

Carthage's Sacred Band: Fact or Fiction?

Today, you would be hard pressed to find a work which discusses Carthage's army without mentioning the *Ἱερὸς Λόχος* (in English, the Sacred Band of Carthage). First appearing in Diodorus in 339 BCE, Carthage's Sacred Band was supposedly a citizen only unit of handpicked soldiers (Diod.16.80.4), a peculiarity if we believe the Greeks that Carthage favored mercenary armies (See Polybius 6.52). Its name—a direct reference to the Sacred Band of Thebes—calls to mind Greece. But, where the Sacred Band of Thebes was assuredly real, I argue that the Sacred Band of Carthage is largely fiction.

In my paper, I contend that the *Ἱερὸς Λόχος* is Diodorus' attempt to create a literary device and explain away inconsistencies about the Carthaginian army. To elaborate, there are clear signs in Diodorus' account that the Sacred Band of Carthage mirrors the Sacred Band of Thebes. Further, comparisons between Diodorus and Plutarch cast doubt on the Carthaginian Band. Overall, I argue that what Diodorus is actually describing is a citizen core of the army, and that by naming it the *Ἱερὸς Λόχος* he was attempting to analyze this non-Greek institution in Greek terms.

In modern scholarship, the Sacred Band is frequently mentioned, but never criticized. Its existence seems to have been taken for granted. For instance, (Miles, 2010) finds it “unusual” that Carthaginian citizens were serving in the army in 340, and highlights the citizen nature of the Sacred Band, never addressing the veracity of the unit itself. On the other hand, both (Ameling, 1993) and (Hoyos, 2010) use the Sacred Band to assess just how many citizen troops were serving in Carthage's armies, but don't actually call into question the unit's existence. My argument thus acts as an extension of the idea, present in both (Ameling, 1993) and (Hoyos,

2010), that citizen soldiers were not rare in Carthage by rethinking the Sacred Band as a Greek literary invention.

Underpinning this assertion is the fact that Diodorus is the only author to explicitly mention the unit, and his account bears the markers of a literary device. To start, the name which introduces the band in book 16, the *Ἱερὸς Λόχος*, is lifted from the Sacred Band of Thebes in Book 15 (Diod.15.81.2). And, when the Carthaginian Band is later annihilated (Diod.16.80), so too is the Theban Band only pages later (Diod.16.86). Chronologically the annihilations of both bands take place within a year, which should be suspicious given that Diodorus uses a similar parallelism trick to link the Greek and Sicilian worlds earlier (Diod.11.24.1). Clearly, Diodorus wishes to link the two forces; if he were properly backed by any other ancient author, we might be able to forgive these suspicions.

However, he is not. Plutarch, though frequently used as a source for the Carthaginian Band, never actually names the *Ἱερὸς Λόχος* (Plut.*Timol.* 27). Historians frequently assume he references it, but his descriptions apply better to the whole army. Further, Plutarch's Theban Band and Diodorus' Carthaginian Band have little in common. While the Plutarch's Theban Band is made up of lovers, with a name deriving from Iolaus or Plato (Plut. *Pelop.*18), Diodorus' Carthaginian band is composed of citizens with no naming justification provided (Diod.16.80.4). And, where the Theban band is 300 soldiers strong (Plut. *Pelop.* 18), the Carthaginian Band is 2,500 (an absurdly large number for a hand-picked unit) (Diod.16.80.4). Overall, it seems that Diodorus has just plastered a Greek name over a foreign institution.

Indeed, Plutarch's descriptions strengthen the idea that the *Ἱερὸς Λόχος* substitutes for a core of Carthaginian citizens in the army. As per earlier, (Ameling, 1993) convincingly argues that citizens served with some regularity in the "mercenary" armies of Carthage (see Polyb.

6.52). For Diodorus, the Sacred Band explains citizens serving by shoving Carthaginian citizen soldiers into a novel group.

Having compiled the evidence then, we should consider the Sacred Band to be a manufactured military unit created for both literary and explanatory purposes. On the literary side, the unit bridges the Greek and Sicilian worlds, and also serves a number of other purposes. On the explanatory side, the unit helps to reconcile Greek misunderstandings on the Carthaginian army, an institution which consistently confounds ancient historians. Thus, we must reexamine the unit and its place in the history books.

Bibliography

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