SYNASPISMOΣ, SARISSAS AND THRACIAN WAGONS*

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Arrian's account of Alexander's skirmish with the so-called 'autonomous Thracians' in the spring of 335 describes one of the most colourful episodes in the history of infantry tactics, one that features theatrics worthy of a 'sword and sandals' epic like Gladiator, but has left modern commentators uneasy, if not incredulous.1 The Thracians, in an effort to bar the Macedonian advance over a mountain pass, had placed wagons on the summit (or, at least, on the crest of the hill) with the intention of using them either as a stockade to fight behind or as weapons by rolling them down upon the densely-packed Macedonian phalanx. Arrian's description, in Brunt's Loeb translation, runs as follows:

They (the Thracians) collected carts and set them up in their front as a stockade from which to put up a defence, if they were pressed; but it was also in their mind to launch the carts at the Macedonian phalanx as the troops mounted the slope just where the mountain was most precipitous. Their idea was that the closer packed the phalanx when the descending charts charged it, the more their violent descent would scatter it.

Alexander consulted how he could most safely cross the ridge; and since he saw that the risk must be run, for there was no way

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1 E.F. Bloedow, 'On "wagons" and "shields": Alexander's crossing of Mount Haemus in 335 B.C.', *AHB* 10 (1996) 119-30, discusses the problem but assumes that the troops in question are all phalangites, armed with the small shield. We do not know how many wagons were involved, though the likelihood (despite Polyaeus: τὰ μᾶλλα πολλὰς) is that there were not many. These were clearly four-wheeled wagons, since a two-wheeled 'cart', whether loaded or empty, would immediately tip over. Turned sideways, they could form a barricade, but as Bloedow notes 'there cannot have been much room for wagons at the top of the Pass' (121).
round, he sent orders to his hoplites (τοῖς ὀπλίταις) that whenever the carts tumbled down the slope, those who were on level ground and could break formation were to part to right and left leaving an avenue for the carts; those caught in the narrows (περικεφαλαμβάνοντο), were to crouch close together (ἐμπεμφταῖσας); and some were actually to fall to the ground and link their shields closely together (συγκλίσσας ... τὰς ἀσπίδας) so that when the carts came at them they were likely to bound over them by their gathered impetus and pass without doing harm. The event corresponded to Alexander's advice and conjecture. Part of the phalanx divided, while the carts sliding over the shields of the others did little harm; not one man perished beneath them (Arr. 1.1.7-10).

R.D. Milns remarks: 'The manoeuvre sounds, at worst, highly improbable, at best highly dangerous.' And I would agree, even though I question Milns' suggestion that the Macedonians were 'to lock their shields together over their heads (presumably kneeling down) and let the wagons' impetus carry them over the heads of the phalanx.' A.B. Bosworth, noting the small size of the phalangite's shield (Asclepiodotus, Tact. 5.1 says it was 8 palms or about two feet in diameter, and not too concave ὀὐ λευκή ἱππή), comments: 'A single shield would hardly even protect the entire trunk. The Macedonians were therefore forced to form a double shield-wall, a line of men lying on the ground and a second rank standing over them, their shields interlocking. The effect would have been an inclined ramp, composed of several successive

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2 The translation 'to crouch' is unnecessary and misleading. They were to pack themselves closely together, or possibly lean back to avoid the wagons (thus, correctly, Bloodow's translation [note 1] 120). The account in Polyænus, Stratagmata 4.3.11, which otherwise adds little to our understanding of the encounter, is helpful on this point. Here we are told that Ἀλεξάνδρος ... παρθένεκαὶν οἶτοις ἐκεῖνων μὲν ὅσος δύνατο, that is, 'to lean away (or bend back) to avoid as many of them as they could.' There is certainly no support for the idea of crouching down and forming a ramp.


4 Milns (note 3) 36.
tiers of shields.” Like Milns, he adds the qualification: “It is hard to see how the manoeuvre could have been carried out as effectively as described.”

N.G.L. Hammond offers a somewhat different interpretation: ‘At the Haemus pass those who were in the path of the wagons hurtling downhill were told by Alexander to lie face down [my emphasis] and fit their shields closely together, i.e. above their heads and shoulders (1.19: Ιωάθες πάλιν ἀπετίθεσι) and as he had anticipated the wagons bounded off the shields and missed their bodies ...’ It is not clear to me whether he envisions the phalangites as lying down in a single row, or in several rows, and on top of one another, to form a ramp of sorts. The former would surely be ineffective and unnecessary - if the troops could form a single line in front of the wagons, they could just as easily evade them - and the latter would be extremely difficult to execute.

But Arrian’s account is, I think, clear enough to show that the manoeuvre was feasible, if we allow for the likelihood that the troops who occupied the difficult terrain and could not simply create an opening in their ranks were hypaspists, and as such differently armed. There is, of course, a direct correlation between the length of the offensive weapon carried by the infantryman and the size of his shield. The advancing pezhetairoi, moving on smoother ground, as their formation required, would have carried the smaller shield and advanced with their sarissas upright. In this way they could divide ranks and create alleys, just as they were to do for the scythe-chariots at Gaugamela. Once the pezhetairoi had levelled their sarissas, such evasive action would have been impossible, since some three feet of sarissa extended behind the infantrymen in rows two through six, and prevented lateral movement. At Gaugamela, the tactic was not entirely successful, since the scythed chariots could be brought alongside the flanks of the pezhetairoi by their drivers; or, if the drivers were killed, as many were, the horses (many of them wounded)

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5 A.B. Bosworth, *A Historical Commentary on Arrian’s History of Alexander*, vol. 1 (Oxford 1980) 56. Cf. J. Worthington, *Alexander the Great: Man and God* (London 2004) 39: ‘Where the line could not open up because of the narrow terrain, the men, following Alexander’s orders, lay flat or knelt on the ground, locking their shields over their heads. The wagons rolled harmlessly over them, apart from causing a few headaches.’

6 Bosworth (note 5) 56. J.F.C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Alexander the Great* (New Brunswick, NJ 1960) 221, comments: ‘it would seem probable that an unrecorded number of legs must have been broken.’

moved unpredictably. The action of the Thracian wagons, though driverless, would in fact have been less erratic.

Polynæus (4.3.11) gives a simplified version of the Thracian episode, which nevertheless adds to our understanding of what transpired:

Ἀλέξανδρος Θρακῶν παρακενταμένων καταγόμενος ἁμέτρως ἐπιθέτον τὸις Μακεδονίσις παρήγγέλων αὐτοῖς ἔκκλησίαν μὲν ὡς τὰ πρότερα ἀπόκεισθαι, ἐὰν δὲ καταλαμβάνωμεν, καθὼς αὐτοῖς πρὸς τὴν γῆν ἀναπέδηκα τὸ ἐπιθέμα, ὡς συμβάλλει μερικώς τοις ἁμέτρως ἐπιθέτοις. Τοῦτο τοις ἐπὶ ἄλλας τήν ἐπιπερχόμεναν διέργαζε τὸς Θρακὸς ἀριστοτεῖον τήν τῶν ἁμέτρως παρακεντῆς.

When the Thracians had prepared to discharge many heavily-loaded wagons against the Macedonians, Alexander instructed them to avoid as many as possible. But, if they were caught in the path, they were to throw themselves on the ground and place their shields over themselves, in order that the wagons which were bearing down on them might jump over them. When this actually happened he proved that the preparation of the wagons was useless for the Thracians.

Thus we learn that the wagons were loaded, for extra weight (and, presumably, speed), and that the Macedonians were to take refuge under their shields, if they could not incline themselves away from the oncoming vehicles. This surely emphasises the futility of a ramp or testudo, with a second row of men kneeling under shields that were neither large enough to protect the body or sufficiently curved to cushion the impact of the wagons.

So much emphasis has been placed on the function of the shield that the offensive weapon, which, though not in use, was nevertheless present, has been ignored. In addition to the virtual impossibility of the two-foot shield providing adequate protection for prostrate phalangites, there is the question of the positioning of the sarissa. Closely-packed infantrymen seeking protection behind a layered wall of small shields would have found their sarissas both an impediment and a danger; for, unlike the body, which could be folded to adapt to the formation, the sarissa could not be grounded by more than a few (perhaps only those in the front ranks), and their protrusion - regardless of the direction in which they might protrude - would not only interfere with the manoeuvre, but would result in the weapons becoming

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8 Compare the description of the carnage in Curt. 4.15.14-17 and Diod. 17.58.2-5 (following the same source) with Arr. 3.13.5-6.
9 I would venture to guess that very few sane men would have the courage to kneel down and hold the small phalangite’s shield in front of them in the face of an on-rushing, and doubtless heavy, wooden wagon.
entangled and carried away by the wagons passing overhead. Spears, buttspikes, and splintered shafts would thus have posed as great a danger as the wagons themselves.

Alexander’s tactics were these: (1) the sarissa-bearing phalanx were positioned on level (i.e. smooth) ground, and were told to break ranks and create alleys; (2) the hypaspists, a more flexible unit, occupied the rougher terrain and, those who could were told to squeeze together to avoid the oncoming wagons; but (3) those who were in the direct path must fall to ground and cover themselves with interlocking shields, over which the vehicles could pass. In short, the positioning and the actions of the troops were determined by their armour and mobility.\(^\text{10}\)

At the risk of circularity, it must be stressed that the troops who employed this synkleis of shields had to have been armed in a different fashion.\(^\text{11}\)

And the manoeuvre in this situation provides evidence for a difference in the

\(^{10}\) One must consider also the unlikeliness that the phalanx (which was certainly present) would be deployed on ground that was totally unsuitable. Fuller (note 6) 220 rightly observes: ‘the slope, though steep, must have been level or Alexander would not have employed the phalanx.’ It follows, then, that troops other than the phalanx must have been stationed on the rough ground. An artist’s rendition of the episode, by Christa Hook, can be found in Waldemar Heckel, with Ryan Jones, Macedonian Warrior: Alexander’s Elite Infantryman. Osprey. Warrior Series (Oxford 2006) Plate F.

\(^{11}\) J. Kromayer & G. Veith, Heerweisen und Kriegführung der Griechen und Römer (Munich 1928) 109, suggest that the hypaspist’s equipment ‘bestand wohl aus einem Schild ... und einer kurzen Lanze ...‘ They do not, however, specify the size of the shield. W.W. Tarn, Alexander the Great, vol. 2 (Cambridge 1948) 153, says of the hypaspists and phalanx: ‘the difference between the two bodies was one of history, recruitment, and standing, not armament.” He is followed by R.D. Milns, ‘The hypaspists of Alexander III – some problems’, Historia 20 (1971) 186-95, at 187-88; cf. also A.M. Snodgrass, Arms and Armor of the Greeks (rev. ed., Baltimore 1999) 115. H. Delbrück, History of the Art of War, vol. 1: Warfare in Antiquity, transl. by Walter J. Renfroe Jr. (Lincoln & London 1990; first published in German in 1900) 179, argues that the hypaspists were hoplites but somewhat more lightly armed; cf. Fuller (note 6) 49-50, who quotes, with a degree of approval, Grint’s similar view in History of Greece, vol. 10 (London 1906) 12. The Macedonian infantrymen depicted in full armour on the battle scene of the Alexander Sarcophagus are, in my opinion, hypaspists; they wear what appears to be the linothorax.

armour of the hypaspists from that of the phalanx. The hypaspist, armed with the traditional hoplite shield, and carrying the less cumbersome hoplite spear (*dory*), could easily find protection under the larger and more rounded (i.e. concave) shield. If the wagons did indeed pass over the shields without killing anyone, as Arrian 1.1.10 claims (*ἐξέστη δὲ ὁ ὀίκετος ἐπὶ ταῦτα ἄμαχος*), then we must be dealing with hoplite shields, spears and hypaspists.

The *synkleis* of shields mentioned by Arrian was thus not the *synaspismos* known to both historians and tactical writers. These, furthermore, are not talking about the creation of something like the Roman *testudo*, but rather a dense formation of phalanx, with their bodies almost at right-angles to the enemy, wielding their sarissas and positioning their shields next to one another. Such a wall of shields is possible, even with the two-foot shield of the *pezheTairoi*, if the phalanx approaches or awaits the enemy with the sarissas of the first five rows levelled for combat. And they present an impenetrable wall to the hoplites or *psiloi* opposite them. The Thracians had hoped to disrupt this phalanx with their wagons and come to grips with the phalanx, in close hand-to-hand combat, when they were most vulnerable. But, by placing the *pezheTairoi* on ground where they could manœuvre, and sending the more mobile and better armoured hypaspists on to the rough ground – presumably on the Macedonian left, where the king himself would lead them in the assault on the heights (Arr. 1.1.11-12), while the phalanx held the middle – Alexander completely negated the threat of the wagons, which did no harm at all to the sarissa-bearers, and put the defenders to flight.

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12 As suggested by T.A. Dodge, *Alexander* (Boston 1890) 191: ‘Those who could not thus step aside to avoid them he bade to lie down, and, by holding their shields above them and locking them together tortoise-fashion, to allow the wagons to roll over the thus improvised bridges.’

13 It is, of course, possible that on this occasion all the infantrymen were armed as hoplites (Arr. 1.1.8 actually uses the term *hoplites*), but this would create logistical problems: the infantry on the march would have to have brought two sets of equipment – we know they acted as sarissa-bearing phalanx against the Getae and the Illyrians – and they would have to have been trained in both styles of fighting. Hence it is safer to conclude that the hypaspists were armed as hoplites and that they were the ones who took refuge under their shields.
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