

THE SPARTAN ARMY IN THE REIGN OF AGESILAOS II*

by

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My PhD dissertation, entitled *The Spartan Army in the Reign of Agesilaos II*, is devoted to studying problems associated with the internal organisation, social structure, equipment and training of the Spartan army. Analysing all these elements allows for a better understanding of how the land army was used by the Lacedaemonian state as a tool for shaping the political world around it. The period of the reign of king Agesilaos II was chosen to fix the chronological boundaries of this thesis. The relatively abundant source material concerning this period allows us deeper insight into questions related to the Spartan army of his age. Agesilaos himself was an able general who led his armies in numerous combats, fighting on three continents, in differing circumstances, in open battles, sieges and skirmishes, deploying a multitude of troop types in different combinations, executing complicated manoeuvres and employing varying tactics. Due to his skilful command, Agesilaos was able to secure and maintain his extraordinary position in Spartan politics. He was one of the Spartan kings who enjoyed the greatest prestige and political influence in his *polis* for decades, arguably making him the most prominent king in the whole of Spartan history.

Moreover, Agesilaos' reign itself forms an epoch in the history of Sparta, covering most of the period between two crucial events of the classical period: the end of the Peloponnesian war and the second battle of Mantinea. During this time, Sparta reached the pinnacle of her political and military power, gaining

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hegemony over Greece and showing unprecedented imperial ambitions. Yet the Spartans were not able or fortunate enough to maintain this status – Agesilaos saw his *polis*' army shattered on the battlefield of Leuctra, leaving Sparta's political position in tatters, her territory severely reduced and her status diminished to a second-grade level.

My thesis is divided, apart from preliminary remarks about sources and modern scholarship, into three chapters describing, respectively, the three main branches of the Spartan army – heavy infantry, cavalry and light infantry. In each case I tried to gather all the source material about the usage of each troop type and offer an analysis of its organisation, social structure and equipment. Due to the predominant position of hoplite warriors in Greek warfare and the fact that they were the centre of attention in the sources, the chapter concerning heavy infantrymen is much longer and more detailed than the remaining two, clearly showing the ancillary role of cavalymen and skirmishers in the Lacedaemonian army.

The first chapter of the dissertation begins with an overview and a short description of the available literary sources, with particular emphasis on their usefulness in the study of the issues connected to the Spartan army, distinguishing authors and works that are most important for research on this topic. Obviously Xenophon is most prominent, as his main work, the *Hellenica*, is a basic source providing an account of this period. Apart from the *Hellenica*, Xenophon's other works are also very important for my dissertation. The *Anabasis* is of particular importance as it describes in detail the way the Greek army operated, while the *Lakedaimonion Politeia*, a treaty on the constitution of the Lacedaemonians, is largely devoted to the description of the Spartan army. Although the great historical works of Herodotus and Thucydides refer to the times before the reign of Agesilaos, they are still important comparative material for Xenophon and the foundation for any attempt at reconstruction focusing on the evolution of the Lacedaemonian army, which makes them crucial to my work. Apart from these, some later sources, notably biographies and apophthegms of Plutarch and the historical narrative of Diodorus, are important, as well as multitudinous sections of ancient works of varying provenance.

After discussing the sources, I try to outline the state of research on the organisation of the Lacedaemonian army. Facing an enormous amount of literature dealing with this subject, I risked presenting the issue in an unconventional way. I chose to describe six highly influential, coherent and thorough visions of the organisation of the Lacedaemonian forces in order to show how differently our sources were interpreted in the past and which direction the ideas of modern historians have taken in the last hundred years¹. I believe that these outlines show

¹ These six synopses outline the following works: J.K. ANDERSON, *Military Theory and Practice in the Age of Xenophon*, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1970; G. BUSOLT, *Spartas Heer und Leuctra*, Hermes XL 1905, pp. 387–449; J.T. FIGUEIRA, *Population Patterns in Late Archaic and*

the scale and character of the problems facing anyone who wishes to devote their time to studying the organisation of the Spartan army. The set of historians was chosen in accordance with their importance and influence on other scholars, as well as to precisely reflect the multiple possible outcomes of analysing the same source material – outcomes which demonstrably can be poles apart, following completely different principles of how to interpret the source material. In most cases, however, individual scholars see certain details in a different light from that of their predecessors and interpret them in another way, modifying existing theories and models. Unfortunately, full reconstruction is often not possible.

The next three chapters, constituting the core of the work, are constructed in a similar way. They are devoted to, respectively, heavy infantry, cavalry and auxiliary units. In each of these chapters I try to outline the origins of the types of units and the way they were used prior to Agesilaos' ascension; afterwards, I attempt to give a comprehensive description of the activities of each of these formations during his reign. Each chapter also contains an analytical part, in which I endeavour to present, in the light of the available sources, issues and questions related to the Spartan army. Later, if possible, I propose feasible reconstructions and their likely variants.

Considering the dominant position of the hoplites in the Greek military and the fact that sources understandably focus on them, the chapter dedicated to heavy infantry is definitely more elaborate and detailed than the other two. I start with a short outline of the beginning of this formation and the issue of the so-called 'hoplite revolution'. At first, I recapitulate traditional 'orthodox' views on the hoplites' origins and their way of fighting, which place the adoption of the phalanx formation in an early phase of the archaic era and posit subsequent major social changes, elevating the hoplite-class to greater political significance and replacing the aristocracy to some extent. I then present some more recent opinions of the so-called 'revisionists', who are critical of these assumptions². Although many elements of the 'orthodoxy' can be successfully contested, especially its ideas concerning the hoplite army's impact on archaic social relations, in my work I oppose the revisionists' ideas of placing the adoption of the phalanx in a late period, believing that the hoplites' way of fighting in the archaic and the classical epoch did not differ significantly.

After a brief outline of the history of the usage of the Spartan heavy infantry prior to Agesilaos' ascension, I try to describe the hoplite phalanx as

Classical Sparta, TAPhA CXVI 1986, pp. 165–213; J.F. LAZENBY, *The Spartan Army*, Warminster 1985; A.F. TOYNBEE, *Some Problems of Greek History*, London 1969; H. VAN WEES, *Greek Warfare. Myths and Realities*, Bristol 2004.

² A coherent outline of the emergence and evolution of 'hoplite orthodoxy' theories, as well as the arguments of their critics, can be found in: D. KAGAN, G.F. VIGGIANO, *The Hoplite Debate*, in: D. KAGAN, G.F. VIGGIANO (eds.), *Men of Bronze. Hoplite Warfare in Ancient Greece*, Princeton–Oxford 2013, pp. 1–56.

a formation. I start with analysing its role on the battlefield, underlining its dominant role in the Greek army as the main offensive and defensive asset. The hoplite phalanx was an essential element of the Greek military, also in a symbolic sense. The ideal of a soldier and a model of masculinity was embodied by a hoplite-citizen. On the battlefield, a tight formation constituted the front of the battle line. It was the most important element and keeping it in order was a key to victory. Although I rather adhere to the traditional vision of the phalanxes' clash as a group fight rather than a series of individual duels, I try to emphasise the universality of the hoplites on the battlefield. Apart from fighting in close formation, the hoplites were able to perform surprising charges, which allowed them to catch up with opposing skirmishers or gain momentum for an attack. They also fought as marines on board ships, or served as storm troops during sieges.

Next I try to describe various elements of the hoplites' equipment and its use in combat, especially highlighting the specifics of the hoplite shield, the *aspis*, for fighting in the close formation of the phalanx, as well as presenting the discussion concerning the gradual reduction in the weight of the equipment during the 5th and 4th centuries BC. I then present the available information on the training and drill of the Lacedaemonian hoplites, as well as the description of manoeuvres used by them on the battlefield, such as counter-marching or wheeling.

The main element of the chapter comes next, i.e. an account of the internal organisation of the Lacedaemonian army. Despite the ancient Greeks' generally positive opinion on the Spartan phalanx, our sources provide us with surprisingly little information on its structure; it seems that this element was crucial to Sparta's many successes on the battlefield.

When attempting any reconstruction, we encounter three major problems:

(1) First of all, our most important sources, namely Xenophon, Thucydides and Herodotus, differ significantly in their description of the organisational details of the Spartan army. In fact, they sometimes even seem to contradict their own accounts. This situation leads to a deliberation: it is possible that our sources describe several chronological moments in the constantly changing organisation of the army, and that they should be considered as true, although showing only separate points in the evolution process of the Lacedaemonian army. The other possible answer is that the army was not constantly changing and we must assume that our sources are sometimes erroneous and make an inappropriate interpretation of its structure, which forces us to reject assumed distortions and reconstruct a proper model from available shreds of evidence. Personally, I believe that justifying all source divergences by subsequent reforms of the Spartan army is not very plausible. I do not think that frequent changes made without an explicit purpose were common in one of the most important institutions of Sparta, especially considering the fact that this community was generally perceived as conservative and boasted about its immutability.

(2) Another significant issue raised in this chapter is the fact that the most basic reconstructions of the organisation of Lacedaemonian hoplite units, based on Thucydides' description of the battle of Mantinea and the chapter concerning the army in Xenophon's *Lakedaimonion Politeia*, lead us to the conclusion that after full mobilisation the Lacedaemonian army numbered around 3,500–4,000 soldiers. Such a low number, taking into account data about the armed forces of other Greek states, makes it doubtful that with such a force Sparta could have achieved the status of a superpower in the Greek world. There are two ways of solving this riddle: the acceptance of the low number as true and an attempt to explain it, or doubling the number of Spartan soldiers, which can be achieved by synthesising one coherent model from several available sources. Although such a merger seems to be quite convincing³, it contradicts the evidence of some very important sources and is consequently highly uncertain.

(3) A third major issue described in this chapter is the social composition of the Lacedaemonian phalanx. There is no doubt that *Spartiatatai*, or full citizens, were too low in number during Agesilaos' time to fully fill the ranks of the Lacedaemonian units. They had to be supplemented by members of some lower social classes, e.g. impoverished citizens, *hypomeiones*. The vast majority of historians indicates *perioikoi* as the backbone of the Spartan forces, but there is no agreement as to whether they fought in separate units, or whether they mixed with citizens. Sources allow to argue convincingly for both possibilities, and I see no reason to definitely choose one of the options – it seems quite plausible that *perioikoi* generally served in separate contingents, but some of them were privileged to join citizen units as well⁴.

The third chapter of my dissertation is centred on the cavalry. Although such a formation was present in Sparta during the archaic period, at some point the Lacedaemonians ceased to use it. The term *hippeis*, meaning literally 'horsemen', refers in the classical age to an elite unit of hoplites – it seems that the aristocratic cavalry evolved at some point into a band of heavy infantry. It was not until the Peloponnesian War that the Lacedaemonians re-created their cavalry corps, as they were facing plundering raids on their territory. The Spartan cavalry did not have a long tradition in Agesilaos' time.

³ Thus, several scholars back this theory, e.g. FIGUEIRA, *op. cit.* (n. 1), pp. 187–191; W.G. FOREST, *A History of Sparta*, London 1968, pp. 132–137; A.W. GOMME, A. ANDREWES, K.J. DOVER, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, vol. IV, Oxford 1970, pp. 115–117; LAZENBY, *op. cit.* (n. 1), pp. 5–10; TOYNBEE, *op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 379; H.T. WADE-GERY, *Essays in Greek History*, Oxford 1958, pp. 80 f. Against it: e.g. ANDERSON, *op. cit.* (n. 1), pp. 239 f.; BUSOLT, *op. cit.* (n. 1), pp. 420–424; C. HAWKINS, *Spartans and Perioikoi: The Organization and Ideology of the Lakedaimonian Army in the Fourth Century B.C.E.*, GRBS LI 2011, pp. 401–434, at p. 410; P.J. STYLIANOU, *A Historical Commentary on Diodorus Siculus Book 15*, New York 1998, pp. 288 f.; VAN WEES, *op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 99.

⁴ Similarly HAWKINS, *op. cit.* (n. 3), pp. 410–415.

Cavalrymen served mainly as scouts, looking out for ambushes. On the battlefield, the cavalry was most often placed on both sides of the battle line, harassing the opponents with their projectiles and protecting the hoplites from being flanked. After breaking the opponent's forces riders were also used to great effect as pursuers.

I try to present what we know about the organisation of the Lacedaemonian cavalry. This formation is quite often perceived by historians as originating from the lower social classes, being poorly trained and generally not being very useful. This assessment is mainly based on a short description of the battle of Leuctra in Xenophon's *Hellenica*. In this chapter I tried to show that such an opinion is not necessarily justified in its entirety, pointing out examples of the cavalry's effectiveness and the fact that even *Spartiatai* served among its ranks. Still, the Lacedaemonian state never made any real effort, unlike the Athenian one, for its cavalry to achieve supreme quality.

Light infantry is the subject of my analysis in the last chapter. The main task of such a formation was to scout and secure the march of the entire army. On the battlefield skirmishers harassed the enemy with missiles, avoiding, thanks to their agility, mêlée combat with the opponent. They were extremely useful in difficult, mountainous terrain and during siege warfare, significantly facilitating both defensive and offensive actions. They were also well suited to 'guerrilla' skirmishes and plundering expeditions into the enemy's territory.

With the significant size of the helot population, it would seem prudent to assume that the Spartans would have used their subjects quite often as light infantry. However, only at the direst moment before the battle of Plataea can we find (in Herodotus' work) traces of helots armed as skirmishers. With this exception, the Spartans entrusted such tasks to mercenaries and *Skiritai*. The latter were residents of the Skiritis region, located on the border of Laconia and Arcadia. A separate subsection of the chapter is devoted to them. Their unique social status is indicated by the fact (corroborated by accounts of both Thucydides and Xenophon) that a permanent place in the structure of the Lacedaemonian army was assigned to them. In Thucydides they appear as hoplites, but in the *Hellenica* and *Lakedaimonion Politeia*, describing the period of Agesilaos' reign, they fulfil the role of light troops, possibly specialising in cooperation with the cavalry. After the defeat at Leuctra, Skiritis was no longer under the influence of Sparta and our sources fell silent about the *Skiritai* in the Lacedaemonian army. From that point only mercenaries were used by the Spartans as light auxiliaries.

The available source material concerning particular types of armed forces and the resulting length disparity between the chapters of my dissertation is significant, clearly indicating the auxiliary nature of cavalry and light infantry. The Lacedaemonians paid great attention to hoplites in their army; their own cavalry remained very average, while light units were really non-existent.

In my dissertation I tried to reconsider some key issues concerning the organisation of the Lacedaemonian army, illustrating them with source examples

connected to the reign of Agesilaos. My aim was to gather the data on the heavy infantry, as well as the cavalry and the light infantry, as both auxiliary formations have been quite often completely ignored or overlooked by scholars. The detailed results of the analysis concern specific subchapters, but there seems to be a general conclusion resulting from the whole work: It is the inclusion rather than the exclusion of possibilities that seems more appealing to me. *Perioikoi* possibly could have provided both separate contingents and could have also been included in citizen units (*morai*), together with *hypomeiones* and *Spartiatiai*. *Skiritai* could have formed both hoplite units and lightly armed detachments of skirmishers. The Spartan cavalry was not necessarily composed of just a particular lower class of Spartan society, but could rather have been a mix of many. In these and many other cases, the inclusion and combination of explanations actually better fits our diverging sources than preferring one option to another and disregarding some accounts which we have.

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