

What were the tactics which made the Macedonian army so successful in Alexander the Great's campaign across Persia and India.

The Macedonian army was among the strongest military forces of the Ancient world, under the command of Phillip II of Macedon and his successor, Alexander III of Macedon. With the introduction of military service as a full-time occupation for men, the army was able to develop from what had been considered a second-level Greek state and army by other states, such as Athens. Advancements made upon weaponry and military tactics, under Phillip, were crucial to the success Alexander saw in his campaign across Persia and India, as well as refinements made to the deployment and placement of different bands of the army (such as skirmish infantry men, archers, cavalry, siege engines, etc). The cohesiveness and flexibility of the Macedonian army was something which aided in the success seen during 13-year campaign. The campaign undertaken by Alexander, as well as the army he commanded, were planned and put into place by his father, with the plan to invade the Achaemenid empire of Persia; estimations made from the works of Diodorus Siculus saw Alexander the Great's land army, upon his invasion in 334.BC, as being approximately 32,000; though this varies as the Macedonian army was said to have had at least 45,000. The basic structure of the Macedonian army during the reign of both Phillip and Alexander saw the Companion Cavalry and the foot Infantry, with other smaller troops such as mercenaries, allied foreign foot soldiers; the Macedonian cavalry gained infamy across the Ancient world, especially following the Peloponnesian war (431.BC - 404.BC).

In Sadler and Serdiville's book, *'Conqueror, Commander, King'*, looks into the phalanx formation used by the Macedonian infantry, developed from hoplite warfare. Infantry was a necessity to Greek armies of the Classical age, as the terrain in Greece could often be mountainous, something which would not have allowed for a predominantly strong cavalry. The addition of the usage of a heavy shield is thought to be the start of the change in formations and the rise in use of the phalanx formation¹. The newer form of the phalanx structure seen used by Alexander's army allowed for manouverment of the soldiers within and those around, as the looser formation allowed for skirmish infantrymen to pass through the phalanx. The ability for soldiers to have ease of manouverment when within the phalanx structure would have been highly beneficial, as it would have allowed for easier defence of its sides and ease of movement across the battlefield. The formation of the phalanx, when engaging an enemy head on, would tighten, with shield being aligned to protect the individual soldiers and the one to their left (shields were held in the left hand, with spears in the right; soldiers would also carry a sword). The second chapter of the book looks at the phalanx formation and how the refinements to it would have aided in the success Macedonians had in battle; phalanx formations were rows of soldiers brandishing pikes, those in the rear rank of the phalanx would be able to move forward and fill openings during battles, due to the mobility afforded by the looser formation structure. The campaigns fought by Alexander and his army, 334.BC - 323.BC were aided by the phalanx structure, as the infantry were able both be offensive and defensive when in the structure, as the 'hedgehog' affect caused by the pikes kept charging enemy infantry and cavalry at a further distance. By stopping their enemies from approaching the phalanx in a large group, the Macedonians

¹ Sadler, J, and Serdiville, R, 2018. Alexander the Great: Conqueror, Commander, King, Castmate Publishers, pg21, available at: https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Alexander_the_Great/pMnXDwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1, Accessed: 19/05/2021

were able to move through the battlefield both defensively while being offensive to their enemy.

The need for a strong infantry formation during ancient warfare, as well as modern, is important as it is a way of ensuring that the infantry is defended. Phalanx formations were arranged for mobility and defense, with the pikes from all rows able to be extended past through those in front safely.

Among the most famous of Alexander the Great's battles is the Battle of Gaugamela, 331.BC; this battle saw the Macedonian army vastly outnumbered by that of the Persians, following the Persian defeat at the Battle of Issus and Darius III needing to recruit a new army before facing the Macedonians again. *Grand Tactics at Gaugamela* states about how the battle was influenced by the movements of Alexander himself, as they "alarmed"² Darius; the tactics put into place by Alexander during Gaugamela are studied to this day in military academies. The use of the cavalry during the battle was something not done before, with the Persian cavalry being led away from the infantry by the Macedonian's own cavalry, led by Alexander. The Macedonian cavalry broke apart and the cavalry was taken directly to where Darius was in the Persian ranks.



The result of the Battle of Gaugamela was Darius fleeing the battlefield upon Alexander and the Cavalry's advancement upon his own position. The tactic which Alexander put into place, of diverting the Persian cavalry to launch an attack on the now open Persian left centre. The Battle of Gaugamela was significant to Alexander's invasion of Persia because this was one of the final battles to take place against the Persians before Alexander took Babylon and was named ruler of Persia. "It is generally agreed by military historians that Alexander's victory at Gaugamela was a tactical masterpiece"⁴, ancient sources states that the Macedonians were vastly outnumbered, with some sources claiming there were approximately 250,000 troops under Darius, and while this number has been found to have been no more than 100,000 by modern estimates, the success seen by the Macedonians during the battle was an impressive feat. The idea of using the cavalry to break the enemy line was something new, cavalry served as a back up to infantry and to charge at enemy infantry. The Companion cavalry was always an important factor in the battles Alexander

² Devine, A.M, 1975. *Grand Tactics at Gaugamela*, Phoenix, pg378, available at: https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/1087282?sid=primo&origin=crossref&seq=5#metadata_info_tab_contents, accessed: 17/05/2021

³ History.com, <https://www.history.com/news/eight-surprising-facts-about-alexander-the-great>

⁴ Devine, A.M, 1975. *Grand Tactics at Gaugamela*, Phoenix, pg 385, available at: https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/1087282?sid=primo&origin=crossref&seq=12#metadata_info_tab_contents, accessed: 18/05/2021

faced, with some of his most trusted or skilled companions being given command, such as Cleitus the Black (who served as a General under Phillip II) and Hephaestion (Alexander's life-long companion who was named Grand Vizier, second only to Alexander).

While the cavalry was successful in breaking the enemy line, the tactic was not complete in its execution, as the Macedonian left centre and baggage train became overrun by the Persians, almost falling under the command of Parmenion. The former General under Phillip was an integral to the success of Gaugamela as Alexander himself, as he was able to keep the Macedonian left from crumbling and was able to bring Alexander and the cavalry back to them, rather than following Darius who had fled.

Gaugamela was a tactically impressive feat by the Macedonians, with the use of the cavalry in a way that had not been done before successfully, but as is stated in *Grand Tactics at Gaugamela*, there was a "misconceived order of priorities"⁵ by Alexander, in his desire to capture Darius.

Bose's book *Alexander the Great's Art of Strategy* talks about the usage of information gathering by Alexander, and possibly Phillip before him. The concept of war was different in the ancient world, with armies needing to search each other out, as stated in the book⁶. The obtaining of detailed information pertaining to their enemy was something which became very important to Alexander and his plans for his campaign. Spies were used during the Battle of Chaeronea, 338.BC, to gather information on the battle field before the Macedonian army arrived. Similarly to how modern spies gather information used to make strategic plans, this was done also by Alexander's own spies. The amount of effort Alexander expended upon information gathering was something which was picked up on and many historical figures prominent in military history modelled themselves on Alexander, such as Napoleon Bonaparte, who would use the Paris libraries to research countries he planned to invade. Spies and information gathering is an important tactic and would have played a significant role in the success of Alexander's campaign across Persia and India. The ability to have information at hand about both their enemy and the battle field would have allowed for more elaborate and harder to combat plans to be made and cohesively put together, such as that of the cavalry break at the Battle of Gaugamela.

Following the Battle of Issus, 333.BC, as stated in *By the Spear*, Darius III's family (his mother, wife and daughters) were captured by Alexander and the Macedonians. Persian customs saw that the royal family would follow the King out to battle, along with the furniture and people of the court, similar to how King's throughout history would, as a form of bragging of wealth and stature. The family of Darius was treated with dignity and respect by Alexander upon their meeting, following by sending a message to the women that Darius was still alive. For Alexander to continue to treat Darius's family with the stature they were afforded as royalty was not common of the time; wars of the ancient world were bloody and brutal events, with the aim of decimating another army deciding the winner. With Darius having fled the battle field and Alexander the definitive winner, to continue to afford the defeated leaders family as is own was an clever way of ensuring that he could build the trust

⁵ Devine, A.M, 1975. *Grand Tactics at Gaugamela*, Phoenix, pg 385, available at: https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/1087282?sid=primo&origin=crossref&seq=12#metadata_info_tab_contents, accessed: 18/05/2021

⁶ Bose, P, 2004. *Alexander the Great's Art of Strategy*, Penguin Group, pg50, available at: https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Alexander_The_Great_s_Art_Of_Strategy/KZI18k24nilC?hl=en&gbpv=1, accessed: 20/05/2021

and respect of the Persians. Something Alexander did frequently throughout his campaign across Persia and India, was to return the land he conquered to their inhabitants, leaving it a Macedonian satrapy while still holding the customs and lifestyle of the past. Alexander integrated himself into Persian customs, being said in sources to be seen wearing Persian clothing and ever increasing the number of Persian troops in his army, something which played a part in the mutiny against him at the Hyphasis river, 324.BC.

While its execution had its criticism, Alexander's integration between Persian and Macedonian customs was something which helped in his success of his campaigns because the people did not feel conquered in the traditional sense of the word, the way of life seen before Alexander was allowed to continue, absolving a lot of possible resentment which would have been directed onwards Alexander had he enforced Macedonian customs across of all Persia.

The Macedonian army under Alexander the Great was one of the strongest and most efficient military forces to date, with Alexander being credited as having never lost a battle during his military career. The success of the Macedonian army cannot be put down to any single tactic but rather the cohesive working of multiple strategies and tactics, both militaristic as well as social. The structural defensiveness of the phalanx and the ability to still be defensive aided in the different battles which the Macedonians faced. The phalanx was protection in settings such as Gaugamela where the area is relatively open, and still be successful in battles such as the Battle of Hydaspes taking place in the landscape of India. The spies and information gathering is a tactic still in use today, the need Alexander had to gather as much information as possible will have definitely played part in the planning of Alexander's battles, and would have ensured plans created for battle would have the best chances of success. The "tactical masterpiece" of Gaugamela would not have been able to play out in the same way, with the same success had there not been information gathered pertaining to the Persian army and the best way to breach their line. The Macedonian cavalry being used to break the line was a new tactic, relying on the Persians following the break away faction of the cavalry. Alexander took risks with his tactics at Gaugamela and in many of his campaign battles. The success of the Macedonian army in Alexander's campaign across Persia and India can be attributed in some way to many different tactics and strategies which Alexander used to both improve the quality and the chances of success within the battles which took place, and the social tactics to help him appeal more to those conquered by the Macedonians, such as allowing Darius's family to retain their royal stature (Alexander went on to marry a daughter of Darius following his return from India in 324.BC) and allowing places to retain their customs and not be forced to accept Macedonian ways of life.

Bibliography

- Bose, P, 2004. *Alexander the Great's Art of Strategy*, Penguin Group,
Devine, A. M, 1975. *Grand Tactics at Gaugamela*, Phoenix, pg374-385
Sadler, J. and Serdiville, R, 2018. *Alexander the Great: Conqueror, Commander, King*, Castmate Publishers
Worthington, I, 2014. *By the Spear: Phillip II, Alexander the Great and the Rise and Fall of the Macedonian Empire*, Oxford University Press