

The First Battles of the Chaeronea Campaign, 339/8 B.C.

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THE WAR between Philip II and the Greek coalition around Thebes and Athens in the years 339–337 is at the same time one of the most famous military conflicts in Greek history and almost completely unknown from the point of view of military history, except for the decisive battle of Chaeronea. The Thebans and the Athenians had formed a front against Philip of Macedon advancing across Central Greece in late 339, and—as it seems—had undertaken military actions almost immediately. The main battle, however, was not to occur for several months, in late summer 338. In most modern accounts a gap between the conclusion of the Theban-Athenian alliance and the great battle of Chaeronea is filled by allied efforts to secure Amphissa and Parapotamii (mentioned in Polyae. 4.2.8, Aeschin. 3.146, Dinarch. 1.74). We know, however, that there were more battles between the Greek coalition and Philip II prior to the decisive encounter at Chaeronea: Demosthenes makes a reference to “the battle by the river” and “the winter battle.”¹ Both encounters have been barely names, beyond an assertion of Demosthenes that the Athenians fought bravely while arrayed with the Thebans.² It has been also

¹ Dem. 18.216: δῖς τε συμπαραταξάμενοι τὰς πρώτας μάχας, τὴν τ' ἐπὶ τοῦ ποταμοῦ καὶ τὴν χειμερινήν, οὐκ ἀμέμπτους μόνον ὑμᾶς αὐτοὺς ἀλλὰ καὶ θαυμαστοὺς ἐδείξατε τῷ κόσμῳ, ταῖς παρασκευαῖς, τῇ προθυμίᾳ, “So, set in array with them in the first two battles, the one by the river and the winter one, you not only showed yourselves irreproachable, but even admirable in your discipline, equipment, and determination.”

² Although the literature on the battle of Chaeronea and Philip is immense, very few scholars mention “the winter battle” and “the battle by the river.”

conjectured that the honours of the Athenian *phyle* Kekropis for its *taxiarches* Boularchos son of Aristoboulos of Phlya (*IG II²* 1155) may commemorate one or both of those battles.³

One should take into consideration another possible reference to the winter and spring campaign before Chaeronea, hidden in the *Sylloge Tacticorum*. This tenth-century collection of stratagems is not an original piece of scholarship. The last 27 of the original chapters (76–102) consist of historical examples taken from the *Strategika* of Polyaeus or rather from the *Excerpts of Polyaeus* compiled before 850 (and perhaps earlier in Byzantine times). Quite surprisingly two anecdotes not attested in Polyaeus are also found in this section. This final part of the *Sylloge Tacticorum* was published by Melber and Wölfflin in their 1887 edition of Polyaeus separately as *Stratagems of Leo*.⁴ Although these so-called *Stratagems of Leo* present their source material in a new and re-arranged, clear and systematic way, they do not attract much scholarly attention, even in comparison with other military writings of the age. Obviously, this section of the *Sylloge Tacticorum*, repeating already-known material, is unattractive in the eyes of ancient historians, as it is not supposed to provide new

Some attention was paid to those clashes by J. Kromayer, *Antike Schlachtfelder in Griechenland* (Berlin 1903) 136; K. J. Beloch, *Griechische Geschichte²* III.1 (Berlin 1927) 566; J. R. Ellis, *Philip II and Macedonian Imperialism* (London 1976) 196 with n.63; G. Cawkwell, *Philip of Macedon* (London 1978) 145; N. G. L. Hammond and G. T. Griffith, *History of Macedonia II* (Oxford 1979) 591; W. K. Pritchett, *Greek State at War V* (Berkeley 1991) 457. In all these works the area of Parapotamii is conjectured as the location.

³ The history of association of *IG II²* 1155 with one or both preliminary battles of the war against Philip is now conveniently summed up in a thorough study of the decree and its possible context: S. Lambert, “Dedication and Decrees Commemorating Military Action in 339/8 BC,” in A. P. Matthaiou and N. Papazarkadas (eds.), *Axon: Studies in Honor of Ronald S. Stroud* (Athens 2015) 233–246.

⁴ On the *Stratagems of the Emperor Leo* and the *Sylloge Tacticorum* see Wheeler in P. Krentz and E. Wheeler, *Polyaeus, Stratagems of War* (Chicago 1994) xxi–xxiii; cf. A. Dain and J. A. de Foucault, “Les stratégistes byzantins,” *TravMém* 2 (1967) 317–392, at 357–358; G. Chatzelis and J. Harris, *A Tenth-Century Byzantine Military Manual: The Sylloge Tacticorum* (London/New York 2017) 10–11.

and otherwise unattested information.

The restricted attractiveness of this source explains why those two stories in the *Stratagems of Leo* that are absent from Polyaeus have escaped scholarly attention. Still, as already stated, one of them seems to refer to the Chaeronea war, and, more importantly, to an otherwise unknown victory of the Thebans over Philip and his cavalry (*Sylloge Tacticorum* 94.3):

οἱ Θηβαῖοι τὸν Φίλιππον ἰππικῶ στρατῶ τούτοις ἐπιέναι μαθόν-
τες τὸν πρὸ τῆς πόλεως τόπον νυκτὸς ἐπικλύσαντες ἔωθεν αὐτοὶ
παρετάξαντο τοὺς Μακεδόνας πρὸς πόλεμον ἐκκαλούμενοι. τῆς
τοίνυν συμπλοκῆς ἀρξαμένης οἱ Θηβαῖοι φυγὴν ὑπεκρίναντο.
καὶ οἱ ἰππεῖς εὐθὺς ἐπισπόμενοι καὶ τοῖς τέλμασι περιπίπτοντες
εὐχερῶς σὺν τοῖς ἵπποις ἠλίσκοντο.

When the Thebans learned that Philip was approaching with an army of cavalry, they flooded the area in front of the city by night and at first dawn they deployed, challenging the Macedonians to battle. Consequently when the engagement began, the Thebans feigned retreat. The horsemen immediately pursued and falling in the marshy ground were easily captured along with their horses. (transl. Krentz/Wheeler)

The only Philip who can be taken into consideration is Philip II: less famous Philip V never attacked Boeotian Thebes,⁵ and Phthiotic Thebes (which was in fact besieged and captured in 217) would not be presented without further identification. The Theban success must, therefore, have taken place in the short period between the final break between Thebes and Philip in late 339 and the great battle of Chaeronea. We have no reason to erase this passage as a piece of authentic evidence on the war of 339–338.⁶ Rather, we should assume that the compiler of the

⁵ During the Second Macedonian War the Boeotian League deserted Philip V and joined the Romans, but did not undertake independent actions against Macedonia; for the context see E. Will, *Histoire politique du monde hellénistique*² (Nancy 1982) 159, 164.

⁶ The most recent translation and commentary on the *Sylloge Tacticorum*, which had not been available to me during the writing of this contribution, also places this episode before or even during the great battle of Chaeronea, but without further exploration of the context: Chatzelis and Harris, *A Tenth-Century Byzantine Military Manual* 146 n.450.

stratagems had access to an independent source, which was not so favourable to Philip as most surviving ancient accounts.

It is tempting to identify the encounter described in the *Stratagems* with one of the battles mentioned by Demosthenes. The battles known from *On the Crown* must have been fought either in the parts of Phocis extending from Elateia (seized by Philip before the outbreak of the war with Athens) down to the Boeotian border or in Boeotia already (around Chaeronea). Both sides of the conflict were extremely active in the region, and tried to secure the sympathy of the Phocian communities. Although it was Philip who eventually gained the support of most of them,⁷ the Thebans were able to fortify Ambryssos in Phocis (controlling one of the routes from Chaeronea to the Gulf of Corinth), and perhaps also a number of other places previously *dioikised* in 346.⁸

Since the stratagem of the Thebans demanded marshy ground which can be easily filled with water during a night, our natural identification must be the battle “by the river” rather than the winter one. The winter battle may well owe its name not only to the season of the year in which it was fought, but also to weather conditions, which might have been untypical for Greek warfare (if a battle was fought in winter in the region of Parnassus). Usually the battle by the river is placed before the winter battle (which is a sequence in Demosthenes’ *On the Crown*), but this is far from certain.⁹

It should be stressed that those battles cannot be identical with the one leading to a seizure of Gravia Pass and Amphissa by

⁷ G. Glotz, “Philippe et la surprise d’Élatée,” *BCH* 33 (1909) 526–546, esp. 535–537.

⁸ Paus. 10.36.3: Θηβαῖοι δὲ ἐς τὸν Μακεδόνων καὶ Φιλίππου καθιστάμενοι πόλεμον περιέβαλον τῇ Ἀμβρόσσω διπλοῦν τεῖχος, “when the Thebans went to war with Philip and the Macedonians, they put up a double wall around Ambrossos.”

⁹ The sequence of the battles in *On the Crown* might be explained by stylistic reasons. Perhaps Demosthenes wanted put stress on the winter battle, and therefore put it at the end of his enumeration.

Philip. Although the conquest of Amphissa was placed by Kromayer in the early summer of 338, a date in January or February seems more likely.¹⁰ Philip's stratagem reported by Polyaeus¹¹ fits better in the winter/early spring months: we may easily imagine how the allies gave up guarding high mountain paths and why they believed that Philip sent his messenger through the pass (the mountain paths were inaccessible). If this is true, the winter battle must have been fought slightly thereafter in the last winter weeks of 338; and the Boeotians and the Athenians withdrew to Boeotia, to the *chora* of Chaeronea, where they fought Demosthenes' "battle by the river" identical with the Theban trick mentioned in the *Sylloge Tacticorum*, perhaps in the spring of 338.

Here we can make one point about reconstructions of the great battle of Chaeronea, and the number of Philip's horse. Diodorus indeed says that Philip invaded Boeotia "with more than 30,000 infantry and no less than 2000 cavalry (16.85.5, transl. Welles). These numbers are often taken as forces that actually took part in the main engagement.¹² Yet what Dio-

¹⁰ Kromayer, *Antike Schlachtfelder* 187. Since, however, Philip's representative took part in the spring meeting of Amphictyony (*CID* II 44.5), one may suppose that he was already in control of the route to Delphi via Gravia and Amphissa.

¹¹ Polyaeus. 4.2.8: "Philip made an expedition against Amphissa. The Athenians and Thebans seized the narrow passes first, and made it impossible for him to get through. Philip tricked the enemy by sending a fake letter to Antipater in Macedonia, saying that he was postponing the campaign against Amphissa but was hurrying to Thrace, since he had learned a revolt had begun there. The letter-carrier went through the narrow passes. The generals, Chares and Proxenus, caught him and, when they read the letter, abandoned their guard over the passes. Philip found the passes deserted and unguarded, burst through, defeated the generals when they turned around, and captured Amphissa." Of course, reliability of the story is weakened by the fact that Frontinus (1.4.13) reports an identical stratagem in the context of Philip's Hellespont campaign. On the other hand, Polyaeus. 4.2.14 may be another version, deprived of all details, of the Amphissa trick.

¹² M. A. Sears and C. Willekes, "Alexander's Cavalry Charge at Chaeronea, 338 BCE," *Journal of Military History* 80 (2016) 1017–1035.

dorus—taken literally—offers is in fact the overall strength of the invasion force (including allies) at the moment of crossing the Boeotian border. We do not know how much Diodorus abbreviates events between Philip’s march into Boeotia and the main battle. We do not know, either, if he correctly reproduces the sequence of events (as he mentions neither the winter battle nor the battle by the river). We may safely assume, therefore, that his data referred to the maximum numbers of Philip’s army, before the preliminary fights in Boeotia, which severely diminished combat value of the Macedonian horse.¹³

The very outcome of the Theban fruitful stratagem, viz. severe losses of the Macedonian horse, fits well with the interpretations of the battle of Chaeronea prevailing nowadays, according to which the cavalry in fact played little or no role in the decisive fight. Paul Rahe convincingly argues that ancient descriptions of the battle (esp. Diod. 16.86.3–4) refer rather to “a long, hard-fought infantry clash,”¹⁴ and the commemoration of both Macedonian and Theban casualties seems to focus rather on infantry units.¹⁵ One must also recall that cavalry is more vulnerable to

¹³ The number of Philip’s cavalry according to Diodorus (2000) is much higher than the number of his *hetairoi* in 339 as transmitted in Athenaeus 261A (Theopompus BNJ 115 F 225b), 800. Even, if one assumes a manipulation by Theopompus (as Hammond and Griffith, *History of Macedonia II* 361–362) or a textual corruption resulting in a loss of a part of the original number (as J. Rzepka, “How Many Companions Did Philip II Have?” *Electrum* 20 [2012] 131–136, arguing for a textual error for 1800), it is clear that Philip took to Boeotia the full body of his elite cavalry and had no further reserve.

¹⁴ P. A. Rahe, “The Annihilation of the Sacred Band at Chaeronea,” *AJA* 85 (1981) 84–87; see also J. Buckler and H. Beck, *Central Greece and the Politics of Power in the Fourth Century BC* (Cambridge 2008) 256.

¹⁵ As may be inferred from data collected by J. Ma, “Chaironea 338: Topographies of Commemoration,” *JHS* 128 (2008) 72–91: two major burials at the battlefield are of the Macedonian foot in the *polyandria* and the of the Sacred Band under the Lion of Chaeronea. Admittedly, Ma adduces examples of buried Thebans’ lethal wounds, which may be interpreted as inflicted by cavalymen. The presence of such probable horsemen-inflicted wounds in the Chaeronea burials is also cited as an argument by recent supporters of a theory of a decisive cavalry charge at Chaeronea: Sears and

such setbacks than infantry, and filling the gaps in decimated cavalry units requires much more time than a simple rearrangement of an enfeebled infantry.

The weakened Macedonian cavalry was not ready to charge the well-prepared Greek infantry; its operational task was most likely to neutralize its Greek counterpart, which was of quite considerable size and prestige.¹⁶

The period between the initial Theban success against the Macedonian horse and the main battle is also a slot in which the last-chance negotiations between Python of Byzantium and the Thebans may be placed (Diod. 16.85.3–4). The success against Philip's cavalry certainly had strengthened the spirit of the allied Greeks, and explains well why they had rejected Philip's peace proposals and entered the great battle with great confidence (and were easily deceived by Philip's false retreat).

The above scenario is very much conjectural. One thing, however, is absolutely certain: any future narrative of the Chaeronea war must take into consideration the brilliant victory of the Thebans over Philip's cavalry in the marshy ground in the neighbourhood of a Boeotian town.

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Willekes, *Journal of Military History* 80 (2016) 1017–1035. The burial of the Sacred Band poses additional problems, as it is clear that in fact the Thebans fought near the *polyandrion*, and they were transported to their tomb in order to leave the most prestigious place to the victorious Macedonian infantry.

¹⁶ The respective official strength of the Boeotian and the Athenian cavalry (700 and 1000), when enlarged by other allies' horse units, was more or less equal to the overall number of Philip's cavalymen before the invasion of Boeotia. Still, we do not know any action of this considerable force, and may assume that its main task was keep an eye on the enfeebled, but still dangerous Macedonian horsemen. The latter were brought into action during a pursuit and butchery of dispersed Greek hoplites, whereas the Greek horsemen were perhaps first to flee from the battlefield.