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Dareios III’s Military Reforms Before Gaugamela and the Alexander Mosaic: A Note

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). 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.³

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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¹ 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.


³ 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).
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 ἔξω καὶ τὰ ἐσωτά πολὺ μεῖζω τῶν προγεγενημένων ἐποίησε διὰ τὸ δοκεῖν διὰ τούτων πολλὰ τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον ἐν τῇ περὶ Κιλικιαν μάχη πεπλεονεκτηκέναι).

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).5 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).6

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,7 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

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6 See the useful sketch in Briant 2015, 184 (fig. 30).

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 (χυστα) is used consistently of the spears employed by cavalrymen.\(^8\) For example, Diodorus 19.27.2, in his account of the battle of Paraitakene, speaks of “two eilai (= ilai) of select xyston-bearers” (εἶλας δύο ξυστοφόρων ἐπιλέκτων) in the army of Eumenes of Kardia.\(^9\) The word ilai or eilai is used only of cavalry squadrons; infantry units, by contrast, are taxeis or phalanges.\(^10\) Diodorus himself describes how, at the Graneikos, the Persian, Spithridates (Σπιθροβάτης Σελεύκου MSS) hurled his lance (ξυστόν) at Alexander, who subsequently thrust his spear (ξυστόν) into the enemy’s chest (Diod. 17.20.3–4; Arr. 1.15.8: τούτον Ἀλέξανδρος παίσας τῷ ξυστῷ...; 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, Hephastion, 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 οὔτε ἔξελιγμοις τῶν ἵππων, ἢ περ ἰππομαχίας δίκη, ἐχρώντο, ἀλλὰ διεκπαίναι πάς τις τὸ καθ’ αὐτόν, ὡς μόινην ταύτην σωτηρίαν ὀφιόν ὀδόν, ἑπειγόμενοι ἐκκόπτον τε καὶ ἐκκόπτοντο ἀφειδῶς, ὅτα δὴ οὐχ ὑπὲρ νίκης ἀλλοτρίας ἔτι, ἀλλ’ ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας οἰκείας ἀγωνιζόμενοι. καὶ ἐντάθθα πίπτουσι μὲν ἀμφὴ ἐξήκοντα τῶν ἑταίρων τοῦ Ἀλεξάνδρου, καὶ πετρώσκεται Ἡρακλίτων τε αὐτῶς καὶ Κόινος καὶ Μενίδας...\(^11\)

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 unthinkingly, 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 Hephastion 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 Σέλευκος, ἀνὴρ ἀγαθὸς γενόμενος, καὶ ἄλλοι ἐς εἴκοσι μάλιστα καὶ ἐκατὸν τῶν ὅλων ἡμελημένων Μακεδόνων), which

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\(^8\) See LSI 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.

\(^9\) Xysta are used by the cavalrymen of Ptolemy and Demetrios (Diod. 19.83.5).

\(^10\) Τάξις can be used of a cavalry unit (e.g. Arr. 3.24.1: ἥδε γὰρ αὐτῷ καὶ ἱππακοντισταί τάξις ἄσων), but it is, at any rate, a general term, as is ἑκατόρχης.

\(^11\) At this point, Diod. 17.61.3 writes: Ἡρακλίτων μὲν εἰς τὸν βραχίονα ξυστὸν βληθείς ἐτρώθη.
implies that there were other dead as well. 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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12 Diod. 17.34.5 says that many Macedonians were killed (ὅμως 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).