

ALEXANDER'S THESSALIAN CAVALRY

Rolf Strootman

*This paper examines the organization, numbers and tactics of the Thessalian cavalry unit in the army of Alexander the Great. It is argued that already Philip II recognized the importance of Thessaly as a recruiting ground for heavy (noble) cavalry with regard to his planned invasion of Asia, and that it was partly for this reason that Philip closely integrated Thessaly in the Argead imperial system, cultivating personal relations with the Thessalian noble families also as a counterweight to the power of the traditional Macedonian noble cavalry, the *hetairoi* (Companions). Alexander inherited these arrangements. The Thessalians on their part joined Alexander's expedition more enthusiastically than other Greeks because of these pre-existing bonds with the Macedonian royal family and because the promise of honor and booty agreed with the heroic mentality of the Thessalian aristocracy.*

Introduction

Various non-Macedonian troops accompanied Alexander the Great to Asia in 334 BC¹. Among these, the contingent of Thessalian horsemen stands out. First, because Thessalians constituted by far the largest Greek unit in Alexander's army. Second, because unlike other Greek troops the Thessalians fought in the great battles at the Granicus, at Issus and at Gaugamela. And not only did they participate actively in these battles, they were given important tactical responsibilities and played a crucial role on the battlefield, where invariably their task was to defend the left flank against the Persian cavalry. Although the king's army was formally a pan-Hellenic force, in practice it was a largely Macedonian army and the token units that had been sent by the southern Greek *poleis* in accordance with the obligations of the League of Corinth – predominantly

¹ All dates are BC unless otherwise indicated.

infantry – seem to have been somewhat mistrusted by Alexander, and even may have been hostages of sorts, guaranteeing the good behavior of their hometowns. The relatively numerous Thessalians on the other hand were highly honored by the Macedonian king and richly rewarded by him for their services. When Alexander demobilized his Greek allies after the defeat of Darius, more than a hundred Thessalians instead of returning home voluntarily re-entered the army as mercenaries and followed the king into Central Asia. Why did Thessalian cavalry play such a distinguished and crucial role during Alexander's campaigns?

This paper is founded on the assumption that the prominence of Thessalians in the Macedonian royal army, and subsequently on the battlefields of Asia, had been deliberated in advance by Alexander's father Philip II (359-336). Philip had incorporated Thessaly in his kingdom. He had created the Greek anti-Persian League of Corinth and prepared for a military campaign against the Achaemenid Empire in Asia Minor. Philip knew he needed more horsemen to offset the cavalry superiority of the Persians. Thessaly provided him with heavy cavalry. Moreover, the incorporation of Thessalian noble cavalry in the king's army, loyal to himself, I would argue, could serve as to counterbalance the power of the Macedonian aristocracy, the Companions.

How was the participation of the Thessalians in the Persian War secured and how were they incorporated in the royal army? What tactical role did they fulfill? The Thessalians in their turn must have had reasons of their own to cooperate so closely with the Macedonians, too. How can their fervor and loyalty be explained?

To answer these question, I will first briefly review the military record of Thessalian cavalry from the sixth to the second centuries BC in Greek warfare. I will then examine the geographical and social-cultural circumstances that made Thessaly in military terms typically a land of horsemen. In the third part of this paper the political relations between Thessaly and Macedonia will be discussed in order to explain how in 334 Alexander could mobilize for his own purposes Thessalian manpower with such apparent ease. Thereafter, the size, organization and tactics of Alexander's Thessalian corps will be dealt with. The remainder of the paper is concerned with the actual partaking of the Thessalians in Alexander's battles.

Thessalian cavalry in Greek warfare

Alexander was neither the first nor the last to incorporate Thessalian cavalrymen in his army. The earliest reports on their military achievements however are not altogether favorable for the Thessalians.

The first account of Thessalian cavalry in action is found in Herodotus' *Histories* (5.63). Thessalians appear in connection to a Spartan attempt to remove the tyrant Hippias from Athens in 511/510. A Spartan surprise landing in the Bay of Phaleron failed because Hippias was forewarned and sent 1,000 allied Thessalian horsemen who drove the attackers from the beaches. This success, Herodotus assures, was due to the fact that the terrain had been flattened in advance and the embarking Spartan warriors were not able to form a line. When in 510 a second Spartan army invaded Attica, this time by land and led by the king Cleomenes, "... they first came to grips with the Thessalian horsemen, who soon ran off ... straight back to Thessaly" (5.64). During the Second Persian War, Thessalian troops fought in the Persian army at the Battle of Plataeae (479). Herodotus again speaks scornfully of them: "As far as the Greeks who fought on the side of the king are concerned, most of them ran away spontaneously, without having fought against anyone or having accomplished anything" (9.67). Thucydides seems more impartial when recounting how in a cavalry battle during the Archidamean War (431-421) Thessalian and Athenian horsemen had the better of a contingent of Boiotian riders until hoplite infantry came to the aid of the Boiotians: -- "the Athenians and Thessalians retreated, leaving behind several dead" (Th. 2.22).

These accounts nonetheless demonstrate the interest other states took in recruiting Thessalian horsemen. Their popularity in Greek warfare increased with the growing significance of cavalry in the Hellenistic Age. Thessalian horsemen turn up in Hellenistic armies particularly in the third century BC, the golden age of cavalry warfare. For instance Thessalians in the service of Pyrrhus of Epirus delivered the decisive blow against the Romans in the Battle of Heraclea (280): "At last, when the Romans were more than ever crowded back by the elephants ... Pyrrhus brought in his Thessalian cavalry upon them while they were in confusion and routed them with great slaughter" (Plu. *Pyrrh.* 17.3). And the initial success of Philip V's army in the Battle of Cynoscephalae (197) in pushing back the Roman right wing was for a large part the work of his Thessalian cavalry (Livy 33.3).

Thessaly, land of horses

“Thessalian horses, Lacedaemonian women and the men who drink water from the sacred Arethusa” – according to an oracle, cited by Strabo (10.1.13), these were the three best things in Greece². Thessaly was the only country in Greece with extensive plains: two broad plains to be precise, both of them watered by Greece’s broadest stream, the Aios River, and its tributaries. This was the only area where the cultivation of surplus grain and the breeding of cows and horses on a grand scale was possible. Thessaly consequently was a land dominated by landowning aristocrats who also controlled the few small cities that developed, relatively late, in the fifth century³. Large landowners supposedly had their lands worked by serfs called *penestai*, people of Aeolian stock whose social status has in the past been compared with that of the helots in Sparta⁴. There were however also free smallholding farmers in Thessaly⁵. Democracy did not develop in the Thessalian cities.

Thessaly was divided into four districts, the so called *tetradēs* or tetrarchies of Thessaliotis, Hestiaiotis, Pelasgiotis and Phthiotis. The Thessalian *ethnos* was loosely united as a federation (*koinon*). In wartime the Thessalian *koinon* was led by a chosen magistrate called *archōn* or *archos*, or perhaps *tagos*⁶. Although the *archōn* formally was a *primus inter pares*, the office was normally held by powerful men such as the notorious Jason of Pherae, who forcefully united Thessaly in ca. 275 with the help of a reformed army loyal only to himself (and who may have been a role model for Philip II) (Westlake 1969², 1-3; cf. Scholten 2003, 139-140).

The Thessalian nobility cultivated a Doric identity (Hornblower 1983 [2002²], 96). The leaders of some princely families, for instance the Aleuads of Larissa, bore the archaic title of *basileus* and claimed to be descendent from Herakles (Helly 1995). Although the Hellenism of the Thessalian landlords was never in doubt, in cultural terms

² Men who drink from the sacred spring of Arethusa presumably are men from Chalcis on Euboea.

³ H. D. Westlake 1969², 1-5, 34-36. The most important cities were Larissa, Pelasgis, Pharsalos and Pherai.

⁴ E.g. Busolt 1926, II, 1479; Sordi 1958, 321. Cf. Hornblower 1983 [2002²], 96. See further Ducat 1994.

⁵ Westlake (1969², 32) has suggested that in the fifth century BC these farmers were marginalized and migrated to the developing Thessalian *poleis*, their land being taken over by the nobility.

⁶ The meaning of the title of *tagos* is debated: notably Helly (1995) has argued against the interpretation of this title (attested for Jason of Pherae) as the title of the official leader of the Thessalian *koinon*; for a contrary view see Sprawski 2004, 437-452.

they were more akin to the nobility of Macedonia than with southern Greek elite families (Westlake 1969², 20-22; cf. Helly 1995). They derived status from the possession of horses, as well as from their own horsemanship. In Thessaly, as Plato said, the best horseman was the most highly honored man (*Hippias Maior* 4.284). The distinctive dress of a Thessalian nobleman was a rider's dress, consisting of a short oblong-shaped cloak worn over a tunic, and a broad-rimmed sun-hat. Thessalians in the Olympic Games almost always concerned horse races, and it is typical that three brothers, members of one of Thessaly's leading dynasties, once won the races while driving their chariots themselves (Westlake 1969², 42). The quality of Thessalian horses was proverbial (See e.g. Sophocles, *Electra* 703-706; Euripides, *Andromache* 1229). The most famous horse of Antiquity, Alexander's charger Bucephalus – "a big horse with a noble spirit" (Arr. *An.* 5.19) – was a Thessalian horse.

Philip II and Thessaly

Macedonian kings had intervened in inter-Thessalian rivalries already in the early fourth century and bonds of friendship with Thessalian dynasties, in particular the Aleuadae of Larisa (Borza 1990 [1992²], 164-165 and 189-190), existed already prior to the rule of Philip II. In 358, Philip strengthened these ties by marrying the Aleuad Philinna (Heckel, 2005, 208; cf. Carney 2000, 61-62). A more profound connection of Thessaly and Macedonia began with Philip II's intervention against Pherae in 355, following the assassination of the tyrant Jason⁷. Taking advantage of existing rivalries among the Thessalian nobility, Philip was able to gradually establish his hegemony by means of a divide and rule policy, now favoring in particular the oligarchs of the city of Pharsalus⁸. In Pharsalus, as in other cities, tyrants and their supporters were exiled,

⁷ Griffith 1970; Hammond/Griffith 1979, 218-230, 259-295; Hammond 1989, 185; Borza 1990 [1992²], 219-221.

⁸ Hammond, 1998, 125-126. Bosworth (1980, 301) has suggested that the preferential treatment of Pharsalus explains why horsemen from that region served as a kind of personal guard of Parmenion in the Battle of Gaugamela. Westlake (1935, 200) distinguishes three phases in the establishment of Philip's power in Thessaly: (1) the Philip-the-Benefactor phase, (2) the Philip-the-Conqueror phase, and (3) the phase in which Philip secured for himself "a position of constitutional authority in order that he might be enabled to carry out his reforms both directly and legitimately".

some of them for all time (Hammond, 1979 [1994²], 48). Philip's hegemony over Thessaly was personal (Cf. Hammond 1979 [1994²], 48-49 with note 8 on p. 200). After Philip had defeated Pherae on behalf of its enemies, Philip's political opponents were expelled from that city, too. But Philip lost no time in securing good relations with those oligarchs who remained behind, cementing his alliance by marrying also the noblewoman Nicesipolis, a woman of the house of Jason (Hammond 1979 [1994²], 48; Heckel 2005, 178; cf. Carney 2000, 60-61).

With the support of his friends among the Thessalian nobility, Philip was elected *archōn* of the *koinon* of the Thessalians for life, perhaps in 344 or 342 (Hammond 1967, 559). This enabled him to reform the administrative structure of the Thessalian federation in order to gain more direct access to the military resources of the country. The most substantial reorganization was the creation, in *ca.* 343/342, of ten military districts, presumably around civic administrative centers (Demosthenes 6.22) (Sordi 1958, 278-279; Westlake 1969², 10). Of course, these decadarchies did not replace the existing four tetrarchies, but the latter presumably served only civic functions (Demosthenes 9.26)⁹. The creation of the decadarchies further divided the Thessalians and later had the additional advantage of providing the Thessalian *koinon* with ten votes in the council of the League of Corinth, which elected Philip both *hegemōn* and *stratēgos* at the establishment of the League in 337. Interestingly, the charter of the League of Corinth stipulated that in case of war each member-state was to provide the federal army with 500 foot and 200 horse for every vote that state had in the council. The unusually large proportion of cavalry cannot but have been fixed with Thessaly in mind.

Alexander and Thessaly

Philip had succeeded in gaining both informal as well as formal hegemony over Thessaly by patronizing noble families and aiding them against their rivals. As a result of his

⁹ Traditional institutions naturally were not abolished; still, the concurrent attestation of both tetrarchies and decadarchies in Demosthenes have been understood as a paradox, to be eliminated by assuming that Philip installed a "council of ten" for each tetrarchy (e.g. H. Vince in his Demosthenes translation of 1930, followed by Hornblower 1983 [2002²], 96) or even in each city (Hammond 1967, 559). But Demosthenes' text unambiguously states that Philip introduced decadarchies among the Thessalian nation as a whole.

policy of benevolent patronage and the resulting institutionalization of his hegemony in his becoming *archōn*, Philip was able to employ Thessalian cavalry units already in his Thracian campaigns of 344 and 341¹⁰. Philip's control of Thessaly and the support of its noble families presumably enabled Philip, too, to operate more independently from the Macedonian aristocracy.

At the death of Philip in 336 it was uncertain whether his control of Thessaly would be passed on to his son and successor, Alexander. Philip's influence in Thessaly after all had been based on his personal relations with Thessalian aristocrats, and the *archōn*-ship was not inheritable. But the bonds that Philip had created turned out to be strong. After his accession Alexander was confronted with the opposition of Philip's former opponents but the resistance was quickly overcome (Westlake 1969², 218; Hammond/Griffith 1979, 437). After the pacification of the country, Alexander addressed the council of the Thessalian *koinon* and the council decided to elect the young king *archōn* and to accept him as the new hegemon of the Greeks (Westlake 1969², 219). It is likely that Alexander thereupon received military assistance from the *koinon* for his Greek campaign of 335, although there is only indirect evidence for Thessalian participation in this war¹¹.

Be that as it may, it is certain that when Alexander crossed the Hellespont only one year later, he could count on the support of 2,000 heavy cavalry from Thessaly (see below). This number is in accordance with the obligation of the *koinon* to send 200 horse soldiers for every vote that the Thessalians had in the League of Corinth, and these ten votes in turn corresponded with the ten military districts into which Philip had partitioned the country¹². Alexander did not demand of all the Greeks that they send the maximum number of troops. He did not need large numbers of unwilling hoplites because the Macedonian infantry already at his disposal sufficed to deal with any Persian army. Besides, the partaking of the maximum number of Greek allied troops

¹⁰ Hammond/Griffith 1979, 437. Participation of Thessalian forces in the invasion of Phocis in 346 is likely; whether or not Thessalian troops fought at the Battle of Chaeronea (338) is unknown (cf. Westlake 1969², 212; Hammond 1979 [1994²], 149).

¹¹ Diodorus (D.S. 17.8.3) says that when Alexander attacked Thebes he had at his disposal 30,000 foot and 3,000 horse; the relatively high number of horsemen suggests the incorporation of Thessalians in the cavalry.

¹² During the Lamian war (323-322), Thessaly again supplied 2,000 horsemen, this time as part of a pan-Greek army fighting *against* the Macedonians (D.S. 18.15.2-3).

would have been a logistic nightmare, so only small token forces accompanied the king to Asia, serving as hostages to keep Greece quiet. Alexander's Macedonian cavalrymen, however, were too small in number to oppose the numerous mounted troops that the Persian king potentially could bring into the field. As one modern historian put it: "Mobility was the key to the conquest of Persia. [Macedonian] infantry was superior to anything Persia could produce, but the phalanx could only defeat what it could catch (Cf. Connolly 1981, 71).

Thessaly was the only region in Greece that was capable, like Macedonia itself, of raising large numbers of cavalry of approximately the same quality as the cavalry supplied by the Iranian nobility¹³. Because of the personal ties that existed between the noble families of Thessaly and the royal house of Macedonia, the Thessalians, as H.D. Westlake remarked, were the only Greeks with any real zest for the expedition: "They could regard themselves as privileged participators ... led by their own *archōn*, whereas the others could only lament the degradation of enforced service under a foreign dictator. It is for this reason that, while Alexander made full use of his Thessalian cavalry ..., the Greek infantry is never found in the fighting line" (Westlake, 1969², 223). Indeed, there is no evidence to suggest that the Thessalians who accompanied Alexander to Asia were reluctant to go. On the contrary, apart from the formal political obligations, it seems that the Thessalians actually sympathized with the Macedonians and their king, who was also their own *archōn*, even showing a certain eagerness to outshine the *hetairoi* ('Companions'), the Macedonian noble cavalry, on the battlefield, as N.G.L. Hammond noted: "Thessalians of the class that served in the cavalry may have viewed service on Macedonian campaigns in company and competition with the Macedonians of the Companion class as something congenial in itself besides offering its changes of profit or advancement" (Hammond/Griffith 1979, 437). Being aristocrats, the greatest potential advancement for these Thessalians was the opportunity to attain glory in war and thereby increase their families' status in the home country.

¹³ Isocrates (8.118) estimated the total of horsemen Thessaly could produce at 3,000; in the Lamian War (323-322) the Thessalians put 2000 horsemen into the field, cf. Brunt 1963, note 27 on p. 36.

The size of the Thessalian cavalry corps

Determining the number of Thessalian horsemen in Alexander's army at first sight this seems unproblematic. Nine different historical sources provide us with the total number of troops that Alexander invaded Asia Minor with in 334. Among these, the statements of four contemporary historians have been preserved second-handedly, namely Callisthenes, Ptolemy, Anaximenes and Aristoboulus. They all say that Alexander's army in 334 consisted of approximately 30,000 infantry; the number of cavalry however varies from 4,500 to 5,500 men. Only Callisthenes and Anaximenes deviate from the number of 30,000 for the infantry, presumably because they counted too the Macedonian troops already present in Asia under the command of Parmenion (Griffith, 1935, 15).

<u>Source</u>	<u>Infantry</u>	<u>Cavalry</u>
Callisthenes in Polybius 12.19.1	40,000	4,500
Anaximenes in Plutarch, <i>Moralia</i> 327E	43,000	5,500
Ptolemy in Plutarch, <i>Moralia</i> 327E	30,000	5,000
Aristoboulus in Plutarch, <i>Moralia</i> 327E	30,000	4,000
D.S. 17.17.4 (1)	30,000	4,500
D.S. 17.17.4 (2)	32,000	5,100
Justin 11.6.2	32,000	4,500
Livy 9.19.5	30,000	4,000
Arrian, <i>Anabasis</i> 1.11.3	>30,000	>5,000
Frontinus, <i>Strategemata</i> 4.2.4	40,000	

Diodorus (D.S. 17.17.4-5) is the only source giving some specification for these totals, roughly distinguishing troops on the basis of their ethnicity. From his list it is apparent that the Thessalian heavy cavalry consisted of 1,800 men. The problem is this: if one adds up the numbers given by Diodoros for each of the units, one reaches a sum total of 32,000 infantry and 5,100 cavalry. Diodorus himself, however, in the same paragraph gives as totals 30,000 and 4,500 respectively:

<u>Infantry</u>			<u>Cavalry</u>	
Macedonians	12,000		Macedonians	1,800
Allied Troops	7,000		Thessalians	1,800
Mercenaries	5,000		Greeks	600
Odrysians, Triballians, Illyrians	7,000		Thracian <i>prodromoi</i> and Paionians	900
Archers and Agrianians	1,000			
Arithmetic total	32,000		Arithmetic total	5,100
Diodorus' total	30,000		Diodorus' total	4,500

The 2,000 missing foot soldiers may be the victims of rounding off. But the relatively substantial discrepancy between the two total numbers given for the cavalry obviously cannot be explained that way. Several modern historians have therefore attempted find a solution, and they did so predominantly at the expense of the Thessalians.

Karl Julius Beloch maintained that the total given by Diodorus (4,500) must be correct since Justin and Polybios give that number too, the latter on the authority of the eye-witness Callisthenes. In order to explain the discrepancy of 600 between Diodorus' given total of 4,500 and the arithmetic total of 5,100, Beloch points to the fact that the number of Thessalian horsemen is exactly the same as the number of Macedonian cavalry, namely 1,800. Assuming that 1,800 is the number of Companions (Macedonian noble cavalry) and that this number must at any rate be correct, and given the fact that the Thessalians follow directly after them in Diodoros' list, Beloch insists that the number of 1,800 is a mistake made by a copyist who erroneously repeated the number of Companions. By reducing the number of Thessalians with 600, the problem is solved¹⁴.

Helmut Berve, too, believed that 1,800 was too high a number for the Thessalians. Accepting Beloch's argumentation, he proposed to diminish their number with 600. Berve, however, missed in Diodorus' list the 600 *prodromoi* (light cavalry) who other

¹⁴ Beloch 1923, 324: "[O]ffenbar ist die Zahl der thessalischen Reiter aus der unmittelbar vorgehender Zahl der makedonischen reiter einfach wiederholt worden, und es ist 1200 zu lesen statt 1800." To be sure, the number 1,800 for the Companions has raised doubts, too: cf. Bosworth 1988 [1993?], 262.

sources say were part of Alexander's army. By adding them up Berve reaches a of 5,100 horsemen. This number corresponds more or less to the round total of 5,000 cavalry supposedly given by the eye-witness Ptolemy (*apud* Plutarch, *Moralia* 327E), on whom Arrian presumably drew when he said that Alexander had with him more than 5,000 cavalry¹⁵. The *prodromoi* according to Berve were Macedonians, accepting not that they were Thracians, as Diodorus seems to imply.

W.W. Tarn turned the argumentation around. He believes that the number of 1,800 Thessalians is accurate and that the number of Macedonian *c.q.* Companion horsemen was manipulated. This was done more or less deliberately by the author of the so-called Mercenary Source – Diodorus' principal source for all military matters before the Battle of Issus – in order to stress that in horsemanship and fighting abilities the Companions and Thessalians were equals¹⁶.

Beloch, Berve and Tarn are of course not the only ones who have reshuffled Diodorus' army list. But the doubt they cast on Diodorus' cavalry numbers was highly influential. In his study of the meticulous study of the campaign and battle of Gaugamela, E.W. Marsden pointed out that this discussion has only succeeded in further obscuring the already ambiguous account in Diodorus (Marsden 1964, 25). According to Marsden, the whole discussion is unnecessary when we accept the possibility that Diodorus, who worked in the late first century BC, used two different sources. The totals of 30,000 and 4,500, then, stem from Diodorus' principal sources, presumably the anonymous Mercenary Source, while the specification must have been taken over from another sources, presumably Ptolemy, who according to Plutarch gave the round totals of 30,000 for the infantry and 5,000 for the cavalry but according to Arrian (*An.* 1.11.3) *a little more than 30,000 and more than 5,000, i.e.* matching more or less the arithmetic totals in Diodorus of 32,000 and 5,100.

If this indeed is true, then the riddle of the two differing totals is solved – but we still do not know how many Thessalians there were. But the only problem here, is the one

¹⁵ Berve 1926, 178: "Da ferner offensichtlich die berittene *xenoi* fehlen, wird man Belochs Änderung der Thessalerzahl von 1800 in 1200 ... durch das mutmaßliche Zahlenverhältnis zwischen Makedonen und Thessalern sehr wahrscheinlich ist, aufnehmen und die freigewordenen 600 Mann den Söldnern zuweisen".

¹⁶ Tarn 1948, 156; for Diodorus' use of the Mercenary Source see Hammond, 1983, 35. The existence of this Mercenary Source is disputed, cf. Brunt 1962, 143.

created by Beloch when he claimed that the number of Thessalians cannot have been the same as the number of Companions. Beloch said so in order to solve 'the problem of the totals', but since Berve and Tarn, this claim has assumed a life of its own. Part of the problem is also the insistence on exact, round numbers where the numbers given by our sources may have been approximate. Considering that the Companions and the Thessalians as it were 'mirrored' each other in Alexander's battle line, as we see below, it is not implausible that Alexander willingly created two corps of cavalry of similar size – or approximately similar size.

Arrian (*Arr. An.* 1.29.4) says that shortly after the beginning of the war, when the army was at Gordion, the Thessalian corps was reinforced with 200 men. Assuming that this statement, like the statement that 1,800 Thessalians crossed the Hellespont in 334, goes back to Ptolemy too, we may add up these two numbers to reach a total number of 2,000 Thessalians sent from Greece to join Alexander's army¹⁷. This total number of 2,000 corresponds precisely with the 10 x 200 men that the Thessalian *koinon* was obliged to provide in accordance with the stipulations of the League of Corinth¹⁸.

To sum up, the size of the Thessalian corps coincided deliberately with the size of the Macedonian Cavalry recruited. The Thessalians even had a guard regiment, the Pharsalian *ilē*, corresponding with the *ilē basilikē* of the Companions. The total size of the corps was between 1,800 and 2,000 men.

Organization, equipment and tactics

Notwithstanding the relative abundant sources for Alexander's wars, next to nothing is known about the organization of the Thessalian cavalry corps. From Diodorus (D.S. 17.21.4; 57.4; 60.8) it is apparent that they were divided into units called *ilai*. Arrian in the context of the Battle of Gaugamela suggests that the *ilai* were recruited on a regional basis, as indeed the *ilai* of the Companion cavalry certainly were, and that one of them was larger than the others: "The entire left wing was commanded by Parmenion, the son of Philotas, and round him rode the riders of Pharsalos, the best and most numerous of the Thessalian horsemen" (*Arr. An.* 3.11.10). Arrian's statement that the Pharsalian *ilē*

¹⁷ Losses had until this time been relatively few (Marsden 1964, 27).

¹⁸ Tarn 1948, 156; Westlake 1969², 222; Marsden 1964, 25.

served as a kind of guard regiment, is reminiscent of the organization of the Companions cavalry, which also had one guard regiment that was larger than the other units.

As we saw before, in battle the Thessalian cavalry on the left flank deliberately mirrored the Macedonian cavalry on the right flank. During the first years of the Asian campaign the Companion cavalry had eight *ilai* and these were recruited a territorial, tribal basis (Arr. An. 3.16.10-11)¹⁹. One of these units was larger than the others and not organized on a tribal basis. This was the *ilē basilikē* or royal guard (Arr. An. 3.118; D.S. 17.57.1)²⁰. The *ilē basilikē* presumably consisted of 300 men²¹. The problem is, that although Diodoros unambiguously says that there were 1800 mounted Macedonian at the Hellespont, it is not sure whether these Macedonians were all Companions, *i.e.* heavy cavalry. Brunt (1963) insisted with Berve (1926) that there were indeed 1800 Companions, and tried to find space for 600 Macedonian *prodromoi* elsewhere (so too Milns 1966). Rzepa (2008) however, has argued that the 1.800 mounted Macedonian mentioned by Diodorus included light cavalry, insisting on 1,200 Companions and 600 *prodromoi*²².

It has been assumed on the basis of analogy that the Thessalian cavalry was divided into eight *ilai* too (Hammond/Griffith 1979 , 438). In that case each *ilē* had approximately 200 men, and the Pharsalian *ilē* 300. Another possibility is that there were ten *ilai*, one from each of the ten dekadarchies or military districts, at least after

¹⁹ For the ethnic basis of the organization of the Companion cavalry see Rzepa 2008, 40-42.

²⁰ Bosworth 1988 [1993²], 259-277. The *ilē basilikē* was later called *agēma*, perhaps in a somewhat different form.

²¹ It is certain that 1,500 Companions stayed behind in Macedonia with Antipater (D.S. 17.17.5); since it is likely that this was half of the available number of cavalry and that Alexander took with him to Asia also 1,500 cavalry *plus* the royal cavalry guard, which must therefore have counted 300 men. The 'sacred' number of 300 furthermore is the traditional number for elite units (e.g. the Sacred Band of the Thebans) and an ideal quantity for the formation of a wedge, a favorite cavalry formation of the Macedonians, cf. Connolly 1981, 71; Hammond/Griffith 1979, 438; Tarn 1948, 157-158.

²² Rzepa, (2008) argues that the Macedonian army had adopted a Greek predilection for ideal proportions, for instance 12,000 heavy infantry (*pezhetairoi*) next to 1,200 heavy cavalry (*hetairoi*; not counting the *ilē basilikē*); explaining the ambiguity in D.S. 17.17.4 by assuming that he compiled two different lists, Rzepa concludes that there were 6 territorial *ilai* of Companions of 150 men each, a doubled (*i.e.* 2 x 1) *ilē basilikē* of 300 men and 6 *ilai* of Macedonian *prodromoi* of 100 men each. The total number of 6 + (2 x 1) + 6 = 13 *ilai* corresponds with the number of *ilai* Alexander attacked with at the Granicus according to Plu. *Alex.* 16.3; these however may have included units of Alexander's Balkan allies.

the arrival of reinforcements at Gordion. The association of the Thessalian guard regiment with the district of Pharsalos certainly points in that direction. In that case each *ilē* had approximately 150 men, while the Pharsalian *ilē* was double that size. In both cases, to find exact round numbers again seems not possible and may not be necessary (but see also Marsden's alternative solution, below).

According to a tactical treatise from the first century BC, Asclepiodotus' *Tacticus* the typical formation used by Thessalian cavalry in battle was the *rhomboid*, a lozenge-shaped wedge formation. None of the ancient historians of Alexander however mentions the formation and its historicity has often been doubted by modern historians. For instance Tarn believed that the *rhomboid* formation must have been so unpractical that it can only have existed as a traditional exercise but was never used on the battlefield (Tarn 1930, 57). But the *rhomboid* may have been practical in that it gave a unit a flexibility that was especially useful for defending operations. In the battles of Issus and Gaugamela the Thessalians' task was to protect the left flank against Persian cavalry attacks while the Companions charged forward from the right. For this task the *rhomboid* may have been better suited for holding one's ground than the wedge formation preferred by the Companions. As Asclepiodotus (*Tact.* 7.2) said, "the Thessalians were the first to use the rhomboid for their *ilai* in cavalry encounters, and they did so with great success both in retreat as in attack ... because it enabled them to turn in all directions." Maneuvering thus must indeed have been difficult; however the Thessalians were "the superiors of all other [allies] in fighting qualities and horsemanship" (D.S. 17.57.3-4) and "unstoppable when operating in formation" (Plb. 4.8.10).

Theoretically, the best figures for creating a perfect *rhomboid* are 172, 196, 225, 256 and 289 (Marsden 1964, 70). After reviewing various possibilities and taking into account the larger size of the Pharsalian *ilē*, Marsden concludes that the Thessalian cavalry was divided into ten *ilai*: nine consisting of 196 men each and one consisting of 256 men²³. Again, these ideal numbers seem to be somewhat too good to be true.

²³ Marsden 1964, 70. Thus the total number of Thessalians in Marsden's opinion must have been 2,020. According to his calculations, each of the regular *ilai* were *ca.* 47 m. deep and *ca.* 37 m. wide, the depth of the Pharsalian *ilē* being *ca.* 55 m.; the entire length of the front when all *ilai* stood together in line (with gaps of 37 m.) was about 700 m.

According to Asclepiodotus (Ascl. *Tact.* 7.2-3) each *ilē* was led by four officers: a commander called *ilarch* (*ilarchos*), a rear-guard officer, and an officer on each of the two central side flanks. These officers presumably were Thessalians. However, the commander of the entire Thessalian corps, the *hipparch* (*hipparchos*), invariably was a Macedonian noble appointed by the king. The position of *hipparch* of the Thessalians during Alexander's Asian campaign was held successively by Kalas the son of Harpalos (Arr. *An.* 1.14.3; D.S. 17.17.4), Alexander the son of Airopos, called the Lynkestian (Arr., *An.* 1.25.3), and Philippus the son of Menelaus (Arr., *Anab.* 2.13.7; 3.25.4).

Fighting as heavy cavalry, *i.e.* operating in close formation, the Thessalians may have been armed in a similar fashion as the Companions (Hammond 1989, 106). Thessalian aristocrats may even have influenced their Macedonian fellow nobles in this respect in the course of the fourth century. Relatively heavy armament in any case will have been necessary to bear up against heavily-armed Iranian cavalry. This means that the Thessalians may have worn linen cuirasses, helmets, pteruges and greaves. Bronze armor and shields will have been exceptional²⁴. The *rhomboid* formation, if historical, suggest that they were armed with a long cavalry lance, probably supplemented by a cavalry saber (*kopis*). In combination with a lance the use of a shield is not likely. The use of horse armor seems unlikely too²⁵.

The campaign in Asia Minor

When Alexander's army crossed the Hellespont in the Spring of 334, the Thessalian cavalry corps consisted of 1,800 men; their commander was a Macedonian, Kalas the son of Harpalus (D.S. 17.17.4; Arr. *An.* 1.14.3)²⁶.

²⁴ As was the case with the Companions, cf. Borza 1990 [1992²], 298-299.

²⁵ According to the Alexander Mosaic from Pompeii and the Alexander Sarcophagus in Istanbul the horses of the Companions had no bodily protection, presumably because Greek horses were heavy and strong enough. Two riders on the Istanbul Sarcophagus, one in the battle and one in the hunting scene, wear the oblong Thessalian cloak and they may be members of the Thessalian cavalry, cf. Sekunda 1984, 18-19; but the color of their costume however seems to be purple (red purple for their tunics and dark blue purple for the cloaks which suggests that they were closer to the king.

²⁶ On Kalas see Berve 1926, vol. II, 188; Heckel 2005, 74-75.

In the Battle at the Granicus (May 334) the Thessalians were positioned on the left flank, which collectively was commanded by Parmenion (Arr. *An.* 1.14.3; D.S. 17.19.6). In this battle, as in the two following battles, the Thessalians' task was to stabilize the left of the battle line while at the right Alexander and the Companions attacked the army of the Persians. Nothing is known about the participation of the Thessalians in this battle, only that afterwards they were "highly honored for their bravery ... and their unequalled fighting qualities", being second only to the Companions (D.S. 17.21.4). After the battle, Alexander sent Kalas with the Thessalians and part of the allied horse to the Troad to pillage the estates of Memnon, the Achaemenid war leader in western Asia Minor (Arr. *An.* 1.17.8). For the Thessalians this may have been a reward of sorts for their valor at the Granicus.

The next year Kalas was appointed as governor of Hellespontine Phrygia. He was succeeded as hipparch of the Thessalians by Alexander the Lyncestian, the son of Aeropos, a scion of one of the great noble houses of Macedonia. Alexander had accompanied Kalas on the expedition to the Troad (Arr. *An.* 1.17.1; 25.2), perhaps to prepare him for his new command. In the same year (334), however, Alexander became the victim of King Alexander's ambition to fill the top stratum of the army with men loyal only to himself. Alexander's brothers, Heromonus and Arrabeeus, had been executed in 336 on the accusation of complicity in the murder of Philip II. Thanks to a timely acceptance of Alexander claims to the kingship and the protection of Parmenion, his father-in-law, Alexander came away unscathed. His turn came shortly after his appointment to the Thessalian hipparchate, a position he presumably thanked to Parmenion's influence too, so that this move may have been meant primarily to weaken Alexander's powerful father-in-law, the leader of the aristocratic opposition against Alexander's pursuit of autocracy; for these conflicts see Müller 2003. In the winter of 334/333 when the army was in Pamphylia, Alexander was quietly removed from his office lest the Thessalians would defend him, and summarily executed on the accusation of conspiring with the Persian king.

The next hipparch was a man called Philippus the son of Menelaus (Berve 1926, vol. II, 384; Heckel 1992, 358-359; Heckel 2005, 212). He probably was a Macedonian too. At the Battle of the Granicus, Philippus had commanded the other allied cavalry (Arr. *An.* 1.14.3). The first time we hear of him as commander of the Thessalians is in the context

of the Battle of Gaugamela (Arr. *An.* 3.11.10; D.S. 17.57.4; Curtius 4.13.29), so it is not certain if he was the immediate successor of the unfortunate Alexander.

In the months after the Battle of the Granicus the Thessalians formed part of the army brigade assigned to Parmenion for operations in central Anatolia. At the end of the campaigning season the army wintered at Gordium in Phrygia (Winter 334/333), where 200 fresh troops reinforced the Thessalian cavalry corps (Arr. *An.* 1.29.4).

The Battle of Issus

In the great Battle of Issus in northern Syria in November 333 the Thessalians' toughness and resilience was put to the test. As at the Granicus they fought on the left wing under the command of Parmenion, protecting the flank of the phalanx. But this time they had to cope with furious attacks by Iranian heavy cavalry.

Relatively detailed, albeit confused and biased, accounts of the battle survive in Arrian, Diodorus and Curtius²⁷. According to Arrian (*An.* 2.8.9 and 2.9.1) and Curtius (3.9.8 and 3.11.3), the Thessalians initially were at the right wing with the king. When Alexander saw that the largest part of the enemy cavalry was on the Achaemenid right flank, he ordered the Thessalians to ride behind the Macedonian lines to the left flank and place themselves under the command of Parmenion. Diodorus (D.S. 17.32.2-3) places the Thessalians there from the beginning of the battle.

Parmenion's left wing was attacked by the cavalry of the general Nabarzanes (Curtius 3.9.1). Although one Thessalian *ilē* was scattered, the corps as a whole at first held its ground against the Persians' superior numbers. Their stubborn resistance allowed the Macedonian infantry to cross the river Pinarus, albeit it with so much difficulty that the phalanx was almost routed by a Persian counterattack; the Thessalians, too, were hard pressed and slowly driven back across the river by Nabarzanes' cavalry (Callisthenes *apud* Plb. 12.18.11-12; Arr. *An.* 2.11.2; Curtius 3.11.1). When the Persian infantry line finally broke because of the panic caused by the charge of Alexander's Companions, the cavalry at grips with the Thessalians was the last to retreat. When they did so they were hindered by their heavy equipment and by the mass

²⁷ For a good reconstruction consult Bosworth 1988 [1993²], 60-62.

of fleeing infantry so that the pursuing Thesalians inflicted great losses on their retreating adversaries.

After the battle the Persian baggage train and treasury was captured at Damascus, Plutarch (Plu. *Alex.* 24.1) reports that “most of all did the Thessalian horsemen enrich themselves, for they had shown themselves surpassingly brave in the battle, and Alexander sent them on this expedition purposely, wishing to have them enrich themselves.” Also Diodorus (D.S. 17.32.2-3) and Curtius (3.11.13-5), with unconcealed sympathy for the Greek element in the Macedonian army, praise the bravery of the Thesalians.

The Battle of Gaugamela

For the following two years the Thesalians do not figure in the historiography of the campaign. They probably have remained in the vicinity of Damascus while Alexander marched south and into Egypt²⁸.

In the Battle of Gaugamela, near the Tigris in northern Mesopotamia (October 331), the Thesalians had rejoined the main army again. They were positioned, together with the other allied cavalry, on the left wing again, under the command of the hipparch Philippus the son of Menelaus. The Thesalians rode with Parmenion, who was again the supreme commander of the Macedonian left wing and apparently used the Pharsalian *ilē* as a personal guard (Arr. *An.* 3.11.10; D.S. 17.57.4; Curtius 4.13.29).

The Battle of Gaugamela was a hard-won victory for the Macedonians and their allies (Cf. Bosworth 1988b [1993²], 80-85). Although it seems that Alexander was successful in attacking the Persian right with the Companions, the left wing was, again, hard-pressed by the massed weight of the Persian cavalry, which was commanded by the satrap Mazaeus. The Persians even took possession the Macedonian camp. Parmenion sent messengers to Alexander to urge him to come to his help, lest the Macedonian battle line would collapse. In it uncertain what happened next. According to Arrian (*An.* 3.15.1) Alexander managed to halted the Companions even though they were

²⁸ Cf. Arr. *An.* 2.13.7: “[Alexander appointed Menon son of Cerdimmus as satrap of Coele Syria, giving him the allied cavalry to protect the country, while he himself proceeded towards Phoenicia.” There is much confusion as regards the satrapal division of the Levant, cf. Leuze 1935; Bosworth 1974.

in full pursuit of the enemies they had routed, made them wheel round and return to the battlefield just in time to rescue Parmenion. According to the other sources (Plu. *Alex.* 32.3-4; Curtius 4.15.6-8 and 16.1-4; D.S. 17.60.7-8), however, Alexander did not come to the rescue and the left wing saved itself, especially through the bravery of the Thessalians. Both versions are of course partial²⁹. The first however seems very implausible given the lack of control commanders normally have over events once a battle has started. Marsden has therefore suggested that Alexander's Companion's had already turned left in order to attack the Persian center (Marsden 1964, 58). As at Issus, the Persian infantry panicked and ran away, forcing king Darius to make his escape as well. When news of the rout reached Mazaeus' horsemen, their resolve wavered, at which moment Parmenion launched a counter-attack with the Thessalians, driving the Persian cavalry off the battlefield, too.

From the Tigris to the Oxus

In January 330 Persepolis was burned and the rule of the Achaemenid dynasty had come to an end. Alexander was now the 'King of Asia'. This meant that the pan-Hellenic campaign against the Persian Empire had come to an end, too, and that Alexander's Greek allies were permitted. About the same time, Antipater had defeated the Spartan king Agis in Greece so that for the time being the chance of an uprising of the Greeks seemed slim. At Ecbatana in June 330 all allied Greek troops were dismissed (Arr. *An.* 3.19.5)³⁰. Most of the Thessalians returned home at this occasion, laden with more booty and honor. No doubt most of them may have had enough of the hardships and horrors of the war.

Alexander gave them moreover a bonus of one talent each; those who remained with the army as mercenaries, however, were promised a bonus of no less than three talents (D.S. 17.74.1-4; Arr. *An.* 19.5; Plu. *Alex.* 42.3). No less than 130 Thessalians

²⁹ According to Hammond 1983, Diodoros' impression of things is "... a fiction, calculated to redound to the credit of the Thessalians". Cf. Bosworth 1988 (1993²), 84: "propaganda with the intention of ... inculpating Parmenion for premature panic".

³⁰ Diodorus (D.S. 17.74.1) places the demobilization of the allies somewhat later, namely after the death of Darius in July 330.

accepted the offer. As part of a corps of mercenary cavalry, consisting further of riders from southern Greek states, and under the command again of Philippos, formerly the hipparch of the Thessalian cavalry corps they followed the king through Khorasan and into Bactria (Arr. *An.* 3.25.4; Curtius 6.6.35-6). However, already in 329, when the army had reached the river Oxus (Amu Darya), the Thessalians are suddenly demobilized and sent home. Arrian, who is the only source mentioning the return of the remaining Thessalians (*An.* 3.29.5) gives no explanation for their sudden dismissal in the middle of operations, although later he has Coenus speak about their unwillingness “to suffer further hardships” (*An.* 5.27.5). The assassination of Parmenion in the same year may have boosted the war weariness of the Thessalians, since Parmenion “enjoyed high honor ... not only with the Macedonians but also with the foreign troops, whom he had led so often” (Arr. *An.* 3.26.4).

Conclusion

More than any other Greek people, the Thessalians were able to raise good cavalry in large numbers. The worth of these troops, as allies or as mercenaries, increased during the wars of the fourth century. Philip II established control over the military resources and agrarian surpluses of Thessaly by means of a policy of divide and rule, binding (part of) the Thessalian aristocracy to his person. He did so on a personal title. Being elected *archōn* of the *koinon* of the Thessalians, Philip did not incorporate the Thessalian League in the Macedonian state. Control over Thessaly provided Philip with a foothold in Greek politics and an additional personal power base to counterbalance the power of the Macedonian grandees in his entourage. Philip then reorganized Thessaly to better control the recruitment of cavalry.

Like his father, Alexander knew that he needed efficient cavalry to defeat the Persians in battle and the Thessalians therefore played a crucial role in his military plans. It appears that the Thessalian aristocracy joined Alexander's expedition force enthusiastically, presumably because strong personal ties existed between Thessalian noble families and the Argead dynasty, and because the promise of honor and booty agreed with the heroic mentality of the Thessalian aristocracy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beloch, K. J. 1923: *Griechische Geschichte*, Berlin/Leipzig.
- Berve, H. 1926: *Das Alexanderreich auf prosopografischer Grundlage*, 2 Vols.
- Borza, E. N. 1990 (revised edition 1992²): *In the Shadow of Olympus: The Emergence of Macedon*, Princeton.
- Bosworth, A. B. 1974: The government of Syria under Alexander the Great, *Classical Quarterly*, n.s. 24, 46-64.
- Bosworth, A. B. 1980: *A Historical Commentary on Arrian's History of Alexander*, I: *Commentary on Books I-III*, Oxford.
- Bosworth, A. B. 1988 (1993²): *Conquest and Empire: The Reign of Alexander the Great*, Cambridge/New York.
- Brunt, P. A. 1962: Persian Accounts of Alexander's Campaigns, *Classical Quarterly* 12, 141-155.
- Brunt, P. A. 1963: Alexander's Macedonian Cavalry, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 83, 27-46.
- Busolt, G. 1926: *Griechische Staatskunde*, Munich.
- Carney, E. D. 2000: *Women and Monarchy in Macedonia*, Oklahoma.
- Connolly, P. 1981: *Greece and Rome at War*, London.
- Ducat, J. 1994: *Les Pénestres de Thessalie*, Paris.
- Griffith, G. T. 1935: *The Mercenaries of the Hellenistic World*, Cambridge.
- Griffith, G. T. 1970: Philip of Macedon's early intervention in Thessaly (358-352 B.C.), *Classical Quarterly* n.s. 20, 67-80.
- Hammond, N.G.L. 1967: *A History of Greece to 322 B.C.*, Oxford.
- Hammond, N. G. L. 1979 (second edition 1994): *Philip of Macedon*. London.
- Hammond, N. G. L. 1983: *Three Historians of Alexander the Great: The So-called Vulgate Authors Diodorus, Justin and Curtius*, Cambridge/New York.
- Hammond, N. G. L. 1989: *The Macedonian State: Origins, Institutions, and History*. Oxford.
- Hammond, N. G. L./G. T. Griffith 1979: *A History of Macedonia. Vol. 2: 550-336*, Oxford.
- Heckel, W. 1992: *The Marshalls of Alexander's Empire*, London/New York.
- Heckel, W. 2005: *Who's Who in the Age of Alexander the Great*, Oxford/Malden.
- Helly, B. 1995: *L'État thessalien. Aleuas le Roux, les tétrades et les tagoi*, Paris.
- Hornblower, S. 1983 (2002²): *The Greek World 479-323 BC*, London.

- Leuze, O. 1935: *Die satrapieneinteilung in Syrien und im Zweistromenlande von 520-320*, Halle.
- Marsden, E. W. 1964: *The Campaign of Gaugamela*, Liverpool.
- Milns, R. D. 1966: Alexander's Macedonian Cavalry and Diodorus XVII 17.4, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 86, 167-168.
- Müller, S. 2003: *Maßnahmen der Herrschaftssicherung gegenüber der makedonischen Opposition bei Alexander dem Großen*, Frankfurt am Main.
- Rzepa, J. 2008: The units of Alexander's army and the district divisions of late Argead Macedonia, *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 48, 39-56.
- Scholten, J. B. 2003: Macedon and the mainland, 280-221, in: Erskine, E. (ed.), *A Companion to the Hellenistic World*, Oxford/Malden, 134-158.
- Sekunda, N. 1984: *The Army of Alexander the Great*, London.
- Sordi, M. 1958: *La lega tessala fino ad Alessandro magno*, Rome.
- Sprawski, S. 2004: Were Lycophron and Jason Tyrants of Pherae? Xenophon on the History of Thessaly, in: Tuplin, C. (ed.), *Xenophon and his World. Papers from a conference held in Liverpool in July 1999*, Stuttgart, 437-452..
- Tarn, W. W. 1930: *Hellenistic Military and Naval Developments*, Cambridge..
- Tarn, W. W. 1948: *Alexander the Great*, Cambridge.
- Westlake, H.D. 1935: *Thessaly in the Fourth Century B.C.*, London.
- Westlake, H.D. 1969 (second edition): *Thessaly in the Fourth Century B.C.*, Groningen.