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THE PRACTICAL AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND TO THE GREEK MERCENARY EXPLOSION

By HARVEY F. MILLER

.... (then) We ourselves, being in early manhood, betook ourselves to soldiering, and went abroad with Iphicrates to Thrace, and after showing our worth there and making some money, we returned home again (Isaeus 11.40)[1]

For all its swashbuckling image, classical mercenary soldiering was, on the whole, as subject to the discipline of practical economics as less glamorous-sounding pursuits. Current economic and political considerations dictated whether and why a citizen would become a mercenary; what and how he would be paid; what negotiating power he possessed; whether a ruler would use mercenaries or his own citizenry to fight his wars, and the necessity for a recruiting centre or 'mercenary market' where prospective employers and employees could meet and strike a bargain.

National rulers contemplating war would have had to consider what the economic effects would be of removing a sizeable segment of the country's labour force from field and workshop. For an extended campaign the cost in neglected farms, reduced food and manufactured goods might have appeared to outweigh the monetary expense of paying others to do one's fighting. As cost-inefficient would it have been to maintain a permanent, fully trained and effective local army merely for the occasional short campaign, when independent professionals could always be engaged on a limited contract basis.

The main consideration of the professional soldier would have been the strength of the economic pressures causing him to hire out his sword for a living instead of embracing a safer, more stable and comfortable civilian occupation. There are relatively few men whose talents and temperaments make them 'natural' soldiers, unhappy in any other vocation. Why then, one may ask, in the fourth century B.C. did so many ordinary Greek citizens enlist as mercenaries?

That century saw the coming together in Greece of a number of seemingly unrelated factors – natural, military, political, and economic – which together drastically affected the ordinary life of all Hellas, and in particular influenced the upsurge of mercenary enlistment.[2] Greece, on the whole (and excluding Macedon and most of the islands) had always been a poor country, short of adequate arable land, short of timber (through deforestation) and short of base and precious metals except for the failing mines at Laurium.[3] Add to this a population which increased steadily until the fourth century and a diminishing export

trade coupled with food shortages and inflation.[4] The Peloponnesian War and the constant warring of the fourth century[5] left an aftermath of devastated farms, the restoration of which required both time and capital. The small farmer had neither. To make matters worse, grain could be and was imported from abroad at prices lower than the cost of local production (Demosthenes 20.32; 56.7), so that those whose farms were still functioning required, in order to survive, finance enabling them to diversify their crops. In most instances the required loans could be raised only by mortgaging hereditary family land (Xenophon *Oec.* 3.6; 2.1). Undercapitalization in classical times was as hazardous to business survival as it is today; not surprisingly then, farming in Greece became more and more the preserve of large, wealthy landowners, while the small farmer found himself dispossessed. Unable to compete with the metics' urban skills, he became an unemployed wanderer (Isocrates 5.121; 8.24. Dem. 14.31), joining on the roads of Hellas another type of victim to the unsettled conditions of the fourth century, i.e. the fugitives and exiles created by the widespread Greek political upheavals. During this century, according to H. W. Parke, probably no Greek city except Sparta failed to experience some violent revolution, and with each the number of homeless on the roads increased.[6]

The food shortages which plagued Greece periodically were exemplified by the famine of 331–324, when, according to Rostovtzeff, no crop failures were reported from Thrace, Egypt, South Russia, or Asia Minor. As if all the foregoing were not enough, it was in the latter part of the fourth century that inflation in Hellas really began to hurt. Rostovtzeff[7] suggests as its cause the effect of an increasing money supply from external (e.g. Persia) and semi-external (e.g. Philip of Macedon) sources in the form of large cash subsidies, bribes, and gifts on a static economy. Not only could productivity not be increased, it was actually falling. Many mainland Greek speciality exports were meeting with severe competition in South Russia and Asia Minor from erstwhile colonies and were having to be cut back. Too much money chasing too few goods inevitably leads to price-rises. In general prices doubled between 404 and 330, but wheat went up from two drachmae in 404 to ten around 300, while oil trebled in price.[8] So desperate was the poverty of so many that a very real fear existed of a social uprising (Dem. 24.149), a fear resulting on occasion in the distribution of free rations. 'They are wandering about for lack of even their daily bread, and destroying those with whom they come in contact ... they have become an equal danger to barbarian and Greek' (Isoc. 5.121), and '.... each seeking to get himself some kind of competence to be rid of the prevailing penury' (Dem. 14.31). It is probable that had there

been no avenue of gainful employment such as mercenary soldiering to absorb large numbers of vigorous young men, there might indeed have been a great deal more unrest and social conflict.

Diodorus writes of the men enlisting as mercenaries '... they expected to gain many advantages' (D.S. 20.40.6–7). What were these advantages? On the whole, formal mercenary wages were low – rarely, in fact, being much more than a subsistence allowance. Pressure exerted by the increasing supply of manpower during the fourth century effectively prevented wages even keeping pace with inflation, so that a mercenary received less in real terms in the third century than he would have in the fifth. Rarely could his pay have equalled that of a skilled workman.[9] In 413 the hired Thracian peltasts arriving too late in Athens to join the fleet bound for Syracuse received one drachma per day (Thucydides 7.27.2), compared with the probable one and a half of the citizen hoplite. By 350 the rate was down to four obols (6 obols = 1 drachma) including subsistence.[10] In 330 Alexander was paying between three and four obols *plus* rations, but by the end of the century it was back to four, from which the soldier was expected to buy his own rations from the commissary accompanying the army or from towns along the way (D.S. 19.68; 19.27.2; 20.73.3). At this very time the hiring rate for unskilled slave labour was three obols.[11]

Clearly it was not the princely basic pay which attracted men to the profession of arms. A soldier must have looked to greater rewards than mere subsistence to compensate him for the rigours and dangers of military life. There were such rewards and they were: (a) private looting; (b) official distribution of army plunder; (c) pay bonuses and/or special honours; (d) the grant, in certain circumstances, of free land.

From earliest times the acquisition of booty had been the perquisite of the warrior, and had been so considered by Plato, Aristotle, and Xenophon: '... when a city is taken in war, the persons and the property of the inhabitants belong to the captors' (Xen. *Cyr.* 7.5.73). What with the army seizing anything of substantial value as well as the inhabitants of conquered towns as slaves, and the private soldier looting anything else he thought it worthwhile carrying, the devastation in the wake of a successful army can be imagined. Official plunder, the result of victorious campaigning, would be realized and a specific share allotted to the troops, sometimes in kind but more frequently in the form of special bonuses or double or treble pay.[12] Special awards of honour for outstanding deeds (usually for officers) might take the form of garlands of gold. The fourth and least common incentive, that of land grants, indicates how deeply affected had been the yeomanry and peasantry of Greece by the loss of their farms and smallholdings in the rural depression of the fourth century. Successive generations grew

up hungry for the land that had once been a part of their lives. Alexander took advantage of this yearning by holding out the inducement of land-grants to his men in and on the way to Bactria (D.S. 17.83.2). Apollodorus distributed land in Pallene in 279 and Eupolemus in the late fourth century[13] while Diodorus records the delight with which Dionysius' mercenaries, angry over pay arrears, accepted the Syracusan dictator's compensatory offer of land in Leontini in lieu of wages (D.S. 14.78). Agathocles too, in 310, needing to spur enlistment for his projected attack on Carthage, offered to distribute enemy land to his soldiers after the successful conclusion of his campaign: '... a good many Athenians and no small number of other Greeks were quick to join in the undertaking, for they hoped to portion out for colonization the most fertile part of Libya' (D. S. 20.40.6). These immediate and enthusiastic acceptances of land-grants might confirm that mercenaries of that period would rather have farmed than fought.

The bargaining position of mercenaries, as with twentieth-century industrial labour, depended upon whether their numbers were greater or less than the demand for them. When they were in short supply, or particularly needed, they could, and did, insist on more attractive terms from their employers, even, as with the Ten Thousand, in the middle of a campaign. Suspecting that Cyrus' expedition 'would involve more difficulty and danger' than he had disclosed to them, 'they asked for more pay, and Cyrus promised to give to all half as much again as they had before'. Later, angry at learning that Cyrus planned to march against the Great King himself, they successfully negotiated a settlement whereby each soldier would receive a bonus of five minae of silver (about four months' pay) and full pay until his return to Ionia (Xen. *Anab.* 1.3–4). Occasions arose too, when employers, finding it difficult to attract sufficient troops, were forced to sweeten the terms of service by shortening the campaign year, or like Scopas, offer pay in advance (Polybius 15.25.6). In second century Ptolemaic Egypt, long-term mercenaries were entitled to the equivalent of overdraft facilities at the royal bank.[14]

The hiring and maintenance of mercenary troops was ruinously expensive, and employers had regularly to face the problem of raising sufficient funds. The Athenians in 413 refused to accept the cost of employing on local defence the Thracians who arrived too late to accompany the Syracuse expedition, and sent them home (Thuc. 7.27).

⊕ Philip II of Macedon financed his mercenary forces (and also his bribery campaign) by modernizing and improving the gold mines in the vicinity of Philippi (originally Crenides), greatly increasing their output (D.S. 16.8.7).

⊕ Phalaris of Acragas, the unpleasant sixth-century Sicilian dictator,

misappropriated, so the legend goes, a large sum entrusted to him for the construction of a temple to Zeus, and used it to hire the mercenaries with whose help he seized power.[15]

⊕ Dionysius I of Syracuse, whose entire career was founded on the employment of mercenaries, resorted to a variety of different finance-raising measures in order to meet their payrolls. Aristotle mentions a twenty per cent 'war tax' on property, and he was reported to have raised large sums by looting foreign temples (D.S. 15.13), as well as by debasing his coinage (Aristot. *Pol.* 1313). Even so he sometimes found himself short of funds, and as we have seen, had to offer his troops land instead of pay.

⊕ Alexander's successors required large amounts to pay their own professional armies, as well as to bribe their adversaries' mercenaries to desert. According to Rostovtzeff,[16] stable and orderly taxation was inadequate, so special forced levies on allied and subject cities were introduced, and exacted with severity (Justin 14.1.6).

⊕ Because of its wealthy Spanish colonies, Carthage was fortunate in being able to afford the luxury of a large wholly mercenary army, only officered by Carthaginians. In Diodorus' words, '... it was with money from these mines (of Iberia) that they (the Carthaginians) drew their continued growth, hiring the ablest mercenaries to be found and winning with their aid many and great wars' (5.38.2–3).

It may be said that the development of coinage was aided and accelerated by the growth of mercenary soldiering. It seems likely that in the days before coinage wages were paid in bulk form on a complicated weight-value basis to be shared by a band or group of men. Plunder was distributed in kind, and the whole system must have been frustratingly cumbersome. First used in Asia Minor towards the end of the seventh century, coinage spread rapidly in the Greek world, and silver was coined in Gela in Sicily about 505, primarily for mercenary wages, and featured a design of a naked cavalryman. By the end of the fifth century, although coining had effectively ceased in other Greek Sicilian cities, Syracuse as the main employer of mercenaries continued to produce large quantities of gold and silver coins. Phoenician Sicily copied these, and here the mercenary connection is particularly clear, the Punic inscription reading 'The Pay-masters' or 'The People of the Camp.'[17]

As has already been mentioned, financing a mercenary army was no easy task for the ancient paymasters, and when, as happened periodically, wages went unpaid, extremely awkward and dangerous situations could develop. Mercenaries were a tough, polyglot lot, coming, at different times and in different campaigns, from areas as diverse as Greece, Ionia, Thrace, Gaul, Iberia, and North Africa, and

were never to be trifled with. About the least extreme thing an unpaid mercenary could do was desert, often to the service of his erstwhile enemy: 'Some of the (unpaid) soldiers went over to Antigonus . . . (who) not only gave them the pay they said was owed them . . . . but also honoured them with gifts' (D.S. 20.113.3). Far more serious was a mercenary mutiny, as experienced by Timoleon, who survived it and succeeded in expelling the mutineers, who sailed to Italy and went plundering on their own account (D.S. 16.82.1). Dionysius II of Syracuse, an ineffective monarch, had the temerity actually to try to reduce his mercenaries' wages, but was terrified by their ferocious reaction and 'barbaric' war song, and conceded all their demands.[18] These instances, though, are trifles compared with what happened at Carthage in 240. When at the end of the first Punic War the Carthaginian forces arrived back in Africa, the City rulers either were reluctant or unable to pay their arrear wages. The men 'remembering the promises the generals had made to them in critical situations' (Polybius 1.67) were understandably incensed, and marched, about twenty thousand strong, on Carthage. They encamped at Tunis where, while their demands became increasingly outrageous, they were joined by about seventy thousand Libyan peasants, smarting under punitive taxation. So began the 'Mercenary' or 'Truceless' War which lasted until 237, and which resulted in, among other things, the subsequent loss by Carthage of Sardinia to Rome.

As with employers of any type of labour, those who employed mercenaries could be efficient or inefficient, well or badly organized. The good organizers suffered neither desertion nor mutiny, but negotiated lengthy contracts with their often permanent or semi-permanent forces, covering all relevant aspects of the hired soldiers' service. From Ptolemaic Egypt, for example, we hear nothing of strikes or unpaid wages. When some grievance surfaced, it was dealt with by way of a petition to authority, in apparent expectation of it being rectified, prompting the advice quoted by Griffiths: 'If you really want to be a soldier, Ptolemy is the best paymaster for a free man'[19]. Another enlightened employer was Eumenes I of Pergamum, a contract of whose in 260 contained the following clauses:

1. A fixed price for wine and wheat at the commissary.
2. A campaign year of ten months, the remaining two months being unpaid.
3. Special tax dispensations.
4. Welfare benefits for soldiers unable to find employment on the completion of a contract, and provision made for orphans of men killed on service.[20]

Essential to the whole institution of organized mercenary soldiering

was a central marketplace of available manpower, where professional soldiers for hire and would-be employers could meet and come to terms. Of the period about 400, Isocrates complained that recruiting was difficult because there was 'no mercenary service' and recruiters cost more than the soldiers they recruited (Isoc. 5.96). It is likely that conveniently situated cities such as Corinth and Athens served as rallying points during the first half of the fourth century, Aspendus in the third, and Ephesus in the second.[21] Ephesus was, in fact, where the 'Miles Gloriosus' of Plautus did his recruiting. Undoubtedly, though, no entrepôt of ancient times could compare with the two on remote promontories of Peloponnesos, Cape Malea and Cape Taenarum, in their heyday. Taenarum, in particular, was the centre of the mercenary world during the latter part of the fourth century. 'Soldiers released from service from all over Asia ... began assembling at Taenarum' – 'He sent to hire mercenaries who were waiting about near Taenarum' – 'The mercenaries, some eight thousand in number, at Taenarum' etc. (D.S. 7.3.1; 13.21.1; 13.9.1). Probably no place in subsequent times has served as efficiently the same purpose.

As we have seen from the Isaeus quotation, in classical mainland Greece to hire oneself out as a soldier was accepted as an unremarkable, everyday means of earning a living. This casual acceptance grew out of the prevailing economic climate; it was responsible for the impetus and dimension of the mercenary trade, and for it becoming an important Greek export. More than sixteen hundred years would elapse before a similar series of economic and psychological stimuli would provoke (this time in Switzerland in the fourteenth century A.D.) another mercenary explosion of equal magnitude.

NOTES

1. Quoted by H. W. Parke, *Greek Mercenary Soldiers* (Oxford, 1933), p. 232. The quotation concerns two brothers who, when orphaned, sold most of their property to provide marriage portions for each of their two sisters, then .... 'We ourselves ...'.

2. While the information we have mainly concerns Attica, there is no indication that conditions elsewhere were greatly different.

3. *Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. v, pp. 13, 22.

4. M. Rostovtzeff, *Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World* (Oxford, 1941).

5. 'Peace was understood in a negative form, simply as an absence of war', (Y. Garlan, *War in the Ancient World*, (London, 1975), p. 17). 'Between 431 and 346 there were only thirty-two years in which no *major* war was being waged in Greece' – Beloch, quoted by Parke, op. cit., p. 228.

6. Diodorus (13.8.5) mentions that more than twenty thousand assembled at Olympia to hear Alexander's messenger proclaim their return.

7. Rostovtzeff, op. cit., p. 99.

8. W. W. Tarn, *Hellenistic Civilization* (London, 1930), pp. 98, 103, 110; *C.A.H.* v. pp. 24ff.; G. Glotz, *Ancient Greece at Work* (New York, 1926), p. 237.

9. Tarn, op. cit., p. 121ff.

10. G. T. Griffiths, *The Mercenaries of the Hellenistic World* (Cambridge, 1935), p. 297.
11. Parke, op. cit., p. 233.
12. Ibid., p. 234.
13. Griffiths, op. cit., p. 313.
14. Ibid., p. 278.
15. M. I. Finley, *Ancient Sicily* (London, 1968), p. 46.
16. Rostovtzeff, op. cit., pp. 137–8.
17. Siculo-Punic tetradrachms, Finley op. cit., plate 7.3.
18. Parke, op. cit., p. 115, quoting Plato's Seventh Letter from Syracuse.
19. Griffiths, op. cit., p. 281, quoting Theocritus 14.52.
20. Garlan, op. cit., p. 97; Griffiths, op. cit., p. 283.
21. Xen. *Hell.* 6.5.11; 7.3.4; Polybius, 33.16.12ff. Griffiths, op. cit., pp. 256 and 259.

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