

The Battle of Chaeronea: The Culmination of Philip II  
of Macedon's Grand Strategy

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In August 338 BC, Philip II of Macedon (c. 382-336 BC) won a major battle near the central Greek city of Chaeronea against a coalition of city-states. The Latin historian Justin wrote, "This day put an end to the glorious sovereignty and ancient liberty of all Greece."<sup>1</sup> Though he became master of the region, Philip did not annex it directly into the Macedonian kingdom after spending many years in conflict, especially with Athens, in what logically looked like a grab for the whole of Greece. Instead, Philip simply imposed hegemony. By the spring of 337 he revealed why: the quest to conquer Persia. Evidence suggests, therefore, that Greece's cooperation and resources were essentially tools he had intended to use all along to accomplish this vastly larger goal. When he won the day at Chaeronea, Philip completed one of the most important steps in a grand strategy that was more than twenty years in the making.

### Classical Sources

Whether Philip already had the conquest of Persia in mind when he became king of Macedonia in 359 BC while still in his early twenties is not recorded in any of the surviving ancient accounts. For the battle of Chaeronea, the most detailed source is the *Bibliotheca historica*, written by the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus between 60 and 30 BC.<sup>2</sup> Additional information can be gleaned from Justin's work, written much later, between the second and fourth centuries AD and from fragments by Theopompus of Chios, Plutarch and a few others, but these are minor and considered unreliable. Demosthenes, the famed Athenian orator, wrote numerous diatribes that casti-

gated Philip, offering some context, but his rants were mostly propaganda. Overall, in following Diodorus's account, the flow of events suggests that from the day Philip became king, he immediately began to implement an overall strategy that was leading him towards the planned Persian expedition.

### **Background Context**

Taking over a fractured and impoverished Macedonia, within ten years Philip rebuilt the army, unified the kingdom internally, secured its frontiers and stimulated the economy with resources that had been grossly underused. Much of his success was due to his understanding of highly mobile and disciplined military tactics, the wise use of resources, and clever diplomacy that often included not only negotiation and strategic political marriages but outright deceit as well. Held hostage in Thebes from about the age of thirteen to fifteen, Philip likely had learned military tactics from the Theban generals Pammenes and Epaminondas, the latter considered one of the best generals prior to Philip. This education served Philip well, demonstrated in his rapid gain of firm control over his realm. Further, while governor of the port of Amphaxitis under his brother Perdiccas III's rule (r. 369-359 BC), he may have also experimented with military tactics that supported some of his later reforms.

A major contribution to Philip's military success included his innovative Macedonian phalanx that was spearheaded—literally—by the eighteen-foot long, iron-tipped pike called the *sarissa*, much longer than any of the shorter weapons the Greeks wielded. Marching in tight ranks, the Macedonian phalanx was usually shaped in a wedge formation. During attacks, the forward few rows held the *sarissa* horizontally with both hands; each row offset behind the one in front, so the long pikes protruded between the soldiers ahead.

Philip drilled them arduously until they could skillfully march and run with the long pikes. The weapon served both offensively and defensively, lightening his soldiers' overall equipment load and increasing their mobility. Shields became smaller and were slung over the shoulder so the phalanx formation could be denser.<sup>3</sup> The Greeks also used a phalanx, but in a more static block formation compared to the quill-pointed Macedonian wedge that was more flexible and maneuverable.

As Philip gained territory, he levied from these new lands native men who were already trained as archers or javelin throwers. Moreover, cavalry grew into an important element in Philip's army. Originally a group of retainers from Macedonian nobility, these horsemen became known as "Companions." When Philip's influence deepened in the powerful region of Thessaly, he gained access to mercenary cavalrymen and Thessalian horses, considered the strongest and fastest animals of the day. After he subdued Thrace in the late 340s, it became a prime source for additional mounted soldiers. Cavalry became the army's main shock force, also in a wedge formation and used to attack enemy flanks while the infantry focused on the center. While Philip learned the phalanx from the Greeks, he may have picked up the wedge from the Thracians.<sup>4</sup>

To the Greeks, Philip was quickly seen as a dire threat. Though embroiled in bulking up Macedonia's strength and fighting off incursions from neighboring enemies, in 358 BC Philip already began to interfere in Greek affairs. Constantly on the move, his army rarely lost a battle, and throughout the twenty years following his accession, Philip gradually increased his influence in Greek lands. He took advantage of the distraction and growing weakness that Athens and other predominant city-states created in their continuous struggle for supremacy over each other. Although defeated in the devastating Peloponnesian War that ended in 403 BC, Athens had rebuilt

some of its power and was still considered—traditionally and psychologically—the leading power in Greece.

### The Road to Chaeronea

Philip must have known from the beginning that to gain control of Greece he would need to defeat Athens at some point. He also must have known he could not simply rush in and pick a fight, demonstrated in how he bided his time for a little over two decades. In 340-339 BC, he moved closer towards this goal. He took control of Greek colonial cities on the northern coast of the Aegean Sea, a region that Athens had long considered its own. He captured the Athenian corn fleet and declared war on Athens. Ongoing for years, a bitter rivalry between Philip and Demosthenes turned fierce. Trying to prod the Athenians to fight back, Demosthenes spoke of Philip: “not only is he no Hellene, not only has he no kinship with Hellenes, but he is not even a barbarian from a country that one could acknowledge with credit;—he is a pestilent Macedonian, from whose country it used not to be possible to buy even a slave of any value.”<sup>5</sup> Underlying the diatribe, Demosthenes understood how dangerous, ambitious and capable Philip was.

The Amphictyonic Council, an alliance to protect temples and sacred lands, knew of Philip’s interest in determining Greek affairs. When it declared a sacred war (Fourth Sacred War, 339 BC) against Amphissa, a city that had been farming on sacred ground, the council made Philip its *hegemon* (leader), obligating him to mitigate the sacrilege. The action provided Philip with the right excuse to move farther into Greece.

Justin wrote that fearing Philip, the Thebans allied with their long-time foes, the Athenians, along with other Greek cities.<sup>6</sup> Under Theban control, the road Philip needed to take southward to ex-

cute his duty was blocked. Undeterred, he chose a mountain route into Phocis, a region he had previously defeated in the Third Sacred War (356-46 BC). With the winter of 339-38 coming on and his leg still healing from a severe spear wound received in the spring, he abruptly turned and seized Elatea, a city that gave him access to Amphissa, Thebes, and most importantly, Athens, only three days' march away. He restored Elatea's fortifications and the political structure of Phocis, turning it into his winter base. In the meantime, he sent envoys to Thebes, hoping to secure an alliance with it at the expense of Athens, the diplomats pointing out that if the Thebans did not join Philip they would face both his and the Council's wrath.

Athens was jittery. Demosthenes called for all able men to march north into Bœotia and prepare for war while he himself traveled to Thebes to try to hold onto the alliance, but a Macedonian envoy was already there. Apparently Demosthenes was convincing—whatever he said is unknown—the Thebans remained allied with Athens in spite of the consequences.<sup>7</sup>

The Thebans positioned one force on the road to Amphissa, and another on the border of Bœotia to block Philip from reaching Attica and therefore Athens. Both forces included large numbers of mercenaries hired by the Athenians. Most other city-states refused to join the Athenian-Theban alliance out of animosity towards Athens' previous exploitations and manipulations of them. Likewise, except for Phocis that lay in a precarious location and was grateful for Philip's restoration of its towns, few joined the Macedonians.

While preparing for the coming battle with Athens, in the spring of 338 BC Philip executed his obligation to the Amphictyonic League. But to reach Amphissa to settle the issue, he faced an enemy force of 10,000 mercenaries. Patiently, he wrote a letter saying he was going to withdraw from a specified position. The letter was sent—deliberately where it would be intercepted by the enemy—

while he feigned withdrawal. The mercenaries let down their guard and Philip's general Parmenion easily surprised them. Within three hours, Amphissa was taken. The Fourth Sacred War ended. More importantly, central Greece was opened to Philip.

## **The Battle**

Details of the battle itself are inconsistent in the sources, causing much historical debate among scholars, but with Diodorus's description as a foundation, Chaeronea is thought to have unfolded as follows: the Athenian coalition decided to hold a pitched battle on the border of Phocis, northwest of the city of Chaeronea that would determine their fate. About two miles wide, the plain of Chaeronea was crossed by several rivers, bordered with hills to the north and south, and swampy land to the east. The restricted space gave, in the Athenians' opinion, their best bet to defeat Philip.<sup>8</sup>

In late summer, the Macedonians camped for at least a day along the Cephissus River on the eastern edge of the plain. They are estimated to have had about 30,000 foot soldiers and 2,000 cavalry. About 20 percent of the infantry were from Macedonian allies. The Greeks camped on the opposite side along the stream called the Haemon, their coalition totaling about 30,000 infantry and 3,800 cavalry. The majority of this infantry were armed as hoplites. While the exact position of the two armies is not certain, historians generally believe that the Greeks stretched their forces across the plain, approximately in a west-east line. They were arranged by ethnic group, their Bœotian allies with their elite Sacred Band of warriors all the way by the Cephissus River, the Athenians and 5,000 light infantry on the left wing by the Haemon near Chaeronea's acropolis. Other allies filled in the center. Facing the Greek right flank, the Macedonian left flank was comprised of the elite Companion Caval-

ry, headed by Philip's son Alexander (eighteen at the time) and probably two top generals. Philip himself and his most elite men faced the Athenians. The bulk of his phalanx was stationed in the center. The Greek allies were supposedly in a superior but defensive position. Philip realized at once that they planned to stretch his line out in order to thin the phalanx. In the constrained fighting space, the cavalry was also limited in effectiveness. If the Macedonian line weakened, it could break and be forced into the marshes. Conversely, if the Greek line broke, the enemy could escape over the Kerata Pass to the south, too narrow for cavalry to pursue.<sup>9</sup>

Philip's army had far more battle experience and discipline, having fought almost every year since he became king. The Athenians had cobbled together their forces in haste, calling up "all the Athenian youth,"<sup>10</sup> hence, inexperienced men, and "at least 6,000 soldiers up to the age of fifty," men no longer in their fighting prime.<sup>11</sup> Further, the best Athenian generals were all dead.<sup>12</sup> Philip, wily as ever, used three tactics. First, he moved his line forward at an oblique angle, he and his right flank closing in earliest. Second, he appears to have feigned retreat, though this tactic's use has been debated. If true, the action pulled the Greek allies to the right, opening gaps they tried to fill but could not close. The well trained Macedonian line held. And third, Alexander took advantage of the gaps, charging with his flank through the Greeks, destroying the Sacred Band and defeating the rest of the Bœotians. At the same time, Philip halted his retreat and the phalanx drove the Athenians into an utter rout. Demosthenes, who had joined the Athenian army, deserted and fled. Greece was now under Macedonian control.

### **The Peace Settlement**

In 337 BC, the year after Chaeronea, Philip revealed that he was

planning to invade Asia. His reasoning was that he must follow the Greek vision of the past and needed to “avenge the Persian invasion of Macedonia and Greece of 480 BC.”<sup>13</sup> With this goal in mind and from the day after the battle, Philip set about finding the most efficacious way to control Greece while gaining its support. His supreme diplomacy came into play once more. He stationed few garrisons—only those that were necessary—judging from past problems in which foreign garrisons brought resentment and rebellion. Athens feared a coming siege, but Philip went easy on the city, sending Alexander and high-ranking generals on a mission of peace, honorably returning the ashes of dead Athenian soldiers and bringing home prisoners while not demanding ransom. He punished Thebes harshly, an act of which Athens would approve.

Historian Ian Worthington speculates that Philip needed to promote good relations with Athens. If he were to punish the city, he would generate the same ill will the Persians had created in their tough treatment in the 480s. Further, Athens was still the most formidable and resilient city in Greece, the most likely to rebel, given the traditional fierce independence Greek city-states craved. Philip also needed to prevent Thebes from becoming a high-ranking power again. Athens could help with that.

Though Athens had to make some concessions in the peace settlement, it kept intact most of its political structure, navy and territory. Philip also made agreements directly with other major cities. Then in Corinth, at a meeting of envoys from each state, he set up the foundation for a Common Peace, a “constitutional mechanism that would keep the Greeks passive and under the rule of Macedonia in his absence.”<sup>14</sup> Each city-state had to swear an oath to not interfere or harm any other state or to ally with any foreign power. A council was created to manage the peace agreement and settle disputes. In creating this structure, Philip let Greece feel it was han-



dling its own affairs and he would not be perceived as a despot. Except for Sparta, all the states accepted the settlement, creating what modern scholars call the League of Corinth. At a second meeting, Philip was elected its *hegemon*.

## Conclusion

Chaeronea has been called one of the most decisive battles in ancient history.<sup>5</sup> Although Philip could not have pinpointed when or where the final battle between the Macedonians and Athens would occur when he took the kingship in 359, he likely envisioned its eventuality as part of his master plan. He wanted to “lead a united Macedonian and Greek army against the Persian Empire.”<sup>16</sup> Overall, Philip saw Greece as a tool and Chaeronea was the step in his grand strategy that gave him that tool. Ironically, he never participated in his ultimate goal; Philip was assassinated in 336 BC. It was left to his son Alexander to carry out the mission.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Justin, *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus*, transl. Rev John Selby Watson (London: Henry G Bohn, 1853), Book VII-IX. <http://forumromanum.org/literature/justin/english/trans9.html> (accessed August 14, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *The Historical Library of Diodorus the Sicilian in Fifteen Books*, Trans. by G. Booth (London: 1814), Book XVI <http://books.google.com/?id=E1UDAAAAMAAJ> (accessed August 27, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Michael M. Sage, *Warfare in Ancient Greece: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1996), 166-68.

<sup>4</sup> Arrian, *Tactics*, 16.6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Demosthenes, *Public Orations of Demosthenes*, Vol.2, 9.31, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/9061/pg9061.html> (accessed September 18, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Justin, *Epitome*, 8.2.

<sup>7</sup> Plutarch, *The Parallel Lives: The Life of Demosthenes*, [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Demosthenes\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Demosthenes*.html) (accessed September 18, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Ian Worthington, *Philip of Macedonia*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 147.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>10</sup> Diodorus, *Historical Library of Diodorus*, 16.85.2.

<sup>11</sup> Worthington, *Philip*, 148.

<sup>12</sup> Diodorus, *Historical Library*, 16.85.2.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas R. Martin, *Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 190.

<sup>14</sup> Worthington, *Philip of Macedonia*, 159.

<sup>15</sup> George Cawkwell, *Philip of Macedon* (London: Faber & Faber, 1978), 148.

<sup>16</sup> Martin, *Ancient Greece*, 190.

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***Kathleen Guler's biography was not available at the time of publishing.***