

ARMIES AND NAVIES

Lecture 17: When Length Matters

Macedon, Philip II and infantry warfare

- ▣ Philip II of Macedon (359-336) was one of the most successful generals of his times.
- ▣ He managed to defeat the hoplite infantries of the poleis in battle, including the Theban Sacred Band.
- ▣ His son, Alexander III (336-323), defeated Greek, tribal and Persian forces during his reign.
- ▣ Part of the success of these Macedonian kings can be attributed to a change in infantry equipment and the resulting change in tactics.

The sarissa

- ▣ The height of the male tree is 12 cubits, which is the length of the longer sarissas. Theophrastos HP 3.12
- ▣ At the siege of Edessa, when a breach was made in the walls, the spear-men, whose spears were sixteen cubits long, sallied out against the assailants. Polyainos *Stratagems* 2.29 (Referring to events of 300 BC)
- ▣ 12 cubits = 18 feet = 5.48 meters
- ▣ 16 cubits = 24 feet = 7.3 meters

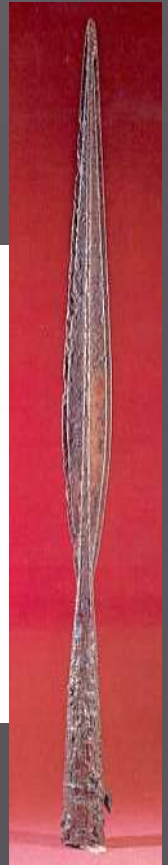
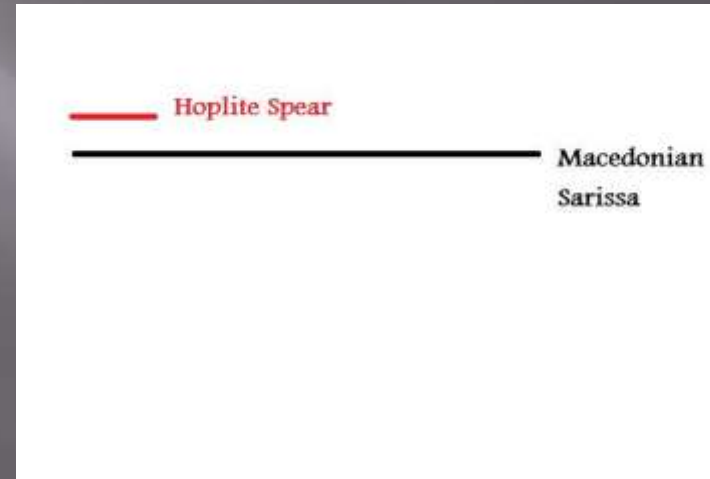
The sarissa (2)



- ▣ It has been estimated that the average width of the shaft was 1 ½ inches.
- ▣ The total weight of the sarissa including the spearhead and butt-spike has been estimated at 14.5 pounds (=6.5kg).

The Sarissa and the Hoplite Spear

- ▣ The Hoplite Spear was about 8 feet (2.4m) and its weight has been estimated at 1kg (2.2 pounds).
- ▣ The sarissa had a greater reach of 3 meters over the hoplite spear.
- ▣ At the same time it was 6-7 times heavier.



Sarissa-head from Vergina

Sarissa and Shield

- ▣ The length of the sarissa was such that it could not be wielded by one hand as the conventional hoplite spear.
- ▣ Thus, the Macedonian infantry could not have a hoplite shield.



The Shield

- ▣ "Of the shields of the phalanx the best is the Macedonian of bronze which is eight palms in width and not too hollow."
Asklepiodotos Tactica
5
- ▣ 8 Greek palms = 24 inches = 60 cm
- ▣ The Hoplite shield was c85 cm.
- ▣ The Macedonian shield was over the soldier's shoulder held by a strap to his neck.

Armour: What's missing?

- ▣ Philip accustomed the Macedonians to constant exercise, as well in peace, as in actual service: so that he would frequently make them march three hundred furlongs, **carrying with them their helmets, shields, greaves, and spears;** and, besides those arms, their provisions likewise, and utensils for common use.
Polyainos Stratagems 4.2.10

Traditional Infantry



Alexander Sarcophagus (c312BC)



Coin of Philip V. Athena Alkidemos
on the reverse

The Hypaspists

- ▣ While the mass of Macedonian infantry was outfitted with sarissas and light armour, the special corps, the Hypaspists, appear to have been outfitted with traditional hoplite armour.
- ▣ The Hypaspists were an elite corp designed to protect the king and take on special missions, similar to the Companion cavalry.

The Advantage of Blended Infantry

- ▣ Close to these were posted the Hypaspists who were shield-bearing infantry under the command of Nicanor, son of Parmenio. Next to these the brigade of Perdiccas, son of Orontes; then that of Coenus, son of Polemocrates; then that of Craterus, son of Alexander; then that of Amyntas, son of Andromenes; finally, the men commanded by Philip, son of Amyntas. Arrian *Anabasis* 1.14

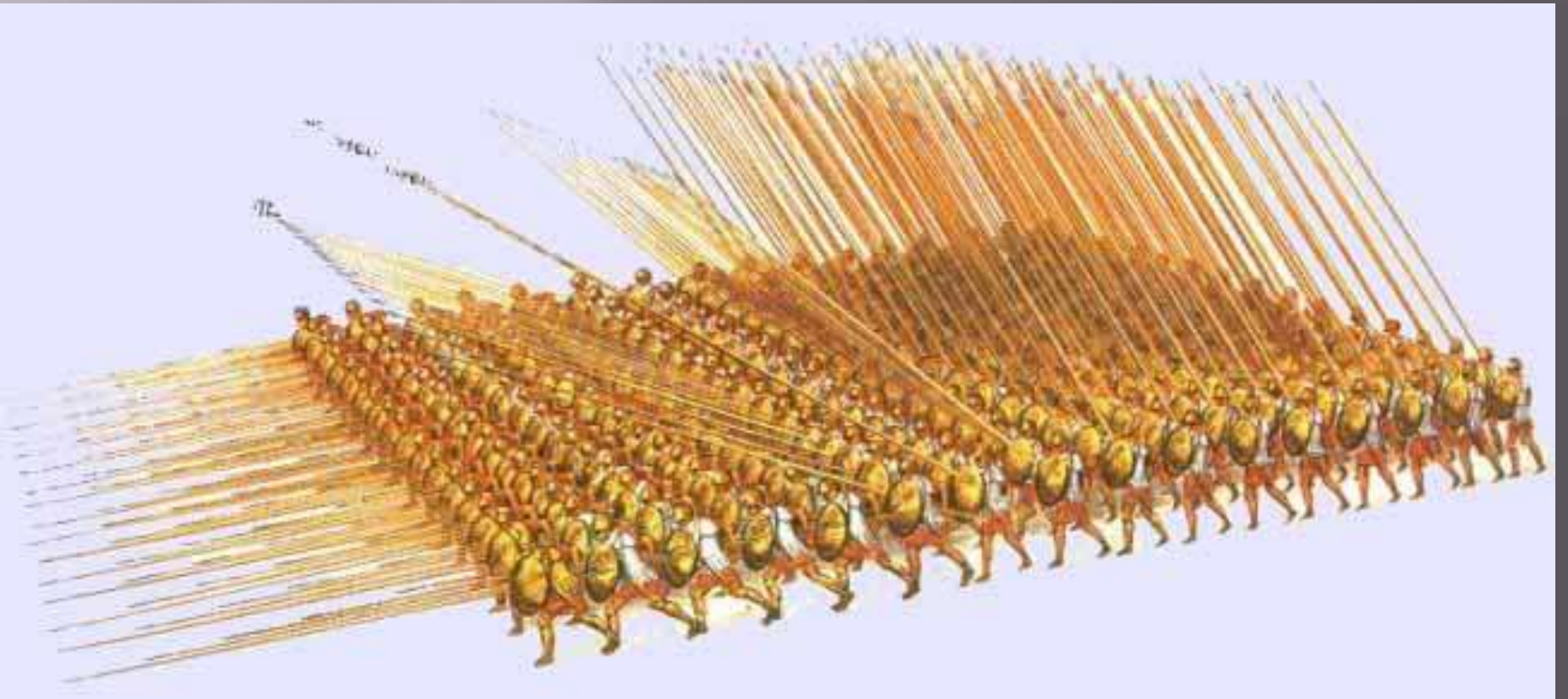
The Use of the Hypaspists

- ▣ The Hypaspists were more mobile than the sarissa-bearing troops.
 - ▣ So they could protect the flank of the rest of the infantry.
 - ▣ The sarissa-bearing infantry was more cumbersome than the traditional hoplite infantry.
 - ▣ Having appointed Sabictas viceroy of Cappadocia, he advanced to the gates of Cilicia, and when he arrived at the Camp of Cyrus, who went with Xenophon, and saw that the Gates were occupied by a strong guard, he left Parmenio there with the regiments of infantry which were more heavily armed; and about the first watch, taking the Hypaspists, the archers, and the Agrianians, he advanced by night to the Gates, in order to fall upon the guards when they least expected it.
- Arrians Anabasis 2.4

The Superiority of the Sarissa in formation

- ▣ It is easy to understand for many reasons that when the phalanx has its own special character and strength nothing can maintain position against its front or sustain its charge. For when in the compact formations used in battle each man with his arms stands in a space three feet in width and the length of the sarissae is according to original policy sixteen cubits, but as fitted to actual requirements fourteen cubits, of which four cubits are taken up by the distance between the hands and by the weighted rear portion of the shaft, it is clear that the sarissa must extend forward ten cubits beyond the body of each hoplite when, holding his pike levelled with both hands, he charges the enemy. Consequently, the sarissae of the second, third, and fourth ranks extend farther than those of the fifth rank, while those of that rank extend two cubits beyond the men in the first rank, when the phalanx has its characteristic compact order both by file and by rank, . . . it is clear that five sarissae, each terminating at a distance two cubits from the next, must project beside every man in the first rank. Polybios 18.29

The Wall of Spears

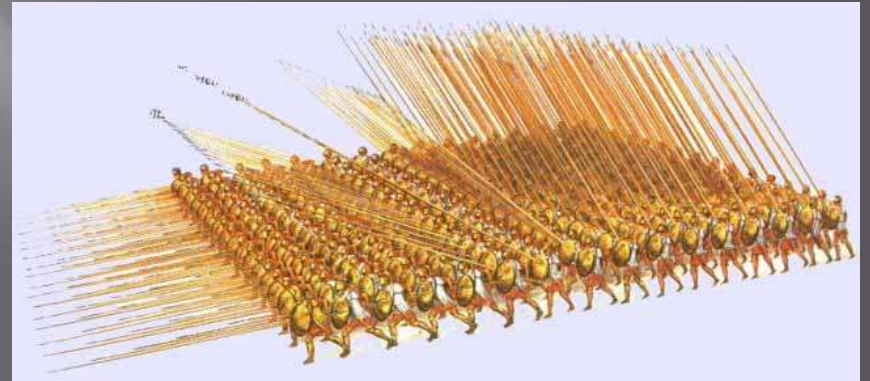


The Rear Ranks

- ▣ From this, it is easy to perceive the charge of the entire phalanx and the levelling of pikes, what is its probable manner and what force it has, when it is sixteen deep. As many men as are behind the fifth rank are by no means able to engage in the danger of direct conflict with their sarissae. Thus, they do not individually level their lances, but carry them slanting upwards over the shoulders of those ahead of them in order to make secure the area directly above the battle array, excluding by the density of their sarissae as many of the missiles as flying over the heads of the leading men could fall on the rear ranks. Polybios 18.30

The Weakness: Mobility

- ▣ Indeed, during a charge these men by the very weight of their bodies pressing against those in front of them add force to the assault, but it is impossible for the first ranks to face about. Polybios 18.30



The Weakness: Ground

- Again, it is acknowledged that the phalanx requires level and clear ground with no obstacles such as ditches, clefts, clumps of trees, ridges and water courses, all of which are sufficient to impede and break up such a formation. Every one would also acknowledge that it is almost impossible except in very rare cases to find spaces of say twenty stades or even more in length with no such obstacles. But even if we assume it to be possible, supposing those who are fighting against us refuse to meet us on such ground, but force round sacking the cities and devastating the territory of our allies, what is the use of such a formation? For by remaining on the ground that suits it, not only is it incapable of helping its friends but cannot even ensure its own safety. For the arrival of supplies will easily be prevented by the enemy, when they have undisturbed command of the open country. 11 But if the phalanx leaves the ground proper to it and attempts any action, it will be easily overcome by the enemy. Polybios 18.31

QUESTIONS?

Follow-Up Reading

- ▣ Minor M. Markle, III 'Use of the Sarissa by Philip and Alexander of Macedon' *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 82, No. 4 (Autumn, 1978), pp. 483-497 Stable URL:
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/504637>
- ▣ Paul A. Rahe 'The Annihilation of the Sacred Band at Chaeronea' *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (Jan., 1981), pp. 84-87
Stable URL:
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/504975>