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BATTLE OF TEGYRA (375 BC).  
BREAKING THROUGH AND THE OPENING OF THE RANKS

The Spartan army enjoyed the reputation of being the best in the Greek world for decades. The heavily armed infantry lived up to this reputation in many battles, notably at Plataea in 479, at Mantinea in 418, and at Nemea in 394 BC. The period of military dominance came to an end with the battle of Leuctra in 371 BC, when the Spartans were defeated by the Thebans under the leadership of Epaminondas and Pelopidas. The battle of Leuctra has been subjected too much analysis in an effort to explain the decline of Spartan military dominance. For years historians have been locked in a dispute on the real and alleged on the real nature of the tactical innovations adopted by Epaminondas.<sup>1</sup> The battle of Tegyra (fought probably in 375 BC), where the Thebans defeated overwhelming Spartan forces in regular battle for the first time, has not, however, received such close attention. In this battle as in others, historians have attempted to discover the innovatory tactical solutions which were to enable the Thebans to achieve great success in the years to come. The aim of this paper is to reconstruct the course of the battle and to examine the tactics adopted by both sides in the conflict.

Ancient authors who recounted the battle of Tegyra were convinced of its great significance. Diodorus (15.371–2) highlighted the fact that the Thebans' victory over overwhelming Spartan troops had been unprecedented. They took such pride in the triumph that from then on they believed themselves capable of winning hegemony in Greece. Diodorus (15.81.2) did not hesitate to count this victory among Pelopidas's greatest achievements. He also emphasised the general's personal credit for the victory, as he was the only Theban leader responsible for defeating the army of the most powerful

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<sup>1</sup> For the Epaminondas' innovations at Leuctra see particularly Buckler 1980: 92 n. 51; Buckler 1985, and Hanson 1988 with Buckler's respond (2003: 293 n. 56). See also: Devine 1983: 205–210; Lazenby 1985: 151–162; Tuplin 1987.

Greek state. A similar opinion is to be found in *The Life of Pelopidas* (17.1–4), authored by Plutarch, who also provided the only existing written description of the battle. In chorus with Diodorus, he mentioned the great fame that Pelopidas had won in this clash. The success was his personal triumph for which no one else could take the credit. The victory was all the more valuable since the Spartans had no excuse for suffering defeat (16.1). In *The Comparison of Pelopidas with Marcellus* (1.3–4), Plutarch put Tegyra on a par with Leuctra as the greatest battle. Plutarch, like Diodorus, explained that the Spartans had never before lost a pitched battle when they outnumbered their opponents. He also talked about the psychological aspect of the Thebans' success, proving to other Greeks (who had been afraid of facing the Spartan army) that brave warriors were born not only on the Eurotas. The other heroes of the battle were the soldiers forming an elite squadron of the Theban army called the Sacred Band, led by Pelopidas; Plutarch (18.1–19.4) devoted a lengthy passage to this troop. This was the first battle in which the Sacred Band proved its worth as an independent military unit. There can be no doubt that both Diodorus and Plutarch regarded the battle of Tegyra as an important event in Pelopidas's life and a turning point in the history of the Theban-Spartan conflict. Plutarch called the clash at Tegyra a prelude (*proagon*) to the battle of Leuctra. Unfortunately, the leading commentator on the Spartan-Theban conflict, Xenophon, did not mention the battle. This could be explained in the same way as many other events overlooked in his *Hellenika* and frequent differences between his testimony and those of Diodorus and Plutarch. The discrepancies have been discussed many times before and still require a convincing clarification. It is worth noting, however, that Xenophon gave only a very brief account of the restoration of Theban control over the cities of Boeotia, a process which lasted several years. The battle of Tegyra, one stage in this process, did not produce significant political consequences; Xenophon might have ignored it for this reason. Perhaps citing this event was superfluous in depicting the collapse of Sparta's power. One cannot rule out that Xenophon (6.4.10) only briefly mentioned the experience gained by the Theban cavalry in this battle because he was trying to oppose Theban propaganda, overrating the significance of the clash. Similar attempts may be noted with reference to Athenian victories at Naxos and Alysia.<sup>2</sup> Diodorus and Plutarch undoubtedly formed part of a tradition of exaggerating Theban success.<sup>3</sup>

The circumstances and site of the battle were quite accidental. The war between Thebes and Sparta had begun in 379 BC, when the Thebans had overthrown the pro-Spartan regime in their city and forced the Spartan garrison at Kadmeia to leave. The Spartans tried to maintain control over the cities of Boeotia and a dominant position in central Greece. The Thebans were fighting for independence and to rebuild the Boeotian League under their leadership. Not all Boeotians were prepared to join them. The citizens of Orchomenos, an old adversary of Thebes, were showing determined resistance. The city of Orchomenos received support from the Spartans operating from neighbouring Phocis. The Spartans placed their garrison there, which was to secure the city's safety

<sup>2</sup> Tuplin 1993: 148, 159, and 166–167.

<sup>3</sup> For Plutarch's sources on Tegyra episode see: Sordi 1989: 123–125; Georgiadou 1996: 77–78.

and Spartan influence in central Greece. Probably in 375 BC, the Spartans launched from Orchomenos an assault on nearby Locris. When the news of the Spartans leaving Orchomenos had reached the Thebans, they decided to take this opportunity and carry out an attack on the enemy city.<sup>4</sup> They presumed that the city would not be heavily guarded. Pelopidas with only the Sacred Band and a handful of horsemen were sent on the mission. However, when they reached Orchomenos it appeared that the Spartans had wisely reinforced its defences by stationing additional military troops in the city. Not equal to launching an attack in these circumstances, Pelopidas turned to retreat. On his way back he took the road circling Lake Copais from the north. In a twist of fate, the Spartans returning from Locris under the command of two polemarchs, Gorgoleon and Theopompos, were travelling at exactly the same time by the same route towards Orchomenos. Both sides, unaware of the fact, were marching towards an inescapable clash.

We owe the description of the battle site to Plutarch, who paid it a lot of attention in *The Life of Pelopidas* (16.2–3). Based on his account, a few years ago J. Buckler managed to find the exact location of the battlefield. Pelopidas led his men via the road from Orchomenos along the northern border of Lake Copais. At a place called Polygyra, identified by J. Buckler as Tegyra, the road became narrow because of the surrounding swamps and a temple of Apollo Tegyraios that stood on this site. Further on, the road wound among blocks of rock lying on the shore of the lake (which was flooded at the time) and a steep slope of Mount Delos on the other side. The Spartans, marching in the opposite direction, unaware of the presence of the Thebans and unobserved themselves, approached them at a close distance. Pelopidas was informed of their presence only when they started to cross the largest bottleneck leading to a more open terrain, where the Thebans were at the time. Both sides were surprised but immediately engaged in a battle.<sup>5</sup>

The number of soldiers fighting on both sides is uncertain. According to Plutarch (*Pelop.* 16.2; 18.1), Pelopidas was in command of the Sacred Band comprising 300 soldiers and some horsemen. Diodorus (15.37.1) quotes a different number, i.e. 500 select warriors (*epilektoi*). It is difficult to account for the difference; perhaps Diodorus meant the total number of cavalry and infantry. Based on this information we may assume that the Thebans either had 500 infantry and a small cavalry unit, or 300 hoplites and 200 cavalrymen. The knowledge of the number of Spartan forces is just as imprecise. Diodorus only reported that they were twice as numerous as the Thebans. Plutarch tried to be more accurate when he stated that two Spartan battalions called *morai* had participated in the clash. Unfortunately, he immediately went on to admit having problems with determining the number of soldiers in a *mora* and he quoted other authors, who gave the

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<sup>4</sup> For the chronology, see: Cawkwell 1963: 88–91; Buckler 1971: 353–361.

<sup>5</sup> There was much discussion on the location of the battlefield and Pyrgos was proposed as the most probable identification (Pritchett 1982: 103–115; Fossey 1988: 367–373) J. Buckler's (1995: 43–55) convincing identification of Tegyra with Polygyra based on his personal topographical observation seems to be the prevalent view now (Georgiadou 1997: 143).

numbers 500, 700 and 900 (*Pelop.* 17.2). The differences in the number of soldiers may be explained by the structure of the Spartan army. It comprised five such battalions but the number of men could differ in each campaign. It depended on the decision of the ephors, who determined the age of the Spartiates who were to participate in a particular campaign.<sup>6</sup> This simple explanation clarifies the discrepancy between various ancient accounts but does not bring us closer to finding out the exact number of the Spartans at Tegyra. This uncertainty opens up a vista of possibilities for interpretation. Advocates of the opinion that the Spartans outnumbered the Thebans fourtoone choose the larger numbers cited by Plutarch.<sup>7</sup> There is no reason to doubt that the Spartan forces were more numerous. However, one should probably agree with those who point out correctly that Plutarch, who described the battle in order to emphasise Pelopidas's merits, did not suggest that the Spartans had an overwhelming advantage.<sup>8</sup>

In a direct clash the outcome of the battle could be decided not only by the proportion of forces but also by training and tactics. Continuous armed conflicts in which Greek states had been intensely involved since the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century resulted in the introduction of innovative tactics and weapons. The Spartans, who had an excellently trained army and an efficient system of battlefield command, developed the tactic of attacking their opponents' flanks, a manoeuvre which was difficult to perform and risky. It was successfully employed by Agis in the battle of Mantinea in 418 (Thuc. 5.71–73) and repeated by Aristodemos in the battle of Nemea in 394 (Xenoph., *Hell.*, 4.2.20–21).<sup>9</sup> The Thebans did not have such a well-trained army, but they too experimented by lining up their troops in very deep formation. At Delium in 424 BC Pagondas had put his troops in a phalanx 25 men deep, rather than eight (Thuc. 4.93.4) like most armies. Perhaps the spectacular success of that battle encouraged the Thebans to apply similar tactics in future clashes. Their belief in the advantage of such a formation was so strong that in the battle of Nemea they ignored their allies' resolution to form up 16 rows and, as we may deduce from Xenophon's account (*Hell.* 4.2.18), chose a much deeper phalanx.<sup>10</sup> Epaminondas used the deep formation to great advantage at Leuctra, where the Thebans formed up in as many as 50 ranks. What the purpose of such formation was, and what real advantages it brought on the battlefield, have been subjects of dispute for many years. There is no doubt, however, that the Thebans appreciated the efficiency of a deep phalanx, which had contributed to their first victory in years at Delium, and that they clung on to these tactics for many years to come.<sup>11</sup>

The advantage of better training, which the Spartans usually had over their opponents, was diminished at Tegyra. The Spartans had to face the Sacred Band – an elite

<sup>6</sup> Lazenby 1985: 8–9.

<sup>7</sup> Anderson 1970: 164 and 225–251.

<sup>8</sup> Georgiadou 1996: 77–78. Cf. Lammert 1933; Sordi 1989: 124–125; Lazenby 1985: 7–10; Buckler 1995: 44–41.

<sup>9</sup> See Lazenby 1985: 139–143.

<sup>10</sup> Pritchett 1971: 134–43.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson 1970: 159–160; Cawkwell 1972: 260–261; Holladay 1982: 95–97; Buckler 1985: 140–143; Hanson 1989: 172–173; Luginbill 1994: 58–60.

squadron comprising 300 soldiers.<sup>12</sup> Similar elite troops were not a novelty on Greek battlefields. The best example was the Spartan *hippeis* fighting at the kings' side and a thousand select Argives. In Thebes there had been a similar regiment called the *hemiochoi* or *parabates*, although we do not know much about it (Herod. 8.124.3; Thuc. 5.57.2; Diodorus 12.78–80).<sup>13</sup> The Sacred Band was created soon after the coup of 379. Selected soldiers, devoted to democracy, kept on standby and paid for by the state, were chosen, it seems, to maintain and guarantee the new order in the city. Splendid training and outstanding bravery made the combat value of these men so great that they formed the first lines of the Theban hoplite phalanx. In this way they, i.e. the best trained, took on the greatest risk and bore the main brunt of the battle. They also set an example for the remaining men who fought behind them. In the Orchomenos campaign the band was used in an innovative way as a special task force. Such bands also appeared in the armed forces of the greatest powers of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. All the outstanding generals of the era perceived the need for such forces. The Thebans took advantage of the Band waiting on standby to carry out a prompt operation; they wanted to take the unexpected opportunity and attack the enemy city. The experience gathered in this campaign determined the future of the Sacred Band, which would always fight as a separate squadron thereafter (Plutarch, *Pelop.* 18.3).

The progress of the battle may only be reconstructed on the basis of Plutarch's brief report, which describes the events in a few sentences:

*So, then, as the Thebans entered the district of Tegyra on their way back from Orchomenus, the Lacedaemonians also entered it at the same time, returning in the opposite direction from Locris, and met them. As soon as they were seen marching through the narrow pass, some one ran up to Pelopidas and said: "We have fallen into our enemies' hands!" "Why any more," said he, "then they into ours?" Then he at once ordered all his horsemen to ride up from the rear in order to charge, while he himself put his men-at-arms, three hundred in number, into close array, expecting that wherever they charged he would be most likely to cut his way through the enemy, who outnumbered him... Confident of victory, the polemarchs of the Spartans, Gorgoleon and Theopompus, advanced against the Thebans. The onset being made on both sides particularly where the commanders themselves stood, in the first place, the Lacedaemonian polemarchs clashed with Pelopidas and fell; then, when those about them were being wounded and slain, their whole army was seized with fear and opened up a lane for the Thebans, imagining that they wished to force their way through to the opposite side and get away. But Pelopidas used the path thus opened to lead his men against those of the enemy who still held together, and slew them as he went along, so that finally all turned and fled. The pursuit, however, was carried but a little way, for the Thebans feared the Orchomenians, who were near, and the relief force from Sparta (17.2–4; translated by B. Perrin, Loeb Classical Library.).*

Various attempts at reconstructing the progress of the battle and reasons for the Spartans' defeat can be divided into three basic lines of interpretation. W. K. Pritchett emphasised the charge of the Theban cavalry. The cavalry, which usually covered the infantry wings, here (for the first time in the history of Greek warfare) supposedly mounted

<sup>12</sup> On the Sacred Band see De Voto 1992.

<sup>13</sup> See Pritchett 1974: 221–225; Tritle 1989: 54 n. 2.

a frontal attack and fought its way through the Spartan hoplite formation. According to a more moderate version the cavalry did not cut through the hoplite formation but the attack incurred heavy losses and facilitated the Sacred Band's task.<sup>14</sup> In V. Hanson's opinion, the tactics of concentrating superior forces on the left wing of the Thebans' forces were of the highest importance. Pelopidas put his superior forces, i.e. the Sacred Band, not on the right wing (as would have been usual) but on the left, opposite to the positions held by the Spartan commanders and superior forces. Similarly to the battle of Koronea, the outcome was to come down to a direct clash of the best forces. The attack of the Thebans deployed in close formation led to the prompt death of both polemarchs, which sealed the Spartans' defeat. According to this reconstruction, Pelopidas must have had other foot soldiers than the Sacred Band and applied the tactics which were later repeated at Leuctra by Epaminondas.<sup>15</sup> The latest and most detailed analysis of the battle by J. Buckler concluded that Pelopidas owed his success to the skilful coordination of cavalry and infantry attacks. In the first phase of the battle he aptly used the element of surprise and, in a quick attack, engaged a considerable part of the Spartan forces in fighting before they managed successfully to deploy. The Spartan forces that did manage to form into line were attacked and scattered by the Sacred Band. Pelopidas was able to combine an unexpected cavalry attack with an accompanying and decisive infantry attack, a feat which he later repeated in the battle of Cynoscephalae. J. Buckler convincingly overturned W. K. Pritchett's theory on the cavalry charge which cut through the Spartan hoplite formation. According to Buckler, Plutarch's use of the word *proemballein* does not constitute a basis for such suppositions.<sup>16</sup>

In his description of the battle, Plutarch emphasises the surprise of both armies at this unexpected meeting. It can hardly be assumed that commanders on either side had the time to prepare a complex battle plan. Pelopidas was in a more difficult situation. He was in close proximity to a hostile, heavily guarded city, and the enemy's overwhelming forces blocked his only way of retreat. What he could do was to fight a battle quickly, as any delay might worsen his situation. The citizens of Orchomenos and the Spartan garrison, alarmed by the Thebans' presence, must have already been on standby. Having understood the situation, they might have tried to attack them from behind. Out of necessity, the battle plan must have been simple – to cut through the enemy line as fast as possible. As the Theban experience of the battle of Coroneia in 394 BC had shown, this was not an impossible feat. In the second stage of the battle the Thebans' close formation cut through the obstructing Spartan forces led by Agesilaos and escaped from the battlefield. The terrain at Tegyra aided this manoeuvre. Pelopidas, who had travelled along Lake Copais before, realised that his squadron would be much safer once they reached the bottleneck.

Having noticed the Spartans, Pelopidas quickly ordered his horsemen, who had covered the rear so far, to launch an attack on the enemy (Plutarch, *Pelop.* 17,2: τὴν μὲν

<sup>14</sup> Pritchett 1982: 116–120; De Voto 1992: 9.

<sup>15</sup> Hanson 1988: 194.

<sup>16</sup> Buckler 1995: 53–54. Cynoscephalae: Plutarch, *Pelop.* 32.3.

ἵππον εὐθὺς πᾶσαν ἐκέλευσε παρελαύνειν ἀπ' οὐρᾶς ὡς προεμβалоῦσαν). Despite some modern opinion<sup>17</sup> which emphasizes the importance of this attack it should be noted that Plutarch did not mention either the effect of the cavalry attack, or the cavalry's later fate in the battle. The cavalry attack seems to have been nothing more than a prelude to the battle proper, and had no decisive influence on the development of the battle. Moreover, the Plutarch's description is clear that it was not the Sacred Band who struck the Spartans as they tried to deploy; on the contrary, the polemarchs Gorgoleon and Theopompus, confident of their advantage, attacked the Thebans. At this stage of the battle the role of the cavalry must have been limited to attempts at stopping the Spartans, marching in a column, from forming a phalanx. Probably the only result of this attack was to buy Pelopidas some time, which enabled him to put his own hoplites in formation and prepare them for a risky clash. The fact that the Spartans managed to form a phalanx despite a cavalry attack is not surprising in the light of Xenophon's account (*Lac. Polit.* 11.7). The author, who was familiar with their military abilities, wrote that forming from line of march into line of battle in the face of an enemy was one of the Spartans' spectacular manoeuvres, and one that they prepared for through intensive training. The development of the battle of Tegyra shows that the Spartans used their skill and, despite the Theban attack, managed to form a phalanx and prepare for a clash with the enemy's infantry. Since the hoplites managed to remain in order and avoid panic, the efficiency of the cavalry attack must have been negligible.<sup>18</sup> The use of his cavalry by Pelopidas was very much in accordance with the art of warfare, which confirms that he was capable of making quick decisions – a valuable feature in a commander, but hardly a manifestation of extraordinary inventiveness or military genius. There is no indication that Pelopidas used the cavalry in an innovative manner throughout the whole campaign. His cavalry was covering the rear of a marching column. On facing the enemy, the horsemen were ordered forwards to make the enemy's manoeuvres more difficult and to buy time for their own infantry to prepare for combat. Xenophon's cavalry performed a similar role during the retreat of Cyrus the Younger's mercenaries. It is worth remembering the famous excerpt from *Anabasis* (4.7.24) in which Xenophon, on hearing shouts from the front of the marching column of Greek forces, guessed that there had been an enemy attack and immediately went to the rescue with his cavalry squadron. Using the cavalry for reconnaissance would be a novel, or at least unorthodox solution – at any rate that is what seems to follow from Xenophon's words. In his treatise for a cavalry commander (*Hipparchikos* 4.5) he recommended using the cavalry in this way when marching across enemy territory. He enumerated the benefits of this tactic and remarked that few commanders could appreciate such methods of seeking information on the enemy. Pelopidas did not count among such generals either. However, it is possible to quote earlier examples of using the cavalry for efficient reconnaissance, e.g. in Thrace by Xenophon himself (*Anab.* 6.3.10–11).<sup>19</sup> Although J. K. Ander-

<sup>17</sup> Pritchett 1982: 116–120; De Voto 1992: 9.

<sup>18</sup> Spence 1993: 155–157.

<sup>19</sup> Spence 1993: 41–149.

son suggests that the man who informed Pelopidas of the approaching enemy was a scout, this seems to disagree with Plutarch's account, which emphasises the surprise at seeing the Spartans and the quickness of Pelopidas's reaction.<sup>20</sup>

The clash of infantry troops was decisive for the outcome of the battle. Pelopidas, who was outnumbered and feared envelopment, wanted to decide the battle quickly and reach his goal, i.e. open a retreat towards Thebes. With this aim in mind he put his 300 soldiers in a close array (Plutarch, *Pelop.* 17. 2: αὐτὸς δε τοὺς ὀπίστας τριακοσίους ὄντας εἰς ὀλίγον συνέγαγεν), hoping that this would enable him to break through the enemy phalanx. Supposedly the Thebans had acted similarly in the battle of Plataea in 431 (Thuc. 2.4.1), at Koronea (Xenoph., *Hell.* 4.3.18), during the decisive clash with Agesilaos, at Leuctra (Xenoph., *Hell.* 4.3.18), and Mantinea (Diod. 15.86.4). Historical sources do not provide a clear-cut answer as to which was like and what advantages it brought. Advocates of the traditional theory of the character of hoplite fighting believe that this allowed them to increase the physical pressure on the enemy during the *othismos*, which decided the battle. Shoving required a close formation in which, according to Thucydides (5.71.1), each soldier tried to move as close as possible behind the shield of his right-hand neighbour. Fighting in an even closer formation than usual must have made using weapons very difficult indeed. This, however, was an inconvenience which was offset by the advantage gained during the *othismos*. Critics of this theory believe that hoplites fought in much looser formation than is usually assumed. They quote the accounts of Polybius (18.30.6–9; 12.21.7) and – with some reservations – Asklepiodotos (4.1–4), according to whom, in order to use weapons freely, soldiers had to stand six feet apart, and perhaps even further. With such big gaps between soldiers, references to *othismos* should be understood as an allusion to duels fought by the men in the front rows.<sup>21</sup> The Spartans must have fought in comparatively loose formation which ensured them enough freedom to carry out the manoeuvres. At Koronea Agesilaos turned the phalanx through 180 degrees. It could have been done only in a way that preserved the original order of soldiers in each file. In the Spartan drill the manoeuvre performed in such situations, *ekseligmos*, was carried out by files of the phalanx. The man at the end of a file made an about turn, and the others stepped in front of him, led by the first man in the file. The gaps between files must have been large enough to enable the men to move freely, without causing chaos in the formation. The Spartans also fought in loose formation at Leuctra, which is why they could have moved the mortally wounded king Cleombrotos to the rear. We may therefore assume that they also fought in loose formation at Tegyra. On the other hand, in the Theban close phalanx the gaps between soldiers in ranks and files could have been much smaller, but not small enough to obstruct their use of weapons. Such formation was used in Greek armies in emergency situations. Thucydides (1.63) wrote that the Spartan commander Aristeus used it in the final stage of the battle of Potidaea. It happened at a critical moment, when the left wing of his troops was scattered and he found himself trapped by the victorious

<sup>20</sup> Anderson 1970: 312 n. 46. Compare Spence 1993: 148.

<sup>21</sup> See Pritchett 1971: 144–54; Krentz 1985: 51–61; Luginbill 1994: 51–61.

Athenian forces. Deploying his men in close formation, Aristeus decided to fight his way through, under enemy fire, to nearby Potidaea. At Coroneia the Thebans decided on such a formation to cut through the Spartan forces blocking their way. Asklepiodotos (4.1.3) also wrote that the close formation (*pyknosis*) was applied in attacking. The advantage of this formation must have consisted in the fact that the Spartan soldiers had to duel with more numerous enemies. The strike of concentrated forces on a shallow and loose phalanx might have led to breaking it under heavy fire and the pressure of many men, wrote Xenophon in the *Anabasis* (4.8.11). It comes as no surprise that the Spartans suffered heavy losses against the Thebans forming such a phalanx. However, the close formation must have made it difficult, if not downright impossible, to manoeuvre and it only enabled the Thebans to cut through the enemy line. The shortened front was the weakest point of this formation, as it made it vulnerable to being outflanked by the enemy. For this reason, Greek armies usually chose the opposite tactics and tried to expand the front of the phalanx to the maximum. Close formation was therefore a solution contrary to the standard procedure. It was applied in special circumstances, when the commander did not expect to defeat the enemy and, staking everything on one roll of the dice, tried to escape from the battlefield at minimum cost. It seems that this was precisely what happened at Tegyra. Perhaps the presence of the Theban cavalry was also some sort of protection against being outflanked.

Both the polemarchs and many soldiers fighting at their side were killed in the violent clash of the Sacred Band with the Spartan forces. However, it is difficult to determine whether, as V. Hanson supposes, the Sacred Band attacked the right wing of the Spartan army, as it did at Leuctra. Such a conclusion may be based only on Plutarch's information about the death of both polemarchs. Although phalanx commanders usually fought on the right wing, it was not a rule for the Spartans. Undoubtedly, both polemarchs fought at the front of their troops, as was the custom (Thuc. 5.72; Xenoph., *Lac. Rep.* 11.5–9).<sup>22</sup> It is also hard to imagine that the Spartan commanders might impassively have watched their men fighting if the Thebans had attacked a different part of the Spartan phalanx. Moreover, at Leuctra the point of launching an attack on the Spartan right wing was to bring about a clash of the superior squadrons on both sides. In the case of the battle of Tegyra, there were two Spartan *morai*, and we can hardly suspect that one of them was of lesser combat value. J. Buckler provided a better explanation in arguing that at Tegyra the terrain allowed Pelopidas to attack only on the right.<sup>23</sup>

According to Plutarch, after the death of both leaders, with many killed and wounded, the Spartans were overcome with fear and decided to open their ranks and let the Thebans through, convinced that the enemy would escape (Plutarch, *Pelop.* 17, 4: διέσχε μὲν ἐπ' ἀμφοτέρα τοῖς Θηβαίοις, ὡς διεκπεσεῖν εἰς τοῦμπροσθεν καὶ διεκδῦναι βουλομένοις). However, Pelopidas took the opportunity that presented itself and, instead of leading his squadron to safety, he launched an attack and scattered the enemy phalanx. Plutarch (*Ages.* 18.3–4) described this part of the battle as similar to the last

<sup>22</sup> Buckler 1980: 63; Lazenby 1985: 29–30; Wheeler 1991: 147–148.

<sup>23</sup> Buckler 2003: 293 n. 56.

stage of the battle of Coroneia. The difference was that at Coroneia the Thebans had been let through by the Spartans and had left the battlefield. Although they had not been defeated, they had to concede the Spartans' victory, as the latter had held the battlefield. At Tegyra, on the other hand, Pelopidas attacked and scattered the Spartans, thus becoming the unquestionable winner. As J. Buckler observed, Pelopidas was not deceived by the Spartan manoeuvre but took the opportunity that he was given. The Spartan manoeuvre was in fact a stratagem, which consisted in letting the Thebans through only to attack their rear and unprotected side.<sup>24</sup>

Although Plutarch's account seems coherent and logical, it remains extremely difficult to imagine how it was possible for the Spartans to open their ranks and counter-march at the same time. It follows from the description that the manoeuvre must have consisted of dividing the phalanx into two wings and leaving a passage between them to let the Thebans through. For a manoeuvre as risky as this not to end in disaster, the Spartans must have maintained discipline and order throughout. It seems astonishing that they should be capable of such a tactic despite their losses, the death of their commanders, and the panic which was starting to seize them. Our doubts about the feasibility of such a manoeuvre should be dispersed by other sources confirming its use on the battlefield. The most notable example is the opening of the Spartan phalanx in the battle of Coroneia, reported by Plutarch (*Ages.* 18.4), Frontinus (*Strat.* 2.6.6), and Polyainos (2.1.19). Although this example is verified by many sources, puzzlingly it is not mentioned by Xenophon. The author, who had probably been an eye-witness of the battle, clearly stated the opposite: it had been the Thebans who had broken through the Spartan formation (*Hell.* 4.3.19). Writing from the Spartan perspective, he had no reason not to mention a manoeuvre that could have been achieved only by a splendidly trained and disciplined army. His brief commentary on the decisions made by the Spartan commander, Agesilaos, does not seem to suggest the possibility of carrying out such a manoeuvre. In the commentary he observed that Agesilaos should have let the Thebans through and attacked them from the side and rear instead of pursuing a head-on clash. Xenophon's words do not necessarily mean that the Spartans could have opened a way through for the Thebans; they only mean that the Spartans could have formed up in a way that would have enabled the Thebans to leave the battlefield.<sup>25</sup> It is also worth noting that Xenophon in the *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, like later authors of treatises on tactics, did not mention such a manoeuvre. The only time he mentioned it was in the description of the battle of Cunaxa (*Anab.* (1.8.9). He described the manoeuvre of opening the phalanx by Greek hoplites and peltasts. A close analysis of this case reveals that it had little in common with the manoeuvre described by Plutarch. At Cunaxa, Greek hoplites fighting in the service of Cyrus the Younger parted their ranks before

<sup>24</sup> Buckler 1995: 53.

<sup>25</sup> This is an interpretation of Xenophon's words (*Hell.* 4.3.19: ἐξὸν γέρ αὐτῶ παρέντι τοὺς διαπίπτοντας ἀκολουθοῦντι χειροῦσθαι τοὺς ὀπισθεν, οὐκ ἐποίησε τοῦτο; *Ages.* 2. 12: ἐξὸν γέρ αὐτῶ παρέντι τοὺς διαπίπτοντας ἐπομένῳ χειροῦσθαι τοὺς ὀπισθεν οὐκ ἐποίησε τοῦτο) proposed by Shipley (1997: 233–235) although he still believes that Spartans were able to open their ranks.

scythed chariots speeding in their direction. In this case the Greeks pursuing their fleeing enemies ran, trying to maintain good order. Driverless chariots ran randomly into the hoplites, which parted every time they saw one. They did it so efficiently that not only did they maintain their order but none of them sustained any wounds. The hoplites parted not before a close and wide front of the enemy phalanx but before chariots which were spread at large intervals and came one by one. Assuming that the gaps between hoplite files were considerable it is easy to imagine that each file could quite comfortably use the gaps to go round the obstruction. In this situation commands could have been issued by lochagoi or lower officers leading individual files. The opening of Alexander the Great's phalanx before the Persian chariots at Gaugamela must have been similar (Arrian *Anab.* 5.17.7). Also in this case, the manoeuvre was not made by the whole phalanx. Naturally, it is very hard to imagine such manoeuvres if we argue the traditional view that the gaps between the files of the phalanx were very small.<sup>26</sup> The manoeuvre used at Cunaxa, i.e. Greek peltasts parting before Tissaphernes's troops charging at them, must have been different, too. Light-armed peltasts did not fight in close formation and dodging the charging enemy was an element of their fighting tactics.

Summing up, we may assume that Xenophon never mentioned the manoeuvre of opening a way through in the phalanx in order to let a close enemy battalion through. The only accounts quoting the use of such a manoeuvre by the Greek hoplites were those of Plutarch, Frontinus and Polyainos. However, their credibility regarding this part of the description of the battle of Koronea has been questioned before. It has been asked whether, unable to cope with a fierce enemy attack, the Spartan phalanx could have formed a lane wide enough for several thousand people to march through. Moreover, Frontinus and Polyainos claimed that the Spartans had attacked the Thebans from the side and rear, i.e. they did what, according to Xenophon, Agesilaos had failed to do.<sup>27</sup> Xenophon's description of the battle of Koronea, lacking this spectacular manoeuvre, appears much more credible. If we reject Plutarch's claim that the Spartans opened the phalanx at Coroneia, then on similar grounds we may not only reject his claim of using the manoeuvre at Tegyra, but also doubt whether it was ever performed by a Greek phalanx.

If we exclude the possibility of opening the Greek phalanx we must admit that Plutarch's description of the clashes at Coroneia and Tegyra is wrong. Naturally, we may look for the sources of this mistake in Xenophon's erroneous interpretation but, as we know, this could only be true in the case of the battle of Coroneia. It is more likely that another description of the battle might have suggested that the Spartans opened their formation; a description available both to Plutarch and Frontinus. Plutarch could have elaborated on it, comparing it with the battle of Leuctra, where a larger and deeper formation of Theban forces was unable to cut through the Spartan ranks, although it incurred heavy losses and forced the enemy to retreat. This could have led him to ask why, in a similar situation, a much more shallow formation of Theban forces could have

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<sup>26</sup> See for example Fuller 1960: 173 n. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Lazenby 1985: 146; Buckler 1995: 53–54; Shipley 1997: 233–235.

fought their way through the Spartan phalanx at Coroneia and Tegyra. The hypothesis that the Spartans purposefully opened their ranks, which led to a great success at Coroneia and to a dismal failure at Tegyra, provided a satisfactory answer. Neither Frontinus nor Plutarch could have examined in practice whether the hoplites were capable of performing such a manoeuvre in combat.

The last stage of the battle of Tegyra began when the Thebans managed, as they had at Coroneia, to break through the Spartan formation. This time, however, confusion crept into the Spartan troops, which led to the partial scattering of their phalanx. This is how we may understand Plutarch's statement that Pelopidas turned against those who were still resisting in order (Plutarch, *Pelop.* 17.4: ἤγειτο πρὸς τοὺς συνεστῶτας). The situation took a much less advantageous turn for the Spartans than in the analogous situation at Coroneia. We may suppose that the partial scattering of the Spartan forces was brought about not only by the successful attack of the Sacred Band. A complete change in the distribution of forces might have been caused by the renewed involvement of the Theban cavalry. If we reject a reconstruction according to which the cavalry cut through the Spartan formation, we must answer the question of the cavalry's later fate. The initial attack on the Spartans was mainly designed to hinder them from deploying and to buy more time for the Sacred Band to prepare for combat. When this task had been completed, the cavalry withdrew, probably to cover the rear. Throughout the battle, Pelopidas expected that the Spartans might be aided by Orchomenos. When Pelopidas cut through the Spartan formation, the horsemen must have tried to take their only opportunity of escaping. They must have attempted this so as not to become separated from their infantry, as had happened to the small Theban troop which had had to find shelter at a temple at Coroneia (Xenoph., *Hell.* 4.3.20; Plutarch, *Ages.* 19.1–2). Probably at the time the cavalry made to cut through the weakened front following the hoplites, disorder might have crept into one of the Spartan wings. Even if the cavalry only wanted to slip out after the hoplites, the sight of the approaching horsemen, the insecurity evoked by the stubbornness of the Theban attack, and the losses suffered caused chaos and one of the wings of the phalanx went into disarray. In the battle of Delium the mere sight of the charging cavalry had caused the victorious Athenians to give way to panic (Thuc. 9.43).

Noticing that the formation of one of the Spartan wings had broken, Pelopidas instantly took the opportunity. He could risk changing the formation and launching an attack on the other Spartan wing, which was still maintaining order. There was another clash, in which the forces were much more equal, but the Thebans certainly surpassed their enemy in terms of self-confidence and eagerness, which had usually been the Spartans' strong point. If we are to believe Plutarch's words, Pelopidas forced them to retreat as well. Even if the Spartan casualties were not heavy, as Pelopidas did not pursue the enemy, he was certainly the winner on the battlefield and he could erect a trophy in token of his victory. However, since his forces were not large, he could not pursue this success further and marched speedily back to Thebes.

The immediate military and political consequences of the battle were not far-reaching, although its outcome might have influenced the Spartans' decision to sign a peace treaty in 375 BC. The battle was far more important for the Thebans; it gave rise to the legend of the Sacred Band and its superb commander. The anecdote cited by Plutarch (*Pelop.* 17.1) at the beginning of his description of the battle stems from this tradition. When one of the Theban soldiers, seeing the Spartans, cried out: "We are fallen into our enemy's hands;" Pelopidas reportedly replied, "And why not they into ours?" We may wonder whether this was Plutarch's way of suggesting that Pelopidas's plans were much more ambitious and that he regarded the situation, which seemed hopeless to his men, as an opportunity to defeat the enemy. If we wanted to treat this exchange as a true event, we might also see Pelopidas's words as an attempt at controlling the panic, which was starting to fill his men, by pointing out that the outcome of the battle was not yet determined. However, it is difficult to resist the impression that the exchange was invented *post factum* and added to Pelopidas's eulogy. The authenticity of these words is even more dubious if we remember that Plutarch attributed a similar statement to a Spartan king Leonidas (*Apoph. Lac.* 225 B and 234 B). We may therefore assume that Plutarch did not quote the anecdote to relate Pelopidas's objectives prior to the battle, since he described his intentions elsewhere. Rather, he wanted to bestow greater praise on Pelopidas. He seems to have purposefully suggested an analogy between the situation and attitude of Leonidas's 300 Spartans at Thermopylae and Pelopidas's 300 Thebans at Tegyra. In this way he gave the clash a heroic dimension; he might have followed in the footsteps of earlier authors, in whose works he could have found similar attempts at glorifying Pelopidas's achievements.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> On pro-Theban traditions see Westlake 1939: 11–22; Sordi 1989; Georgiadou 1996: 77–78; Georgiadou 1997: 21–22.

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