

# The Ancient History Bulletin

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## **Edited by:**

Edward Anson ✦ Michael Fronda ✦ David Hollander  
Timothy Howe ✦ Joseph Roisman ✦ John Vanderspoel  
Pat Wheatley ✦ Sabine Müller



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# Dareios III's Military Reforms Before Gaugamela and the Alexander Mosaic: A Note<sup>1</sup>

Waldemar Heckel

It is a sign of progress in Alexander scholarship that the traditional view of Dareios III as the inept and cowardly king of the Persian Empire has been debunked by some of the most reputable experts in the field, although it is unfortunate that others, both laymen and scholars, still repeat the old refrain that the Persians lost the war with Alexander on account of their leader's cowardice. Over the last three decades, Dareios has been rehabilitated by Jakob Seibert (1987); Carl Nylander (1993), Ernst Badian (1999, 2000) and particularly Pierre Briant (2015).<sup>2</sup> One aspect of the Persian king's rehabilitation involves his preparations for a second major confrontation with the Makedonian invader after the defeat at Issos. It is noted that he took great care to summon troops from the core regions of the empire as well as the Upper Satrapies, that he chose with care a battlefield (on the plains of northern Mesopotamia) appropriate to the type and number of his troops, that he directed his subordinates to draw Alexander away from the valley of the Euphrates to the Tigris region, and that he rearmed at least some of his men in response to lessons learned in Kilikia. It is the last point that I should like to address.

Curtius (4.9.3-4) writes:

Since his army was half as large again as it had been in Cilicia, many were without weapons, and procuring these became the highest priority. For the cavalry and their mounts there were protective coverings made of interconnected iron plates; those whom Darius had previously provided only with javelins were now also issued shields and swords (*quis antea praeter iacula nihil dederat, scuta gladiique adiciebantur*); and herds of horses to be broken in were distributed among the infantrymen, so that his cavalry would be stronger than before.<sup>3</sup>

After this, Curtius goes on to talk about the addition of the scythed chariots, which although generally not as effective as oriental rulers would have wished, did inspire terror in some of

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<sup>1</sup> I should like to thank Professors Ed Anson, Sabine Müller, and Pat Wheatley, as well as the Editor, Timothy Howe, for reading and commenting on this note. I have benefited from their constructive criticism, although Professor Anson doubts whether Dareios III can be fully rehabilitated.

<sup>2</sup> J. Seibert, "Dareios III." In W. Will and J. Heinrichs (eds.). *Zu Alexander d. Gr.* Vol. 1 (Amsterdam, 1987) 437-56; C. Nylander, "Darius III—the Coward King. Points and Counterpoints." In J. Carlsen, B. Due et al. (eds.). *Alexander the Great. Reality and Myth* (Rome, 1993) 145-60; E. Badian, "A Note on the Alexander Mosaic." In Frances B. Titchener and Richard F. Moorton, Jr. (eds.). *The Eye Expanded. Life and the Arts in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999) 75-92; id., "Darius III." *HSCP* 100 (2000) 241-68; and in greater depth P. Briant, *Darius in the Shadow of Alexander*. Translated by Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge, MA, 2015). I do not mean to misrepresent Pierre Briant's contribution to our understanding of Dareios III. As he rightly says in another book: "Does it need repeating that a reconsideration of Achaemenid history is not the same thing as either the 'rehabilitation' of Darius or an exaltation of the grandeur of his empire? The objective is a *reevaluation* (the scientific approach), not the *rehabilitation* (the moralizing approach) of Achaemenid history" (Briant, *Alexander and his Empire*. Translated by A. Kuhrt. Princeton. 2010: 172).

<sup>3</sup> Translations of Curtius are by J.C. Yardley (Penguin Classics); those of Diodorus by C. Bradford Welles (Loeb Classical Library); Arrian is translated by P.A. Brunt (Loeb Classical Library).

the Makedonian troops.<sup>4</sup> But it is clear that Dareios' primary concern was to improve the fighting efficiency of the mounted troops, in whom he placed his trust. Diodorus (17.53.1) reports the military changes in the following words:

He [Dareios] had fashioned swords and lances much longer than his earlier types because it was thought that Alexander had had a great advantage in this respect in the battle in Kilikia (τὰ μὲν γὰρ ξίφη καὶ τὰ ξυστὰ πολὺ μείζω τῶν προγεγενημένων ἐποίησε διὰ τὸ δοκεῖν διὰ τούτων πολλὰ τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον ἐν τῇ περὶ Κιλικίαν μάχῃ πεπλεονεκτῆναι).

Diodorus also goes on to comment on the scythed chariots, and it is clear that the two authors have based their accounts on the same primary source. These accounts, despite their minor differences, are in agreement on two points: the superior equipment of the enemy was thought to have contributed to the victory at Issos, and the changes made affected the cavalry.

Diodorus' version has, however, attracted the attention of Nylander, who uses the reference to "longer *xysta*" as a means of explaining (or, rather, reinterpreting) the battle scene of the Alexander Mosaic from Pompeii (now in the Naples Museum, see Figure 1, below).<sup>5</sup> The appearance of what seem to be Makedonian sarissas behind the chariot of Dareios does not, in his opinion, indicate the envelopment of the Persian King, who is now on the verge of fleeing. These are instead the lengthened spears of the Persian infantry. Badian cites Nylander's arguments with approval: "The effect is vastly increased by the lances in the background on the right. Where we can see the bearers, they are Persians, and all but three on the far right point toward the Macedonian enemy" (1999, 80; cf. 2000, 258 n.33). In fact, a closer look reveals that the Persians seen just below the protruding sarissas are not holding them (Figure 2). The only barbarian with his hands on a shaft holds up a standard, not a weapon (Figure 3). The others, some of them horsemen, have their arms in the air and are clearly frightened and fleeing. The proximity of the sarissas to these Persian figures shows that the Makedonians are closing in on them. And, indeed, one can see on the left, where the sarissas are also behind Darius and pointing the same direction, Makedonian infantrymen wearing Phrygian-style helmets (Figure 4).<sup>6</sup>

Nylander (1993, 156 n.42) quotes the above-noted passages from Curtius and Diodorus, and he concludes that the battle scene, previously thought to depict Issos,<sup>7</sup> is in fact Gaugamela. But the lances adopted by the Persians, at Dareios' behest, were not the Makedonian *sarissai*. They are *xysta*. In neither Curtius nor Diodorus do we hear of infantry reform, and, although

<sup>4</sup> See the discussion in W. Heckel, C. Willekes and G. Wrightson, "Scythe Chariots at Gaugamela: A Case Study." In E. Carney and D. Ogden (eds.), *Philip II and Alexander the Great. Father and Son: Lives and Afterlives* (Oxford, 2010) 103-9, 272-75. On scythed chariots see Alexander K. Nefiodkin, "On the origin of the scythed chariots," *Historia* 53 (2004) 399-78; J. Rop, "Reconsidering the Origin of the Scythed Chariot," *Historia* 62 (2013) 167-81; also the response by A.K. Nefedkin, "Once More the Origin of the Scythed Chariot," *AHB* 28 (2014) 112-18.

<sup>5</sup> Nylander 1993, incorporating arguments published in "Il milite ignoto: un problema nel mosaic di Alessandro." In *La regione sotterrata dal Vesuvio: Sudi e prospettive* (Naples, 1982) 689-95, and "The Standard of the Great King: A Problem in the Alexandermosaik." *Opuscula romana* 19 (1983) 19-37.

<sup>6</sup> See the useful sketch in Briant 2015, 184 (fig. 30).

<sup>7</sup> See the arguments in A. Stewart, *Faces of Power. Alexander's Image and Hellenistic Politics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1994) 130-50, esp. 134, dismissed by Badian 1999, 90 n.17 as "rather subjective." Ada Cohen, *Art in the Era of Alexander the Great* (Cambridge, 2010) 167 appears to accept the scene as depicting the battle of Issus.

Curtius and Diodorus are not in perfect agreement—the former speaks of swords and shields, the latter of swords and lances—it is clear from the language of Diodorus that he too is speaking of cavalry weapons.

The word *xyston* (*xysta*) is used consistently of the spears employed by cavalymen.<sup>8</sup> For example, Diodorus 19.27.2, in his account of the battle of Paraitakene, speaks of “two *eilai* (= *ilai*) of select *xyston*-bearers” (εἴλας δύο ξυστοφόρων ἐπιλέκτων) in the army of Eumenes of Kardia.<sup>9</sup> The word *ilai* or *eilai* is used only of cavalry squadrons; infantry units, by contrast, are *taxeis* or *phalanges*.<sup>10</sup> Diodorus himself describes how, at the Graneikos, the Persian, Spithridates (Σπιθροβάτης MSS) hurled his lance (σαννίον) at Alexander, who subsequently thrust his spear (ξυστόν) into the enemy's chest (Diod. 17.20.3-4; Arr. 1.15.8: τοῦτον Ἀλέξανδρος παίσας τῷ ξυστῶ...; cf. Plut. *Alex.* 16.11, where Kleitos kills the man with his *xyston*; for the Makedonians around Alexander using their *xysta* at Gaugamela: Arr. 3.14.3). At Gaugamela, Hephaistion, fighting on horseback, is wounded by a Persian *xyston*, showing the effectiveness of the new weapon in Persian hands. In fact, one of the hardest fought engagements of that battle occurred after the flight of Dareios, when the Makedonian cavalry engaged their barbarian counterparts and suffered heavy casualties.

οὔτε ἀκοντισμῷ ἔτι οὔτ' ἐξελιγμοῖς τῶν ἵππων, ἥπερ ἵππομαχίας δίκη, ἐχρῶντο, ἀλλὰ διεκπαῖσαι πᾶς τις τὸ καθ' αὐτόν, ὡς μόνην ταύτην σωτηρίαν σφίσιν οὔσαν, ἐπειγόμενοι ἔκοπτον τε καὶ ἐκόπτοντο ἀφειδῶς, οἷα δὴ οὐχ ὑπὲρ νίκης ἀλλοτρίας ἔτι, ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας οἰκείας ἀγωνιζόμενοι. καὶ ἐνταῦθα πίπτουσι μὲν ἀμφὶ ἐξήκοντα τῶν ἐταίρων τοῦ Ἀλεξάνδρου, καὶ τιτρώσκεται Ἡφαιστίων τε αὐτὸς καὶ Κοῖνος καὶ Μενίδας...<sup>11</sup>

There was no more javelin-throwing and no manoeuvring of horses, as usual in a cavalry engagement, but each strove hard to break his way through; they kept on giving and taking blows unsparingly, treating this as the one hope of safety, inasmuch as they were men now no longer fighting for another's victory, but for their own very lives. There about sixty of the Companions of Alexander fell, and Hephaestion himself, Coenus and Menidas were wounded... (Arr. 3.15.2).

Finally, there is the matter of the lesson learned at Issos. It was not the weaponry of the phalanx (specifically the *sarissa*) that impressed Dareios; for the phalanx was broken at one point in the battle and the Makedonians incurred relatively heavy casualties. Arrian (2.10.5-7) mentions one hundred and twenty of the most notable men, including the commander, Ptolemaios son of Seleukos (2.11.7: ἐνταῦθα πίπτει Πτολεμαῖός τε ὁ Σελεύκου, ἀνὴρ ἀγαθὸς γενόμενος, καὶ ἄλλοι ἐς εἴκοσι μάλιστα καὶ ἑκατὸν τῶν οὐκ ἡμελημένων Μακεδόνων), which

<sup>8</sup> See LSJ s.v. ξυστόν. R. Gaebel, *Cavalry Operations in the Ancient Greek World* (Norman, Ok, 2002) 162: “The two words used to identify this lance, *xyston* and *dory*, were applied rather indifferently by the historians and were commonly used for the infantry spear as well.” This is certainly true of *dory*, but Gaebel's own footnote (162 n.12) gives only two examples of the use of *xyston* (Arr. 1.16.1 and Diod. 17.20.3), both of which refer unequivocally to the spear of a cavalryman.

<sup>9</sup> *Xysta* are used by the cavalymen of Ptolemy and Demetrios (Diod. 19.83.5).

<sup>10</sup> Τάξις can be used of a cavalry unit (e.g. Arr. 3.24.1: ἤδη γὰρ αὐτῷ καὶ ἵππακοντισταὶ τάξις ἦσαν), but it is, at any rate, a general term, as is ταχιάρχης.

<sup>11</sup> At this point, Diod. 17.61.3 writes: Ἡφαιστίων μὲν εἰς τὸν βραχίονα ξυστῷ βληθεὶς ἐτρώθη.

implies that there were other dead as well.<sup>12</sup> Instead it was the efficiency of the Companion Cavalry that won the day and turned Dareios in flight. This was the advantage that the Persian king was anxious to negate. The literary evidence for the use of the *sarissa* by the Persian infantry at Gaugamela is, as far as I can determine, entirely lacking. The Alexander Mosaic, which admittedly is poorly restored in places, gives no support to the Persian use of the *sarissa*. It may depict the battle of Issos after all.

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Figure 1

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<sup>12</sup> Diod. 17.34.5 says that many Macedonians were killed (ὁμοίως δὲ πολλῶν καὶ παρὰ τοῖς Μακεδόσι πεσόντων συνέβη). At 17.36.5 he says that 300 infantrymen were killed. See also J. Rzepka, "The casualty figures of Alexander's army." In T. Howe, S. Müller and R. Stoneman (eds.), *Ancient Historiography on War and Empire* (Oxford and Philadelphia, 2017) 169-78, at 171 n.8 (although the Diodorus reference is misprinted).



Figure 2



Figure 3

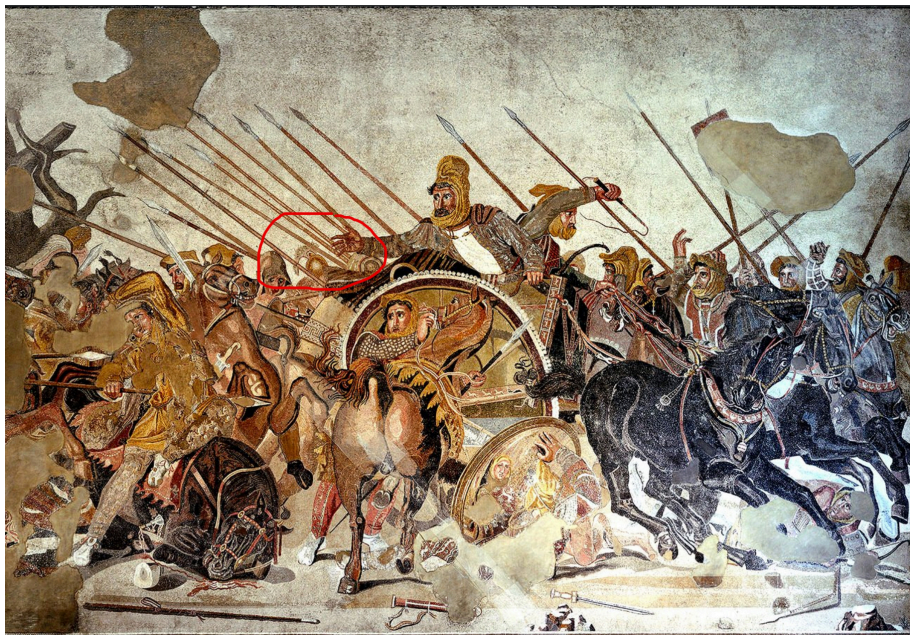


Figure 4