
ASTHETAIROI

ALEXANDER THE GREAT'S ATTACKING GUARDS

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Abstract

The references in Arrian's *Anabasis* to *asthetairoi* are under consideration in the article. It defines that at least four *taxeis* are called *asthetairoi*. Initially only Coenus' and Perdiccas' *taxeis* were designated as *asthetairoi*. These battalions held the extreme right honour position in the heavy infantry during the great battles and often found in circumstances requiring great mobility. *Asthetairoi* were more lightly armed than the others *pezhetairoi*. They were equipped as *sarissa* bearers in the field battles and had hand-to-hand warfare weapon: the standard hoplite spears or javelins. Later *taxeis* of Amynta and Polyperchon became *asthetairoi* and appeared on expeditions requiring mobility, but specifically only soldiers from battalions of Coenus and Perdiccas had special armament.

Keywords: Alexander the Great, *asthetairoi*, phalanx, *sarissa*

1. Introduction

The Macedonian army from the time of Philip II and Alexander the Great has been attracting the attention of the researches over a long time. Thanks to the methodical analysis of the antique written tradition data and Archaeological science achievements, our knowledge about Macedonian military machine and its separate components has been broaden noticeably during the last half of the century. Among other things it is known that the Macedonian infantry during the Eastern campaign was more variable than the traditional hoplite phalanx [1]. Apart from the armed *sarissa pezhetairoi* ('foot companions') Alexander also had in his disposal the *hypaspists* ('shield-bearers') who were more mobile than the *pezhetairoi* and outfitted with hoplite equipment, as the most part of the modern specialists believe [2-6]. The one of the findings which broadened our idea about the Macedonian infantry was made in 1973, when Bosworth turned his attention to the use of Arrian word *asthetairoi* to designate some Macedonian infantry brigades. He proved that the presence of this notion in six fragments of Arrian's *Anabasis* couldn't be considered as the misspelled word *pezhetairoi* and both words were used by the antique author in parallel [7]. Bosworth didn't mention a very interesting trend consisting in continuous collocation of the noun

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asthetairoi with the participle *kaloumenoi* in the text of Arrian. We should agree with the conclusion of Anson in accordance to which the last word was used by the antique historian in the meaning ‘so-called’, implying that the term was either of recent or an initially unofficial origin [3, p. 89]. It means that we have the real military term used in the Alexander’s army to designate some phalanx brigades. Comparing the notions ‘pezhetairoi’ and ‘asthetairoi’, the researchers has come to the decision that the first notion had wider meaning: *asthetairoi* belonged to *pezhetairoi* but was stand out from *sarissa* bearers [5, p. 30; 6, p. 28; 8-10].

2. Discussion

The term ‘*asthetairoi*’ was used by Arrian for the first time to designate Coenus’ *taxeis* in the story about the siege of Tyre (*Anab.*, II, 23, 2). The detailed description made by the author about allocation of the Macedonian army subdivisions between two corps for the separate march from the Cophen River (Kabul) to the Indus in 327 BC, allows understanding which infantry regiments belonged to *asthetairoi* at that time. Arrian says that the *taxeis* of Gorgias, Cleitos and Meleager formed part of the corps Hephæstion and Perdikkas and King took “the brigades of the *asthetairoi*” (*Anab.*, IV, 22, 7; IV, 23, 1) with him. Then Arrian mentions *taxeis* of Coenus, Attalos (*Anab.*, IV, 24, 1), Polyperchon (*Anab.*, IV, 25, 5) and Alketas (*Anab.*, IV, 27, 1) in the description of the forces actions headed by King in the Swat valley. *Asthetairoi* also appears in the following sections of the essay: this word designates Peithon’s *taxis* in the description of the Mallian campaign (*Anab.*, VI, 6, 1). So the term *asthetairoi* is used in the source to name the *taxeis* of Coenus/Peithon [7, 11], Perdikkas/Alketas, Amyntas/Attalos and Philippos/Ptolemaios/Polyperchon. The hypothesis that the *asthetairoi* were not whole phalanx brigades but an elite subdivision within each regiment [12] should be considered as inconsistent according to Bosworth due to the direct incompliance with the Arrian’s text [13]. The clear guidelines of the antique author also makes us admit that the conclusions on belonging only three phalanx brigades to *asthetairoi* by the end of Alexander regency are wrong [7-9, 14, 15] and we shall agree with the specialists who talk about four subdivisions of this type [3, p. 84-85; 11, p. 292]. We should point out that according to the antique written tradition data, three of four *taxeis* of *asthetairoi* were completed with natives of Upper Macedonia. Thus Diodorus describing the battle of Gaugamela mentions that Coenus’ *taxis* is Elimeiotid, Perdikkas’ is Orestid and Lynkestian, Polyperchon’s is Tymphiot (*XVII*, 57, 2). According to Bosworth, the word *asthetairoi* was formed from the word *asista-hetairoi* (‘closest in kin companions’). The researcher suggests that this is a technical term used to denote the infantry from Upper Macedonia [7]. According to Hammond’s version, the notion under consideration appeared by transformation of the initial *astoi-hetairoi* (‘townsmen-companions’). This term also includes companions

recruited from the cities of Upper Macedonia by 352 BC [16]. Sekunda also holds this opinion [6, p. 28].

According to the opinion of other researchers, *asthetairoi* distinguished not by the origin but by the premium status based on the special combat characteristics. Griffith was the first who announced this point of view. He recognized that the Bosworth's hypothesis was attractive but he offered his own interpretation of the term approaching its meaning to *aristoi-hetairoi* ('best companions'). According to this specialist, such a name wasn't initially common for any phalanx brigades but was awarded only on merit. Griffith says that the fact that *asthetairoi* were from Upper Macedonia is incidental. According to his hypothesis, the Coenus' brigade was the first that got the *asthetairoi* status and it happened not without the influence of the personal sympathy of King for this commander [8]. Milns and English supported the hypothesis suggested by Griffith [9, 15]. Heckel shared Bosworth's point of view in his early works [5, p. 31-32; 11, p. 292], but then that author and Anson came into approaching the name '*asthetairoi*' to the word-combination *aster-hetairoi* ('stars companions') suggesting that only elite phalanx brigades were honoured by that name and the soldiers' shields was decorated by the eight-rayed star – the symbol of dynasty of the Argeads. Some archaeological and fine art records indirectly prove this point of view. They give evidence that the eight-rayed star played the role of shield emblem in the Macedonian army but wasn't commonly used [17].

Based on the available fragmentary data it is hard to prefer any of the mentioned versions of the term of interest. However it is possible to draw certain conclusions how *asthetairoi* differ from other infantry regiments and this difference is not in the origin of the military personnel from Upper Macedonia. Judging by the specific character of the 'tour of duty' of *taxeis* of *asthetairoi*, they were used not like the other brigades of *sarissa* bearers. It is known from the Arrian text that Coenus' and Perdiccas' *taxeis* played the special role in major battles: that subdivisions took up very important position on the right flank of phalanx next to the *hypaspists* and Companion cavalry, at that the end most right place in the *sarissa* bearers line was given to Perdiccas' *taxis* (Anab., I, 14, 2) in the battle of Granicus and to Coenus' brigade (Anab., II, 8, 3; III, 11, 9) in the battles of Issos and of Gaugamela. Bosworth consider in accordance with his concept that the position of the Elimeiot *taxis* in the right flank during two of three major battles between the Persian and Macedonian armies is incidental and can't witness of the special status of this subdivision [18]. The validity of this affirmation is uncertain because the fixed position of *taxeis* of *asthetairoi* next to the attack unit of cavalry and the *hypaspists* shows the special role of these brigades in the battles, their elite status and high combat effectiveness [5, p. 31-32; 9, p. 101].

Were *asthetairoi* different as the special Macedonian infantry brigades from the other phalanx *taxeis* by the equipage? Milns suggests that the status difference between infantry brigades didn't influence on the type of the arm used [9]. But we should mention that it is not possible to get the complete idea about the Macedonian warfare of the Age of Alexander based only on the analysis of

major battles. Gaebel fairly noticed that Alexander solved multiple battle missions during the long interval between the general battles using the subdivisions specially created for that purposes. The researcher states that the infantry types the phalangites were used most frequently, that were used varied from one taxis to four taxeis [19]. We should mention that the great conqueror used independent subdivisions of different type and size. Alexander formed the mobile corps from the most mobile and combat-capable subdivisions of his army to move fast to the area where the enemy was concentrated, to strike suddenly and to follow up the retired. All cases of including the phalanx brigades to such corps fixed in the resources are showed in Table 1.

Table 1. The use of phalanx brigades in mobile military operations.

Taxeis	Military operation		Sources of knowledge
Coenus'/ Peithon's	1.	Night operations near Pelium (335 BC)	Arr. Anab., I, 6, 9-11
	2.	Turning movement near the Persian Gates (winter of 331-330 BC)	Arr. Anab., III, 18, 6; Curt., V, 4, 20-30
	3.	Follow-up of Darius III (330 BC)	Arr. Anab., III, 20, 1 – 21, 10
	4.	The Mardian campaign (330 BC)	Arr. Anab., III, 24, 1-4
	5.	Campaign against Satibarzanes (330 BC)	Arr. Anab., III, 25, 6
	6.	Campaign against Aspasians (327 BC)	Arr. Anab., IV, 23, 5 – 24, 5
	7.	Campaign against Guraeans (327 BC)	Arr. Anab., IV, 25, 5-7
	8.	The advance to the Aornos Rock (327 BC)	Arr. Anab., IV, 28, 8
	9.	Night operations on the Hydaspes River (326 BC)	Arr. Anab., V, 12, 2
	10.	The Mallian campaign (325 BC)	Arr. Anab., VI, 6, 1
Amyntas'/ Attalos'	1.	Turning movement near the Persian Gates (winter of 331-330 BC)	Arr. Anab., III, 18, 6; Curt., V, 4, 20-30
	2.	The Mardian campaign (330 BC)	Arr. Anab., III, 24, 1-4
	3.	Campaign against Satibarzanes (330 BC)	Arr. Anab., III, 25, 6
	4.	Campaign against Aspasians (327 BC)	Arr. Anab., IV, 23, 5 – 24, 5
	5.	Quick march to crush the Indians near Arigaeum (327 BC)	Arr. Anab., IV, 24, 7-10
Philippos'/ Ptolemaios'/ Polyperchon's	1.	Night operations on the Danube (335 BC)	Arr. Anab., I, 3, 5 – 4, 5
	2.	Turning movement near the Persian Gates (winter 331-330 BC)	Curt., V, 4, 20
	3.	Campaign against Guraeans (327 BC)	Arr. Anab., IV, 25, 5-7
Perdiccas'/ Alketas'	1.	Night operations on the Pelium (335 BC)	Arr. Anab., I, 6, 9-11
	2.	Turning movement near the Persian Gates (winter 331-330 BC)	Arr. Anab., III, 18, 5
Craterus'/ Gorgias'	1.	Turning movement to crash Uxians (winter 331-330 BC)	Arr. Anab., III, 17, 1-6
Meleager's	1.	Night operations on the Danube (335 BC)	Arr. Anab., I, 3, 5 – 4, 5
Cleitos's	1.	Night operations on the Hydaspes River (326 BC)	Arr. Anab., V, 12, 2

It's revealed that taxeis of Craterus/Gorgias, Meleager and Cleitos took part in mobile combat operations 1 time each, Perdiccas'/Alketas' taxis – 2 times each, Philippos'/Ptolemaios'/Polyperchon's – 3 times each, Amyntas'/Attalos' taxis – 5 times each. The leader is Coenus'/Peithon's brigade that took part in 10 operations of that type. In other words, the phalanx brigades named by Arrian as *asthetairoi* were engaged for the actions as part of the mobile troops more often than other taxeis. It makes us to agree with Anson's conclusions that the subdivisions *asthetairoi* differed from the other phalanx taxeis by the specific character of the tactical employment: they were actively used in the operations requiring mobility and lighter equipment [3]. It's very illustrative that the term *asthetairoi* was used in three episodes from the six fixed cases related to the forming of the troops used for the whirlwind independent attack. All three cases refer to the Indian campaign of Alexander: creation of mobile corps to conquer the Swat valley (Arr. Anab., IV, 23, 1), to defeat the Mallian (Arr. Anab., VI, 6, 1) and to establish control over Arabis valley (Arr. Anab., VI, 6, 1). The *asthetairoi*'s partners in all that campaign were the mobile subdivisions – Companion cavalry, the hypaspists, mounted and foot archers.

The special combat characteristics of *asthetairoi* were revealed during assaulting the cities and other fortifications. According to Arrian, Coenus' *asthetairoi* together with Admetus' hypaspists in the time of Tyre siege played the role of the naval landing forces and break into the city over the scaffold bridges (Anab., II, 23, 2 – 24, 3). The taxeis under the command of Peithon participated many times in taking the fortifications during the Mallian campaign (Arr. Anab., VI, 6, 1-6; 7, 1-6). The contribution of Perdicca's taxis in Thebes' storm in 335 BC was very specific. Arrian tells based on the Ptolemaios data that the city assault started with an unauthorized by Alexander taxeis attack of the Thebans positions (Anab., I, 8, 1-8). Diodorus also speaks about the special role of the taxeis in the capture of Thebes, pointing out that Perdicca by order of King occupied some passage to the city left unescorted (XVII, 12, 3-5). Polyaeus cites very similar story with the only difference that the turning movement to the rear area of the defenders was made by Antipatros and not Perdicca (IV, 3, 12). It seems that the Arrian's information is more reliable in this case: the battle the course of which was taken under Alexander's control rose aggressively thanks to the actions of Perdicca's brigade and that led to the rapid capture of the one of the biggest city in Greece. In the time of Halicarnassus siege in 334 BC, Perdicca's taxis also distinguished. According to Arrian, two soldiers of that subdivision drank together at night and after that they armed and started climbing the walls of Halicarnassus' acropolis. The fight started and the other soldiers of Perdicca's taxis joined it soon. In the end of the battle the Macedonians pushed back the enemy outside the gates and almost captured the city (Anab., I, 21, 1-4). Diodorus confirms this information in general terms by mentioning the drunken soldiers of Perdiccas who climbed the walls of Halicarnassus' acropolis at night but who was forced back by the superior forces of defenders (XVII, 25, 5). The Curtius information about the great role played by Perdicca and Meleager (and their taxeis) during the attack of

the city of the Memaceni in the Central Asian campaign (VII, 6, 19-21) should refer to the same information block.

According to the preponderant opinion, the main elements of pezhetairoi arm were the longer spears – sarissas. Heckel and Jones, based upon the hypothesis that sarissas were useless during the sieges, consider that the hypaspists and not pezhetairoi played a decisive role during cities assault [5, p. 47]. The above given examples of the sieges makes us doubt in the complete relevancy of the last affirmation. Not only the hypaspists but some phalanx brigades made contribution to the success of the operation on capturing the enemy city and it allows looking at their combat capabilities and equipage in a new way. Anson notes that the soldiers from Coenus' taxis participating in Tyres storm as naval landing force couldn't be armed with sarissas at that moment [3, p. 84]. Unfortunately, there are only fragmentary data available about the special arm of the phalangites during cities assaults. Diodorus tells in his story about the Thebes capture that the Macedonian and the Thebans threw javelins to each other before the sword fight (XVII, 11, 3-4). Arrian notes, describing the abovementioned night episodes in Halicarnassus with two soldiers from Perdicca's taxis, that they threw javelins to the enemy (Anab., I, 21, 2). The fight between the Macedonian Corrhagus and the famous Greek athlete Dioxippus that took part during the Alexander's Indian campaign described by the antique authors should be also mentioned. It is reported that the Macedonian armed with sarissa, javelin and sword for the fight but he was prostrated by the Greek armed only with a club. Dioxippus could dodge from the thrown javelin, broke sarissa and stroke the enemy down to the ground while he was trying to take the sword out from the scabbard (Diod., XVII, 100, 1-8; Curt., IX, 7, 16 – 22). Based on such information a part of the specialists assumes that all Macedonian phalangites had javelins and not only sarissas [20, 21]. The other researchers come to the conclusion that all pezhetairoi could use not only sarissas in the battles but simple hoplite spears [22, 23]. It won't be right to apply this conclusion for all subdivisions but the soldiers of taxis of asthetairoi who played a key role during a siege of enemy cities and mobile combat operations evidently had another arm together with sarissas and it could be javelins or hoplite spears, as Anson assumes [3, p. 84-85]. Sekunda, based on the description of the fight between Corrhagus and Dioxippus, considers that all phalangites used javelin and sarissa in the battles at the same time during the Indian campaign [6, p. 32]. The information about using javelins by Corrhagus is very interesting but it would be a mistake to think that the arm used by him was common.

Based on the information about involving the phalanx brigades in the mobile operations, Anson comes to a conclusion that the taxis of Coenus and Perdiccas initially belonged to asthetairoi who fought side by side with hypaspists and each other during big battles and separate operations. Later on Alexander started using the mobile troops more actively and the asthetairoi corps was extended with Polyperchon's and Amyntas' taxis. The researcher believes that the soldiers of those subdivisions were rearmed to participate in mobile

combat operations [3, p. 84-85]. It's hard to give a single-value estimate for the last conclusion. The antique tradition says nothing about rearming of two phalanx brigades, about 3000 people. We have data that the Macedonian conquer had certain difficulties in supporting his troops with the arm at the final stage of the Eastern campaign. According to Curtius, Coenus turned Alexander's attention to a bad arm condition of the soldiers in his speech at Hyphasis (IX, 3, 10-12). Diodorus also gives the same estimation for the equipage of the Macedonian soldiers at that period (XVII, 94, 2). It is for sure that Alexander could lightweight the phalangites equipage in conditions of the shortage of protective clothing and increased requirements for the troop's mobility. Sekunda has the same point of view. He assumes that starting from 330 BC pezhetairoi started getting rid of armours and some part of phalanx taxeis or some soldiers forming part of them started using the lightweight arm in advance of campaigns in desert and mountain areas of Iran and Central Asia [6, p. 32]. However the data available allow to conclude that there were no strict arm uniformity in all infantry brigades and among taxeis of asthetairoi as well. More specifically, Arrian, speaking about the aggressive campaign of Alexander from Embolima to Aornos, points out that the commander took with him Coenus's taxis and the "lightest from the rest of the phalanx, but at the same time the best armed" together with archers, the Agrarians, two hundreds of Companion cavalry and a hundred of mounted archers (Anab., IV, 28, 8). The integration of Coenus' taxeis in the mobile corps together with the most mobile troops and the best armed soldiers from the rest taxeis witnesses that the Coenus' brigade overcame the rest of the phalangites including the other asthetairoi by the equipage quality and the mobility. Judged by the information of Arrian, Alexander didn't have any other regiments of phalanx in Swat regions. We may assume that only initial asthetairoi to which the soldiers of Coenus's taxeis and probably the Perdikkas' brigade belonged had the special arm. Apparently, they are described as the "lightest armed of the phalanx" in the Arrian's text. The first mention is found in the description of the campaign against the Tapyrians in the course of which Alexander threaded a thorny path together with the hypaspists, the archers and the "lightest-armed and more nimble of the Macedonian phalanx" (Arr. Anab., III, 23, 3). There were the lightest armed of the phalanx and a half of Companion cavalry, the hypaspists, the archers and the Agrarians in a mobile corps with which Alexander had an aggressive march from Jaxartes River (Syr-Darya) to Maracanda (Arr. Anab., IV, 6, 3). It is for sure that the term 'phalanx' admits a lot of interpretations in the essay of Arrian. But it would be a mistake to confirm after Sekunda that the antique author specified the hypaspists in like manner in this case [6]. "Shield-bearers" are mentioned by Arrian separately from the "lightest armed of the phalanx" in both fragments and it appears that the "lightest armed of the phalanx" were asthetairoi.

3. Conclusions

Despite a lack of information in the sources we may conclude that the *asthetairoi* were the elite part of phalanx of pikemen. They overcame the other *pezhetairoi* with the mobility and better fitted to the battles on rough terrains and to assault of fortifications thanks to the specific characteristic of the arm but unlike the *hypaspists*, *asthetairoi* used *sarissas* during big battles. The information about special use of their brigades comes into conflict with the conclusion of some researchers affirming that the *asthetairoi* were stand out by Alexander only in the course of the East campaign [8, 9]. Apparently, the *taxeis* of Coenus and Perdikkas differed from the other phalanx brigades during the Age of Philip II and it may be related with their later inclusion to the Macedonian army [3, p. 87]. Alexander got those special infantry regiments after his father death. He used their exceptional capabilities in the combat operations where the mobility required a part from the strength. Later on, the functions of *asthetairoi* and their elite status were transferred to the brigades of Polyperchon and Amyntas, but the conqueror still preferred the Coenus' *taxis* during troops selection to participate in the most important mobile combat operations. Alexander highlighted it from the other phalanx brigades because of the special features of the soldiers arm of that subdivision and because of their huge combat experience and discipline different from the violent temper of the Perdikkas' soldiers.

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