THE GREEK AND PERSIAN WARS
500-323 BC

JACK CASSIN-SCOTT
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Text and colour plates by
JACK CASSIN-SCOTT
The Ionian Revolt

The years 500-323 B.C. were a period of intense military activity in the eastern Mediterranean and Asia Minor. The combatants, whether they were involved in petty inter-state conflicts or the oppressive warmongering and imperialism of the Persians and Macedonians, found the fortunes of western Asia Minor, under the leadership of Aristagoras. An urgent appeal for aid was answered by both Athens and the small city state of Eretria on the island of Euboea; Athens supplied twenty-five ships. Sparta, the greatest military power within the Hellenic world, had no great liking for distant expeditions and, lacking any great knowledge of events outside her own European Greece, refused help. In the spring of 498 B.C. the Ionian forces, confident though the evidence suggests otherwise,
1 Greek light infantry (gymnet)
2 Greek heavy infantry (hoplite)
3 Greek slinger
Greek armoured infantry
Persians, but it slowly became clear that the Athenians did not consider it to be a democratic alliance of free states. Some time during the period 470–69 B.C., Naxos terminated its alliance with the League. It was immediately besieged and forced to capitulate; Athens, it seemed, would not tolerate insubordination from her ‘allies’. At about the same time Carystus and the surrounding land in southern Euboea was forcibly annexed by the League for the sake of consolidating its territories. The implications were obvious—Athens was transforming the League into an empire. The forces available to the League were considerable. In 468 B.C. it dealt a decisive blow to the Persians who were launching a new fleet, comprising 200 ships, from their Phoenician shipyards. War between Sparta and Athens gradually became inevitable, for the Athenians had

made alliances with Thessaly and Megara and with Argos, a powerful Peloponnesian rival of the Spartans. As relations worsened with Aegina and Corinth, who were jealous of the trading potential of Piraeus, by now the chief Greek port, tension in the Peloponnesian rapidly became acute.

The prominent figure in Athenian politics at this time was Pericles, who was determined to unite the whole of Greece under Athenian religious leadership. In 457 B.C., he completed the fortification of Piraeus and linked it to Athens with a walled corridor about seven kilometres wide, and his command was to see the city reach the height of its imperialist aspirations.

Athenian expansionist policy had become so obvious that Sparta sent an 11,000-strong army to Boeotia to persuade its inhabitants to join the Peloponnesian League and resist Athens, and this force defeated an Athenian army at Tanagra, east of Thebes; but it then withdrew to the Isthmus leaving the Boeotians at the mercy of the Athenians, who took control of the whole area, except Thebes itself, two months later. Eventually a five-year peace treaty was negotiated between the Athenians and the Peloponnesian League in 452 B.C., but it was not until 445 B.C. that a definitive
truce, intended to last for thirty years, was agreed upon by Athens and Sparta. The two states could, however, find no mutually acceptable terms which would be likely to form a lasting peace, and the treaty fell prey to the conflict of interests which characterized relations between Athens and Sparta.

Pericles died in 429 B.C. and the new leader, Cleon, who was vigorously anti-Peloponnesian in his attitude, turned his attention to Sicily. He hoped to sever the links between Syracuse and the Peloponnesians, for the Syracusans had a substantial fleet which could be a threat to the Athenians. The war proved inconclusive for both Athens and Sparta, but in 425 B.C. an expedition to
Sicily turned the scales in favour of the Athenians. Forty ships under Eurymedon and Sophocles were sent to reinforce troops already in Sicily. Travelling with them was Demosthenes who, although holding no command, was empowered to use the fleet as he saw fit. When Eurymedon and Sophocles received news that sixty Peloponnesian ships had arrived at Corcyra off the west coast of Epirus they decided to hasten straightaway to meet the enemy, despite their inferiority of numbers. Opposing this, Demosthenes made the apparently extraordinary proposition that the fleet should instead put in at the headland of Pylos on the west coast of Messenia, along which they were at that time sailing. Demosthenes' plan was to fortify and hold Pylos, but the two admirals were unimpressed and were only persuaded to go along with the idea when a storm compelled them to shelter in Navarino Bay, protected by the Pylos peninsula and the island of Sphacteria. Walls were constructed to the southeast and south-west of Pylos, and also to the north where it was connected by a sand bar to the mainland. Demosthenes, with five ships and 1,000 hoplites and light troops, was left to garrison the headland.
Meanwhile, the main body of the fleet made for Corecyra once more. Demosthenes' plan was to instigate and support revolt in Messenia, and the Spartan response was swift. The bulk of the Peloponnesian army withdrew from Attica, which had once again been occupied, and marched directly to Pylos. The squadron at Corecyra was instructed to sail immediately for the same spot. Demosthenes, faced with the prospect of attack from land and sea, requested immediate aid from the Athenian fleet, now at Zacynthus.

The Spartans prepared to attack the garrison at Pylos, preferably before the return of the Athenian blockading Sphacteria and its Spartan garrison. The Spartans, reluctant to lose the troops on Sphacteria, negotiated a truce for the purpose of peace negotiations in Athens. Under the terms of this truce the Peloponnesian ships were given into Athenian custody and the Athenians were to supervise the sending of supplies to Sphacteria. When, however, the peace talks failed and the truce was ended, the Athenians, claiming that the terms of the armistice had been violated, refused to hand back the Spartan ships, and blockaded Sphacteria once more. The expectation was that the garrison on Sphacteria could be stormed into surrender, by
Under the command of Aristes, satrap of Hellas-pontine Phrygia, they discussed their strategy; Memnon’s sound advice was to retreat, destroying the land as they went, and then to carry the war into Greece, leaving the beleaguered Alexander in a hostile wasteland; but this plan was rejected by the satraps, who favoured an immediate conflict, apparently placing their confidence in the advantage they had over Alexander in their choice of terrain. Positioned on the eastern bank of the river Granicus (which was in the area of the Dardanelles), they could force Alexander to attempt a precarious crossing which would break his formation and hinder the effective use of cavalry. Although the Persian infantry was no match for that of the Macedonians, Aristes was relying on his superior numbers of cavalry—over 15,000—to counter any Macedonian attack.

On reaching the battle-ground Alexander’s staff saw clearly the dangers of a direct advance across the river, and so, overnight, they moved downstream, fording the river at dawn. By the time the Persian cavalry, summoned by scouts, had arrived at Alexander’s crossing point, the Macedonian phalanx had formed up and Alexander’s cavalry charged, forcing a Persian retreat.

The ground on the eastern side of the Granicus gave the Macedonian cavalry the chance to exercise its skill to the full, and as soon as the Persians advanced on his position Alexander moved his right wing cavalry against them. Moving first towards the Persian left, he suddenly bore round and forced his wedge formation into the Persian centre. The enemy replied with a similar charge against the Macedonian centre, but left their infantry an easy target for the Macedonian phalanx. A further cavalry charge, this time by Parmenio on the Macedonian right wing, put the Persians to flight, leaving only a pocket of resistance from Memnon’s Greek mercenaries, soon overcome by the triumphant Alexander. The defeat cost Aristes 2,500 cavalry, and dispelled any illusions Darius might have had about the gravity of the Macedonian threat.

Many cities in Asia Minor submitted without trouble to Alexander, but he met with some resistance, particularly at Miletus and Halicarnassus. After a short siege Miletus was occupied, but Halicarnassus, defended by the experienced Memnon who had escaped at Granicus, proved intransigent; Alexander left a detachment of 3,000 foot and 200 horse to besiege the port, and headed on round the Lycian coast, aiming eventually to occupy all the ports of the eastern Mediterranean, thus rendering the Persian fleet inoperative. By October 333 B.C. he had arrived at Tarsus in Cilicia whence he moved around the coast of Syria to Myriandrus, only to hear that Darius’ forces had manoeuvred into position behind him, at Issus, on the northern bank of the river Pinarus. His lines of supply and communication cut, Alexander was forced to turn about and fight. His exhausted troops marched back towards the Pinarus where the Persians, having once again chosen their position with care, awaited them. Darius was protecting his weak Asiatic infantry with Greek mercenaries, who, along with the 2,000 first class Persian troops of the Royal Bodyguard, and the lightly-armed Cardaces, made up the Persian front line. As Alexander approached, Darius moved his
main cavalry force onto his right wing near the sea
shore. Parmenio and Alexander led the left and
right wing cavalry respectively, the phalanx taking
up the centre.

As soon as the first volley of arrows had been
loosed by the Persian archers, Alexander led the
Companion Cavalry in a brilliant charge which
shattered Darius’ right wing. However, this created
a gap to the right of the struggling Macedonian
phalanx and into this gap Darius’s Greek mercen-
aries poured, battling furiously with Alexander’s
centre. Alexander’s main concern now was either to
capture Darius or to kill him, hoping to remove,
along with the Great King, any further united
opposition within the Persian Empire. Darius,
seeing the danger, fled the battlefield, although he
apparently wounded Alexander who almost took
him in a direct charge.

Before he could pursue, Alexander had first to
make sure of his victory; he turned his right wing
against the Persian centre. The mercenaries
were shattered and their predicament caused the cavalry
on their right to follow Darius in flight. The
Macedonians followed and the Persians were
routed. Alexander was now free to pursue the Great
King himself, but Darius had made good his escape.
Over 10,000 Greek mercenaries successfully re-
retreated, to offer their services in the next conflict,
which was inevitable as long as Darius remained
overlord of the Persian Empire.

Alexander pushed on down the Syrian coast,
taking all the Persian naval bases and thereby
obtaining complete control in the eastern Medi-
erranean. A detour was made into Egypt, but by the
summer of 331 B.C. Alexander had led his army
back northwards through Syria to Thapsacus on
the Euphrates, en route for Babylon, the economic
centre of the Empire. Meanwhile, Darius, thinking
that Alexander would head down the Euphrates,
prepared for a repeat of Artaxerxes’ defeat at
Cunaxa which lay a little north of Babylon. The
astute Macedonian leader was not, however, to be
which, suitably levelled, would be admirable
terrain for his cavalry and chariots.

After allowing his army several days’ rest,
Alexander, who had heard from captured scouts of
Darius’ final plan, reached the battlefield and saw
to his horror that Darius’ forces were considerably
stronger than he had believed. The Great King was
relying on a strongly armed cavalry of 34,000 to
form his front line; the Macedonian cavalry would
be outnumbered by almost five to one. On 29
September Alexander reconnoitred the plain and
retired to his tent to develop his strategy.

26. Theban shield and bows and cases.

The battle order of Alexander’s army was drawn
up next day in much the same way as it had been at
Granicus and Issus, but with the wings strength-
ened and angled back from the main force. Behind
a cavalry screen on the right wing, he placed a powerful mercenary force, whilst the
remainder of the mercenaries and the League
infantry protected the rear. The left wing was, as
usual, under the command of Parmenio. Alexander
planned to use the fortified wings of his army to
draw the Persian strength onto his flanks and then
to make a decisive charge into the Persian centre
where Darius himself was positioned. As the two
armies approached each other, Alexander...
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