

CASA ESSAY

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WHY DID THE THEBANS DEFEAT THE NORMALLY MILITARILY SUPERIOR SPARTANS AT THE BATTLE OF LEUCTRA (371 BC)?

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Introduction

The battle of Leuctra was fought in 371 BC and represents a turning point in Greek history.¹ For a long time the Spartans had held military dominance on any battlefield they entered, but this battle put an end to that dominance. It has been said that the Theban general, Epaminondas, applied revolutionary tactics to defeat the Spartans (Cawkwell 1972), but Hanson (1988) disputes this claim and gives different reasons as to why the Spartans lost. I believe not enough thought has been given as to the Spartan loss at Leuctra. Even if Hanson (1988), Cawkwell (1972) and Krentz (1985)² give various suggestions for Sparta's loss at Leuctra, there are still numerous other factors influencing a battle that have not been considered in enough detail by them. I will be analyzing the translated texts of Xenophon (*Xen. Hell.* 6.3-15), Pausanias (*Paus.* 9.13.2-12) and Plutarch (*Pel.* 20-23). While analyzing these texts I shall keep in mind that Pausanias and Plutarch were not alive at the time of the battle and when they wrote, they were being influenced by the 'Epaminondas tradition'³ and not the culture at the time of the battle. Xenophon might have been alive at the time of the battle but he was a Spartan and certainly

¹ I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Susan Haskins for all the assistance that she gave me with this paper and the CASA judges for the feedback that I have received from them.

² Hanson 1988 at first aims to dispute the revolutionary tactics of Epaminondas, he then moves on to give his own reasons, like the death of the Spartan King, the lack of morale of the Spartans, not defending their own but attacking someone's homeland. Cawkwell 1972 focuses on the genius of the Theban general Epaminondas and says that the main factor influencing this Theban victory are the revolutionary tactics applied by him. Krentz 1985 states that the main factor, that brought forth the Spartan loss, was the numerical superiority of the Thebans, especially on their left wing.

³ The 'Epaminondas tradition' gives all the honour of the victory at Leuctra to Epaminondas and his revolutionary tactics without considering the other generals and the various factors that influenced the battle. See Hanson 1988:204.

saw the battle from a Spartan perspective. I will focus on the following factors influencing the battle at Leuctra (371 BC): (1) the purpose or the motivation of each side engaging in this battle. (2) the morale of the troops before engaging in the battle. (3) the quality and quantity of the troops fighting against each other. (4) the formations and the tactics that the generals applied at the battle. By looking at all these separate factors, I believe I will be able to produce a much clearer explanation of the Spartan loss and the unexpected Theban victory. I will also look at the 'revolutionary tactics' employed by Epaminondas and discuss these in respect to the aforementioned factors.

Motivation

At Leuctra both sides were motivated in many different ways to face each other on the battlefield, where the outcome was uncertain. Yet both sides decided to fight and risk everything that they stood for.

For a long time Sparta had dominated the Peloponnesian world. They had military dominance and oppressed many other cities who were too scared to rebel against them due to their brutal and unforgiving reputation. In 379 BC a group of Theban democrats overthrew their ruling oligarchs, who were puppets to Spartan overseers, and instituted the Boeotian confederate democracy which was free from the outside influence of other cities. This revolutionary idea threatened the dominance of the Spartans and if it spread, many other smaller cities might combine and become democratic confederations that would be harder to manipulate (Hanson 2010:95-96). The Spartans also saw the expulsion of the Spartan overseers out of Thebes as a grave insult and they were determined to reestablish the influence that they had in Boeotia (Hanson 2010:95). This drove the Spartans to invade Boeotia in order to put an end to this revolution and to reassert their authority. Every Spartan was motivated by this as they all prided themselves on being part of the strongest military power in Greece. However, once the Thebans had reclaimed their independence, they were determined to keep it and even though the Spartans attempted to invade at least four times, all these attempts were thwarted.⁴ These failures started to break down the excellent reputation that the Spartans had, up until then, enjoyed. This began to influence the dominating power that the Spartans had over their allies and other minor cities. This angered the Spartans further and made them more desperate to get rid of the threat represented by the Boeotian confederate democracy. So when Cleombrotus, the Spartan king leading the invading force in 371 BC, finally broke through the

⁴ For more information on the failed invasions of Sparta, see Hanson 2010:96.

Boeotian defences and arrived at the plain at Leuctra, he and his Spartan army were determined to force a fight and reclaim their reputation (Paus. 9.13.9).

The Thebans were tired of being dominated by Sparta. They were motivated to eliminate the dominance that Sparta enjoyed over the Peloponnesian world in order to keep their own independence (Hanson 2010:95). Even while they were able to repulse the first invasions of Sparta, by either active or passive means, the constant conflict often brought famine to Thebes. After realizing that the Spartans would not give up until they had won, the Thebans decided that it was not enough to simply repulse the various invasions, but to crush the Spartans in battle so as to discourage them from ever invading again (Hanson 2010:96). This was a great motivating factor for the Thebans when preparing for the unavoidable conflict that was destined to come. When the Spartans finally broke through the defenses, which had been established on the Boeotian borders, and arrived at the plain at Leuctra, this famous battle began. The Thebans had to fight or all that they had worked for in the last decade would have been for nothing. If they lost this battle or avoided it they would lose the trust of the other cities that had joined their alliance, and those would then most likely rebel against them (Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.6). The fate of their city was also at stake (Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.6). So the Thebans' motivation to engage in this battle is clear: their independence, their recently established reputation, and most of all, the lives of their loved ones were all at risk if they lost or did not fight in this battle.

Morale before the start of the battle

At Leuctra there were various factors that influenced the morale of the soldiers. Some of these influenced the Spartans in such a negative way that they stopped fighting with the motivation that they usually showed during a battle, and forced them to eventually retreat.

The Spartans had tried to invade Thebes numerous times already and had failed. Finally, through trickery, they managed to break through the defenses to the plain at Leuctra and threaten the army of Thebes and her allies (Paus. 9.13.3). However, even if they were successful at breaking through the defenses on this occasion, they still could have started to doubt themselves, due to their previous failures. Another problem was their meticulous attention to religion. The Greeks were a very religious people who believed in oracles. At Leuctra there was a monument dedicated to two virgins who had been raped by Spartans. These virgins had killed themselves. Their father cursed the place where they died. It was said that on this cursed plain the Spartans would finally be defeated (Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.7). This scared the Spartan soldiers and they feared that the oracle

might be true. So even if they were motivated to go into this war, doubt about whether they could win was probably already creeping in.

The Thebans were doubtless also scared. They were going to fight against an enemy that had held military dominance over the whole Peloponnesian region for a long time. They had prepared for this battle for years and their generals used the oracle of the two slain virgins to their advantage, encouraging their troops by telling them they would win. Another rumour was that the armour of Heracles that was stored in one of their temples had disappeared. The interpretation was that Heracles had taken his armour to fight against the Spartans (Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.7). So the Theban soldiers were encouraged through the assumed support of their gods. As previously mentioned, their motivation was also very great. They were going to fight to protect their homeland and their loved ones. The morale of a soldier who protects his homeland will be greater and he will fight much harder than a soldier who is invading the land of another.

Quality and quantity of the troops

At the battle of Leuctra King Cleombrotus, with an army of approximately 10 000 soldiers, fought against a Theban force of 7500.⁵ Looking at the troop numbers on both sides in this way makes it seem like the Thebans achieved a tremendous victory. That is why it is important to look at the numbers more carefully and by adding the quality of the separate troops to this equation one will find that in actual fact it was Thebes that held the advantage.

Spartans were very specific and traditional about who was allowed to become a *Spartiate*, the world renowned Spartan soldier. You had to be a Spartan citizen and come from a military family. You had to be able to pay for the daily messes that you had to attend every night and if you were not able to do this you were expelled from being a *Spartiate* and were labeled 'inferior'. Inferiors were still allowed to fight for Sparta but only as part of the *morai*, this being the second part of the Spartan army which was brought in after the decline in numbers of the *Spartiates*.⁶ Due to these reasons and the constant conflict being fought at that time

⁵ For the extent of this paper I will be using the troop estimations from Busolt (Delbrück, 1975:169).

⁶ Cawkwell argues that the 'inferiors' were just as well trained as the *Spartiates* and should be considered to be equals to the *Spartiates* on the battlefield. He also states that for this reason we should not assume that the Spartan army had become weaker just because there were less *Spartiates*, as the 'inferiors' were there and they were growing in number. I disagree with this as the 'inferiors' would not fight as zealously for the country, that had insulted them and degraded them, as the *Spartiates* would. It is also important to note that only the 'inferiors', who had been *Spartiates* before, had the same

the number of *Spartiates* began to decrease so that when it came to the battle of Leuctra there were only 700 *Spartiates* left (Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.15). Due to the lack of *Spartiates* the Spartans also forced *helots*, soldiers from the cities that they had oppressed, to become hoplites and fight for them.

The Spartan army invading Boeotia consisted of 9300 hoplites, 600 horsemen and a few hundred light armoured spearmen (Delbrück 1975:169). During the Peloponnesian war many armies started to employ mercenary soldiers to fight for them, as it was not profitable for the citizen levy to stay away from home for long and leave their work unattended. This was the start of professional soldiers in Greece. This also allowed the soldiers of the other cities to adopt the drill discipline from the Spartans (Delbrück 1975:149). Consequently there were many other soldiers who might not have had the extensive military training that the Spartans had, but were still good soldiers and able to complete difficult maneuvers. So the 9300 hoplites that Cleombrotus had under his command included *Spartiates*, *morai*, *helots* but predominantly allied hoplites who were also trained to some extent in the art of war. A problem with the Spartan force was its severe lack of adequate cavalry. They were unable to see the advantages that a cavalry force, which was well trained and integrated into the battle plans, could give them (Christensen 2006:57) and even if they had a cavalry force of 600 horsemen; they were badly trained, with no experience and only the weakest of the Spartans were assigned to fight on horseback (Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.11).

After the abolition of oligarchy and the start of the Boeotian confederate democracy it was clear that Sparta would soon invade to put a stop to this revolution (Hanson 2010:95). So already long before the battle of Leuctra Epaminondas started to prepare the Theban soldiers to fight against Sparta (Cawkwell 1972:260-262). Another special addition was the Sacred Band that consisted of a Brotherhood of 300 elite soldiers. There were another 2100 Thebans⁷. Thus the Theban hoplite force consisted of at least 300 elite soldiers, about 2100 well-trained and experienced Theban soldiers and the rest must have been adequately trained hoplites from the allies of Thebes. The great advantage that the Thebans had was their 600-800 horsemen. It was probably the best trained cavalry at that time in Greece (Christensen 2006:57). They also had the necessary combat experience due to their recent battle against the Orchomenians and Thespians. The Theban general was also able to integrate them properly into the

military training as the *Spartiates*. Their offspring however might still fight as an 'inferior' but not with the same Spartan training that their fathers enjoyed (1983:388).

⁷ I suggest this number because Epaminondas put all the Thebans into his left wing and left the centre and the right wing to the allies. The left wing was 48 files wide and 50 ranks deep and therefore 2400 soldiers. If you subtract the Sacred Band from this number you come to 2100 other Theban soldiers (Bourellet 1966:76).

army and in his tactics so that they were able to assist the hoplites and affect the outcome of the battle.

The allies on both sides in the conflict were highly unreliable. So the main part of the conflict fell to the Spartans and the Thebans (Delbrück 1975:169). This shows that the Spartans, having only 700 Spartiates on whom they could truly depend, were in actual fact at a disadvantage as the Thebans facing them had at least 2400 experienced and motivated Thebans and 600-800 veteran horsemen they could trust.

Formations & tactics used in the battle

The battle of Leuctra (371 BC)

Looking at the starting formations of each side, one will see that King Cleombrotus set up his soldiers in the typical and traditional square formation. The Spartans were positioned on the right wing and the allies took care of the centre and the left wing of the line (Bourelet 1966:78). The only innovation in his formations was that his files were 12 men deep instead of the typical 8 (Cawkwell 1983:399).

The Theban right wing and centre was held by their allies and set up in the traditional and proportional style, just like the Spartans facing them. The left wing, which was held by the Thebans themselves, was set up in a column. It was only 48 files wide but 50 men deep (Cawkwell 1983:399). The position of the separate formations is also interesting. Where the Spartans placed their three separate formations in a straight line, the Thebans placed their left wing in front of the centre but to the left and the right wing behind the centre but to the right so that their combined formation made one oblique line facing the enemy, hence the name; the 'oblique formation'⁸ (Bourelet 1966:78).

It seems that on the left of the Theban line the terrain was impassable because when the Spartans advanced, their cavalry were drawn in front of their own Hoplites forcing them to stop (Delbrück 1975:168). The Theban general seems to have seen an opportunity and charged with his own horsemen, who were far more experienced and better trained and routed the enemy who turned and fled into their own infantry lines (Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.13). At the same time as the cavalry battle, between the lines, the left wing of the Thebans began to advance. As soon as their cavalry had defeated the opposing cavalry and forced them into the hoplite lines, the column was able to charge into the disrupted right wing of the enemy (Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.13). The Spartans were unable to outflank the column in order to simultaneously attack them from the side, as the victorious Boeotian cavalry was

⁸ For my illustration of this arrangement refer to Appendix A.

there to hinder this tactic (Bourelet 1966:78). But even if they were demoralized by the loss of their cavalry and the disruption of their formations they managed to stay together and fight and not scatter and flee in the face of such a huge column. Only when their king Cleombrotus fell (Hanson 1988:200), along with his bodyguard, did the Spartans start to give ground. They were not routed but in complete order, while still facing the huge column, they slowly retreated back to their camp and its defenses (Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.14). While this battle with the column went on the allies of Sparta attempted to charge the right flank and center of the Thebans, but whenever they came close the Thebans allies withdrew even more, denying the Spartan allies a fight. When the Spartans then began to retreat, the allies lost heart and broke off their pursuit and fled to camp, afraid of being surrounded by the flank (Cawkwell 1983:397). This brought with it the end of the battle and the invasion of Boeotia. The Spartans went home having lost at least 400 of their elite and many others whereas the Thebans only had minor casualties (Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.15).

The revolutionary tactics of Epaminondas

It has often been said that this battle was a revolutionary battle and that Epaminondas brought in many innovative ideas that changed the face of Greek military tactics after this. I will look at some of these 'revolutionary' ideas and discuss if they were revolutionary at all.

Traditionally the strongest units of an army were stationed on the right hand side of the line. However, at the battle of Leuctra the Thebans placed their strongest troops on the left to face the strongest soldiers of their enemy (Cawkwell 1972:259). It becomes clear that the Thebans did not trust their allies to fight and knew that if they would be used against the Spartans they would clearly lose. Not wanting to risk this, the Thebans concentrated a large amount of their force on the wing facing the Spartans hoping to smash and destroy the Spartans by clear numerical advantage. The centre and left wing, held by their allies, were ordered to withdraw and not face those who opposed them until the Spartans were defeated (Hanson 1988:1998). The line was also set up in the oblique formation. Cawkwell sees three revolutionary innovations in this set up. Firstly, the concentration of forces was on the left instead of the right (Cawkwell 1972:259). Secondly, ordering troops not to fight but slowly withdraw. Last is the oblique formation.

Hanson disputes Cawkwell's arguments and states that these cannot possibly be revolutionary innovations to the art of warfare, as all these tactics or formations had been used in battles before (Hanson 1988:192). Although these

tactics had been used before,⁹ the great feat that the Thebans achieved at this battle was to apply certain tactics and formations from history and make them work in their favour. The Thebans had untrustworthy allies but they needed their help to destroy the Spartans. By applying these formations and tactics, the Thebans were able to keep their allies safe, under careful watch and at the same time prevent the Spartan allies from interfering while they were dealing with the Spartans. The huge column that they had set up on the right might not have been such a good idea and the Spartans might have well repulsed its attack if luck had not been on the Theban side. The false maneuverability of the cavalry and the death of Cleombrotus were both unforeseen events that turned the battle in favour of the Thebans.

Cawkwell sees the role that the cavalry played in the battle as another revolutionary innovation (1972:261). Once again Hanson disputes this, as cavalry had already played a role in battles since the Peloponnesian War (1988:195). However, the Thebans' use of cavalry and their ability to integrate them into their army and tactics was inspired. Where the Spartan cavalry seemed to fight independently and through this impeded the hoplite attack and disrupted them, the Boeotian cavalry was able to work together with the hoplites in order to reach a combined victory.

Thus there are really no revolutionary innovations in this battle. However one cannot say that the Theban generals were not great military tacticians, as they were able to take formations and tactics from history and apply them to their own situation. They were also veterans at adapting their plans and changing their tactics in order to seek out a greater advantage for themselves.

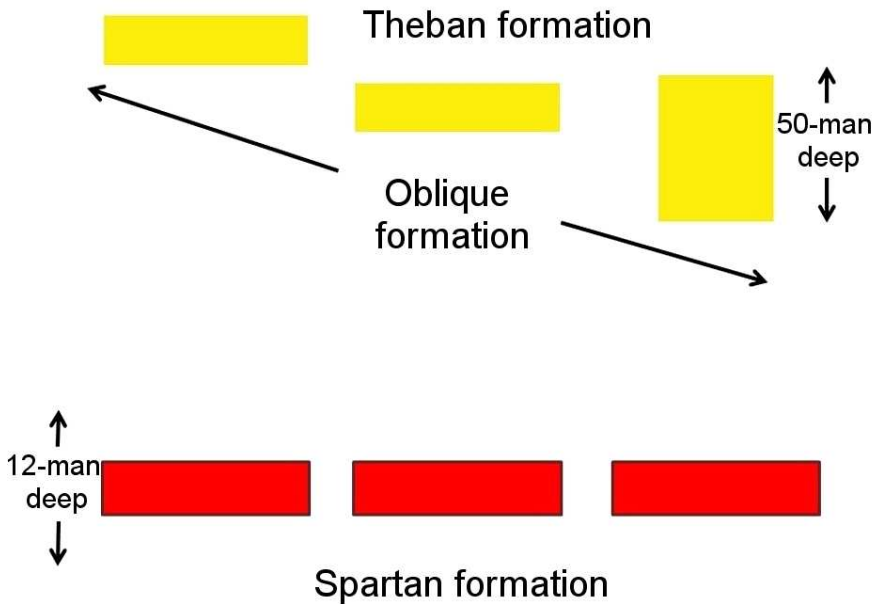
Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be seen that many factors contributed to the victory of the Thebans. The Theban army, even if outnumbered, had the advantage of having more loyal and experienced troops, especially when it came to the cavalry. The Spartans could only really depend on the 700 *Spartiates*. Using their own trustworthy and motivated troops, and applying old tactics and formations in new ways, and with some luck, the Thebans were able to defeat the Spartans who were, at that time, still reputed to be the best army in Greece. But motivation and the morale of the troops also influenced the outcome of the battle. First, it was through their religion and their belief that they were doomed to lose, that they started to doubt their own skills and lose morale. Second, if the Spartans had more compelling reason to fight, they might have continued the battle, as they were

⁹ For further information on the battles in which some of these tactics have been used before, refer to Hanson 1988.

trained to do, and emerged victorious. There were no revolutionary innovations, there was just a combination of good preparation and motivation with a bit of luck added that gave the Thebans this momentous victory.

Appendix A



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