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## The Battle of Mantinea 418 BC

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The first battle of Mantinea was fought at a time when Sparta's military supremacy on land had been compromised by defeat at Sphacteria in 425 BC. The battle was crucial for Sparta as defeat would result in the loss of Tegea to the Argives and with it communication with Sparta's allies to the north. Mantinea demonstrated once again the military qualities of the Spartan hoplite despite the blundering of the Spartan King, Agis, on the battlefield. Agis, while making sound strategic movements prior to the battle made a series of tactical errors on and near the battlefield. The first of these was his initial attack on the Argive army, which was deployed on high ground. Then having manoeuvred the Argive army out of its strong position he was surprised by the repositioned Argive army as he deployed from the Pelagos Wood. As the two armies clash Agis attempts to realign the Spartan army and as a result risks defeat. In the centre however the Spartans are victorious allowing Agis to turn his centre to attack the Argive right wing securing a Spartan victory. While both military and political considerations impact on the final acts of the battle the outcome is clear. Sparta strengthens its political position and recovers its military reputation which was badly damaged by the defeat at Sphacteria.

Our primary source for the battle of Mantinea, as well as events leading up to the battle, is that of Thucydides whose history was written during the Peloponnesian War. He was well qualified to write such a history as he commanded Athenian troops and ships just six years before. This experience gave him a military perspective of the events he describes. Further, as Thucydides was a relative of the pro-Spartan statesman Cimon and an admirer of Pericles, his history is likely to be relatively unbiased<sup>1</sup>.

In 421 BC the Peace of Nicias was signed between Sparta and Athens. At this point in the war the Athenians had achieved their war aims while Sparta had failed of hers<sup>2</sup>. This period of peace can however be described as “a troubled

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<sup>1</sup> Warry John, *Warfare in the Classical World*, London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995, p 40.

<sup>2</sup> Buckley T, *Aspects of Greek History 750-323 BC*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 368.

interlude before the resumption of hostilities”<sup>3</sup>. In 418 BC Tegea seemed likely to abandon its alliance with Sparta and join Sparta’s enemy, Argos. A Spartan army under King Agis was dispatched to prevent this, for the loss of Tegea would have meant that Sparta would be cut off from her northern allies. Agis was himself in a difficult position politically. After the failure of two invasions of Attica followed by his inability to bring the Argive army to battle earlier in 418 BC his leadership was compromised. So much so that ten advisors were appointed to ensure a positive outcome to the campaign.

Initially it seemed the Spartans would be outnumbered on arrival at Tegea until the army could be supplemented by troops from allied Corinth, Boeotia, Phocis and Locris. However, disagreement prevailed within the Argive camp. Following the victory against Orchomenus the Eleians disagreed with the Mantineans and Athenians on attacking Tegea. The Eleians as a result withdrew their 3000 hoplites from the attack on Tegea. A window of opportunity now presented itself for Agis. He could strike now, while he had a superior force, but without his northern allies, or wait and risk the return of the Eleians. He elected to attack.

The area between Mantinea and Tegea consists of a valley that narrows at one point some four miles from Mantinea. Between this point and Mantinea the valley widens again but passes initially through the Pelagos Wood. Nearer Tegea are two rivers, the Sarandapotamos and the Zanovistas. Agis first determined to attack the Argive coalition which was deployed on rising ground between the Pelagos Wood and Mantinea. At the last moment he was dissuaded by what Thucydides describes as an older man not to attempt an uphill attack and retires<sup>4</sup>. It is possible that the older man refers to one of the ten advisors assigned to Agis by Sparta due to his poor performance in recent campaigns. Breaking off the attack Agis then determined to draw the Argive army out of its superior position by diverting the Sarandapotamos river so that it would flood the Mantinean countryside when the rainy season arrived in the

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<sup>3</sup> Pomeroy S & Burstein S, *Ancient Greece A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 303.

<sup>4</sup> Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Letchworth: Temple Press, 1952, 5.65

coming weeks<sup>5</sup>. With the diversion complete, the Spartans marched back towards Mantinea. Thucydides describes the Spartans as being surprised as they marched out of the Pelagos Wood by the Argive army which had now redeployed<sup>6</sup>.

Thucydides describes the deployment in detail. To summarise, the Spartan army was drawn up with the Sciritae on the left, extending to the right were first Brasidas' soldiers from Thrace as well as freed helots and then the Spartans themselves. Finally, there were the Arcadians from Harea, the Maenalian and the Tegeans and cavalry on both wings<sup>7</sup>. Aspects of the deployment are worth consideration. Usually a hoplite army would form up with its best troops on the right wing and this wing would carry the main attack, often outflanking the enemy line as the hoplites advanced. However, at Mantinea the Spartan dispositions do not follow this pattern. The Sciritae were formed up on the left. Diodorus describes the Sciritae later under Agesilaus:

*The company known as Sciritae amongst the Spartans is not drawn up with the rest, but has its own station with the king and it goes to the support of the sections that from time to time are in distress; and since it is composed of picked men, it is an important factor in turning the scale in pitched battles, and generally determines the victory.*<sup>8</sup>

At Mantinea, they were not held back in reserve, or deployed on the right flank. In addition the Spartan allies, rather than the Spartans themselves, took the place of honour on the right flank while the Spartans occupied the centre. That Agis was surprised by the position of the Argive army is intriguing given his aim to force them from their initially superior position by diverting the Sarandapotamos river. However, the deployment of the various contingents of his army does suggest he was indeed surprised. With his troops deployed in such a way, it is unclear what Agis' plan involved.

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<sup>5</sup> Kagan D, *The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, pp 116-118.

<sup>6</sup> Thucydides 5.66.

<sup>7</sup> Thucydides 5.67.

<sup>8</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Diodorus of Sicily in Twelve Volumes with an English Translation*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, Ltd. 1989. Retrieved 25<sup>th</sup> April 2006, from <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-in/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0084&layout=&loc=15.32.1>

In contrast the Argive army was more traditionally deployed. The right wing of the Argive army, deployed opposite the Sciritae, consisted of the Mantineans. Extending to the Argive left flank in order were detachments from the Arcadian allies. This included a thousand elite troops from Argos as well as other Argives, Cleonaeans and Orneans. On the Argive left flank were the Athenians with their own cavalry<sup>9</sup>. Thucydides makes no mention of cavalry on the Argive right flank. The Argive army had deployed traditionally with its best troops on the right flank. Kagan in his description of the battle agrees with the estimates by scholars that there were some 8000 Argives facing Agis' army of 9000. Further, the armies deployed over a frontage of around one kilometre and the Spartan line was one hundred metres wider than the Argive line<sup>10</sup>. Thucydides indicates that the Spartan army was generally drawn up eight ranks deep and while he gives no depths for the Argive army, the frontage and army calculations would indicate that they were formed in a similar depth. The Spartan right flank overlapped the Argive left, which was held by the Athenians, and no attempt was made to extend the Argive left flank to prevent it being outflanked. Rather, as the battle unfolded, the Argives extended their own right flank past the Spartan flank held by the Sciritae. The dispositions therefore suggest the Argive commanders were prepared for an attack based around their best troops on their right flank, while the Athenian contingent, with supporting cavalry, delayed on the left.

The two armies now moved to contact and Thucydides describes the advance of the two hoplite armies:

*After this the two armies met, the Argives and their allies advancing with great violence and fury, while the Spartans came on slowly and to the music of many flute-players in their ranks. This custom of theirs has nothing to do with religion; it is designed to make them keep in step and move forward steadily without breaking their ranks, as large armies often do when they are just about to join battle<sup>11</sup>.*

Kagan interprets the description to show that the Argive generals intended to strike rapidly and with their reinforced right wing destroy the hastily deployed

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<sup>9</sup> Thucydides 5.67.

<sup>10</sup> Kagan D, p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> Thucydides, 5.70.

Spartan army,<sup>12</sup> a sensible conclusion presuming that the Spartans had been surprised by the Argive deployment<sup>13</sup>. Such an attack would prevent the Spartans recovering from a poor tactical situation. However, as pointed out by Hanson, it also shows the professional nature of the Spartan army<sup>14</sup>. That is, it advanced calmly forward without breaking ranks. This very professionalism may have encouraged Agis, lacking in battlefield experience<sup>15</sup>, to conduct the manoeuvre Thucydides next describes:

*Agis, afraid of his left being surrounded, and thinking that the Mantineans outflanked it too far, ordered the Sciritae and Brasideans to move out from their place in the ranks and make the line even with the Mantineans, and told the Polemarchs Hipponoidas and Aristocles to fill up the gap thus formed, by throwing themselves into it with two companies taken from the right wing...*<sup>16</sup>

The number of troops that Agis moved left was significant. The Sciritae numbered 600 men<sup>17</sup> alone. While Thucydides does not directly define the number of Brasidas' veterans at Mantinea, he provides clues to their strength in earlier sections. In Thrace, Brasidas had initially 1700 heavy infantry<sup>18</sup> and this was later supplemented by a further 700 helots equipped as heavy infantry along with mercenaries<sup>19</sup>. If all these were present at Mantinea, then Agis ordered a significant portion of his army to move left. Hipponoidas and Aristocles now wisely refused Agis' order to move troops, possibly 1000 in number<sup>20</sup>, from the right into this gap. There is some discussion among scholars on the reasons behind the actions of the two Polemarchs which are described in detail in Kagan's analysis of the battle<sup>21</sup>. What is clear, however, is that the movement of troops to the left had created a gap and its potential impact was significant. Hanson describes the most common way to achieve the collapse of the enemy line:

*The most common way to collapse a Greek phalanx on the field of battle was to cause a collective loss of nerve that would sweep through the*

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<sup>12</sup> Kagan D, p 124.

<sup>13</sup> Thucydides 5.66.

<sup>14</sup> Hanson V, *The Western Way of War Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*, London: University of California Press, p 141.

<sup>15</sup> Kagan D, p 92.

<sup>16</sup> Thucydides, 5.71.

<sup>17</sup> Thucydides 5.68.

<sup>18</sup> Thucydides 4.78.

<sup>19</sup> Thucydides 4.81.

<sup>20</sup> Kagan, p 125.

<sup>21</sup> Kagan, p 126-128.

*enemy ranks and so result in a mad dash from the rear. The key to that objective was to find gaps or, better yet, to create breaches in the enemy line...*<sup>22</sup>

As a result of Agis' redeployment, a gap existed in the Spartan line and this likely contributed to the Argive success on the Spartan left, for the Argive right flank now broke the Spartan left flank and the Sciritae and Brasidean veterans were driven back in rout to the Spartan camp<sup>23</sup>.

In the centre, however, Agis and the Spartan troops quickly destroyed the Argives opposite them, many in fact breaking at the first impact<sup>24</sup>. Hanson describes in some detail the impact of two hoplite lines contacting:

*Indeed, the narratives of the battles of Mantinea, Delion, Nemea and Leuktra, not to mention the accounts of earlier (often nameless) conflicts in the Lyric poets, make no sense unless we understand that both sides literally collided together, creating the awful thud of forceful impact at the combined rate of ten miles per hour...*<sup>25</sup>

This impact was too much for the Argives who broke under the Spartan attack. Concurrently the Spartan right flank was also making progress against the Athenians who were overlapped by the Spartan allies on their left flank. However, the Athenians were protected, to some degree, by the Athenian cavalry posted on the extreme left<sup>26</sup>. An interesting difference can now be seen between the Spartan army and that of the Argives. Both armies had been victorious in a portion of the battlefield: the Argives on their right and the Spartans in the centre, and with time, on the Spartan right flank where the Athenians were now hard pressed. Unlike the Argives, Agis was able to stop the Spartan centre from pursuit and reposition it to attack the Argive right flank<sup>27</sup>. This is in contrast to the Argives who, while defeating the Spartan left, could not support their own centre. With this manoeuvre and the resulting combat, the Spartans achieved victory.

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<sup>22</sup> Hanson, p 160.

<sup>23</sup> Thucydides 5.71.

<sup>24</sup> Thucydides 5.72.

<sup>25</sup> Hanson, p 157.

<sup>26</sup> Thucydides 5.73.

<sup>27</sup> Thucydides 5.73

Kagan suggests two possible reasons for the change of focus of Agis, from that of defeating the Athenians and pursuit in the centre, to that of protecting his flank. Firstly, it would seem that he wanted to save his army from further losses. To do this he must stop the Argive pursuit of his left wing. Such a move to his left would also allow the Spartans to destroy the elite part of the Argive army - its right wing. Interestingly, Kagan's second suggestion is that there were political forces at play. These forces included a reluctance to cause Athenian casualties which could strengthen the position of Spartan enemies in Athens<sup>28</sup>. The fact that political forces may be a factor is strengthened given Kagan's analysis of Diodorus' explanation of the events relating to the escape of the Argive elite<sup>29</sup>. It is therefore likely that both military and political considerations affected Agis' decisions.

The battle of Mantinea was the result of Spartan desire to prevent Tegea joining the Argive coalition. It required the Spartans to move quickly and Agis, though inexperienced, handled the strategic movements well. However, he acted rashly in his pre-battle attack on the Argive positions on high ground. Further, he was later surprised by the Argive redeployment. As a result of this surprise he deployed his numerically superior and better trained troops poorly. In the resulting battle he created a hole in his line that was to contribute to the loss of his left wing. Agis was however saved by his centre. Being well trained the troops of the centre were able to be repositioned following the rout of the Argive centre. In contrast the Argive right wing, though defeating the Spartan left, was unable to reposition itself to defeat the Spartan centre. The Spartan victory at First Mantinea strengthened Spartan military reputation which had suffered after the defeat at Sphacteria. It also enabled Sparta to retain a link to her northern allies.

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<sup>28</sup> Kagan D, p 130-131.

<sup>29</sup> Kagan D, p 131-132.

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