

The Role of Greek Cavalry on the Battlefield: A Study of Greek Cavalry from the Peloponnesian Wars to the Second Battle of Mantinea

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Historians usually argue that the Greek hoplite phalanx rendered cavalry ineffective until Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great began to employ cavalry as a shock weapon in the fourth century BCE. This assumption, however, assumes that cavalry are only truly powerful when they are used as a battering ram against enemy infantry. The evidence instead indicates that Greek cavalry could play a lethal role on the battlefield without charging into the waiting spears of enemy infantry. To illustrate the important role Greek horsemen played on the battlefield between the Peloponnesian War and the Second Battle of Mantinea, this paper examines the literary evidence provided by Thucydides, Diodorus, and Xenophon's accounts. There are two primary movements in this study of Greek cavalry, beginning first with an examination of Athens' campaigns in Thessaly, Thracian Chalcidice, and Sicily during the Peloponnesian Wars and then moving on to examine the battles at Sardis, Leuctra, and Mantinea. This paper aims to encourage other scholars to reconsider how historians should understand Greek warfare by showing how Athenian and later Spartan imperial ambitions fell apart because of cavalry.

Students of Greek military history tend to assume that cavalry played a marginal role on the battlefields of ancient Greece until the era of Philip and Alexander. Until recently historians have also assumed that the hoplite phalanx rendered cavalry obsolete on the Greek battlefield.¹ Few men wanted to risk impaling their expensive horse on a hoplite's nine-foot spear. This consideration, however, assumes that cavalry are only valuable as a shock weapon to shatter infantry formations. Yet if used to harass and to hit a body of spearmen in the rear or the flanks, cavalry can easily tear hoplite formations apart. Evidence indicates that Greek commanders understood the danger cavalry posed to infantry formations and under the right circumstances cavalry could reverse the tide of battle or turn a tactical victory into a strategic triumph. To show the important role that Greek horsemen played on the

¹ Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 183.

battlefield before Alexander the Great, this paper examines the decisive role cavalry played on the battlefield from the First Peloponnesian War in 460 BCE up to the Battle of Mantinea in 362 BCE.

Before the Persian Wars (492-450 BCE), the majority of battles in regions like Attica and the Peloponnese arose from border disputes.² These clashes were often arose from quarrels over which polis controlled a shrine or a farm on the border. These clashes were often of more concern to farmers than aristocrats;³ the wealthy knights likely saw little need to risk losing an expensive horse when the stakes were not high or did not concern them. The limited aims in Greek warfare before the Persian Invasions also meant there was little need for cavalry on the battlefield. In fact, conflicts were of such little consequence that hoplite warfare was almost ceremonial in nature.⁴ The limited nature of warfare in archaic Greece meant there was little need to pursue and to slaughter the retreating enemy.⁵ Instead, a battle of pushing and shoving might last up an hour until the defeated phalanx ran away. The victors might then pursue the defeated foe for a few minutes, but hoplites were likely already exhausted after an hour of sustained stabbing and shoving while encased in heavy armor and were probably incapable of sustaining a long pursuit.

The Persian Invasions changed Greek warfare in several ways, especially for Athens, and showed the power cavalry could wield on the battlefield. The arrival of the Persians, who could field massive armies of cavalry, forced the Greeks to fight a total war that raged from Athens to Thessaly. At Plataea, the Greeks had experienced the annoyance and the destructive power that cavalry could wreak against infantry under the right circumstances.⁶ The Athenians likely began to increase their cavalry forces after Plataea in response to their experiences in the Persian Invasions. In addition, after the Athenians began to devote their efforts toward imperial expansion, they clashed with the Boeotians, the Thessalians, and

² Hanson, *The Western Way of War*, 3-5, 32-33.

³ Hanson, *The Western Way of War*, 36.

⁴ Hanson, *The Western Way of War*, 35-37.

⁵ Hanson, *The Western Way of War*, 35-37.

⁶ Hdt. 9.18-23, 69.

the Chalcidians. These regions had large cavalry forces, at least by Greek standards, and Athens was forced to increase her cavalry forces from ninety to 1,200 *hippeis*.⁷ Since Athens incorporated wealthy cities into her league, she was also able to provide insurance for horsemen who lost their mounts in the service of the state, which likely made aristocrats more willing to serve in Athens' forces.⁸ Furthermore, the scope of warfare had changed. Before the Persian Wars, the polis had little need to compel its aristocrats to risk losing an expensive horse when a farm was at stake. The Persians, however, had sacked and destroyed Eretria and Athens, and their repeated invasions threatened the entire Greek world.⁹ As warfare in ancient Greece lost its limited scope and everyone began to have a stake in the outcome of the war, aristocrats started to play a more involved role on the Greek battlefield.

Unfortunately for Athens, her imperial ambitions fell apart due to Athens' enemies' deployment and use of cavalry at the most critical moments in her land campaigns. Victor Davis Hanson points out that in the Peloponnesian Wars, less than a half a dozen major battles occurred between hoplite phalanxes.¹⁰ Except for at the First Battle of Mantinea, cavalry played a critical role in determining the outcome of these battles.

Athenian operations in Thessaly and Chalcidian Thrace illustrate the critical role cavalry played in early Greek warfare. Although Athens likely began to strengthen its cavalry forces after the Persian Wars, it continued to rely on the Thessalians to provide cavalry.¹¹ The Battle of Tanagra (457 BCE) revealed the dangers of this dependence. During a Spartan expedition in northern Greece, the Athenians and the Thessalians engaged the Spartans at a town in Boeotia called Tanagra. According to Diodorus Siculus' account in his *Library of History*, the Thessalians switched sides and the battle ended as a

⁷ Leslie J. Worley, *Hippeis: The Cavalry of Ancient Greece*, (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994), 68-70; see also J. K. Anderson, *Ancient Greek Horsemanship* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1961), 131; and Glenn Richard Bugh, *The Horsemen of Athens* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 66-67.

⁸ Glenn Richard Bugh, *The Horsemen of Athens The Horsemen of Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 37-38.

⁹ Hdt. 6.101.

draw.¹² That night the Thessalian cavalry hit the Athenian supply train, which drew the Athenian hoplites out for a second round of fighting.¹³ The Spartans then came up and the ensuing fight ended as a draw.¹⁴ Thucydides, however, who also provides an account of the battle in his summary of the First Peloponnesian War, states that the battle was a Spartan victory.¹⁵ As Thucydides lived during the battle and may have even had family members who fought in this campaign, it seems more reasonable to prefer Thucydides' verdict than that of Diodorus, who wrote centuries after the event.¹⁶ Thucydides, however, does agree that both sides sustained heavy losses.¹⁷ This mutual loss of life implies that the fighting was close, since decisive battles in the ancient world tended to end with the loser sustaining a disproportionate number of casualties. Thucydides also agrees that the Thessalians switched sides.¹⁸ Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude based on Diodorus and Thucydides' accounts that the fight could have gone either way, and that the defection of the Thessalian cavalry likely played a decisive role in determining the battle's outcome.

To avenge their defeat at Tanagra, the Athenians attempted to place the exiled Orestes on his father's throne in Thessaly three years later.¹⁹ According to Thucydides, the Thessalians were unable to challenge the Athenians in a pitched battle, so the Athenians marched right up to Pharsalus and besieged the capital city.²⁰ The Thessalian cavalry, however, prowled around the besiegers' encampment. Their presence prevented the Athenians from sending out foraging parties, turning the

¹⁰ Victor Davis Hanson, *A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Random House, 2005), 208.

¹¹ Worley, 68.

¹² Diod. Sic. 11.80.2.

¹³ Diod. Sic., 11.80.3-5.

¹⁴ Diod. Sic., 11.80.6.

¹⁵ Thuc. 1.108.1.

¹⁶ Thucydides' parents were members of both the Athenian aristocracy and the Thessalian royalty. He likely had relatives who fought, perhaps even on both sides, at Tanagra; see Thuc., 4.104.4 and Plut., Cim. 4.1.

¹⁷ Thuc. 1.108.1.

¹⁸ Thuc., 1.107.7.

¹⁹ Thuc., 1.111.

²⁰ Thuc., 1.111.

besiegers into the besieged.²¹ This reversal forced the Athenians to break their siege and to withdraw from Thessaly by ship without attaining any of their objectives.²² Athens' failure to secure Thessaly for her side deprived Athens of an important ally in her later campaigns in Chalcidian Thrace. After their failures in Thessaly, the Athenians redoubled their efforts to build a cavalry force so that by the time of the Second Peloponnesian War (431 BCE), the Athenians could field one thousand cavalry and two hundred mounted archers.²³

During another expedition to subdue the rebel Chalcidians in Thrace (429 BCE), the Athenians dispatched a force of two thousand hoplites and two hundred horsemen to pacify the region.²⁴ The Athenians and the Chalcidian rebels met at the rebel city of Spartolus. In the initial phase of the battle, the Athenian hoplites defeated the Chalcidian hoplites, but the rebel cavalry and light troops defeated Athens' cavalry.²⁵ The issue hung in the balance when reinforcements arrived to support Spartolus. The light troops and the cavalry pressed another attack against the Athenian hoplite phalanx, and the Athenians were driven back to their baggage train.²⁶ Thucydides records that although the Chalcidian hoplites were unable to withstand the advance of the Athenian phalanx, the Chalcidian horsemen pressed the Athenian infantry on all sides with repeated charges.²⁷ I. G. Spence emphasizes the psychological terror that a charge by horses across a field could cause, intimidating their targets to such a degree that, often before the horsemen have reached the infantry, the formation has already begun to fall apart because some of the less disciplined infantry have broken formation to escape the onrush of steeds.²⁸ This impulse to escape the charging cavalry and the destruction caused by the javelins thrown by horsemen and peltasts likely created gaps in the phalanx formation. The horsemen also likely hurled

²¹ Thuc., 1.111.

²² Thuc. 1.111.

²³ Bugh, 66-67. See also Thuc. 2.13.8.

²⁴ Thuc. 2.79.1.

²⁵ Thuc., 2.79.2-3.

²⁶ Thuc., 2.79.4-5.

²⁷ Thuc., 2.79.6.

javelins at the Athenian hoplites, creating additional gaps in the Athenian formation before the Chalcidian cavalry smashed into the phalanx and fought with their spare javelins or swords. The Chalcidian cavalry repeatedly hammered the Athenian phalanx until the hoplites panicked and fled.²⁹ Under the traditional rules of hoplite warfare, the battle would have been over after Athens' hoplites had routed Spartolus' hoplites. The Chalcidians' use of cavalry and light troops together, however, not only averted defeat, but also allowed them to route and to pursue the Athenians, leaving 430 Athenian hoplites dead, the Athenian commanders slain, and the expedition shattered.³⁰

Later frustrated by the Spartan commander Brasidas' success in liberating her allies in the north, in 422 BCE, Athens dispatched the politician-turned-general Cleon to remedy the situation.³¹ After arriving at Eion, Cleon settled down to wait for reinforcements, but prolonged inactivity began to break down discipline in the Athenian ranks, which began to murmur against their commander.³² To restore discipline and his troops' confidence in his abilities as their general, Cleon decided to march his troops toward Amphipolis in order to reconnoiter Brasidas' position.³³ Cleon's expeditionary force included about three hundred cavalry, but Cleon may not have brought them on his reconnaissance march to Amphipolis, as Thucydides makes no mention of their presence in the battle around the city.³⁴ Brasidas had mercenary horsemen and three hundred Hellenic cavalry, who were likely drawn from the violently anti-Athenian Boeotian Confederation.³⁵ After Brasidas sallied from Amphipolis and trounced the

²⁸ I. G. Spence, *The Cavalry of Classical Greece: A Social and Military History with Particular Reference to Athens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 105-108.

²⁹ Thuc. 2.79.6.

³⁰ Thuc., 2.79.7.

³¹ Thuc., 5.2.1.

³² Thuc., 5.7.2.

³³ Thuc., 5.7.2-5.

³⁴ Thuc., 5.2.1 and 5.6-11.

³⁵ Sparta had only recently created a cavalry corps in response to Athenian naval raids, and she likely needed her cavalry to defend Laconia against the Athenian navy; see Thuc. 4.55.2. In addition, Thucydides mentions that the Spartans brought Boeotian cavalry to support their initial invasions of Attica; see Thuc. 2.22.2. These considerations make it likely that the Spartans, who never had a strong cavalry tradition (see Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.10-1), relied heavily on Boeotia to provide cavalry support for the Laconian infantry.

unprepared Athenians, the Athenian hoplites withdrew to a nearby hill.³⁶ There they repulsed the Spartan attacks two or three times until Brasidas' second-in-command, Clearidas, brought up his Chalcidian and Myrcinian cavalry and targeteers to attack the Athenian phalanx.³⁷ Under a barrage of missiles, the Athenian hoplites broke formation and fled, allowing the Spartans and their allies to slaughter the shattered Athenians.³⁸ Though the credit for the victory goes to Brasidas for his bold stratagem, the Chalcidian and Myrcinian cavalry played an important role in turning a tactical rout that chastised the Athenians into a strategic disaster that left six hundred of Athens' finest hoplites dead, the Athenian commander dead, and the Athenian expedition in tatters.³⁹

These disasters in the North deprived the Athenians of an important source of its income, just as Athens was running out of funds to wage the war.⁴⁰ Over the past nine years Athens had spent 5,600 talents of silver.⁴¹ With the further loss of income from cities like Amphipolis and the death of Cleon, Athens' most hawkish general and politician, the Athenians allowed Nicias to negotiate a peace with the Spartans in the winter of 422-421 BCE.⁴² Since the Athenians could not retake Amphipolis and the other rebel cities in the North by force, they would try – and ultimately fail – to regain those cities by diplomacy. Yet had it not been for their enemies' effective use of cavalry, the Athenians might have succeeded in northern Greece and might have been able to continue waging war.

Before moving onto examine how cavalry played a decisive role in the other theaters of the Peloponnesian Wars, it might be helpful to pause and examine the cavalry tactics the Thracians and Chalcidian Greeks used. The use of cavalry with light infantry in the North by the Thracians and the

³⁶ Thuc. 5.10.6-9.

³⁷ Thuc. 5.10.9.

³⁸ Thuc., 5.10.

³⁹ Thuc., 5.11. Ironically, Brasidas was unwilling to confront the Athenians in a pitched battle because the Athenians had dispatched their toughest hoplites with Cleon; see 5.8.2.

⁴⁰ Robert E. Gaebel, *Cavalry Operations in the Ancient Greek World* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 96.

⁴¹ Vincent Gabrielsen, *Financing the Athenian Fleet: Public Taxation and Social Relations* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 174-75.

⁴² Thuc. 5.16, 18.

Greeks in that region provides important information for how effective Greek commanders employed their cavalry. This Greek cavalry of this age were not the shock troops later used by the Macedonians.⁴³

The cavalry could pepper the enemy with javelins, but each horseman usually carried only two javelins.⁴⁴

To conserve ammunition and to increase the likelihood of a successful hit, the cavalryman likely rode up close to the enemy infantry before hurling his javelin.⁴⁵ The cavalryman probably had to approach the enemy infantry even if he had carried more javelins, since his reliance upper body strength to throw the javelin would restrict the rider's throwing range. However, the cavalryman's mobility allowed him to hurl his projectile with less risk than the darter or the peltast could.

After discharging his javelin, the cavalry likely remained close to the enemy formation to protect friendly skirmishers, providing that the enemy's light infantry and cavalry had been routed. Greek military history contains instances of hoplite commanders sending the fleetest of foot to kill peltasts who moved too close to the formation.⁴⁶ After running forward and then throwing javelins, the peltasts were likely a little worn out, so when the hoplites would charge forward in pursuit of the skirmishers, the more agile hoplites had a chance to catch and to kill some of the skirmishers.⁴⁷ Without cavalry to cut down the soldiers who left the safety of the phalanx, nothing prevented hoplites from running up and catching unwary peltasts. At battles like the Battle of Potidaea, cavalry likely kept close to the enemy infantry to prevent impetuous hoplites from rushing forward out of formation to chase away

⁴³ There is evidence that the Macedonians as early as the Peloponnesian Wars used their cavalry as shock troops; Thucydides describes the cavalry as being armed with a cuirasses and lance like spear charged the enemy light cavalry; see Thuc. 2.100.5.

⁴⁴ Gaebel, 29.

⁴⁵ Worley, 38; P. A. L. Greenhalgh, *Greek Warfare: Horsemen and Chariots in the Homeric and Archaic Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 38-39.

⁴⁶ Xen. *Hell.* 4.4.16 and 5.4.59. If, however, the peltasts were content to harass at a safe distance, they normally could evade the pursuit of the more heavily armored hoplites; see Xen. *Hell.* 3.2.4 and 4.5.14-5. Nevertheless, that the Spartan commanders were willing to order their hoplites to pursue the peltasts implies that the Spartan commanders believed that the hoplites could catch the peltasts; indeed, Xenophon confirms that this might have happened if Iphicrates had not ordered the Athenian peltasts to withdraw as soon as the Spartans dispatched hoplites from the phalanx in pursuit; see Xen. *Hell.* 4.5.15.

⁴⁷ See above note and Xen. *Hell.* 4.4.16 for an example of a successful pursuit of peltasts by hoplites.

peltasts.⁴⁸ The cavalry's proximity to the enemy infantry likely permitted the light infantry to stand closer to the enemy infantry than they otherwise would have, as the cavalry could now attack any individuals or small groups of men that broke away from the phalanx to attack the skirmishers. The reduction in range would probably have increased the accuracy and the effectiveness of the peltasts' attacks, which would also have made it more likely that any hoplite formation that they attacked would fall apart. When the phalanx lost cohesion, the cavalry could then run down the fleeing hoplites.

The battles in Boeotia, Thrace, and Chalcidian Thrace showed that the infantry were often at the mercy of the cavalry. Many historians assume that because Greek cavalry did not normally plow into infantry formations as did knights from the Middle Ages, cavalry did not normally play a decisive role on the Greek battlefield. This assumption arises from the belief that the violent crashes between hoplite phalanxes decided the outcome on the Greek battlefield. The evidence, however, demonstrates that this assumption dramatically undervalues the decisive role that cavalry played on the Greek battlefield. When operating with light infantry, horsemen could rip apart phalanxes that could otherwise hold out against other hoplites. The Spartans likely owed their victory at Tanagra to the defection of the Thessalian cavalry. Even when their infantry were routed, the Chalcidians' cavalry and light infantry defeated the Athenians. Horsemen also turned a tactical rout into a strategic triumph through the vicious pursuit of fleeing hoplites at Amphipolis. These victories won by Greek horsemen permanently crushed Athenian power in Thrace.

The earlier Boeotian victory at Delium provides another example of how the cavalry could turn a battle around. In 424 BCE, the Athenians invaded Boeotia and established a supply base near Delium. The Boeotian Confederation rallied, and under the command of the Theban *boeotarch* Pagondas, challenged the Athenians to fight.⁴⁹ Before the battle, the Athenian *strategos* Hippocrates left three

⁴⁸ Gaebel, 95-96.

⁴⁹ Thuc. 91.

hundred Athenian cavalry behind at the base at Delium.⁵⁰ The Athenians then split their remaining cavalry between both flanks.⁵¹ Pagondas placed a detachment by Delium to prevent the Athenian cavalry from sallying out and divided his remaining thousand cavalry and ten thousand light troops between both flanks.⁵² During the battle, the Boeotian left collapsed, but Pagondas dispatched two squadrons of cavalry around the hills to surprise the Athenians and to save his left flank.⁵³ The Athenians up till this point had been winning, but the sudden arrival of cavalry unnerved the hoplites on the victorious Athenian right flank.⁵⁴ Having just shoved and stabbed their way through a horrible mêlée, the Athenian hoplites on the right panicked at the thought that a new Boeotian army had arrived and that they would have to endure a second round of hard contact.⁵⁵ The right flank collapsed. Despite the advantage of attacking from the high ground and their superiority in depth, the Theban phalanx being twenty-five men deep compared to the Athenian phalanx's depth of eight men, the Boeotian hoplites on the right were unable to break the Athenian hoplites on the left. Instead, they had to be content with slowly pushing the Athenians down the hill.⁵⁶ Yet it was only after the seeing their right flank break that the Athenian left flank panicked and fled.⁵⁷ As the Athenian hoplites fled, the Boeotian and Locrian cavalry pursued and slaughtered the shattered Athenians.⁵⁸ Once again, the cavalryman, not the hoplite, played the decisive role on the battlefield.

Another instance of cavalry thwarting Athens' ambitions can be seen in the disastrous Athenian expedition to Sicily (415-413 BCE). Nicias warned the Athenians that Syracuse's chief advantages against the Athenians lay not with her hoplites and light troops, but with her horsemen and her ability to grow

⁵⁰ Thuc., 4.93.2.

⁵¹ Thuc., 4.94.1.

⁵² Thuc. 4.93.3-4.

⁵³ Thuc., 4.96.3-5.

⁵⁴ Thuc., 4.96.5.

⁵⁵ Thuc., 4.96.5.

⁵⁶ Thuc., 4.96.4.

⁵⁷ Thuc., 4.96.6.

⁵⁸ Thuc., 4.96.8.

grain at home instead of importing it.⁵⁹ Despite his own warning, however, Nicias never asked for horsemen.⁶⁰ Instead, he requested hoplites and triremes as well as archers and slingers to counter the enemy horsemen.⁶¹ Yet contrary to what Hanson argues, this exclusion of cavalry from his requested troops was not an indication that Nicias undervalued cavalry.⁶² The feasibility of bringing cavalry even in the Athenians' horse transport ships was a massive undertaking. Horse transport continued to pose logistical problems even into the eighteenth century CE; when the British army attempted to move horses from England to Boston during the American War for Independence, only 532 horses out of 856 horses survived the trip.⁶³ The Athenians under Pericles' command had transported three hundred cavalry to raid Epidaurus, but the trip across the gulf that separated Attica from the Peloponnese was a mere fifty miles; in contrast, the trip from Athens to Sicily was more than six hundred miles.⁶⁴ The Athenians likely recognized the dangers this distance would pose to their horses because when they finally did dispatch a sizable contingent of cavalrymen from Athens, they sent them without their mounts.⁶⁵ Also, while Pericles could not have hoped to procure cavalry in the Peloponnese, the Athenians seem to have been confident that they would be able to obtain cavalry once they arrived in Sicily.⁶⁶ Fears of Athenian imperial ambition, however, dissuaded Greek city-states in Magna Graeca from adequately supporting the Athenian venture.⁶⁷ The result would be disastrous for the Athenians.

Almost from the beginning of the Sicilian expedition (415 BCE), the efforts of enemy cavalry crippled the Athenian expedition's efforts in Sicily. The Syracusan cavalry first confined the Athenians to their camp, and at one point, the Syracusan cavalry rode down and slaughtered a great number of

⁵⁹ Thuc., 6.20.4.

⁶⁰ Thuc., 6.22.

⁶¹ Thuc. 6.22.

⁶² Hanson, *A War Like No Other*, 208.

⁶³ John Tokar, "Logistics and the British Defeat in the Revolutionary War," *Army Sustainment Magazine* September-October. 1999, accessed 8 December 2013, <http://www.almc.army.mil/alog/issues/sepoct99/ms409.htm>.

⁶⁴ Thuc. 2.56.

⁶⁵ Thuc., 6.94.4.

⁶⁶ Thuc., 6.21.

⁶⁷ Thuc., 6.44, 79, 88.

Athens' light troops, which Nicias had been depending on to counter the Syracusan horse.⁶⁸ This disaster might explain why the Athenians were unable to drive off the Syracusan horse in later battles and could not press their pursuit of the defeated Syracusan phalanxes. Eventually, the Athenians were unable to move at all, and it is likely that any attempt to move their troops by sea would have ended disastrously, as enemy cavalry could attack the hoplites as they landed before they could form up into a phalanx. As such, the Athenians chose instead to send a double agent to the Syracusans to trick them into sending their cavalry away from the city so that the Athenians could land near Syracuse.⁶⁹ When the Athenian force landed, the Athenian commanders must have realized that they could not hope to conduct offensive operations until the enemy's cavalry were neutralized, so the Athenian commanders decided to fortify a position where the enemy could not attack their flanks and await the Syracusan attack.⁷⁰

Syracuse's cavalry consistently denied the Athenians the decisive victory they needed to end the campaign. From the winter of 415 BCE through the majority of the summer of 414 BCE, the Athenian hoplites consistently routed the Syracusan hoplites.⁷¹ Indeed, until the final days of the campaign, the Syracusans were on the verge of collapse.⁷² The Athenian commanders, however, failed to find a way to press their pursuit and to turn the tactical rout into a strategic victory. A massive disaster on the scale of what the Athenians suffered at Amphipolis or Delium could have been fatal to Syracuse's independence. The Athenians, however, lacked what the Chalcidians and the Boeotians had: abundant cavalry. In contrast, the Syracusans had an advantage in cavalry and used it effectively on the battlefield. The Athenian hoplites were forced to pursue the defeated Syracusan levies in formation because the Syracusan cavalry hovered around the Athenian phalanx. For example, at the battle near the Olympieum, the Athenians and their Argive allies split the Syracusan phalanx in half and routed both

⁶⁸ Thuc., 6.52.2.

⁶⁹ Thuc. 6.64-5.

⁷⁰ Thuc., 6.66.1.

⁷¹ Thuc., 6.70, 97, 98, 100-102; 7.5.

⁷² Thuc., 6.103.3-4.

halves.⁷³ The Athenians, however, were unable to exploit this tactical success because the Syracusans' cavalry stymied the pursuit of the infantry and allowed the Syracusan hoplites to withdraw unmolested.⁷⁴ The Syracusan infantry could also move with relative safety behind the Athenian lines because the Syracusan cavalry could restrain the enemy's infantry from moving quickly enough to block such a maneuver. Even after the Athenians defeated the Syracusan phalanx at Olympieum, they were unable to prevent the Syracusans from dispatching a force to garrison Olympieum, which was now behind the Athenian lines.⁷⁵ Syracuse's cavalry consistently denied the Athenians the decisive victory they needed to defeat Syracuse. Therefore, it may be said without exaggerating that the Syracusans owed their city's salvation to their horsemen.

Even after the Spartan military adviser Gylippus arrived with reinforcements from Corinth in the summer of 414 BCE, the Syracusan cavalry remained the decisive factor in defeating the Athenians on the land.⁷⁶ Gylippus restored morale and supplemented the Syracusan phalanx's ranks with Corinthian hoplites; nevertheless, the Syracusans were once again defeated by the Athenians hoplites in the initial vicious fighting between the Athenians' siege walls and the Syracusans' city walls.⁷⁷ Gylippus then realized that they had lost because he had chosen ground that did not permit his cavalry to participate effectively in the conflict.⁷⁸ Robert Gaebel points out that Sparta did not raise her own cavalry forces until she was forced to by Athenian naval raids on the coast of the Peloponnese, so it is remarkable that a Spartan recognized and admitted that cavalry were a critical military arm.⁷⁹ During the next sally, Gylippus deployed his troops in such a position as to permit the use of cavalry. In the ensuing battle, the Athenians lost, and the Syracusans extended their counter-wall beyond the Athenian siege wall. The

⁷³ Thuc., 6.70.2.

⁷⁴ Thuc. 6.70.3.

⁷⁵ Thuc., 6.70.4.

⁷⁶ Thuc., 7.5-6.

⁷⁷ Thuc., 7.5.2.

⁷⁸ Thuc., 7.5-6.

⁷⁹ Gaebel, 106.

ubiquitous Sicilian cavalry continued to patrol around the Athenians' camp, preventing the hoplites and the sailors from foraging or gathering firewood. As a result, Athenian morale plummeted, and after the Syracusans smashed the Athenian fleet, Nicias decided to retreat overland.⁸⁰ Though the Athenians managed to give the Syracusans the slip twice, the Syracusan cavalry were able to retard the Athenians' march enough that the Syracusan infantry caught up with them. At one point, the Syracusan cavalry reduced the Athenian retreat to six stadia, a distance of less than a mile, allowing their main force to overtake the demoralized Athenians.⁸¹ The Athenians were either slaughtered or captured and pressed into hard labor at the quarries.⁸² Those Athenians fortunate enough to survive were branded with the sign of a horse to remind them of the cavalymen who ensured their defeat at every turn.⁸³

The campaign in Sicily demonstrates that infantry could not effectively maneuver with enemy cavalry prowling around, ready to engage anyone who fell out of formation. The Athenians failed to turn tactical successes into strategic victories because the Syracusan cavalry could cut down individuals or pockets of hoplites that pursued their defeated infantry. As a result, Athenians had to move in formation, and movement in such circumstances, as seen when the Athenians attempted to flee from Syracuse, could be painfully slow. If the Syracusan cavalry could restrict the Athenian movement to 0.61 miles per day, it is no wonder that the Syracusan infantry could send troops to fortify positions behind the Athenian lines or prevent effective pursuits by Athenian infantry. Cavalry rendered the Athenian infantry helpless and dealt Athens her most crushing defeat on land during the Peloponnesian Wars, again proving their usefulness far and beyond what historians had previously thought.

After the Peloponnesian Wars, cavalry continued to play an important role in the armies of the ancient Greeks. The Battle of Sardis illustrates the progress in the development of Greek cavalry. In the

⁸⁰ Thuc. 7.13.2, 7.78.6.

⁸¹ This works out to .68 miles or 1.11 kilometers assuming that Thucydides used the Attic definition of a stadion as 185 meters.

⁸² Thuc. 7.86.2 and 7.87.1-2.

⁸³ Plut. *Nic.*, 29.1.

past, Greek horsemen had not normally attempted to challenge the superior Persian cavalry, and when the Greek horsemen did challenge the Persians, the Persians normally won.⁸⁴ Yet according to Xenophon's account of the battle at Sardis in the *Hellenica*, not only did the Ionian cavalry stand up to the Persian cavalry, but eventually the Persian cavalry even broke and fled. However, it must be said that Xenophon may have inflated the importance of cavalry to the Greek victory at Sardis. One must consider that Xenophon likely served as the commander of the Greek cavalry.⁸⁵ If this was the case, he may well have wanted to show the improvement in the Greek cavalry since he had assumed joint command. The dust kicked up by thousands of horse hooves would also have limited Xenophon's view of the battle. Finally, as Xenophon was writing more of a memoir than a history, his account naturally would have been limited to his own personal experience and interests.

After the Peloponnesian Wars, the Spartans dominated Greece. Sparta's allies, however, were furious that the Spartans had not imposed harsher terms on Athens after her final defeat at Aegospotami (405-404 BCE).⁸⁶ In addition, the allies resented Spartans' heavy-handed treatment; after Athens was defeated, the Spartans compelled their Theban allies to disband the Boeotian Confederation and to receive a Spartan garrison. As such, in 378 BCE, the Thebans assassinated the leaders of the pro-Sparta government in Thebes and evicted the Spartan garrison from the city.⁸⁷ In response, the Spartans declared war.⁸⁸ The two most important battles in this war between Sparta and Thebes were fought at Leuctra (371 BCE) and Mantinea (362 BCE).

The Battle of Leuctra illustrates the important role cavalry could play on the battlefield. The battle began with the Boeotian cavalry running roughshod over the Spartan cavalry throwing the

⁸⁴ Xen. *Hell.* 3.4.13-4.

⁸⁵ Thuc., 3.4.20. Xenophon is likely the "one other man" he says commanded the cavalry at Sardis under the Spartan king Agesilaus.

⁸⁶ Thuc., 2.2.19-20.

⁸⁷ Thuc., 5.4.2-12.

⁸⁸ Thuc., 5.4.13-14.

Peloponnesian horsemen back into the Spartan phalanx.⁸⁹ Xenophon writes that the Peloponnesian cavalry collided with and disorganized the Spartan hoplite formation at the same time that the Theban hoplites on the right crashed into the Spartans.⁹⁰ Historians tend to emphasize the disproportionate depth of the two phalanx formations as the decisive factor in the battle: the Spartan formation was twelve hoplites deep, while the Thebans' phalanx was fifty shields deep.⁹¹ Ultimately, the weight of the Theban phalanx and the slaughter of the Spartan commanders caused the Spartans to break, but one can see the role cavalry played by a quick comparison of Leuctra with Delium. At Delium, the Boeotian hoplite phalanx had a depth of twenty-five men, and they were unable to shatter the Athenians despite having the advantage of charging downhill.⁹² Military historians typically agree that the weight of the men in the middle and the rear of the phalanx pushing the man in the front was traditionally the key to victory in a fight between hoplites.⁹³ Yet the fact remains that the Athenian hoplites and later the Spartan hoplites initially held under tremendous pressure. Therefore, the weight of the Theban phalanx at Leuctra might not have been as decisive as previously supposed. It is possible that the Spartans may have chosen to die rather than to break, had it not been for the destruction of their leadership on that flank and the disorder in their ranks.⁹⁴ The Spartan phalanx lost cohesion when the Spartan cavalry stumbled back into the formation, causing men to move out of formation in order to avoid being trampled by their own cavalry. This panic happened at the same time that the Theban hoplites came crashing into the Spartans.⁹⁵ The hoplite phalanx's power depended on the formation's cohesion; if that was lost, not even Spartan hoplites could hope to hold back the tide. With no time to reorganize, the

⁸⁹ Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.13.

⁹⁰ Xen. *Hell.* 6.14.

⁹¹ Xen. *Hell.*, 6.4.12-3.

⁹² Thuc. 4.96.4.

⁹³ Hanson, *The Western Way of War*, 172, 174-76.

⁹⁴ Diod. Sic. 15.55.4-15.56.3.

⁹⁵ Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.13.

Spartans still put up a stubborn fight. One can only wonder what might have happened at Leuctra had the Spartan phalanx had not been disrupted by the retreat of its own cavalry.

Spartan hegemony over central Greece died at Leuctra, but Epaminondas decided to bring the war to Sparta. During his last invasion of the Peloponnese, the great general's every move had been successfully countered by the Spartans and their allies.⁹⁶ Epaminondas decided that before he withdrew for the harvest, he would confront the Spartan coalition at Mantinea in order to save his reputation and to restore his allies' confidence.⁹⁷ At the Battle of Mantinea, the Theban general Epaminondas placed a great deal of reliance on the cavalry, and they nearly turned the battle into the ultimate victory that Epaminondas wanted.

Xenophon states that Epaminondas pinned his hopes of victory on the success of the Boeotian cavalry.⁹⁸ At Mantinea, Epaminondas formed his cavalry into wedges, a formation that was optimal for smashing into other formations, and mixed light infantry in his cavalry formation.⁹⁹ These light infantry could hold onto the horse's tail and flank and run behind but slightly to the side of the charging cavalry.¹⁰⁰ This tactic allowed the Boeotian cavalry to overwhelm the enemy's cavalry with superior numbers and engage infantry like the Chalcidian cavalry had at Spartolus and Amphipolis. In the first stage of the battle, the numerical superiority of the Theban cavalry and javelin men allowed the Boeotians to run roughshod over the Athenian horse.¹⁰¹ The Theban cavalry then hit the Athenian hoplite phalanx in the flank, causing the formation to collapse. Thus, the Theban cavalry likely would have cut down a great number of the Athenian infantry, had it not been for the timely countercharge by

⁹⁶ Xen. *Hell.* 7.5.10-13, 15-17.

⁹⁷ Xen. *Hell.* 7.5.18.

⁹⁸ Xen. *Hell.* 7.5.24.

⁹⁹ Xen. *Hell.* 7.5.23-4.

¹⁰⁰ For an illustration on an Athenian frieze, see *The Landmark Xenophon's Hellenika* (New York: Anchor, 2010), 314. The light infantry man holds onto the horse's tail and flank, running slightly the side of the horse in order to avoid being kicked and takes long strides.

¹⁰¹ Diod. Sic. 15.85.4-5.

the Eleian cavalry.¹⁰² The Theban cavalry were likely disorganized by their pursuit of the Athenians and were unable to reform a line in time to receive the Eleian cavalry charge. The Eleian counterattack halted the Boeotian pursuit of the routed Athenians and finally turned the tide of the battle on that flank.¹⁰³

Despite the prevailing scholastic opinion to the contrary, the evidence indicates that cavalry, not hoplites, often played the decisive role on the Greek battlefield. The evidence presented does show that Greek cavalry could deliver punishing charges: at Spartolus, the Chalcidian cavalry hammered the Athenian phalanx with repeated charges, and at Mantinea, the Boeotian cavalry crashed into the Athenian hoplites on the right flank. Greek cavalry, however, were better equipped to engage the enemy with skirmish tactics and were ill-equipped to charge spearmen head-on. This shortcoming has caused many military historians to assume Greek horsemen were normally ineffective on the battlefield because cavalry could not be deployed as a shock weapon against hoplites. This thinking, however, assumes that cavalry are effective only when used as a sledgehammer, but as seen at the battles of Spartolus and Potidaea and in the history of other cavalry nations such as the Mongols, horsemen can be incredibly lethal without charging straight into the waiting spears of enemy infantry. Even Alexander exploited gaps in infantry lines to ride around in order to hit the enemy in the rear, and Macedonian cavalry did not normally charge into hoplite phalanxes head-on. Cavalry also played a critical strategic role in Greek warfare. As shown at Pharsalus and Syracuse, once one side gained cavalry superiority, the other side's infantry were effectively under siege. If Athens had deployed sufficient cavalry at Thrace or Sicily, the outcome of the Peloponnesian Wars may have been different. These examples should prompt scholars of ancient military history to reconsider the assumption that the hoplite was the dominant military arm in the ancient Greek military. Greek cavalry could and did play a decisive role on the battlefield, even if their use did not conform to the West's image of the armored knight plowing into

¹⁰² Diod. Sic. 15.85.6-7.

helpless infantry. As the above battle accounts illustrate, it was they, not hoplites, who were often the decisive force on the battlefield.

¹⁰³ Diod. Sic. 15.85.6-7.

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