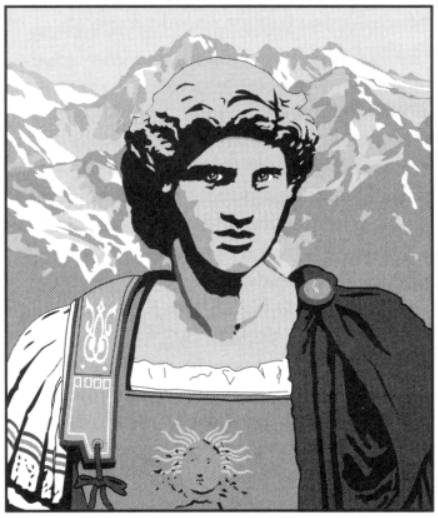
Foundations of Victory: Reasons for Macedonian Supremacy

BY JIM WERBANETH

Alexander the Great's conquest of the Persian Empire has no parallel in Western Military history. In his 1987 book, *The Mask of Command,* John Keegan vividly placed it into perspective:


By Rodger B. MacGowan ©1996

Imagine a Highland Napoleon. Imagine a Bonny Prince Charlie with European ambitions who, having won back Scotland from King George II, sets off at the head of his clans not just to conquer England — a mere preliminary — but to cross the Channel, to meet and beat the French army on the River Somme, then journey south into Spain to besiege and subdue its principle fortresses, return north to challenge the Holy Roman Emperor, twice confront and defeat him at the head of his forces, seize his Crown, burn his capital, and finally depart eastward to cross swords with the Tsar of Russia or the Sultan of Turkey. Imagine all this compressed into, say, the years 1745-56, between the princeling's twenty-second and thirty-third birthdays. Imagine on his death, at the age of thirty-two, the crowns of Europe shared between his followers — Lord George Murray ruling in Madrid, the Duke of Perth in Paris, Lord Elcho in Vienna, John Roy Stewart in Berlin, Cameron of Lochiel in Warsaw, a gaggle of tartaned chieftans braying for whiskey in the small courts of south Germany and London garrisoned by a crew of bare-kneed highlanders. Finally, imagine most of the Jacobite empire enduring into the nineteenth century, parts of it into the twentieth, and its last fragment into the twenty-first.

The *Deluxe Edition* of The Great Battles of Alexander partially illustrates how the Macedonian king accomplished his singular feat. As a tactical game, it throws little light on his grand strategy, but it does accurately demonstrate how a combination of tactical genius, daring, and a highly developed combined arms military system could dominate the battlefields from the Balkans to the Indus.

Gamers with experience playing Alexander quickly see the havoc that the Macedonian system can wreak on its enemies. In every major battle Alexander has an edge over his Persian and Indian enemies. In two, Gaugamela and the Hydaspes, the other side has a noteworthy chance of winning, but the advantage still lies with the Macedonians. The Persians in the Issus scenario have less of a chance. There is almost no possibility that they will beat a competant Alexander at the Granicus, and for the Greeks at Chaeronea, the result is almost always disaster. If played with the Spartans, the outcome is slightly less inevitable, but the army commanded by Alexander's father Philip is still generally the winning one.

Superficially at least, the reasons for this tactical domination are simple: a military genius leading an army better than any opposing it. But a deeper examination is in order. For the Macedonian player, it is necessary to best exploit his side's awesome capabilities, and for the Persian or Indian side, to better anticipate and cope with them.

Alexander's advantages are threefold; excellent command, infantry, and cavalry.

GBoH Historical Perspective

Command

There is a clear parallel between the armies of Alexander the Great and Napoleon. Both were the products of distinct military systems, but, in practice were dominated by, and ultimately served, the ambitions of a single, extraordinary individual.

This is reflected in *Deluxe* Alexander. At Chaeronea, the young Alexander is a gifted subordinate. In the other battles, he is a king and commander with the highest leadership ratings in the game. In a game system largely geared to command, high numbers translate into a key asset. High initiative enables a leader to react to lower-rated enemy commanders' moves, or take a shortcut in the normal order to preempt them. Superior charisma aids combat.

Never to be neglected, a high personal combat factor is a threat to enemy leaders. In the highly personalized view of leader versus leader battlefield confrontation intrinsic to the game, a commander highly-rated in this area can directly confront his enemy counterparts, potentially decapitatiing the opposing force and undermining its cohesion. In this light, Alexander's aggressive confrontation of the Persian King Darius at Issus and Gaugamela was an extremely sound tactical decision, not just the product of rash bravado.

Thus Alexander himself is one of the most important assets of the Macedonian army. Wherever he personally engages the enemy is most likely to be the place where the battle is decided.

He is, of course, not the only leader in the Macedonian army. However, his host relies on very few commanders; including the king, there are never more than three standard, true leaders on the Macedonian side. By contrast, leadership is dispersed among seven Persians at Gaugamela, eight on the Granicus.

Experienced players should use the optional rule for Macedonian contingent commanders. These are leaders outside the chain of command, who are responsible for very specific unit types only, with two main functions. One is to relay something similar to line commands, used in this game by the Persians and Indians (familiar to SPQR players). The other is to provide a charisma-based bonus in combat, at low risk. This is the more important role, one that the Macedonian player should exploit to the fullest.

Infantry

Alexander's infantry is not a truly radical departure from its Greek predecessors so much as an evolution to a higher, more effective form. The Greeks, typified by the army at Chaeronea, fielded armies in which the bulk of the force, and the arm of decision, was hoplite militia.

Two innovations, however, set the Macedonian system above that of the classical Greeks. One was an increased reliance on, and enhanced prestige of, arms denigrated by the Greeks. For them, light infantry were comprised of the lower classes, who could not afford the full panoply of the hoplite. In Hellenic eyes, real men (and upstanding citizens) carried a shield and spear, and fought in seried ranks. Lesser characters flitted about the Battlefield, wielding bows and slings.

The Macedonian system inherited by Alexander from his father recognized that light infantry could have a more decisive place on the battlefield and developed it to a higher degree. *Deluxe* Alexander reflects this most prominently in the Agrianian javelinists.

These units have a troop quality of six, extremely high by the standards of skirmishers in the game. Qualitatively, they stand out for an ability to initiate close combat, unique for skirmishers, who tend to stay back and harrass the enemy with bow and sling.

An agrianian unit cannot hope to survive a charge by enemy hoplites, or any kind of massed infantry for that matter. But they are dangerous to enemy skirmishers and their maneuverability makes them a distinct threat to enemy flanks.

Moreover, they pose a special danger to chariots. These wheeled anachronisms, so beloved by the Persians and Indians, are mostly ineffective, but they are hard for cavalry and regular infantry to attack frontally. Skirmishers enjoy attack superiority against chariots, and, with their special capability for shock combat, the Agrianians are an important tool for eliminating, not just neutralizing, chariots.

The second Macedonian innovation was the professionalization of the hoplite phalanx. From a militia formation, it was transformed to a standing unit of professional soldiers, heavily drilled to march and fight with a precision beyond that possible with part-time troops.

Equipment also underwent important changes. Lighter armor increased mobility. Most crucial, the old pike was replaced with the sarissa, a much longer spear that gave the phalanx a correspondingly greater reach.

In *Deluxe* Alexander, the differences are so profound that the game recognizes only Macedonian formations as true phalanxes, portraying the Greek ones as double-sized standard heavy infantry, their size handicaping them with a lower ability to move any direction but straight ahead.

Deluxe Edition:
The Great Battles of Alexander

The Macedonian Art of War, 338 - 326 B.C.
The Great Battles of History Series, Volume I
Published: 1995
Game Design: Mark Herman & Richard Berg
Art Director: Rodger B. MacGowan
Project Editor: Gene Billingsley

Contents: 720 die-cut Counters; Three 22x34 inch Maps; Ten Great Battles; Rulebook; Charts & Tables; One 10-sided die; Bookcase Box
Time Scale: 20 minutes per game turn
Map Scale: 70 yards per hex
Unit Scale: 100 men per size point
Players: 1-4

Proper Macedonian phalanxes have a wide variety of advantages in combat. Some of these can be found in heavy infantry, but the Macedonian phalanx is indisputably superior to the Greek hoplite infantry. Also, it has the option to form especially imposing double-depth formations; even though a unit's troop strength is arguably the least important variable in combat, the Macedonians have the option to create formations of overwhelming size.

The best example of the Alexandrian phalanx's ascendency over its predecessor is at Chaeronea, where they meet in head-to-head battle. Historically, the young prince Alexander delivered the death blow to the Greek army, riding at the head of his father's cavalry. But in the scenario, the double-depth phalanxes have the capacity to shred the Greek heavy infantry on their own.

The Macedonians, additionally, have high-quality heavy infantry of their own, in the form of the hypaspists. These are, basically, conventional, single-hex heavy infantry with high troop quality ratings.

In practice, hypaspists fulfill some valuable roles. More agile than the phalanxes, they guard the vulnerable flanks of their line. Moreover, they are extremely useful for tasks in which a less linear approach is appropriate. For example, in the Crossing the Jaxartes scenario, they are much better at crossing the river than their larger cousins.

Cavalry

If Persia excels at anything, it is cavalry. The armies of the Granicus, Issus and to a somewhat lesser degree Gaugamela, are essentially cavalry forces, augmented by a few infantrymen and screened by foot skirmishers. Also, like light infantry and skirmishers, cavalry was an arm denigrated by most democratically-minded Greeks, who prefered to rely on the artisans and farmers who filled the heavy infantry's ranks, instead of the untrustworthy aristocrats with horses. In addition, Greek topography is not well suited to large-scale cavalry actions.

Therefore there is some irony in that cavalry is the centerpiece of the Macedonian offensive punch. Like the Macedonian light infantry and skirmishers, their cavalry was greatly enhanced and augmented in numbers, potency and social standing. In fact, it was the arm most associated with the king, both socially and on the field of battle.

Described in its simplest terms, the basic Macedonian tactic in the game is a hammer blow delivered by the cavalry on the right flank, personally led by Alexander himself, while the main infantry line advances to occupy the enemy center. On the left, the Thessalian cavalry, under the older, more conservative general Parmenion, holds against a Persian offensive. However, some Macedonian players will find an opportunity for at least a limited attack.

The cornerstone of the Macedonian horse is the Companion heavy cavalry. It is the quintessential example of quality without quantity; there are only four units in any battle against the Persians. Supporting them is a similar number of light cavalry and lancers. Considering the superior numbers of cavalrymen opposing them for the King of Kings, at first glance it appears to be a slender reed for victory. This is especially true when the Persians have cataphracted Bactrian heavy cavalry on the field.

The Thessalian cavalry on the other flank is a mirror image of the Companions and their lighter support. There is heavy cavalry, of just slightly lower quality. Like the Companions, when using the recommended optional rule for such they must assume a special charge formation for maximum effectiveness. In addition, they are backed up by corresponding numbers of light cavalry and lancers.

The quality of the Companions makes them a force with which to reckon. But it takes the presence of Alexander the Great at their head to make them a force capable of rupturing the enemy army with one furious charge. It takes his initiative, and elite status, to get them moving and to remove cohesion hits (thus sustaining the charge), and his charisma to not just defeat, but overwhelm, the enemy in the most critical combats.

Conclusions

Very few military revolutions come like a bolt out of the blue; Europe's encounter with the Mongols is the most obvious exception. But most are the result of evolution, and the refinement of existing methods and technologies. The *blitzkrieg* was founded on tanks and small-unit infantry tactics, both pioneered in World War I, in the best-known instance from the twentieth century.

The Macedonian way of war, as portrayed in The Great Battles of Alexander, is very similar. There was nothing in Alexander's army that would have been unrecognizable to Leonidas, Miltiades, or Pericles. The differences are threefold, with no technological innovation more striking than adding a few feet of ash to a pike's shaft. Everything else is a matter of emphasis and combination, not basic innovation.

The strengths of the Macedonian army — command, infantry, and cavalry — are not each sufficient to create the empire that Alexander did historically. Even his genius and vision were unlikely to gain him such a windfall without the means provided by his army. But in combination, they are extraordinarily powerful.

Do you agree with Jim Werbaneth's reasons for Macedonian supremacy?

Or do you have a different point-of-view? Write to C3i with your historical perspective on this subject — Ed.