DIODORUS’ ACCOUNT OF THE BATTLE OF GAZA
by A.M. Devine
(University of South Africa)

The battle of Gaza (312 B.C.) is of particular interest to the military historian as it illustrates the tactical skills and methods of two important generals (three, if we include Seleucus) of the late fourth century, one a veteran of the campaigns of Alexander the Great, Ptolemy I, the other an aemulus Alexandri of the second generation, Demetrius Poliorcetes, the son of Antigonus Monophthalmus. The action, therefore, is, as we will see, patient of analysis in terms of ‘Alexandrine’ tactics. Fortunately, the narrative of Diodorus (19.82.1–19.84.8), on which any reconstruction of the battle must be based,1 is straightforward, reasonably comprehensive, and free from rhetorical embellishment. As in the case of Paraitacene and Gabiene earlier, Diodorus’ account is derived directly from the lost history of Hieronymus of Cardia,2 which explains both its coherence as a tactical narrative and its Antigonid point of view.

1. THE LOCATION AND TOPOGRAPHY OF THE BATTLEFIELD

The battle was fought some 270 stades from Azotus,3 a little to the south of Old Gaza.4 The topographical setting is described as being a wide and easily traversable plain.5 The evidence thus points to a site somewhere along the ancient coastal road, the Darba-Sultani, between the modern city of Gaza and the Besor River.6

2. DEMETRIUS’ ORDER-OF-BATTLE

Demetrius’ order-of-battle is given in some detail by Diodorus 19.82.1–4. On the left wing (ἐπὶ . . . τὸ λαϊνόν κέρας), where he himself took post, Demetrius stationed first the body of 200 chosen cavalry [1] that accompanied him.7 Also riding with this unit were Pithon, son of Agenor, the satrap of Babylonia, whom Antigonus had appointed ‘joint commander’8 with Demetrius, and most of Demetrius’ other official ‘friends’, including, probably, Nearchus the Cretan and Philip, whom Antigonus had appointed as counsellors to Demetrius (in addition to Pithon himself and Andronicus the Olynthian), and Boeotus, one of Antigonus’ own personal advisers.9 As an advance-guard (πρόταγμα) for this squadron, Demetrius deployed three small ilai of cavalry [2], with another three ilai [3] as a flank-guard (πλαγιοφύλαξ). Independent of these and stationed outside the wing (χώρις ἐξο τοῦ κέρατος ἀπολελυμένας) were three ilai of ‘Tarentine’
KEY TO THE BATTLE PLAN, FIG. 2.

The Army of Demetrius:
1. Elite cavalry (200).
3. Flank-guard of 3 ilai (150).
4. Tarentine cavalry: 3 ilai (100).
5. Companion cavalry (800).
6. Cavalry of mixed origin (1,500).
7. Phalanx infantry (11,000).
8. Cavalry under Andronicus (1,500).
E Elephants with light infantry.

The Army of Ptolemy and Seleucus:
I. Cavalry (3,000).
II. Phalanx infantry (18,000).
III. Cavalry (1,000).
IV. Light infantry with anti-elephant ‘mines’.

Movements and Manoeuvres:
A...A. Opening cavalry attacks.
B...B. Ptolemy and Seleucus’ envelopment and Demetrius’ counterattack.
C...C. General advance by Demetrius’ elephants.
D. Demetrius’ retreat towards Gaza.
cavalry [4]. Thus, according to Diodorus, the troops drawn up around the person of Demetrius amounted to 500 horsemen equipped with the _sarissa_ (ζυστοφόροι) and 100 Tarentines, who were armed with javelins. Next to his squadron of _élite_ cavalry, Demetrius posted the 'so-called' Companion cavalry [5], 800 strong, and after them, 1,500 horse of mixed origin [6]. Along the front of the entire wing (πρὸ παντὸς...τοῦ κέρατος), he stationed 30 of his elephants [Ε...Ε] and filled the intervals between them with units of light-armed infantry, of which 1,000 were javelin-men and 500 Persian slingers. The total strength of the left wing was thus 2,900 cavalry, 1,500 light infantry, and 30 elephants.

In the centre, Demetrius drew up the infantry phalanx [7] of 11,000 men, of which 2,000 were Macedonians, 1,000 Lycians and Pamphylians, and 8,000 mercenaries. The 13 remaining elephants (Ε...Ε) were posted in front of the phalanx (πρὸ τῆς τῶν πεζῶν φολάργος), while an adequate complement of light infantry was mixed in with them to fill the intervals between the animals.

On the right wing, Demetrius posted (ἐπί...τὸ δεξιὸν κέρας) the rest of the cavalry [8], 1,500 strong, commanded by Andronicus the Olynthian, one of his four official advisers, who was ordered to keep his formation oblique (λογὶ φολάττειν τὴν στάσιν) and thus stay 'refused' (φυγομαχεῖν) until the battle had been decided on the other wing. In this arrangement we see the Alexandrine tactics of the oblique order being carried into a third generation, as it were. Alexander at the Granicus, at Issus, and at Gaugamela had adapted this form of attack from the original Theban model of Epaminondas and developed it to encompass the much larger-scale manoeuvres of the Macedonian army. Antigonus at Paraitacene had revived it — unsuccessfully as it happened, thanks to the delinquency of the other Pithon, the erstwhile σωματοφύλαξ of Alexander. Demetrius had commanded the Companion cavalry at Paraitacene, and his first-hand experience of his father’s tactical plan in that battle, together with the tactical legacy of Alexander, clearly inspired his own use here of the oblique order attack.

Although Diodorus provides no totals for Demetrius’ forces, we are able to estimate their total strength with a reasonable degree of accuracy. The cavalry strength of the army in the battle was 4,400: 2,900 on the left wing, 1,500 on the right. Antigonus had initially allocated a full five thousand cavalry to his son’s command, and a wastage figure of 600 is perfectly reasonable in a force of this size. Likewise we can compare the strengths of the remaining units in Demetrius’s army at the time of the battle with the original forces committed to him by Antigonus. Demetrius had begun with 10,000 mercenaries: their number had by now fallen to 8,000. By significant contrast, the 2,000 Macedonian phalanx had kept up to strength. Demetrius’ original force of 500 Lycians and Pamphylians had been reinforced to 1,000, while all 43 of his elephants had survived. Since a definite proportion between the number of elephants and that of their supporting light infantry seems to have been maintained, the unknown strength of the light infantry in the centre can be extrapolated from the given number on the left. There Demetrius had deployed 30 elephants and 1,500 light
troops, i.e., 50 per elephant. In the centre, he posted 13, which should thus be supported by 650 light infantry. Demetrius' army, then, mustered 11,000 heavy infantry, 4,400 cavalry, 43 elephants, and about 2,150 light infantry — a total of 17,550 men (or at the very least a few hundred more than the 16,900 accounted for in detail).

3. THE ORDER-OF-BATTLE OF PTOLEMY AND SELEUCUS

Given Hieronymus' Antigonid standpoint, faithfully echoed by Diodorus, it is not surprising to find the dispositions of Ptolemy and Seleucus described in much less detail. The forces involved on this side appear to have belonged in their entirety to Ptolemy, Seleucus being associated in the supreme command for purely diplomatic reasons. Ptolemy's forces are given as 4,000 cavalry and 18,000 infantry. These figures represent only 'the Macedonians and the mercenaries', and plainly exclude the mass of native Egyptians that accompanied the army, some as bearers carrying the arrows and other equipment, but some armed and tactically serviceable. These latter Egyptians would probably have acted as a screen of light infantry for the phalanx or the cavalry.

Ptolemy and Seleucus at first concentrated the bulk of their cavalry on their left, but when they learnt from their scouts that Demetrius was massing most of his cavalry on his left, they speedily transferred their strongest cavalry, numbering 3,000, to their right, and took post here themselves. In front of their position, they stationed the men who were to operate the anti-elephant 'mines' — evidently caltrops made of iron and connected by chains (χάρακα σεσυγιαφομένον καὶ δεδεμένον ὑλόσειν): when these were stretched out, they would provide a barrier against the elephants. Also posted in front of this wing were units of light infantry, consisting of javelin-men and archers, who were ordered to keep up a continuous barrage against the elephants and their mahouts.

Diodorus provides no details of the dispositions made by Ptolemy and Seleucus in the centre and on the left wing of their army. The phalanx was, as we have seen, 18,000 strong and consisted of Macedonians and mercenaries, no doubt with the latter predominating. As 3,000 out of a total of 4,000 cavalry in the army were posted on the right, the left wing was held by only 1,000 horse. Thus, while the two stronger cavalry wings — Demetrius' left (2,900) and the right of Ptolemy and Seleucus (3,000) — were roughly equal in numbers, Demetrius' refused right was stronger (1,500) than the opposing left of Ptolemy and Seleucus (1,000), which fact, since these latter wings did not engage, served only to negate Demetrius' effective overall superiority in cavalry. Ptolemy at least, having ridden with Alexander at Issus, had evidently absorbed the spectacular lesson the great conqueror had taught on that battlefield regarding the concentration of cavalry at the decisive point. Demetrius, by contrast, had not had the benefit of such experience, and his superficial imitation of Alexander's oblique order ironically placed him at a disadvantage.
4. THE BATTLE

(i) THE FIRST PHASE

The battle opened with a cavalry action between the advance-guards at the outer ends of the two stronger cavalry wings. In this initial combat, Demetrius' troops successfully drove off their attackers, and Ptolemy and Seleucus were obliged to modify their approach. They now rode around Demetrius' left flank and attacked with their striking force concentrated in a column of ilai. Heavy fighting ensued, and repeated charges had to be made by the attackers, under the personal leadership of Ptolemy and Seleucus. The combat, indeed, apparently degenerated into hand-to-hand fighting, in which the combatants resorted to the use of their swords in place of their shattered sarissai.

(ii) THE SECOND PHASE

The cavalry battle on the flank had been in progress for some time and had apparently stabilized when Demetrius' elephants were brought up in the hope of demoralizing, rather than actually engaging, the troops opposite. However, as they reached the 'minefield' that had been prepared against them, they were met by a shower of missiles from the enemy's archers and javelin-men, which wounded many of the animals, as well as their mahouts. Goaded on by their mahouts, some of the elephants fell victim to the 'mines' and went out of control. The end result of Ptolemy's prescience in setting up these 'mines' was that, after most of the mahouts had been shot down, all the elephants were captured.

(iii) THE THIRD PHASE

The defeat and capture of the elephants panicked Demetrius' cavalry, who must already have been failing under the repeated assaults of Ptolemy and Seleucus, and most of them turned and fled. After an abortive attempt to stem the tide of horsemen abandoning the combat, Demetrius and such of his cavalry as still remained in formation were likewise forced to retreat. Their withdrawal was facilitated by the fact that they were retiring across a wide and easily negotiable plain, and until they reached Gaza most of the cavalry retiring with Demetrius obeyed orders and stayed in formation (εἰς τὰ ξένα), which discouraged their pursuers from closing with them. The infantry that retreated with them, however, simply abandoned their formations and threw away their weapons. As the retreating column was passing Gaza at about sunset, some of the cavalry dropped out and entered the city in order to rescue their baggage. Their endeavours resulted in chaos at the open gates of the city, and when Ptolemy appeared on the scene, the gates could not be closed in time, so that his cavalry dashed in and took the place without a struggle. Demetrius, meanwhile,
continued his flight as far as Azotus, 270 stades from the field of battle, which he reached around midnight. 43

5. THE LOSSES

Only Demetrius' losses are given by Diodorus (19.85.2–3) who puts them at more that 500 dead, most of whom were cavalry or distinguished officers, including Pithon, Demetrius' 'joint commander', and Antigonus' personal adviser, Boeotus. At the same time, Ptolemy and Seleucus took more than 8,000 prisoners, who must have come almost exclusively from the infantry, if not indeed from the ranks of the mercenaries, who may simply have defected to the victorious side en masse as soon as the battle had been decided. All the elephants, together with the royal baggage and the court personnel who had accompanied Demetrius' army, likewise fell into the enemy's hands. Ptolemy and Seleucus, however, for reasons of propaganda, returned both baggage and functionaries without ransom. As a result of his defeat, Demetrius was forced to withdraw to Tripolis in Phoenicia, while Ptolemy occupied the coast as far north as Sidon and Tyre, both of which he took by subversion.

6. CONCLUSION

The battle of Gaza was by no means a tactical masterpiece for any of its participants. The forces involved were small and relatively easy to control. On the whole the preliminary dispositions on both sides were conventional. One exception, Demetrius' oblique and refused right wing, proved to be a tactical mistake because it tied down and excluded from the actual battle too great a proportion of his cavalry. By contrast, Ptolemy's use of a 'minefield' covered by the fire of his archers and javelin-men against Demetrius' predominant strength in war-elephants was an inspiration that nullified the latter's advantage. Likewise Ptolemy's concentration of force on his right wing and his aggressive cavalry tactics forced Demetrius onto a defensive which he was unable to reverse. This undoubtedly demoralized his otherwise formidable left wing cavalry, who broke and fled after the disaster to the elephants. Ptolemy's victory was thus not the result of any highly original and large-scale tactical plan, but rather of experience, which had taught him the basic tactical principles of the concentration of force, the momentum and, as regards the enemy, the demoralizing effect of a sustained offensive, and the security afforded by a circumspect defence against locally superior enemy forces (as in the case of the elephants). All in all, Ptolemy emerges as a worthy student of Alexander the Great.

NOTES

1. The other sources, Plut. Demetr. 5.2 and Justin 15.1.6–9, add nothing of substance to Diodorus' account.


4. Diod. 19.80.5; 19.84.7.

5. Diod. 19.84.6.


7. Diod. 19.82.1. Bar-Kochva (above, note 6) 237, note 52, speculates that this unit was an *agema*, like those mentioned in the context of Paraitacene (Diod. 19.27.2; 19.28.3–4); cf. Diod. 19.40.2 (*'selected cavalry' at Gabiene*).

8. Diod. 19.82.1; 19.56.4. Since there is no evidence that Pithon (= Peithon: I use the former spelling here in conformity with Diodorus' usage) took any tactical decisions in the battle, his position is perhaps better described — as by K. J. Beloch, *Griechische Geschichte* 4.1, Berlin and Leipzig 1925, 130 — as Demetrios' Generalstabchef (chief of staff). Had he exercised any operational control, the fact could have been used by the pro-Antigonid Hieronymus to exonerate Demetrios from blame for the defeat, especially as Pithon did not survive to give his own version. As it is, we can be suspicious that his status in the army has been exaggerated for this very reason.

9. Diod. 19.82.1; 19.69.1; 19.85.2


11. Diod. 19.82.2. Deducing the 200 lancers who constituted Demetrios' *agema* from the given total of 500, we are left with 300 lancers in the six supporting *ilai* — i.e., with 50 horsemen in each *ile*. The Tarentines appear to have been deployed into even smaller *ilai*, since three such *ilai* here total only 100 men. While it is possible that Diodorus' total of 100 Tarentines is merely a mistake for '150', which figure would allow for three apparently standard-sized *ilai* of 50 horsemen each, it should be noted that 36 horsemen would form an 'ideal' cavalry wedge six ranks deep, while an 'ideal' formation of the same type seven ranks deep would contain 49 men: see Figs. 1(a) and 1(b). The Δ-shaped wedge would appear to be an appropriate formation for Tarentine cavalry, given what we know of their equipment and tactics, for which see, for example, Asclep. *Tact.* 1.3; Ael. *Tact.* 2.13; and Arr. *Tact.* 4.5–6.

12. Diod. 19.82.3.

13. Diod. 19.82.4.


15. Diod. 19.82.4; cf. 19.29.7. Diod. 19.82.4 is the only instance of the expression λοξην ... την στένου in Diodorus. Elsewhere Diodorus uses λοξην ... την φαλαγγα of Epaminondas' formation at Leuctra (15.55.2; cf. Plut. *Pelop.* 23.1), and λοξη in the ταξιν of Alexander's battle-order at Gaugamela (17.57.6) and of that of Antigonus at Paraitacene (19.29.7). The sense of these expressions is perfectly clear from the context and is succinctly stated by Arr. *Tact.* 26.3: λοξη δε όνομαζεται φαλαγγα η το μεν ηπερν κερας ... τοις πολεμιοις πελαξων έχουσα και αυτο το ανω άγωνισομεν, το ηπερν δε δι έκποτολης σφοξουσα ('that formation is called λοξη in which one wing ... is advanced against the enemy and alone does the fighting, while the other is held in reserve').


17. Arr. 2.11.1. See my forthcoming paper, 'Grand Tactics at Issus.'

18. Diod. 17.57.6; Curt 4.15.3. See my article, 'Grand Tactics at Gaugamela,' *Phoenix* 29 (1975) 374–385, esp. 380–381, and below, note 19.


22. Diod. 19.69.1.
23. Diod. 19.69.1; 19.82.4.
24. Diod. 19.69.1; 19.82.4.
25. Diod. 19.69.1; 19.82.3-4.
26. The total of 18,300 given by Griffith (above, note 10) 53, note 1, remains unexplained, as does that of 17,500 given by H. W. Parke, *Greek Mercenary Soldiers*, Oxford 1933, 219, which appears to overestimate the number of cavalry, while ignoring the unspecified number of light infantry in the centre.
28. Diod. 19.83.2: ἠπερπατών here obviously has the first of two senses distinguished by G. T. Griffith, 'Alexander's Generalship at Guagamela', *JHS* 67 (1947) 77—89, especially 79, note 1 — i.e., the common sense (as in English) of 'posted in front,' rather than the second tactical sense of 'posted on the flank.'
29. Diod. 19.83.2. The scepticism of H. Delbrück, *Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen Geschichte* 1, Berlin 1920, translated by W. J. Renfroe as *History of the Art of War within the Framework of Political History* 1, Westport and London 1975, 240—241 ('The emplacing and binding together of the 'harrows' took place . . . in full view of the enemy. It appeared to the cavalry that the enemy had built this obstacle himself. Delbrück wrongly assumes that one's own advance as well as that of the enemy, the cavalry combat ensued on the extreme flank and was drawn even farther toward this side by an envelopment by the Ptolemaic forces, thereby avoiding the stake obstacle. Only those for whom it was intended, that is, the elephants, instead of exerting their well-known effect on the enemy horsemen, persisted in moving directly to the point where they were expected . . . The entire account is a guard room story, not a word of which may be accepted in an historical account.') is unjustified. Delbrück 240 wrongly assumes that these obstacles were 'palisades reinforced with iron and bound together with chains.' Although the most common meaning of χώρας in Diodorus is 'palisade' (18.13.1; 18.34.2; 18.70.2; 18.70.6; 19.18.4; 19.39.1; 19.49.1; 19.108.5; 20.6.3; 20.47.2; 20.83.4; 20.108.5; 20.108.7) or 'fortified camp' (16.68.1; 19.4.7; 19.26.3; 19.68.7; 19.108.3), our author also applies the term to an 'iron-studded boom' used against shipping by Demetrius at the siege of Rhodes in 305 B.C. (20.85.2; 20.86.3; 20.88.5). The term thus appears to have a broader application than Delbrück believes. Moreover, a device similar to those employed here at Gaza — studded frames concealed in shallow trenches — had already been used against elephants by Damis, a veteran of Alexander's campaigns in India (18.71.2), at the siege of Megalopolis in 318 B.C. (18.71.3—6). As to the matter of concealing the laying of the 'minefield' at Gaza, this procedure would surely have been covered by the clouds of light infantry deployed in front of the main battle-line for the very purpose of tactically exploiting this artificial obstacle (19.83.3; 19.84.1).
30. ἠπερπατών is again obviously meant in the first of Griffith's two senses: above, note 28.
31. Diod. 19.83.3.
32. Griffith (above, note 10) 109—110.
33. Diod. 19.83.1; 19.80.4.
34. A tactical mistake analogous to this oversight of Demetrius was perpetrated at Waterloo by Napoleon's brother Jerome, the erstwhile king of Westphalia, who committed more French troops to the diversionary attack on Hougoumont than the British did to its defence: D. G. Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, London 1967, 1072—1073.
35. Arr. 2.11.8.
36. Arr. 2.8.9; 2.9.1; 2.9.4; Curt. 3.11.2—3; 3.11.13—15.
37. Diod. 19.83.3: ἐπ' ἄκρων τῶν κεράτων ἐπιστορίας συνεδριά τῶν προτεσταγμένων ἠπερπατον. That these cavalry were 'posted in front' in the first of Griffith's senses (above, note 28) can be deduced from Diodorus' description of Demetrius' order-of-battle at 19.82.2, where our author makes an explicit distinction between the πρόναυα and the πλαγιοφύλακες, and from his account of the cavalry battle, which, having begun in front of the ends of the wings, only thereafter moved around to the flank proper of Demetrius' left wing (19.83.3—4). The term (ἄκρων) in the sense of the end of a tactical formation appears four times elsewhere in Diodorus: three times in the context of the battle of Paraitacene — 19.27.6: the end (τον ἄκρον) of Eumenes' phalanx, consisting of more than 6,000 mercenaries; 19.28.3: Eumenes' *agema* posted at the end of his right wing (ἐπ' ἄκρου . . τοῦ κέρατος); 19.29.5: Antigonus' *agema* stationed at the end of his right wing (ἐπ' ἄκρου . . τοῦ κέρατος) — and once in the context of Gabiene (19.42.5: Eumenes isolated at the end of his left wing (ἐπ' ἄκρου τοῦ κέρατος) with a small number of cavalry). That the expression refers to the end of a tactical front, rather than to a flank proper, is
evident from these Diodoran instances, as well as from the sole instance in Arrian (5.13.4), where κατά... τὰ ὄχρα τῆς φιλαγγος describes the position of Alexander's light infantry prior to the battle of the Hydaspes.

38. Diod. 19.83.4: μετ' ὄλιγον δὲ τὸν περὶ Πτολεμαῖον καὶ Σέλεουκον περιπατεύσαντον τὸ κέρας καὶ βιαστέρων ἐπενεχθέντων ὀρθὰς ταῖς ἑλαῖς. The expression περιπατεύειν τὸ κέρας occurs three times elsewhere in Diodorus: twice in the specific sense of riding around the enemy's wing in order to reach his rear (to seize his baggage in both cases) (17.59.5: Mazaeus’ cavalry at Gaugamela riding around Alexander's left; 19.42.3: Antigonus' cavalry at Gabiene riding around Eumenes' flank); and once, as here, in the sense of riding around the enemy's wing in order to attack his flank (19.30.2: Pithon’s cavalry at Paraitacene making a flank-attack on Eumenes' right). The phrase ὀρθὰς ταῖς ἑλαῖς occurs nowhere else in Diodorus, and evidently comes straight from Hieronymus. The same expression appears at Arr. 4.4.7, where it is used to describe Alexander's charge against the Scythians at his forcing of the Jaxartes. The concept is elucidated by Arr. Tact. 26.1: Φιλαγγος ἐπτιν... ὀρθὰ... ὅταν ἐπὶ κέρας πορεύονται οὕτω δὲ αὖ τὸ βάθος τὸ μήκος πολλαπλάσιον παρέχεται ('a formation is ὀρθὰ whenever it marches in column, thus having a depth many times greater than its width').

39. Diod. 19.83.5.
40. Diod. 19.84.1–2.
41. Diod. 19.84.4. Diodorus is explicit in giving Ptolemy full credit for this device, which of course reflects favourably on Hieronymus' good judgment and lack of bias as a military historian.
42. Diod. 19.84.5–8.
43. Diod. 19.85.1.
44. Plut. Demetr. 5.2 gives the number of Demetrius' dead as 5,000, which figure is absurdly high, especially if Diodorus is correct in effectively limiting the casualties to the cavalry. In any case, 5,000 for 500 is very likely a scribal error.
45. Cf. Griffith (above, note 10) 53; 114, note 1; and 262.
46. Diod. 19.84.4.
47. Diod. 19.85.3.
48. Diod. 19.85.5; 19.86.1–2.
49. I am indebted to my colleague Mr. A Tronson and Professor D.B. Saddington for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
Acta Classica is published annually by the Classical Association of South Africa. The journal has been in production since 1958. It is listed on both the ISI and the SAPSE list of approved publications.

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