

## GRAND TACTICS AT GAUGAMELA

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LIKE SO MANY of the decisive battles of history, Gaugamela became the subject of a number of conflicting accounts not long after it was fought. As a result, it has been a perennial source of difficulty, and indeed of controversy, for modern scholars. In particular, extensive disagreement over Alexander's tactics on this field has been productive of several attempts in recent years to reconstruct what actually happened during the course of the battle.<sup>1</sup> Most of these attempts have been marred by the evident desire of their authors to force the engagement into a preconceived tactical mould, one derived essentially from the military systems of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Too often have we beheld Alexander wearing the cocked hat of Napoleon or performing the Prussian drill of Frederick the Great. Hence it is my aim in this paper to put forward yet another attempt at reconstructing the events of the battle of Gaugamela—this time, however, avoiding the intrusion of tactical anachronisms. This will involve, among other things, the presentation of a somewhat unorthodox view of Alexander's use here of the grand tactics of attack in oblique order.

### THE MACEDONIAN ORDER OF BATTLE

Since Gaugamela was fought on an open plain,<sup>2</sup> the normally important factor of terrain played only an indirect role in Alexander's plans, and had little effect on the course of the battle other than that of facilitating the Persian tactics of double envelopment with cavalry. Its influence was, however, visible in the rather unusual nature of the formation taken up by the Macedonian forces prior to the opening of the engagement. Having no natural obstacle on which to rest either of his flanks, and hence expecting to be easily outflanked by the numerically superior Persians,

<sup>1</sup>The most interesting recent reconstructions of the battle are to be found in Sir William Tarn, *Alexander the Great* (Cambridge 1948), *Part I Narrative*, 46–51, and *Part II Sources and Studies* 182–190; G. T. Griffith, "Alexander's Generalship at Gaugamela," *JHS* 67 (1947) 77–89; A. R. Burn, "Notes on Alexander's Campaigns, 332–330," *JHS* 72 (1952) 81–91; J. F. C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Alexander the Great* (London 1958) 163–180; E. W. Marsden, *The Campaign of Gaugamela* (Liverpool 1964) 40–64; R. D. Milns, *Alexander the Great* (London 1968) 110–126; F. Schachermeyr, *Alexander der Grosse* (Vienna 1973) 267–276; R. Lane Fox, *Alexander the Great* (London 1973) 233–243; and P. Green, *Alexander of Macedon* (Harmondsworth 1974) 286–296. These works will be cited by author's name.

<sup>2</sup>For the site of the battlefield, see Schachermeyr, 268, sketch-map 4, and 270, note 311.

Alexander drew up his army in what might be loosely described as a tactical "square." At both ends of the Macedonian front were placed flank-guards, drawn back from it *en échelon*. Because of the necessity of maintaining tactical flexibility, the angle at which these flank-guards were drawn back could not have been too great. It was probably something like 45°.³ As a consequence of the Macedonian army's deployment in this long-based trapezoid formation, its second line of infantry was unable to cover the full length of its rear, a fact which would not fail to have an effect, albeit a minor one, on the course of the battle.

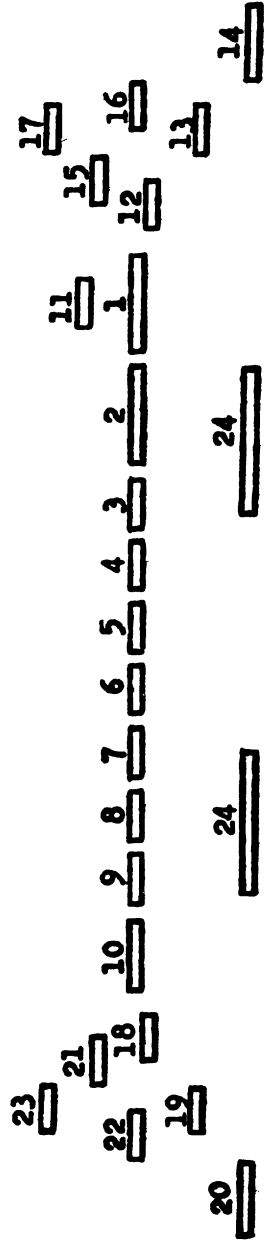
The flank-guard of the right wing took the form of a roughly wedge-shaped arrangement of cavalry and infantry units, each with its front parallel to that of the opposing Persian battle-line. These units were deployed in three *potential* lines, which could, when the need arose, be easily formed into three *actual* lines, still set at an angle to the main front of the army, but now facing outward from the centre. In the rearmost of these lines, posted in order from left to right, and from front to rearward, were one half of the Agrianians [12],⁴ commanded by Attalus, Brison's Macedonian archers [13], and, right flank rear of the entire army, Cleander's mercenary infantry [14]. Positioned in front of the Agrianians and the archers, in the second of the three lines, were the πρόδρομοι ἱππεῖς [15], under Aretes, and the Paeonian cavalry [16], under Ariston. Finally, in front of them, and hence in front of the whole body, were stationed the mercenary cavalry of Menidas [17], forming, as it were, the point of the "wedge."⁵

The left flank-guard was similarly arranged, with its constituent units drawn back *en échelon* at approximately the same angle. Roughly

³There can be no question but that the flank-guards were placed at an angle to the enemy battle-line and not simply, as Marsden, 48–51 and diagram 2, has them, to Alexander's allegedly oblique front. The phrase ἐς ἐπικαμπήν is used by Arrian to describe the positioning of both the right (3.12.2) and left (3.12.4) flank-guards. In the case of the former, the reason given for this disposition is εἰ που ἀνάγκη καταλαμβάνει ἢ ἀναπτύξαι ἢ συγκλεῖσαι τὴν φάλαγγα. Now, if this flank-guard were already parallel to the Persian front, there could be no question of using it to extend (ἀναπτύξαι) the phalanx still further, while using it to close up (συγκλεῖσαι) the phalanx would involve a retreat in the face of the enemy, which could well be dangerous, if not disastrous.

⁴The numbers in square brackets correspond to those used to indicate the relevant units in Figs. 1 and 2.

⁵This interpretation of Arr. 3.12.2–3 is based on Burn, 85–86. Griffith, 78–79, however, interprets this passage as meaning that Menidas' cavalry was, in fact, posted on the extreme right flank rear of the army, at an angle to the main front, with the rest of the flank-guard in line with it on its left. Like that of Marsden, Griffith's exegesis is open to doubt on tactical grounds: for, if it is accepted, then, as Marsden observes (48), "it is extremely difficult to explain why the Persians did not attempt to stop Alexander's movement to the right by attacking the Companions themselves" (rather than by clashing with Menidas' cavalry).



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FIG. 1. ALEXANDER'S ORIGINAL ORDER OF BATTLE (BASED ON ARRIAN 3.11.8-3.12.5).

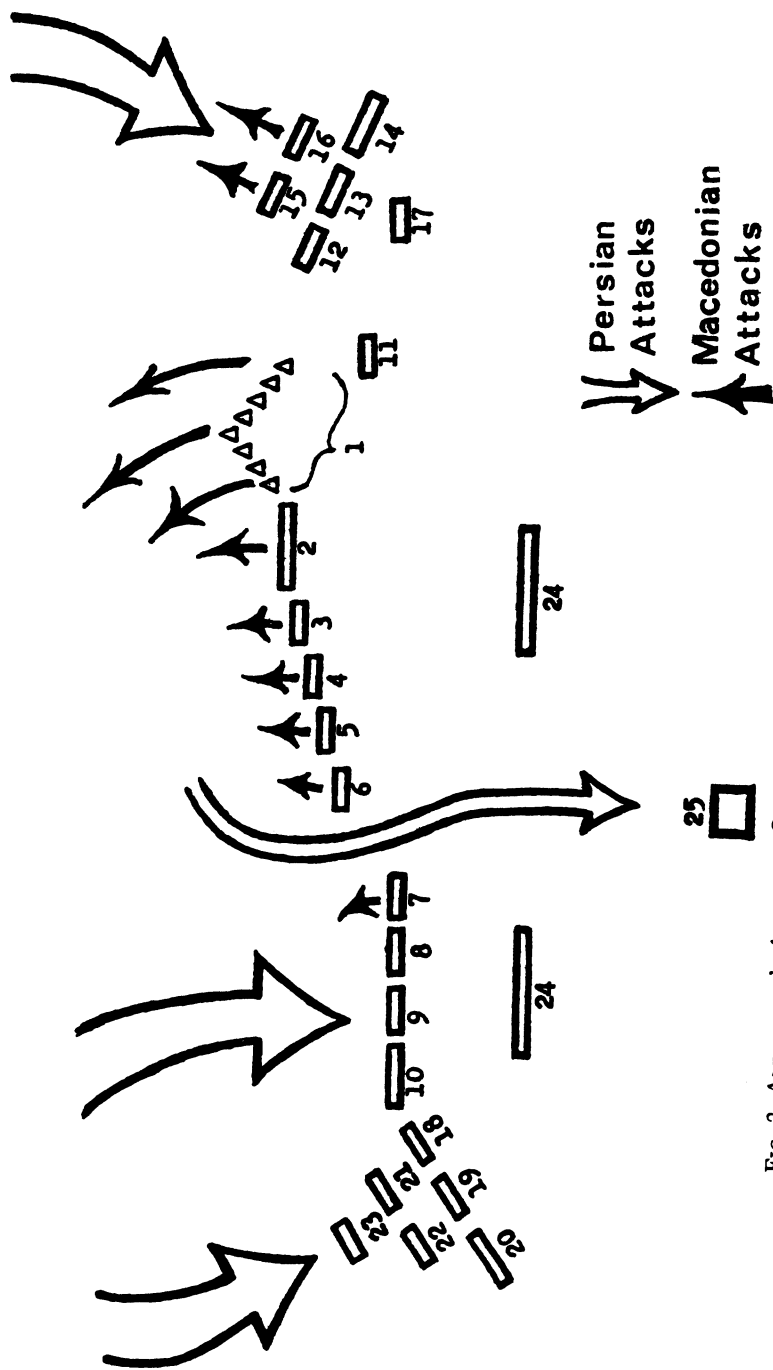


FIG. 2. ALEXANDER'S ATTACK IN OBLIQUE ORDER (THE SITUATION AT ARRIAN 3.14.2-3.14.5).

wedge-shaped like the flank-guard of the other wing, it, too, was deployed in three *potential* lines: two of cavalry, supported in rear by a third of infantry. At the point of this "wedge" stood the mercenary cavalry of Andromachus [23], while behind them were stationed the allied cavalry [21], under Coeranus, and Agathon's Odrysian horse [22]. The third and rear-most line was made up of Sitalces' Thracian javelin-men [18], together with two units omitted by Arrian, but mentioned by Diodorus, namely, the Cretan archers [19] and the Achaean mercenary infantry [20].<sup>6</sup>

Formidable as these flank-guards were, the real strength of the Macedonian force lay in its centre. Here was arrayed the iron core of Alexander's army, the front-line infantry phalanx. Drawn up in order from right to left were: first, in their accustomed place of honour, the Hypaspists [2], under Nicanor, then the *taxeis* of Coenus [3], Perdiccas [4], Meleager [5], Polyperchon [6], Simmias [7], and Craterus [8]. On either flank of the infantry were stationed the best cavalry units of the entire army: on the left, the superb Thessalian cavalry [10], under Philip, supported by a body of allied Greek horse [9], commanded by Erigyius, and, on the right, the Companion cavalry [1], officially commanded by Philotas, but led in battle by Alexander himself. Needless to say, Darius could not, and would not, risk the destruction of his own first-rate cavalry in a direct assault on so invulnerable an enemy front. Rather, common sense dictated that the Persian attack would be made against the Macedonian flanks; hence Alexander's added concern with providing particularly strong mobile defences for these flanks.

#### THE BATTLE

The battle itself was precipitated by Alexander's movement *ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ δεξιόν*,<sup>7</sup> which alarmed Darius, who was afraid that, if the Macedonian army reached the ground which had not been levelled by the Persians, his (supposed) advantage in weaponry, in the form of scythe-chariots, would

<sup>6</sup>Diod. 17.57.4; cf. Curt. 4.13.31, Arr. 3.12.4-5. The reconstruction here of the left flank-guard is based on Burn, 86-87.

<sup>7</sup>Arr. 3.13.1. It is generally accepted that the Macedonian advance took the form of an oblique movement towards the Persian left. Although it is probable that, due to the factor of simple physical convenience, the Macedonians did advance at an angle to the enemy front (though not at too pronounced an angle; otherwise, Darius would not have feared that they would move off the prepared ground before making contact with his forces), their *Aufmarsch* has come to be connected with the avoidance of enemy "mine-fields" (Curt. 4.15.1; cf. Polyaeus 4.3.17), and with an opening general attack in oblique order (Diod. 17.57.6). However, the propinquity of any kind of minefield is rendered dubious by the Persian attempt to envelop Alexander's right flank, while the attack in oblique order does not appear to have taken place until the crisis of the battle (see below, 382).

be nullified.<sup>8</sup> Therefore he ordered the advance-guard of his own left wing (probably the thousand Bactrian cavalry and the regiment of Dahae, also a thousand strong, mentioned by Curtius 4.12.6) to ride around the Macedonian right wing, which Alexander was leading in person, and halt its march. This placed Alexander on the defensive, and, in order to regain the initiative, he detailed Menidas [17] to charge the enveloping Persians. The counter-attack, however, failed, and Menidas' small force (a mere four hundred horsemen<sup>9</sup>) was driven back by the superior weight of the enemy cavalry. Alexander now ordered a charge to be made by Aretes' *prodromoi* [15]<sup>10</sup> and the Paeonians of Ariston [16], stiffened with Cleander's mercenary infantry [14]. As this second counter-attack, carried out by far more formidable Macedonian units, was meeting with greater success than the first, Bessus, Darius' left wing commander, threw into the fray the rest of the Bactrians, possibly as many as eight thousand in number.<sup>11</sup> These were themselves repulsed, and their battle-formations broken, after a long, hard fight<sup>12</sup> culminating in a vigorous charge by the troops of the Macedonian flank-guard.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the Persian scythe-chariots were demonstrating their ineffectiveness with a charge against the Macedonian right centre. They were promptly routed by Balacrus' javelin-men and the remaining half of the Agrianian contingent [11], who had been stationed in a forward position in order to screen the Companion cavalry [1].

Now came the crisis of the battle as Alexander halted his lateral march and began a direct advance on the Persian positions. The movement of some cavalry, which Darius had told off to support the troops attempting the envelopment of the Macedonian right, had left a gap in the front line of the Persian left centre.<sup>14</sup> It was towards this gap that Alexander, seizing the tactical initiative once more, now wheeled, and, making a wedge (*ἐμβολον*) of the Companion cavalry [1] and part of the infantry phalanx [2, 3, 4, 5, 6],<sup>15</sup> led the attack in the direction of Darius himself. At this development, the Great King fled.

<sup>8</sup>Arr. 3.13.2; cf. 3.8.7.

<sup>9</sup>Arr. 3.5.1. See also J. R. Hamilton, *CQ* 5 (1955) 217–218.

<sup>10</sup>Aretes' "second" charge at Arr. 3.14.1 and 3.14.3 appears to be a doublet of the one at Arr. 3.13.3.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Curt. 4.12.6.

<sup>12</sup>Arr. 3.13.4. The repeated assaults of Bessus' cavalry indicate that this struggle was of lengthy duration, ending, perhaps, just after Alexander's major attack on the enemy centre, while the fact that the heavier losses here were incurred by the Macedonians suggests that the retreat of the Persian left was due more to demoralization, as a result of Darius' flight from the field, than to actual tactical defeat at the hands of Alexander's troops.

<sup>13</sup>Griffith, 80–81, and Burn, 87, note 6, are agreed in excluding the Companion cavalry from this part of the action; cf. Tarn II 185–186.

<sup>14</sup>Arr. 3.14.2; cf. Curt. 4.15.20.

<sup>15</sup>Arr. 3.14.2 and 3.14.4.

I suggest that this evolution into a wedge-shaped formation, evidently carried out *only* during the actual crisis of the battle, has led to the Macedonian army being credited by both Curtius and Diodorus with a battle-line in oblique order from the very beginning of the engagement.<sup>16</sup> The identity of the source, or sources, utilized by these two historians for their battle-narratives is itself a major *crux*, and need not concern us here. It is possible that Curtius and Diodorus both muddled their accounts of Gaugamela themselves. However, it is more likely that they inherited an already defective tradition. Nor, indeed, is it hard to see how such an erroneous version got its start. It may, at first, have been a case of mere over-simplification. For, whatever its original tactical disposition, the front line of the Macedonian army was, at this stage of the conflict, actually advancing in oblique order. The wedge of Arrian 3.14.2 was, it should be stressed, no mere metaphor, but rather a complex formation of units arranged *en échelon* in two oblique lines, slanting in opposite directions but meeting in a broad point. The left-hand side of this massive wedge was made up of the first-line infantry units of the phalanx from as far left as (and including) Polyperchon's *taxis* [6], while the *ilai* of the Companion cavalry [1] constituted both the much shorter right-hand side and the broad apex of the formation.<sup>17</sup> A sharper point was doubtless provided by the person and body-guard of Alexander himself, swinging leftward to assail Darius. At the same time, the flank-guard of the Macedonian right wing, also in oblique order, was swinging outward to the right in close combat with the Bactrian cavalry of Bessus.<sup>18</sup> A military ignoramus, especially if he had not been present at the battle, might well have become obscure, or even genuinely confused, when endeavouring to describe so complicated a tactical situation. Not so, however, the experienced soldier Ptolemy, who (we may reasonably assume) rode with the βασιλική ἵλη throughout the engagement. Ptolemy may not have had a very clear idea of what was going on in other parts of the field—his coverage of the proceedings on the Macedonian left is far from comprehensive—but it is only thanks to him (and to Arrian, who preserves his account, at least in outline) that an accurate reconstruction of Alexander's oblique order tactics, and hence of the decisive moment of the battle, can be made.

Meanwhile, in the centre, due to both the pace of Alexander's advance towards the gap in the Persian front and the evolution of his right wing into wedge-formation, a gap developed in the Macedonian army's own

<sup>16</sup>Curt. 4.15.1; Diod. 17.57.6.

<sup>17</sup>For alternative reconstructions of Alexander's wedge, see Fuller, 171, diagram 11, and 174; Marsden, 57; Milns, 118 (diagram) and 123; Schachermeyr, 273; and Green, 293.

<sup>18</sup>There is no reason to suppose, as Griffith, 84–85, does, that Alexander had to wheel to his right and drive Bessus' wing off the field himself.

front line. While all the units from Polyperchon's *taxis* [6] rightward surged forward in the great attack on the Persian centre, Simmias, unable to push forward as rapidly, and hearing that the left was in difficulties, halted his own *taxis* [7] to succour it. Through the resultant gap there now penetrated a force of Indian and Persian cavalry from the disintegrating enemy centre.<sup>19</sup> Reaching the Macedonian baggage-park [25],<sup>20</sup> they fell upon its defenders, overwhelmed them, and liberated those of their own troops whom they found there as prisoners. At this, the Macedonian second-line infantry [24], in accordance with previous orders, faced about and put the raiders to flight.

While all this was taking place, the left, under the command of Parmenion, was sustaining an attempted envelopment, as well as a frontal assault, by the as yet undefeated Persian right, commanded by Mazaeus. Being thus hard-pressed, Parmenion despatched riders to Alexander, asking for assistance.<sup>21</sup> It is almost certain, despite statements to the contrary in our sources,<sup>22</sup> that this message was never delivered. For when Parmenion's messengers reached the Macedonian right, they found that Alexander was already far advanced in his pursuit of Darius and returned, apparently without having accomplished their mission.<sup>23</sup> Fortunately, however, for the Macedonian cause, Parmenion succeeded, without help, in checking the Persian attack with his Thessalian cavalry [10]. Then, as news of Darius' flight from the field filtered through to the faltering enemy right, the repulse rapidly became a rout.

<sup>19</sup>The account of an attack on the Macedonian camp itself, by cavalry sent from the Persian right by Mazaeus (Curt. 4.15.5; Diod. 17.59.5-8; Plut. *Alex.* 32.3), is probably as apocryphal as the fantastic story of the refusal of Darius' mother, Sisymbria, to be rescued (Diod. 17.59.7; cf. Curt. 4.15.10-11), with which it is connected. Plut. *Alex.* 32.3-4 and Curt. 4.15.6-8 render the alleged attack on the camp even more dubious by linking it with the tale of a weak-kneed Parmenion demanding aid from an unperturbed, if contemptuous, Alexander (see below, note 21).

<sup>20</sup>Arr. 3.14.5-6. As this raid was dealt with by the second-line infantry (Arr. 3.14.6), it is evident that its object (whether intended or not) was merely the field baggage-park, and not Alexander's fortified four-day camp (Arr. 3.9.1; Curt. 4.10.15), some 16-17 miles away, or either of his two alleged night-camps (Curt. 4.12.17 and 4.12.24; cf. Arr. 3.9.3-4, which has only one such camp), also some 3-4 miles distant.

<sup>21</sup>An appeal for help from Parmenion at this stage is quite credible, and need not be associated with any deliberately discrediting story of cowardice or irresolution on his part, as it is in Plutarch and Curtius (above, note 19), though, very significantly, not in Diodorus (note especially, 17.60.8). For the role of Callisthenes as the creator of the anti-Parmenion tradition, see Tarn II 352-353 and 357, and J. R. Hamilton, *Plutarch: Alexander, A Commentary* (Oxford 1969) 89.

<sup>22</sup>Arr. 3.15.1; Curt. 4.15.6-8 and 4.16.2-3; Plut. *Alex.* 32.3-4 and 33.6.

<sup>23</sup>Diod. 17.60.7. The dust and chaos of battle (Curt. 4.15.32-33; Diod. 17.60.4), together with the likelihood that Alexander was by then a couple of miles or so from his original position at the start of the battle, render it most unlikely that anyone coming from the left wing could have reached him while he was pursuing Darius. Cf. Fuller, 178, and Lane Fox, 241.



Whether or not he received Parmenion's appeal for help, Alexander *did* turn back, most likely because of the loss of Darius' trail at the River Lycus (probably the Khazir Su) and the growing darkness of evening.<sup>24</sup> It was during this rearward ride<sup>25</sup> that Alexander became involved in a short but bloody clash with a large body of retreating Persian cavalry, in company with some Parthian and Indian horse. Here, according to Arrian,<sup>26</sup> took place the hardest fought cavalry action of the entire battle. After having slain sixty of Alexander's Companion cavalry [1] and wounded his favourite, Hephaestion,<sup>27</sup> the remnants of the Persian horse broke through the Macedonian squadrons and made good their escape.

When he had assured himself of the fact that his army was completely victorious, and that hence there was no more glory to be won on the field, Alexander renewed his pursuit of Darius. Meanwhile, Parmenion advanced and took the Persian camp, along with the enemy's baggage-train and elephants. Having crossed the Lycus, Alexander bivouacked on the far side and rested his cavalry until around midnight, when he rode on to Arbela, some forty miles away, where he hoped to capture both Darius and his field-treasury. When he reached Arbela the following day, he did in fact find there the Persian field-treasury, as well as his defeated opponent's chariot, but no Darius. The Great King had ridden on to meet an ignominious end—at the hands of his own subjects.

<sup>24</sup>Curt. 4.16.16–19; cf. Plut. *Alex.* 33.6–7. That "Alexander was no Prince Rupert, and Gaugamela no Edgehill"—as Marsden, 61, puts it—has become a dogma in recent studies of the battle. It is highly probable that, after the battle of Ipsus in 301 B.C. (where Demetrius, pursuing the beaten cavalry of Seleucus and Lysimachus too far from the field, left his father, Antigonus Monophthalmus, to be defeated and killed), the historiographical emphasis changed from one of execrating Parmenion for being responsible, through his "unnecessary" appeals for assistance, for the escape of Darius (Curt. 4.16.3 is most significant here), to that of glossing over the tactically irresponsible character of Alexander's prolonged pursuit of the Great King (note Curt. 4.16.29–30). The linking of the historian Aristobulus with the battle of Ipsus at Arr. 7.18.5 is certainly evidence for this view.

<sup>25</sup>Arr. 3.15.1–2; Curt. 4.16.20–25. Hardly the vast enveloping movement, aimed at the complete encirclement of the Persian centre and left, that Marsden, 61, seems to make it. Alexander lacked both the required effective superiority in numbers and the tactical position from which to carry out such an encirclement. In any case, the grand tactics of central penetration would have held a greater appeal, because of their directness, for the king's "heroic" spirit (here note, for example, Arr. 1.11.7–8; 1.12.1; 3.3.1–2; 5.26.5; 6.9.3–6; and 6.24.2–3; Plut. *Alex.* 8.2), as well as being better suited to the task of dealing with the rather loose tactical formations of the Persians.

<sup>26</sup>Arr. 3.15.2; cf. Curt. 4.16.20. The importance and ferocity ascribed to this clash by our sources probably have their origin in the personal reminiscences of Ptolemy himself.

<sup>27</sup>Arr. 3.15.2. No tactical conclusions can be drawn from Arrian's inclusion here of Coenus and Menidas; cf. Griffith, 86–87, and Milns, 124. It is evident from Diod. 17.61.3 and Curt. 4.16.31–32 that Arrian has simply conflated a mention of the wounding of Hephaestion and the loss of sixty Companions in this encounter with a casualty list of senior officers; cf. Burn, 88, and also R. M. Errington, *CQ* 19 (1969) 237.

## CONCLUSION

Having thus reconstructed the battle of Gaugamela, we may appropriately conclude with an appraisal of Alexander's generalship on this field. That he showed great competence here goes without saying. What is open to question is the consistency with which Alexander displayed this competence in his conduct of the battle. Certainly the foresight shown in providing adequate mobile protection for the flanks of the Macedonian army during the defensive phase of the action merits immediate praise. Yet the wisdom of Alexander's order for Menidas and his mercenary cavalry [17] to open the engagement on their own is far from obvious. It certainly seems irresponsible to launch a small body of horse on a charge against a much stronger formation of enemy cavalry, even if, as was the case here, support were close at hand. Viewed in this light, Menidas' charge does appear to have been an error—and an error of carelessness at that.

But simple carelessness, especially at crucial moments, is hardly typical of Alexander. Everything he did was carefully planned in advance. This is not to say that he never miscalculated. Rather, his mistakes, like those of other men of great military or political genius, were by and large due to passion or megalomania. Such a mistake, as we shall see, was his prolonged pursuit of Darius from this very battlefield. And that was the result not of any impetuous decision, but rather of yet another attempt—despite a similar failure at Issus—to carry out his long-standing, if overly hazardous, plan to end the war at one blow by seizing the person of the Great King. Likewise, Menidas' charge was no ill-considered manoeuvre, but part of a carefully laid tactical plan that happened to misfire. It was, in fact, a device to "draw" the enemy.<sup>28</sup> At the Granicus Alexander had sacrificed his advance-guard of cavalry in order to throw the Persian horse guarding the ford into confusion.<sup>29</sup> Only then had he launched his main attack with the Companion cavalry. Here, at Gaugamela, Alexander faced a similar problem—how to open the enemy's ranks for the decisive assault. Since Bessus' Bactrians and the Dahae were moving around his flank in a disciplined manner,<sup>30</sup> Alexander had to "draw" them. The only way that he could do this was by sending a small unit forward to attack, and be driven back in disorder—a disorder which would include the pursuers. Having thus dissolved their battle-formation, Alexander could exploit their disorganization by sending in stronger cavalry units. In the event this is exactly what he did. And, but for the vastly superior numbers of the Persian cavalry, he would probably have won his battle there

<sup>28</sup>I am particularly grateful to Professor E. Badian for suggesting this interpretation to me.

<sup>29</sup>Arr. 1.15.1–3.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Arr. 4.5.4–5.

and then. The fact that this tactical ploy failed should not blind us to its viability. It had worked before, and should have worked here, had not the Persians, as seems very possible, been expecting it. At any rate, Alexander did make a mistake for which he must be held accountable, that of underestimating the strength of the forces with which Darius could counter his opening move. But the initial failure was by no means irretrievable. On the contrary, it opened the way for a stab at the heart of the Persian army, since in order to meet the threat Darius had uncovered his left centre.

Brilliant and subtle tactician that he was, Alexander, like Napoleon, worked on the principle of "a plan with branches." Once his original plan had bogged down in a hard-fought cavalry engagement on the right, Alexander put into effect its main branch—the central attack in wedge-formation. This major attack was the high-light of the battle in more ways than one, and, as such, warrants some discussion. The manoeuvre itself was well-conceived, and—apart from the consequent disjunction in the Macedonian front line—skilfully executed. That Alexander chose this tactic, rather than, say, an ordinary frontal assault, was evidently due to two separate considerations. First, he meant to seize the opportunity to envelop the internal left flank of the Persian centre by way of the gap that had just opened. Secondly, he sought to enable his Companion cavalry [1], the tactical spearhead of the wedge, to advance ahead of the infantry, while neither depriving itself of close support from the phalanx nor disrupting the army's main battle-line. In devising the manoeuvre of attack in wedge-formation, or, more technically, in double oblique order, Alexander evinced a striking originality in the sphere of grand tactics. For although the oblique order attack had been invented by Epaminondas some forty years before,<sup>31</sup> Alexander appears to have been the first general to develop the manoeuvre in any tactically significant way.<sup>32</sup>

But from this point on Alexander's tactics are not so commendable. Putting his long-term political interests ahead of the requirements of the immediate tactical situation, he at once set off in pursuit of Darius himself. Admittedly, the successful capture of the Great King's person would have outweighed any incidental disaster, such as the destruction of the Macedonian left by an undefeated Persian right. But it must be conceded, in view of the ease of retreat afforded Darius by the open terrain of the battlefield, that there was never very much chance of Alexander actually overtaking his quarry. Moreover, across the enemy's

<sup>31</sup>For the first well-authenticated occurrence of the oblique order attack, at the battle of Leuctra in 371 B.C., see Diod. 15.55.1–15.56.4.

<sup>32</sup>The "Alexandrine wedge" seems to have made its début during Alexander's Illyrian campaign in 335 B.C. (see Arr. 1.6.3).

natural line of retreat there lay the River Lycus, complete with a bridge that could be broken down by the Great King or—as indeed happened—hopelessly blocked by his fleeing followers after his crossing.<sup>33</sup> Although it is possible that Alexander was unaware of the problem of the river-crossing until he got to it, the nature of the terrain in rear of the Persian position could scarcely have escaped his notice. In these circumstances, the tactically correct course of action would have been for him to return to the battlefield proper as soon as the rout of the Persian centre was seen to be complete. That he did not in fact do so is an instance of tactical delinquency which can be counted against him, at least from the standpoint of a critique of pure generalship. His Homeric attitude to war had again led him off in fruitless quest of the “*spolia opima*.”

Needless to say, Alexander was fortunate in having as the commander of his left so competent a tactician as Parmenion, to whom belongs the glory of winning here—as at Issus—what was virtually a separate battle. Parmenion's wing of the army had certainly been placed in jeopardy by the king's preoccupation with Darius. The gravity of the situation is indicated by Parmenion's (unanswered) appeal for help. Nevertheless, two considerations can be advanced in partial defence of Alexander's conduct. In the first place, he had provided his general with the excellent Thessalian cavalry [10] to act as a nucleus for offensive action. In the second, his apparent confidence in the ability of Parmenion and his troops to withstand the onslaughts of the Persian right was justified by the successful outcome of a remarkably similar situation at Issus.<sup>34</sup>

It is generally agreed by military historians that Alexander's victory at Gaugamela was a tactical masterpiece. This judgment, though substantially correct, does require some qualification. As we have seen, Alexander's tactics in this battle, while on the whole brilliant in their originality and subtlety, were not altogether flawless in their execution. The masterpiece was marred by the victor's heroic pretensions and mis-conceived order of priorities. Gaugamela, we must remember, was, after all, the victory of a very great but as yet immature general.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Curt. 4.16.8–9 and 4.16.16–17.

<sup>34</sup>Arr. 2.11.1–3; cf. 2.11.6–7 (suspicious); Curt. 3.11.13–15; cf. 3.11.16 (also suspicious). See above, note 24.

<sup>35</sup>I am greatly indebted to Professors E. Badian, A. B. Bosworth, D. Fishwick and J. King-Farlow, as well as to an anonymous referee, for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.