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GREEK MERCENARY TROOPS AND THEIR EQUIPMENT¹

1. Two Views of Mercenaries

David Whitehead's article "Who Equipped Mercenary Troops in Classical Greece?", in a recent volume of this journal,² expresses disagreement with an argument I have put forward to the effect that employers of mercenaries in fourth-century Greece would "often – perhaps even usually – equip them."³ Some further comment is required, both to clarify my own case and to question Whitehead's line of argument against it; and since "general considerations which tell, explicitly or implicitly, a different story"⁴ form an important element in Whitehead's analysis, I shall take the opportunity of sketching the situation a bit more broadly than I did before.

It is common ground that earlier scholars, particularly H.W. Parke,⁵ have assumed without argument that mercenaries must usually have provided their own arms and armour. Whitehead describes this assumption as an orthodoxy,⁶ but I think that may run the risk of dignifying it with a status that it does not really have. It is simply a question that nobody has thought about much. Instances where an employer did provide the equipment are recognised by both of us: the chief ones are Cyrus and the army he recruited to attack his brother King Artaxerxes II, and Dionysius I and his mercenary army in Sicily.⁷ The issue is whether any generalization from them is possible.

The reason why the question is an important one is that an answer to it would be very informative in the context of fourth-century social history as a whole. There were large mercenary armies involved in virtually all the (many) military struggles in and near Greece from the end of the Peloponnesian War to the establishment of the Hellenistic Kingdoms. If we could say (at least in general) what kind of men took service in these armies, then the light that information

1 I wish to thank Prof. V.J. Gray and Prof. K.A. Raaflaub for comments on drafts of this paper. They are not responsible for the errors that remain.

2 David Whitehead, "Who Equipped Mercenary Troops in Classical Greece?" *Hist.* 40 (1991) pp.105-113. Hereafter = *Whitehead*.

3 Paul McKechnie, *Outsiders in the Greek Cities in the Fourth Century B.C.* (London, 1989) p.85. My book hereafter = *Outsiders*.

4 *Whitehead*, p.105.

5 H.W. Parke, *Greek Mercenary Soldiers* (Oxford, 1935), e.g. at p.106.

6 *Whitehead*, p.110.

7 *Whitehead*, pp.107-8.

would cast on the cities they came from would be very useful. At risk of seeming over-schematic, I suggest that the possibilities are more or less as follows: either mercenaries owned their (usually hoplite) equipment, and so were drawn from people with a 'hoplite census', i.e. the landowning, agricultural 'middle class' of Classical Greece; or mercenaries were often given their equipment, and so can be presumed to have been drawn from non-landowners (rather like Marius' Mules).⁸

Here the matter of 'orthodoxy' may perhaps come in. That is to say that an old-fashioned view of fourth-century Greek history would picture it as a period of economic and moral decline of the Greek city-state, leading up to the moment when Philip II took over control of a weak and enfeebled system. This view would fit in with the assumption that mercenaries were men of solid economic status and general position in their communities, who, when they went soldiering, left their land untended (thus causing economic decline) and abandoned their civic responsibilities (weakening their home cities both militarily and morally). Men of that kind could have lived at home: most people were farmers, after all, and being able to afford hoplite equipment would imply being in (very roughly) the better-off half of the farming population.

The other possibility is that most mercenaries were poor. That is, they would have been of the economic background of an Athenian rower rather than a hoplite. The problems are the obvious ones: how did they get armour and training? But, putting those aside for a moment, there are attractive features in the hypothesis. It ceases to be necessary to ask why men faced danger, discomfort and social uprooting when they could have been at home growing barley and olives on the ancestral acres. If large numbers of middle-class men had been taking that option, out of choice (although the pay was bad⁹), then there really would be a case for thinking that the lack of patriotism and the general irresponsibility of the hoplite class had led to Philip's takeover. It would amount to a moral decline, and presumably we should go back to asking what features of the education and the cultural life of such people had caused it. But if we take the view that most mercenaries took to soldiering because they needed the money (though it was not a well-paid job), because they did not have enough land to make a living from farming, then the (rather implausible) idea that a sort of epidemic of ethical inadequacy had struck the hoplite class after 403 becomes unnecessary.

A wider comparative view would support the case for assuming that mercenaries were usually poor. Pierre Ducrey draws the parallel between Greek mercenaries and the Swiss mercenaries of the medieval and modern periods.¹⁰ The regions

8 Aristotle is quite straightforward on the question of rich and poor in the political context: the "rich" are hoplites, the "poor" are unarmed. *Politics* 1289 b 31-2.

9 See *Outsiders*, pp.89-93.

10 Pierre Ducrey "Remarques sur les causes du mercenariat dans la Grèce ancienne et la Suisse moderne", in *Buch der Freunde für J.R. von Salis zum 70. Geburtstag* (Zürich, 1971) pp.115-123.

of Greece that stand out as recruiting areas for mercenaries (Ducrey focuses on Arcadia and Crete) were like medieval Switzerland in being mountainous, isolated and poor.¹¹ A few phrases in Ducrey's article delineate a huge area of unattempted research in archives, chronicles, registers and municipal and parish documents in Switzerland, which could determine the background of men who took up mercenary service. It is to be hoped that one day someone will be attracted to the mountain of work Ducrey commends. But Ducrey already has good *a priori* grounds for questioning P. de Vallière's explanation of the exodus of Swiss to serve in foreign armies as attributable to the "turbulence de la jeunesse".¹²

2. Literary Sources

Ancient writers who mentioned mercenaries were not aiming at giving a dispassionate or sociological picture. This makes it difficult to draw accurate inferences from their comments. There are, for instance, a number of soldiers in Plautus. Plautus' Greek originals, mostly from the early third century, were set by their writers in the context of a reasonably recent past of a non-specific kind. So in the *Bacchides* the soldier Cleomachus asks for two hundred "good gold philips" in blackmail¹³ – though of course he does not get the money in the end. The setting implied is closely related to the period we are considering. But the Plautine soldiers, though they are mercenaries, do not tell us much. The stereotype on which they are constructed deals with a boastful type (he is an officer, of course) who, among other things, is a big spender. So Antamoenides in the *Poenulus* is worrying about the mina he paid to the pimp,¹⁴ and Pyrgopolynices in the *Miles Gloriosus*, when he loses Philocomasium, also loses all the presents he gave her, plus whatever she likes to take from his house, plus the rascally slave Palaestrio.¹⁵ All this is comic exaggeration of the impact a flamboyant type of mercenary general, or recruiting officer, might have been able to make from time to time. The rhetorical purpose of the characterization is clear, and no one gets misled by it into thinking that all the thousands of fourth-century mercenaries were like the soldiers in New and Roman Comedy.

Not all literary texts on this subject are as easy to understand. Some point in the same direction as Plautus' picture – though without the exaggeration, and without the typical reversal which makes the boastful soldier a victim of well-deserved retribution plotted by the scheming slave. Xenophon himself was a

11 Ducrey, *Causes du mercenariat* (as in n.10) p.122 (and cf. p.116).

12 Ducrey, *Causes du mercenariat* (as in n.10) p.115.

13 Plautus *Bacchides* 882-3.

14 Plautus *Poenulus* 1280.

15 Plautus *Miles Gloriosus* 1204-5 and 1349-57.

mercenary, and a member of the upper class. The two brothers in Isaeus *Meneclēs* were from a similar background.¹⁶ To apply this more broadly: a man with a panoply would *ipso facto* be more employable as a mercenary than a man without one. In the case of particular small forces (like city garrisons), it probably would not be impossible to find enough ready-equipped men.

It should not be regarded as surprising that men of the upper classes took some of the leading positions in mercenary service, as they did in most aspects of Greek life. The same thing is evident in other periods in history. Compare how in the 1030s AD Haraldr Sigurðarsson, half-brother of the deposed king Olaf II of Norway, went during his exile to Byzantium with ‘a company of 500 brave men’ and took service under the emperor Michael IV Katallakos.¹⁷ As an aristocrat who was down on his luck – like the impecunious brothers in Isaeus – he found mercenary service attractive. It involves war, and war, in the eleventh century AD as in the fourth century BC, was a means of gaining honour and so of mending one’s fortunes. Haraldr gained promotion in the Byzantine army to the rank of *spatharokandidatos*, and later regained his inheritance, becoming king Harald III of Norway.

But the fact that aristocrats at a variety of periods may have seen mercenary service as a promising way out of difficulties should not lead us to think that mercenary armies were usually full of upper-class men in temporarily straitened circumstances. There were 500 followers for one Haraldr Sigurðarsson. So care is needed in dealing with things like the passage where Xenophon speaks of some soldiers of the 10 000 having brought slaves with them or even having spent money of their own to come on Cyrus’ expedition.¹⁸ This is a plea intended to convince people who doubt the Cyreians’ respectability. Isocrates alleges that they were “not chosen for quality, but men who were not able to live in their own lands because of *phaulotes*.”¹⁹ Which out of Xenophon and Isocrates is telling the truth? Xenophon is known to be capable of *suppressio veri* on the grand scale,²⁰ but Isocrates was just as partial, and the character-sketches in Xenophon *Anabasis*

16 Isaeus 2 (*Meneclēs*).6; cf. *Outsiders*, p.91.

17 The main primary source is the *Logos Nouthetikos*, ed. V.G. Vasilevskii and P. Jernstedt (St. Petersburg, 1896). See Sigfus Blöndal, *The Varangians of Byzantium* (tr. Benedikt S. Benedikt, Cambridge, 1978) pp.54-58.

18 Xen. *Anab.* 6.4.8.

19 Isoc. *Panegyricus* 146: *phaulotes* = either “poverty” or “worthless character” (cf. *LSJ*). Presumably Isocrates meant his audience to respond both to the economic and the moral meanings of this word.

20 The argument that he was there, with the men who went to Babylon and back, is of limited value: in the *Hellenica* he does not mention the refoundation of Messene – yet it was Sparta’s territorial losses after 370 that cost him his country estate, where he had been living for a number of years. He could keep quiet about things he had seen happen, if it did not suit him to reveal them.

2²¹ show that Isocrates' implication that all the Cyreians were from the lowest class is a *suggestio falsi*.

Cyrus' army started a trend. There was barely a time thereafter in the fourth century when there were not large mercenary armies in commission.²² Whitehead thinks, with J. Roy,²³ that the size of Cyrus' army is the best argument for believing that armour was provided to the 10 000 (I myself persist in feeling that the explicit statement that the Greeks' weapons belonged to Cyrus is just as convincing²⁴). But Roy's argument is on the whole prejudicial to Whitehead's case, because Cyrus had 10 000 men, or rather more, but "between 399 and 375 there were never less than 25 000 mercenaries in service."²⁵ If Cyrus had to provide armour, at least to some, in order to recruit 10 000 mercenaries, then I'd have thought that *a fortiori* some of the 25 000 mercenaries who were in service every year must have been given their equipment.

That is, up to a point, a justification for generalizing from Cyrus' army. The case of Dionysius I and his armaments programme, narrated by Diodorus under 399,²⁶ forms, I think, a very strong parallel – because it is also dealing with a large army. The other texts that I mentioned in *Outsiders* are less easy to make anything of. Whitehead is right to point out the difficulties involved in attempting to use Polyaeus.²⁷ "Polyaeus, who produced his book very quickly, did not make his own extracts but utilized earlier compilations; theories about his sources are useless."²⁸ One can only note what is there and pass on.

In this case, briefly, to Evagoras. The peltasts sent to him from Athens in 391 were given their equipment.²⁹ Whitehead's argument in this connection is that the reason why the equipment was given out is related to "the particular nature of Evagoras' request, in combining an approach to Athens (rather than anywhere else) with a request (if such it was) for peltasts rather than hoplites."³⁰ His idea is that peltasts were uncommon and few men, if any, who had their own peltast equipment would have been available at this early date. This is questionable: Whitehead does not mention Iphicrates and the *xenikon en Korinthoi*. 390 was the year when Iphicrates' defeat of a Spartan *mora* with a peltast force demonstrated the capabilities of the peltast, but his army had been operating successfully for

21 Xen. *Anab.* 2.6.1-30.

22 Parke, *Mercenaries* (as in n.5) pp.20-1 and Table II.

23 Whitehead, p.107, referring to J. Roy, "The Mercenaries of Cyrus", *Hist.* 16 (1967) pp.287-323.

24 Xen. *Anab.* 2.5.38, quoted at *Outsiders*, p.81.

25 Parke, *Mercenaries* (as in n.5) p.227 and Table II; quoted at *Outsiders*, p.91.

26 D.S. 14.41.3-4 and 42.2-3; *Outsiders*, pp.82-3.

27 Whitehead, pp.105-7.

28 W.W.Tarn in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, s.v. "Polyaeus".

29 Lysias 19 (*Aristophanes*).21 and 43; cf. *Outsiders*, p.84 and Whitehead, p.108.

30 Whitehead, p.108.

several years before that. Peltast fighting in 391 was not still in the stage where peltasts might be “sailors and/or others kitted out *ad hoc*.”³¹ All the same, it is a small force and a single incident. I would not wish to use it to generalize about anything.

There is one other large army, though, that something should be said about, and that is the Phocian army. In the first place (and I missed this before) Diodorus says that the Phocians made armaments, apparently for their mercenaries, at the time of Onomarchus and Phayllus.³² This points in the same direction as Cyrus’ and Dionysius’ provision of weapons and armour, suggesting that where large numbers were required, men who did not own their own suits of armour would be taken on and equipment issued. Whitehead mentions the Phocian army in another context, at the moment of its ceasing to be a Phocian army. In 345 Phalaecus withdrew rather than fight Philip – the result for Phocis being the end of its resistance against the Amphictyonic League. Whitehead speaks of Phalaecus’ 8 000 men being “ceremonially disarmed” before their retreat.³³ D.S. 16.60.3, which he cites, says that the Amphictyons and Philip threw the arms of the Phocians and their mercenaries down the rocks (presumably at Delphi, towards the Corinthian Gulf). This happened after the Phocian surrender. What Whitehead does not add is that Phalaecus and his men withdrew *before* the Phocian surrender, under a truce (16.59.3). I do not think they had handed over their weapons: not only because the chronological sequence in Diodorus implies that they had not, but also because allowing their withdrawal made sense for Philip. He was a pragmatic general – he claimed he could capture any town that a donkey laden with gold could be got into – and his only serious pitched-battle defeat had been at the hands of Phocian mercenaries. He would have had every reason for making the option of walking away an attractive one for Phalaecus and his men. Whitehead’s alternative is complex. He believes that they handed over their panoplies to Philip then bought themselves new ones before their westward voyage. I cannot agree

31 *Whitehead*, p.108 and n.23.

32 D.S. 16.33.2 and 36.1; Onomarchus “got ready a mass of weapons from the bronze and iron” [sc. that was available in the Delphian sanctuary] – as well as coining the silver and gold to use for war expenditure; and after the disaster of the Crocus Field (352), Phayllus “began collecting a mass of mercenaries, offering double the usual pay, and sent for help from his allies. And he also made ready a mass of weapons, and struck gold and silver coinage.” Cf. W. Kendrick Pritchett, *The Greek State at War V* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991) pp.53-4. Diodorus’ source at this point is probably Demophilus’ history of the Sacred War (see N.G.L. Hammond, “The Sources of Diodorus Siculus XVI”, *CQ* 31 [1937] pp.79-91, at pp.82-85) and Demophilus’ reason for mentioning the manufacture of weapons was probably to draw attention to the Phocians’ profane use of the sacred treasures of Delphi. So special rhetorical requirements led Demophilus to refer to manufacture of weapons (which were for the mercenaries – this is not made explicit, but is a fair inference) which most historians of most wars did not bother to include.

33 *Whitehead*, p.112.

that this is likely. What the ceremony of throwing armaments off the cliffs seems to me to suggest is that the Phocians had a stockpile of arms, presumably made from metal belonging to the Delphi temple. Its destruction was necessary because it was regarded as polluted, having been sacrilegiously made out of objects that should have been kept for religious purposes.³⁴

3. The Argument from Silence

Whitehead's case against provision of armour relies on two arguments. First, that the cases in which such provision is mentioned in literary sources reflect exceptional situations; and second, that if it had been usual to provide armaments to mercenaries then this fact would be mentioned in literary sources – above all in Aeneas Tacticus.³⁵ Whitehead thinks that if cities kept stocks of armaments, Aeneas might – indeed, must – have said something. The shortest reply to this is that Aeneas' book, although we have almost 100 Loeb pages of Greek text, is terribly fragmentary. Parke notes this.³⁶ Aeneas himself says in a chapter on encouraging *homonoia* (social concord):³⁷ “provision must be made for those people who do not have what they need. How this can be done fairly and without troubling the rich, and from what revenues the costs can be met, has been dealt with in my book on *Finance*.” Here he is referring to poor people generally, and the problem of debt, so I do not think armour would be included in the provisions he has in mind at this exact point – but elsewhere in his book on finance there might have been something relevant. I cannot accept that the ‘silence’ on provision of equipment to mercenaries in the extant work of Aeneas proves, or even *hints*, that such provision would only happen exceptionally.

The argument from silence in Whitehead's article encompasses more than just Aeneas, though. He wants to say that because our literary sources in many places speak of a mercenary force being raised, and do not usually say anything about where the mercenaries' weapons come from, this should be taken as confirmation that the instances where it is known that arms were provided were exceptional.³⁸

34 This would fit in with the idea that Demophilus (Diodorus' source for the Sacred War narrative) mentioned the manufacture of the armour (and now its eventual destruction) to trace the fate of the offerings that had been in the temple of Apollo, and to bring out the sacrilegious nature of the Phocians' occupation of Delphi and their use of its wealth: cf. n.32.

35 *Whitehead*, p.110. The sections in which nothing is said (and according to Whitehead, something might be) are 10.7, 10.9 and chs. 29-30.

36 Parke, *Mercenaries* (as in n.5) pp.94-5: “we are unable to have access to Aeneas' general reflections on the use of mercenaries.”

37 *Aen. Tact.* 14.1-2.

38 *Whitehead*, pp.110-11.

This, I fear, does not take account of the complexity of the relationship between histories, as literary works, and the events they describe. Diodorus, in particular, was working from several published histories of the period and fitting material from them into a work designed to his own plan – a work in which there was more of Diodorus and his own ideas than has sometimes been recognised.³⁹ Many of Diodorus' lost sources were writing on quite a wide canvas so had to be economical with detail – and where detail did get in historians had characteristic interests: descriptions of pitched battles can be detailed but the *minutiae* of campaigns, and even manoeuvres, are often given such poor-quality attention that little can be made of them.⁴⁰ Even contemporary historians probably did not care much whose the weapons were in a particular mercenary army. They may not even have known. Putting together an army was not really part of what they were writing about. Xenophon says who recruited Cyrus' soldiers, and where,⁴¹ but that is because his book is the story of the army itself, and the adventures of the Greeks who served in it. Even so, the information that the Greeks' arms had belonged to Cyrus comes in incidentally, as a point brought up in an attempt to make the Greeks give up those arms to the King's victorious army. Similarly, Demophilus' interest in the Phocians' manufacture of arms arose out of his concern with sacrilegious uses of temple treasures: that is why he also mentioned the coining of the gold and silver.⁴² States produced coinage to pay armies – it is well known that this was one of the main reasons for issue of coins in the ancient world. Yet in summary references to raising of armies we do not usually hear of the moneyers being put to work. So building an argument against provision of arms on the basis of literary references that do not mention it is unsatisfactory.

4. In Practice

Whitehead describes my suggestion that employers of mercenaries in fourth-century Greece would “often – perhaps even usually – equip them”⁴³ as a case “for the prosecution”.⁴⁴ I think in this paper I have been able to get far enough to show that it meets at least an Athenian standard of proof – which is to say that it is more likely than the alternative the other side is offering. But it would not be satisfactory to leave what I said in *Outsiders* unqualified. This is so particularly because

39 See Kenneth S. Sacks, *Diodorus Siculus and the First Century* (Princeton, 1990), for instance at pp.6-7.

40 See e.g. the confusing accounts of Agesilaus' Sardis campaign, discussed in P.R. McKechnie and S.J. Kern (eds.), *Hellenica Oxyrhynchia* (Warminster, 1988) at pp.140-6.

41 Xen. *Anab.* 1.1.6-2.9.

42 Cf. nn.32 and 34.

43 *Outsiders*, p.85.

44 *Whitehead*, p.110.

Whitehead has misunderstood it in an important respect. He assumes that I think mercenaries who received armour would give it back on leaving the service of the issuer (and he produces evidence to show that unemployed mercenaries were not unarmed⁴⁵). This is my fault for not dealing with the question. I should assume that a discharged mercenary would typically keep his armour. An employer taking on men too poor to own their own armour would in any case have given training, and the issue of armour would form part of the whole process of preparation that went into forming a hoplite army out of (so to speak) the oarsman class.

There are two possibilities: either that the employer would bear the cost and write it off, or that he would recover it from the soldiers – probably by deductions from pay. In the first case, the grant of armour might act as quite a substantial inducement to a man to join an army. For the employer, there would be the advantage of having his army in a set uniform of known quality. The uniformity might make the army look more fearsome on the battlefield, and encourage cohesion and fighting qualities among the soldiers; but if all the soldiers had their own armour something similar could be achieved by painting the shields. In the second case the expectation of getting to own the armour at the end of a campaign might encourage loyalty. I would not think it likely that a lender other than a mercenary employer would want to finance purchase of armour: a soldier might never come back to the *agora* he borrowed the money in (indeed, even granted the intention to pay, he might get killed). In a few cases a family member might finance purchase of armour for a poor relative, I suppose, but apart from that possibility I should think any credit for purchase of armour would have to come from the mercenary's employer.

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45 *Whitehead*, pp.112-3.