Curtius, and which struck terror to the soul of an Aemilius; but it may be that an inaccurate general impression has somewhat obscured the details. The length of its distinctive arm, the *σάρισσα*, has been so much discussed that one or two points only in the controversy need be touched upon: as is well known, our ancient authorities, with only one exception, assert that it was from 14 to 16 cubits in length, i.e. 21 to 24 feet, and incredible as such dimensions seemed, no one openly questioned it till Köchly, in a short treatise on the *Tactica* of Aelian and Arrian, maintained that the cubits should be read feet, and, adhering to this view in his larger work, he was followed without comment by Droysen; Grote however in an appendix to the 92nd chapter of his history has, apparently to his own satisfaction, rehabilitated the old theory. Before considering the question on its own merits, it may be remarked that Grote

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has taken no notice in that appendix of the fact, emphasised by Köchly whom he professes to answer, that the earliest and best edition of Aelian's *Tactica*, that namely which has come down to us under the name of Arrian, definitely gives feet and not cubits: the MSS. may be altered, but there is the reading. Leo Tacticus, Constantine and the rest merely copy Aelian, and go for nothing, and we need only take account further of Polybius, and probabilities. Now Aelian is discounted by the variant of Arrian, and, with all appreciation of Polybius as a historian, Alexander's tactics are not perhaps his strongest point: he knew too much of the later army to be clear as to the earlier; and there is no question that he is sadly at fault in his criticism of Callisthenes' account of Issus¹: the latter was a liar of no mean order, but he was capable, an eye-witness, and without the smallest motive for falsification in this case: and when Polybius denies the possibility of the Macedonian phalanx crossing the Pinarus, it is manifest that he is judging Alexander's tactics by the experience of the succeeding century, when the incapacity of later generals to manœuvre so complex and multiform an arm as the phalanx of Issus, had induced its relapse into a jointless, mechanical body which, on the authority of Polybius himself, was fatally disordered by the least inequality of ground: is it conceivable that such was the force which Alexander led up the Cilician and Persian Gates, or opposed to Spitamenes and his inaccessible Scythians? Polybius may be right about the *σάρισσα* of later days: he must have seen it often enough, and could hardly make an error of seven feet in its length; and, himself the author of a lost treatise on Tactics, he is too good an authority for us to dispute now: but if so it is small wonder that the Romans cut the phalanx to pieces: for if anyone is inclined to agree with Mr Grote that even a specially-trained, athletic man-at-arms can make easy play with a 21-foot pike, held either three or six feet from the butt, let him try to poise for even a quarter of an hour a punt-pole double the usual length, and furnished with a heavy iron head: and he will perhaps agree that such a weapon must

¹ xii. 17 foll.

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have been the last resort of military incompetency. Remember also that the longest Swiss pike was never more than 17 feet, and its bearer was encumbered with neither shield nor sword, whereas the Macedonian hoplite had both. The smallest disarrangement and the top-heavy phalanx must have been in hopeless difficulties, as indeed Polybius is forced to allow that it was.

A further argument against the longer *σάρισσα* may legitimately be drawn from the shield and sword with which the phalangite was also armed: the *σάρισσα* in fact must have been of such dimension that on occasion it could be wielded with one hand: for example at Issus it seems that recourse had to be made to the sword to win the farther bank of the Pinarus; and this must often have happened: what then became meanwhile of the *σάρισσαι*? they could hardly be all abandoned. The word is also used of the arm of a certain class of cavalry, the *σαρισσοφόροι ἵππεις*, and they are evidently distinguished by its use from the Companions etc. who used the short spear (*ξυστόν* or *λόγχη*), and there can be no doubt that it was the same as the infantry-spear: it must accordingly be one-handed in this case, and if 14 feet long, would not be unlike the Cossack lance of the present day. Thrice also in Arrian¹ we hear of Alexander on emergency mounting his *foot* as they stood, and it is possible, more especially from the expression used on one such occasion (iii. 21), that they retained their *σάρισσαι*. Lastly is it conceivable that when Alexander snatches a *σάρισσα* from a guard, stabs Clitus, and props it against the wall with intent to throw himself on it, he was rushing about a banquet-hall with a twenty-one foot spear? Curiously enough Aelian himself (*Tactica* xii.) when theorising, and not professing to relate history, counsels a spear of a maximum length of only twelve feet.

If the heavy-armed phalanx of Alexander is studied in his proper historians apart from the tactical treatises, two things at once attract attention: first the mobility and adaptability of the machine, and second, its subordinate place in the military system. As regards the first point much has been already said

¹ i. 6: iii. 21: iv. 23.

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in the question of the *σάρισσα*, and further than that we will only notice the miscellaneous character of the work that it has to do. It marches almost incredible distances, and that usually under certain impedimenta¹: for example, if we can believe such figures, on one occasion it marched 150 miles in three days (Arr. iv. 6), while 30 to 40 miles a day is accounted a mere trifle, and that when crossing the Taurus². Again we frequently read of an advance *δρόμῳ*, at Gaugamela in company with the cavalry, and in Persis in the wildest mountain work³: at Gaza and in Sogdiana⁴ it climbs ladders, besides dislodging the Indians of Sangala from their strange and difficult lager of waggons. The phalanx that does this work cannot be the stiff, cumbrous machine that its name naturally connotes. In what respects then did it differ? Firstly, as has been already pointed out, in wielding a pike only 14 feet long at the most. Secondly, in its much shallower formation: sixteen files is the depth universally assigned, on the authority of the tacticians (though they lay down no positive rule and are notoriously inconsistent in their numeration with Alexander's corps), and of the organisation described in Arrian vii. 23: but in this very passage occurs the word which should have precluded such an error, the term *δεκάς*, used also in a passage of the contemporary Anaximenes preserved by Photius⁵. Alexander made files of 16 at Babylon, but this is introduced as an innovation on the old *δεκάς*, designed to counteract the loss of weight of armour by increase of numbers: Alexander was not the man to be bound by a formal number, and a *δεκάς* may have been eight or twelve as exigencies of space etc. required: and Polybius redeems his unnecessary criticisms of Callisthenes by preserving thereby the record of the eightfold files at Issus⁶. Particular formations like the wedge of Gaugamela, and that used against Glaucias, were due to the deploying of files one behind the other: but whenever Alexander

¹ vid. Arr. iii. 8.² cf. also Plut. Alex. 42 for an average of 37½ miles per day.³ cf. iii. 14. 18: iv. 26.⁴ *ibid.* ii. 27: iv. 2.⁵ Sub v. *πεζήταιροι*: Harpocration also *πεζήταιροι* with same note: *πεζήταιροι* Suidas and Ulpian in Ol. ii. p. 29.⁶ xii. 19.

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attacked in line, as he did, according to Frontinus¹, whenever he had a strong force compared with his enemy, or when leading flying columns, there can be little doubt that his phalanx was comparatively shallow. Thirdly, in being handled, as only a born general could have handled it, in smaller units: this needs no detailed proof. And lastly, in all probability in being at all times mixed with lighter files: this is advanced with some hesitation, as being rank heresy; but it is very difficult to explain in any other way several passages in the historians. Again and again in Arrian (especially i. 27 and ii. 4) we find a clear distinction between lighter and heavier hoplites of the phalanx (and that without reference to the Hypaspists or "velites"): and in at least two passages (Arrian i. 21: iii. 26) if not three (v. 17?) hoplites seem to use missile weapons. Perhaps the 'old guard' of Diodorus xvii. 27 means merely the foremost files of the phalanx, and may afford an explanation of the dubious term *πεζέταιροι*, of which more anon. But at any rate, if on such slight evidence we may conjecture that the rear files (except probably the *ὄργαγός* himself) discharged missiles instead of pushing on the front, we should explain the mobility of the first phalanx, graduate the change to the second, and give four men at any rate in each file a better employment than catching arrows on their spears, and shoving the men in front². Following this conjecture we have as the largest constituent of Alexander's "ever victorious army" from six to ten battalions, presenting a front of five pikemen, who on occasion could use the sword at close quarters, comple-

¹ Strateg. 5.

² As to the number of hoplites and the strength of the *τάξεις* or *φάλαγγες* I have nothing new to say, nor can anything be made out beyond what Droysen and others have done. As to Curtius v. 2 on which much reliance has been based, the passage is altogether unworthy thereof: two-thirds of the chiliarchs mentioned there are nobodies: the number nine, agreeing with the 9000 Macedonians of Diodorus xvii. 17 (i.e. 12,000 minus 3000

Hypaspists), means nothing, for that number had greatly increased before Alexander reached Susa: the tactical unit of the phalanx was no more a pentecosiarchy before, than it was a chiliarchy afterwards: and the apparent increase of the *τάξεις* in India to ten is more than accounted for by the rapid increase of the army, which might be guessed, even if we did not know it for a fact from Arrian's *Indica*, chap. 20.

mented perhaps by from two to four lighter hoplites armed with javelins, and closed by an *ὄραγός*, probably armed also with the pike. This is of such a nature as to be used against a Greek phalanx or Scythian horsemen with equal success: and its component individuals are equally ready to assault a wall, or throw up works against it. In short we have here the best parallel to the Roman infantry. But it is a great and frequent error to regard it as the flower of Alexander's army, the centre to which the other corps were merely subordinate: if we have learnt from the tacticians to see in the phalanx of pike-men the essential Macedonian organisation whereby the world was conquered, a careful study of Alexander's historians will soon show that its general had no such high idea of it: nor had he much reason to do so, for if it had been a matter only of pikemen, his earliest experience of a pitched battle, Chaeronea to wit, would have been less fortunate. So far as we can trace the details of that engagement, the victory appears to have been due solely to the cavalry of the right wing. And it is to this cavalry, Companion and Thessalian, and to the light corps of Hypaspists that the chief glory of the Asiatic conquest belongs: every corps did its own work indeed in Alexander's magnificent system, and each depended on the other, but three parts of every victory were won without the phalanx at all. Take the great battles in review: at Granicus the heavy-armed never crossed the stream till the victory was won, and the battle is invariably alluded to as a *ἵππομαχία* (Arrian i. 15, 16, 17; ii. 7; iii. 22; iv. 8): the phalanx was used only to break up the helpless *στίφος* of Greeks, standing their ground rather *ἐκπλήξει* than *λογισμῶ βεβαίῳ*: at Issus the cavalry on each wing again bore the brunt of the battle, the heavy troops being engaged, according to Diodorus (xvii. 33), for a short time only, but long enough to show that they were by no means able to do what they liked with Darius' mercenaries: Issus would have long hung in the balance, possibly been lost, but for the cavalry. At Gaugamela the phalanx on the level ground was brought up earlier and it certainly helped by its pressure in the rout of the Persian left wing: but here again it was subordinate to the Companion cavalry, while the

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destruction of the Persian centre and right (remembering that the centre was really opposite to the Macedonian left) was due to the heroic efforts of the Thessalian and Greek allies, helped later in the work of breaking and butchering the heavy masses of fugitives by the Companions returning from the pursuit of the Persian left. Lastly at the Hydaspes there was apparently only one battalion of heavy-armed engaged at all: and throughout the campaigns in Central Asia the Companions, Hypaspists, Agrianians, archers, horse-archers and the like form the bulk of every flying column, sometimes accompanied by one *τάξις* of heavy-armed as at the Persian Gates, sometimes by two as against the Arians, seldom by more and often by none, as against the Aspasians and for part of the campaign against the Malli: picked men from several *τάξεις* are however sometimes employed. Again in the distribution of rewards and prize-money the phalangites are held far inferior to the horse, obtaining on one occasion only two minae per man as against six, on another ten minae as against a talent¹. We are told that Philip drafted all his best men into the cavalry, reserving to the *πεζέταιροι* those of less merit; and a command in the Companions seems to have ranked above one in the foot, if we may judge from Clitus, Perdicas, Craterus and Coenus, who, while commanding *τάξεις* of infantry, have also *ἵππαρχίαι* in the Companions²: curiously we do not hear of these officers as cavalry commanders till quite late, and it may have been a special mark of promotion. It should be noted that these four officers, together with Hephaestion, a cavalry officer also, are those entrusted at different times after Parmenion's death with the most important independent commands. Nothing shows the conscious inferiority of the foot to the horse so clearly as the outcome of the dissension after Alexander's death; as soon as it becomes a question of close fighting the phalanx yields tamely to the Companions and Meleager flies without striking a blow³. Such was the subordinate position of the phalanx,

¹ Diod. xvii. 63: 74: cf. Curt. vii. 5.

² vid. Arr. v. 22, vi. 6 for Clitus: v. 12, 22: vi. 6 for Perdicas: v. 11 for Craterus: v. 16 for Coenus. These

dual commands are curious, and will be discussed later under *πεζέταιροι*.

³ Curtius x. 7 foll. and Diod. xviii. 2.

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as befitted the *essentially inferior* arm, essentially inferior as characteristic of a lower grade of tactics, the corps of the commonplace general, safer and casier for him to use than cavalry and light troops which must be handled in many units; but inferior to these when directed by a master of strategy. Alexander used it for just such purposes as it was adapted to serve—to break up a counter-phalanx of Greeks, who would stand to receive it; to press upon the disordered mass at Gaugamela, while the cavalry rode through and through from the flanks: and as soon as he can alter its formation by the introduction of Asiatics he does so, seeing he had no more Greeks or mail-clad Indians to meet. Whether he would have recalled it to its early form to meet Italian infantry, cannot be determined; but certainly not till then. It would be idle to depreciate the work that it did for Alexander, laborious and useful, if not so brilliant as the achievements of the cavalry and Hypaspists: but, if to one can be awarded the praise where all combined in ordered effort, it was these latter, and not the phalanx, that conquered Asia. A word on the disputed term *πεζέταιροι*: setting aside those explanations of Ulpian¹ that are apparently due to defective orthography, we are left with the information that the term includes all Macedonians in the army outside the cavalry. This view has been accepted by Droysen, and, following him, by Grote and others, and is the generally accepted one. There is another which restricts it to the Hypaspists, enunciated by Sainte-Croix, and repeated in the Classical Dictionary: carelessness or ignorance could alone originate a theory which half-a-dozen or more passages in Arrian at once refute². Whoever these *πεζέταιροι* were, they at any rate did *not* include the Hypaspists at all, and so far Droysen's view is also incorrect: these latter *may* have been called *ἐταῖροι* like the cavalry, but never *πεζέταιροι*. Must we then take *πεζέταιροι* as signifying all the Macedonian heavy-armed? The term is used eight times by Arrian, and not at all by our other extant historians: in only one of these eight (i. 28) does it seem in the least to connote all the *τάξεις* of the heavy-armed,

¹ Note on Demosth. Olynth. ii. 17.² See, among others, i. 28 and vi. 21.