



Sellasia Revisited

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SELLASIA REVISITED*

(Pl. 57)

Polybios' description of the battle of Sellasia in 222 B.C. between Antigonos Doson and Kleomenes was the subject of considerable controversy in the early part of this century.¹ Hence Pritchett's essay, which demonstrated that most of the difficulties were not in Polybios' text, but in its interpretation by modern critics,² was a valuable contribution. Pritchett proposed that the scene of the conflict between the Spartan left wing and the Macedonian right should be transferred about one kilometer north of Kromayer's location,³ a shift which helps to remove many of the objections raised by earlier writers.⁴

This note is concerned with the location of the battle between the Macedonian and the Lakedaimonian phalanxes, which were armed with sarissas.⁵ This battle is sometimes cited as an example of sarissa-armed phalanxes being used on uneven ground;⁶ hence locating the site of the battle between the phalanxes at Sellasia is of interest in determining what sort of terrain was appropriate for sarissa-armed phalanxes. Kromayer made the two phalanxes meet on the western side of the hill called Melissi, which Polybios calls *Olympos*, just south of a *rheuma*.⁷ I shall argue instead that this battle was really fought on the saddle of Melissi, where there is a plain about 300 yards long and 80 yards wide. The terrain suitable for a sarissa-armed phalanx will also be discussed.

Let us begin by reviewing the troops engaged on Olympos. Kleomenes stationed 6000 Lakedaimonians and about 5000 *μισθοφόροι* on Olympos,⁸ and Antigonos had 10,000 Macedonian phalangites and about 5000 *misthophoroi* on the hill.⁹ Antigonos drew up the Macedonians in a *διφάλαγγία ἐπάλληλος*, and *ἐποίει δὲ τοῦτο διὰ τὴν στενότητα τῶν τόπων*.¹⁰ Since the phalanx was of double depth, presumably it was 32 men deep.

* It is a pleasure to thank Minor M. Markle, III for interesting me in the battle of Sellasia and for accompanying me to the battlefield, although unfortunately the pressure of time prevented him from exploring it thoroughly with me. I am grateful to W.K. Pritchett and J.K. Anderson for helpful comments on the article. I am also indebted to the inhabitants of Sellasia, especially Peter Koutris, for their hospitality.

¹ Ancient sources: Polybios 2.65-69; Plutarch, *Kleomenes* 27-28; *Philipoimen* 6. For modern writers see the references cited in W.K. Pritchett, *Studies in Ancient Greek Topography* (Berkeley 1965) 59-70 (hereafter *SAGT*); F.W. Walbank, *A Commentary on Polybios I* (Oxford 1957) 272-87; W.W. Tarn, *CAH* 7 (1928) 885; especially A. Kromayer, *Antike Schlachtfelder in Griechenland* 1 (Berlin 1903) 199-277 (hereafter *AS*) and 4 (Berlin 1931) 597-99; *id.* *BCH* 34 (1910) 508-37; and G. Soteriades, *BCH* 34 (1910) 5-57 and 35 (1911) 87-107, 241-42.

² W.K. Pritchett, *SAGT*.

³ Cf. Kromayer, *AS* map 5 with Pritchett, *SAGT*.

⁴ To a large extent Pritchett's locations for the hill called *Enas* and the *Gorgylos potamos* were anticipated by L. Ross, *Reisen und Reiserouten durch Griechenland* (Berlin 1841) 178-

Ten thousand phalangites, 32 deep, in the *πυκνή* formation (3 feet apart), would occupy $10,000 \div 32 \cong 310$ yards.¹¹ The Macedonian *misthophoroi* initially were stationed in front of the phalanx;¹² they were recalled before the charge of the phalanxes;¹³ and hence they presumably were then ordered to cover the flanks of the phalanx. After both phalanxes lowered their sarissas and charged, there was a fierce struggle, during which the Macedonians were driven back *ἐπὶ πολὺ*;¹⁴ finally, the Macedonians launched a charge which drove the Spartans from their *ὄχυρωμάτα* and resulted in their complete defeat.¹⁵

These facts provide the basis for a series of objections to Kromayer's positioning of the battle on Olympos (see ill. 1):

1) According to Polybios, the Macedonian phalanx was arrayed in double depth because of the narrowness of the ground. Yet the terrain on the western side of Melissi, where Kromayer makes the phalanxes meet, rises with a nearly constant slope for a distance of about 700 yards, more than enough for a phalanx of ordinary depth (16 men) and width (620 yards);

2) Accepting Pritchett's location for the *Gorgylos potamos* and Kromayer's positioning of the Spartan phalanx on the western side of Melissi (called Kokkina), an advance of the Macedonian phalanx due south from Rankazolakka to Kokkina would involve crossing the *rheuma* opposite the Dagla ridge. This gorge is shown on pl. 62b of Pritchett's *Studies in Ancient Greek Topography*, and he himself calls it "a formidable natural barrier."¹⁶ The slope of the banks is at least 45°, which makes it extremely difficult for an unencumbered man to traverse the gorge, let alone a man carrying a 21-foot sarissa, and especially 10,000 such men drawn up 32 deep. Sending a phalanx across such an obstacle would inevitably result in its total disorganization.¹⁷ On the other hand, an advance of the Macedonian phalanx along the Oinous would have been barred by the Spartan cavalry, and if the Mace-

86, and A. Jochmus, *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* 27 (1857) 34-41.

⁵ Polybios 2.69.7.

⁶ See, e.g., the comment by J.K. Anderson in M.M. Markle, *AJA* 81 (1977) 332, n. 45.

⁷ Kromayer, *BCH* 34 (1910) pl. 13, reproduced here as ill. 1.

⁸ Polybios 2.65.9, 66.8, 69.3; Plutarch, *Kleomenes*, 28.5.

⁹ Polybios 2.65.2, 66.8, 69.3; Plutarch, *Kleomenes*, 28.5.

¹⁰ Polybios 2.66.9.

¹¹ For the tactical details, see Polybios 12.20.7, 18.29.2, 30.1; Walbank (supra n. 1) 281.

¹² Polybios 2.66.9.

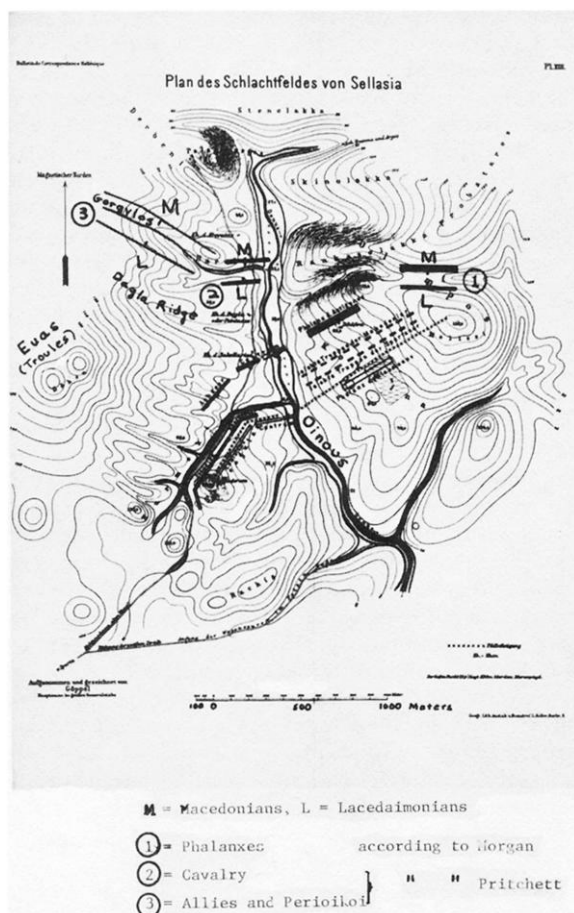
¹³ Polybios 2.69.7.

¹⁴ Polybios 2.69.8. Autopsy of the site strongly suggests that Phylarchos' figure of 5 stades in Plutarch, *Kleomenes* 28.4, is a considerable exaggeration.

¹⁵ Polybios 2.69.8-11.

¹⁶ Pritchett, *SAGT* 65.

¹⁷ See Polybios 11.15-16 for what happened when a Spartan phalanx tried to cross a far less formidable ditch fifteen years later.



ILL. 1. Map of the battlefield of Sellasia, showing the reconstructions of Kromayer, Pritchett, and the author

donian phalanx tried to ascend Kokkina from the bed of the Oinous, its rear would have been exposed to attack by the Spartan horse;

3) It would make far better sense for Antigonos to send his phalanx up the west side of Provatares, then down its south side across the saddle connecting it with Melissi, next up the north side of Melissi, and then have it charge downhill toward Kleomenes' camp. The numerically inferior Spartan phalanx could not withstand such an assault from a superior height.

¹⁸ Pritchett, *SAGT* 65, 68-69 moves Kleomenes' defensive positions on Olympos forward to the southern bank of this *rheuma*; all three points apply equally to his modification.

¹⁹ Pritchett, *SAGT* 65, n. 27. This plain is barely visible in a photograph of Olympos (*SAGT* pl. 58b) taken from just north of the summit of Troules. A photograph taken from the northern peak of Troules is presented here in pl. 57, fig. 6. The contours in Kromayer's map (*AS* map 5) around the saddle

Presumably Kleomenes could recognize this, in which case he would have built his camp on the summit of Melissi, where his troops would at least have had the advantage of the ground, regardless of which way Antigonos attacked.¹⁸

These points caused me to suspect that Kleomenes' camp was on the summit of Melissi, and that the battle between the phalanxes occurred on the saddle joining Melissi with the southern part of Provatares. In July 1979 I visited Sellasia to inspect the terrain. I ascended Provatares along the spur opposite Pritchett's candidate for the *Gorgylos potamos* and then made my way through the scrub to the saddle of the ridge connecting Provatares with Melissi. On the saddle there was a small cultivated plain, about 80 yards wide and 300 yards long, which Pritchett noted as a wheat field (pl. 57, figs. 1-6).¹⁹ The ground is eminently suitable for sarissa-armed phalanxes, and it is of just the right width for the Macedonian *diphalangia* of 10,000 men. The hills north and south of the saddle rise evenly with a moderate slope, which would not excessively break up the phalanxes.

How well does my reconstruction fit the evidence provided by Polybios and Plutarch? I assume throughout that Pritchett's description of the action on the west bank of the Oinous is essentially correct.²⁰ A map of the battlefield, adapted from Kromayer, is presented in ill. 1. Kleomenes' defensive position runs from the north of the summit of Troules along the Dagla ridge to the Oinous. On the east bank of the Oinous, Kleomenes' camp would be on Melissi. Since the *rheumata* on either side of the saddle north of Melissi would be essentially untraversable by a body of troops (and any who crossed would be exposed to an attack from superior ground), any assault from the north would be channeled into the saddle. Since the Oinous is at most a few feet deep, and the level ground on its east bank opposite the Gorgylos no more than 100 yards wide, the cavalry posted on the west bank could have prevented any advance along the east bank next to the stream.²¹ Overall, it would not be easy to find a better defensive position in this valley.²²

In preparation for the battle on Olympos, Antigonos would have sent his Macedonian phalangites and his *misthophoroi* up the west side of Provatares to its summit, and then had them descend southward toward Melissi. The battle on Euas (Troules) would proceed according to Pritchett's reconstruction, with the defeat of Euklidas' troops exposing the west side of Melissi to an assault by the victorious Macedonians. Therefore, Kleomenes attempted to defeat his oppo-

are inaccurate; Pritchett, *SAGT* 59, has noted how often Kromayer's map differs from the Greek General Staff Map.

²⁰ See Pritchett, *SAGT* 61-70.

²¹ Thus Pritchett, *SAGT* 69, n. 62.

²² The gap between the phalanxes on Olympos and the cavalry in the Oinous valley finds a parallel in Pritchett's positing of a discontinuity in the Spartan line between the summit of Euas and lower down on the Dagla ridge (*SAGT* 68).

nents on Provatares before trying to deal with the Achaians and the other Macedonian allies below in the valley of the Oinous. The Lakedaimonian and Macedonian phalanxes descended the moderately steep (but uniform and unbroken) slopes of their respective hills to the saddle, where they clashed. The Macedonians were forced to retreat ἐπὶ πολύ;²³ then the Spartans were compelled to give ground. The presence of a hill behind either line would make it difficult for one side to push back the other farther than the depth of the plain. Finally the Macedonians, by virtue of their greater depth,²⁴ forced their way uphill to the Spartan fieldworks, while the Macedonian allies advanced up Melissi to threaten Kleomenes' left flank.²⁵ Faced with such pressure, the Lakedaimonians turned and fled.

In summary, there seem to be good reasons for locating the battle between the Spartan and the Macedonian phalanxes in the plain on the saddle north of Melissi. The hills north and south of this saddle rise with a pronounced but even slope, and they are not broken up by ravines, so they would not interfere unduly with an orderly advance of a phalanx.²⁶ If Sellasia is an exception to Polybios' characterization of the ground suitable for a sarissa-armed phalanx, it is a minor exception which does not refute his contention that a phalanx has need of τόπων ἐπιπέδων καὶ ψιλῶν in order to be effective.²⁷ It is important to remember that *epipedos* does not exclude a gentle slope. Let us examine a few passages which illustrate this usage.

In his description of the mountain of Eryx, Polybios (1.55.8) says τοῦτου δ' ἐπ' αὐτῆς μὲν τῆς κορυφῆς. οὗσης ἐπιπέδου, κείται τὸ τῆς Ἀφροδίτης τῆς Ἑρμικίνης ἱερὸν. Whether the *koryphe epipedos* is only the land presently enclosed by the Norman castle at Erice or is the entire area occupied by the modern town,²⁸ the adjective *epipedos* cannot mean "flat" or "level," as any visitor to Erice will immediately observe.²⁹

Speaking of the situation of the town of Sinope, Polybios (4.56.6) says τὸ δὲ λοιπὸν τῆς χερρονήσου πρόκειται μὲν εἰς τὸ πέλαγος, ἔστι δ' ἐπίπεδον καὶ πανευρέφον ἐπὶ τὴν πόλιν. This plateau has a definite but gentle slope.³⁰

²³ Supra n. 14. So long a retreat would have extended over all of Provatares. Is *σταδίου* an error for *πλήθρα*?

²⁴ I would presume that the Lakedaimonian phalanx was of ordinary depth (16 men), so that its front essentially equalled that of the Macedonian phalanx.

²⁵ Plutarch, *Kleomenes* 28.5.

²⁶ Today Troules and Provatares are covered with a fairly dense scrub, which would seriously inhibit, if not make impossible, any sort of battle between ordered formations. M. Markle has suggested to me that these hills have lost a layer of topsoil, which would have supported grass or cultivated crops. The loss of topsoil due to destructive farming techniques is a well known occurrence in Greece and elsewhere.

²⁷ Polybios 18.31.5.

²⁸ See Kromayer-Veith, *AS III* (Berlin 1912) 28-29 and map 2.

²⁹ I spent two weeks in Erice in June 1980.

³⁰ See the map of D. Brauns, *Zeitschrift für allgemeine Erd-*

In describing the expedition of Philip V into Lakonia, Polybios (5.24.3) says that the Macedonians encamped on a plateau close to the Eurotas and at most two stades from the city of Sparta. Philip's campground can only be on the hills north of the Menelaion, on the east bank of the Eurotas.³¹ Polybios calls this place a χωρίον ἐπίπεδον. The ground, which is readily visible from any vantage point within the town of Sparta, rolls gently.³²

In reference to the twin *akropoleis* of Leontinoi (the modern Lentini), Polybios (7.6.3) mentions τὰ δ' ἐπίπεδα τῶν λόφων τούτων ὑπὲρ τὰς ὀφρὺς. The summits of these hills, Metapiccola and San Mauro, have a noticeable slope, although of course they are much less steep than the sides of the ridges.³³

In fact, it should be obvious that a sarissa-armed phalanx was capable of operating effectively on gently sloping ground, especially if the phalanx could charge down a mild gradient. When Philip V was deliberating whether to commit his phalanx at Kynoskephalai, he was well aware that the ground was not optimal for a sarissa-armed phalanx, yet nonetheless he felt that his phalangites could be employed with effect. When his troops charged down the hills of Kynoskephalai, they drove back the opponents who were before them. Philip's right wing was defeated by an attack in its rear, not by the ground.³⁴

I would conclude that the terrain at Sellasia is consistent with Polybios' description of the ground appropriate for a sarissa-armed phalanx, provided that we realize that *epipedos* can be used of ground rising with a gentle even slope.

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AGAIN THE SO-CALLED TOMB OF PHILIP II

One of the most spectacular archaeological discoveries in this century has been the excavation, by Professor M. Andronikos in November 1977, at Vergina-Aegae, the ancient capital (before Pella) of Mace-

kunde 2 (1857) 27-34.

³¹ A. Jochmus, *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* 27 (1857) 11-12.

³² In June 1980 I visited Sparta to inspect the ground.

³³ See the 1:25,000 map of Italy published by the Istituto Geografico Militare, Sheet 274-IV-NW. For the archaeology of Leontinoi, see *PECS* s.v.

After submitting this article I discovered that my remark on the meaning of *ἐπίπεδος* had been anticipated by Kromayer in his discussion of the battle of Lake Trasimene in *AS III* (Berlin 1912) 173-76. Kromayer adduced the αὐλῶν ἐπίπεδος between the twin akropoleis of Leontinoi (Polybios 7.6.2) as evidence that *epipedos* need not mean "level." However, comparison of the 1:25,000 map of Lentini with the description of Leontinoi in *PECS* shows that Kromayer misidentified the αὐλὸν *epipedos*, which is in fact the next valley to the east.

³⁴ Polybios 18.22.8-26.5.

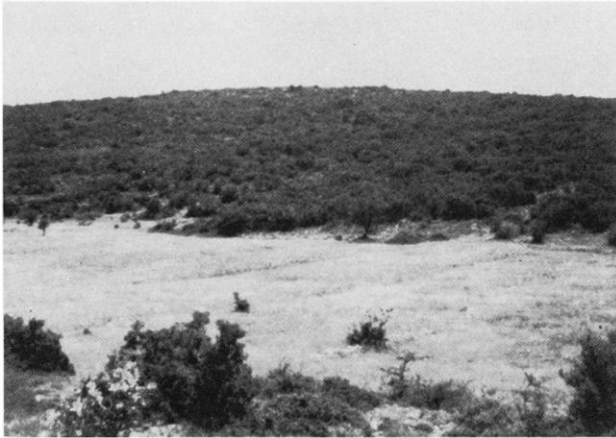


FIG. 1. Looking SE from the base of Provatares toward Melissi



FIG. 2. Looking SW from the base of Provatares toward Melissi



FIG. 3. Looking W; in the background, the twin summits of Troules

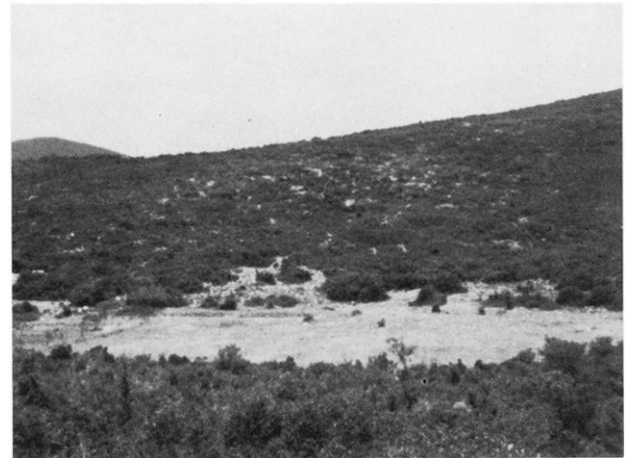


FIG. 4. Looking N from Melissi toward Provatares



FIG. 5. Looking E from the W edge of the plain

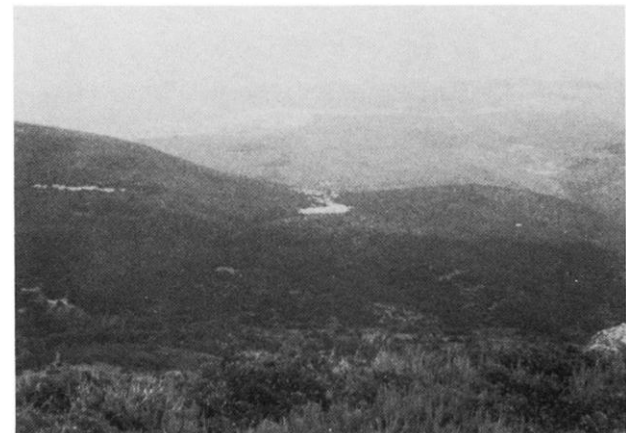


FIG. 6. Olympos, viewed from the N peak of Troules