

The Spartan Defeat at Lechaeum

One of the most memorable episodes of the Corinthian War (395-386 B.C.) is Xenophon's vivid account of how a large force of mercenary peltasts under the command of the Athenian Iphicrates gained victory over a *mora* of Spartan hoplites near the port of Lechaeum in 390 B.C., killing approximately 250 out of 600 hoplites, or about 40% of the regiment's original strength (*Hell.* 4.5.11-17). Plutarch aptly describes this heavy defeat as "the greatest disaster" for the Spartans (*Ages.* 22.2). Given the importance of Iphicrates' achievement for our understanding of lightly armed infantrymen in Classical Greece, it is unsurprising that scholars have sought to study the confrontation at Lechaeum, both reconstructing the course of the fighting and offering an explanation for the outcome (e.g. Best 1969; Anderson 1970; Lazenby 1985; Konecney 2001). In this presentation I argue that Lechaeum should not be taken as an example, along with Demosthenes' victory on Sphacteria (425 B.C.), of the Spartans' supposed inability to adapt to the increased prominence of non-hoplite troops in contemporary warfare, but should instead be attributed to Iphicrates' exceptional generalship.

An assessment of his military career suggests that he was an unusually enterprising and resourceful commander who understood acutely how different types of troops, such as hoplites, javelin-men, and cavalry, should be combined to defeat his opponents (*Poly. Strat.* 3.9.22; cf. *Xen. Oec.* 8.6). While he was not an innovator of peltast tactics nor a reformer of their equipment – despite garbled late sources (*D.S.* 15.44.2-4; *Nep. Iphic.* 1.3-4) – his originality in the Corinthian War was in building upon the already well-honed individual missile-skills of his skirmishers and in taking advantage of the unique circumstances concerning the employment of his mercenary contingent (Parke 1933; Pritchett 1974). Specifically, his contribution lay in his emphasis on constant unit drill and unusually strict (if not excessively harsh) discipline, with the

result that the peltasts could fight effectively in good order while arrayed in loose formation, regardless of the battlefield situation (Nep. *Iphic.* 2.2; Poly. *Strat.* 3.9.32). Taken together with Iphicrates' ability to exploit any enemy mistake, his force of experienced and trained peltasts, perhaps numbering in the thousands, was a formidable instrument of war by 390 B.C.

At Lechaeum, it was the decision of the *polemarch* to divide his forces, with the cavalry accompanying the Amyclaeans towards Sikyon while his *mora* was returning to Lechaeum, which provided the opportunity for Iphicrates. Despite this blunder, I argue that the decisive moment in the battle was the failure of the very first Spartan hoplite pursuit, where the youngest hoplites would charge out the phalanx and attempt to engage the peltasts in close combat, in response to the peltasts' missile-fire directed against their unshielded side (Xen. *Hell.* 4.5.13-15). Iphicrates, anticipating the pursuit and knowing from experience that the Spartans were swift enough to catch peltasts even at the length of a javelin's cast (Xen. *Hell.* 4.4.16), gave explicit instructions to his troops, which they obeyed, to retire before the Spartans came near. This had two important consequences. First, it raised the morale of the peltasts, who pressed their attack with greater determination. Second, all subsequent Spartan pursuits were rendered ineffective. Nor did the reappearance of the cavalry retrieve the increasingly desperate situation for the *polemarch*, on account of the close proximity of Callias' Athenian hoplites stationed not far from Corinth (Xen. *Hell.* 4.5.16-17). This cooperation between Iphicrates and Callias ensured that there would be no escape for the Spartans. After the former had worn them out, the latter's advance put the demoralized *mora* to flight, just as Iphicrates had intended.

Bibliography

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