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Terrain in Thucydidean Warfare

Holding the High Ground: A Case-Study of the Battle of Sphacteria

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This short article is an extended abstract, based on the paper which I had the privilege of presenting at the CAHA Colloquium 2017. The paper which I delivered at the Colloquium consisted of a selected portion of my wider research into 'Terrain in Thucydidean Warfare', which I am currently conducting for my MRes thesis. In this extended abstract, I have focused on the key points in my paper to construct a concise yet coherent argument. Using the Battle of Sphacteria as a case-study, I argue that holding the high ground was of paramount importance in Thucydidean warfare.

My argument undermines the orthodox model of Classical Greek warfare. This model maintains that hoplites were the predominant troop in Classical Greek armies, and that Classical Greek warfare was governed by mutually agreed conventions and unwritten rules which restricted fighting almost exclusively to a decisive pitched battle between hoplite phalanxes on an open and level plain. Victor Davis Hanson, who is a staunch advocate of orthodoxy, has asserted:

Passages in Greek literature confirm that hoplite battle was largely confined to flat plains . . . wars were decided only when two phalanxes of hoplite infantrymen met each other in daylight on level plains.¹

Similarly, Josiah Ober has stated:

Hoplites were soldiers of the open plain. Because of their highly specialized equipment and phalanx formation, hoplites could do battle properly only in a wide, clear, flat space that was free of even minor obstacles.²

The orthodox argument that fighting was restricted to flat and clear plains derives primarily from a single quote attributed by Herodotus to the Persian commander Mardonius, claiming that the Greeks sought out the most level piece of land on which

¹ Hanson 2000: 207.

² Ober 1991: 173.

to fight.³ Contrary to the orthodox model of Classical Greek warfare, my paper – using Sphacteria as a case-study and also considering other literary evidence from Thucydides – asserts that the high ground was not only prevalent but critically important.

Thucydides' account of the Battle of Sphacteria, recorded in his *The Peloponnesian War*, is a fascinating narrative.⁴ Occurring in 425 BC, on a small island in the south-west Peloponnese, this battle was dictated by the high ground. Thucydides mentions the high ground three times in his narrative, and each time it reflects the tide of the battle.⁵ First, the Athenian light-infantry land on the island and secure the high ground, from where they relentlessly harass the Spartans.⁶ Second, the Spartans retreat up to the high ground, and then are able to successfully repel the Athenian attacks.⁷ And third, a small contingent of Athenians covertly climbs on to the high ground behind the Spartans and surprise them, causing them to despair.⁸ In each of these three cases, whoever holds the high ground has the upper hand (pun intended).

Holding the high ground is the most consistently important factor in Thucydides' account of the Battle of Sphacteria, but there were other factors that affected the development and outcome of the battle. The Athenians vastly outnumbered the Spartans and this was surely a factor, but Thucydides' omission of the significance of this numerical disparity – particularly in such a detailed narrative – indicates that it was not an important factor.⁹ The Athenians' numerical superiority in light-infantry specifically is alluded to by Thucydides, and it was a considerable factor, but the significance of this factor was controlled by the high ground.¹⁰ There were also other factors that had temporary effects on the battle. For example, the rough ground

³ Herodotus VII.9b.1.

⁴ Thucydides IV.27-41.

⁵ For Thucydides and topography, see Funke and Haake (2006).

⁶ Thucydides IV.32.2; Wilson 1979: 113.

⁷ Thucydides IV.35.4; Gomme 1956: 476.

⁸ Thucydides IV.36.2; Wilson 1979: 117-123; Hornblower 1996: 191-192.

⁹ The Athenians had 800 hoplites, 800 archers, 800 peltasts, an unspecified number of Messenians, and the crews from seventy triremes. The Spartans had 420 hoplites, who would have also been accompanied by some Helots (Thucydides IV.31ff.; see also Wilson 1979: 104-106).

¹⁰ See Gomme 1956: 474-475.

aided the mobility and hence the prowess of the Athenian light-infantry early in the battle.¹¹ The element of surprise, in the Athenians' initial assault and in the final attack, was a factor.¹² And the confusion caused by the uproar and by the clouds of dust and ash was a factor that prompted the Spartans to retreat.¹³ All these factors, however, only affected limited parts of the battle. The fact remains that the only consistently important factor, and the only factor which corresponds precisely to the changing tide of the battle, was holding the high ground.

The paramount importance of holding the high ground, which is evident in Thucydides' battle-narrative for Sphacteria, can also be identified elsewhere in *The Peloponnesian War*. One interesting example involves Demosthenes, who was the Athenian commander at Sphacteria. Prior to Sphacteria, Demosthenes was campaigning in Aetolia, where he was on the receiving end of an attack by light-infantry from the high ground.¹⁴ In his account of the Battle of Sphacteria, Thucydides states that Demosthenes had learnt about fighting in woodland from his experiences in this campaign,¹⁵ although I would suggest that he might have learnt more about the importance of holding the high ground. There are also three recorded examples of armies choosing the leave the relative safety of a fortified city and instead move onto the high ground and confront the enemy there.¹⁶ This evident preference for facing an enemy whilst holding the high ground, rather than whilst defending a walled city, is a testament to the importance of holding the high ground. The final example worth considering is the Battle of Mantinea, or more specifically the prelude to the Battle of Mantinea. The Spartan commander, King Agis, leads his army towards the Argives, who are holding a strong position on the high ground. One of the Spartan veterans points out the folly of assaulting such a strong position, and so King Agis withdraws his army.¹⁷ Again, this example indicates the importance of holding the high ground.

¹¹ Thucydides IV.33.2.

¹² Thucydides IV.32.1, IV.36.2.

¹³ Thucydides IV.34.2; Hornblower 1996: 190-191.

¹⁴ Thucydides III.97.3; *see also* Funke and Haake 2006: 375-376.

¹⁵ Thucydides IV.30.1.

¹⁶ Thucydides IV.57.2, IV.129.2-3, IV.131.1.

¹⁷ Thucydides V.65.

At the Colloquium, I concluded my paper by attempting to answer the question of *why* holding the high ground was of paramount importance. I proposed that Thucydides' literary evidence – at Sphacteria and elsewhere – indicates that holding the high ground was a critical factor in the struggle to outmanoeuvre and outflank one's enemy, and that this was why holding the high ground was also critical. Exploring this issue further is the next stage in my research.

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