MILITARY UNREST IN THE AGE OF PHILIP
AND ALEXANDER OF MACEDON:
DEFINING THE TERMS OF DEBATE

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The armies created and employed by Philip II and Alexander III of Macedon were undeniably superior implements of conquest. Despite the military successes they enjoyed, both kings occasionally had disciplinary trouble with their soldiers, including several significant outbreaks of collective unrest. The famous incidents at the Hyphasis and Opis remain the best-known examples of such episodes. Other, smaller episodes abounded but have received limited attention from historians. Waldemar Heckel devoted much more attention to the Hyphasis mutiny in his recent work, so it is only fitting to honor him by refining the terms necessary to debate and discuss what actually occurred at the Hyphasis River in 326.

Military unrest is a topic that, until recently, seemed beyond the interests of historians of the pre-modern world. However, unrest in the military, both of individuals and collectively in groups, was a problem with which every officer had to contend at some point. Incidents large and small occurred in every army. While limited primary sources have been an impediment to studies of ancient military unrest, an even greater basic stumbling block has been establishing the vocabulary for discussing military unrest. This chapter addresses that dilemma by refining the terms necessary to identify and discuss military unrest, especially in regard to ancient soldiers.

Military discipline need not be defined by formal rules, or brutality, (or both), nor be maintained by the same in order to be effective. When modern readers think of discipline, it is often in terms of punishments and regulations, especially the necessity of following commands. It is important to recognize that military discipline, ancient and modern, is more complex than adherence to orders or punishment for infractions; it is a means of control that includes physical, mental, and social components reinforced with positive as well as negative sanctions. This discipline could, as C. Julius Caesar recognized, be

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1 I am grateful to Frank L. Holt and W. Lindsay Adams for reading over drafts of this article and providing helpful comments. Any errors that remain are my own.

2 See most recently, Sekunda 2010, 446–71; and Brice 2011, 137–47.

3 Heckel 2003, 165–73. I thank the editors for inviting me to honor Waldemar in this way.

enforced effectively through willing compliance and maintaining morale in combination with clear expectations and regulations. No such laws that promoted discipline survive from Alexander's period, although Elizabeth Carney's examination of Philip's and Alexander's disciplinary practices and punishments demonstrates that there were certainly explicit expectations, and probably also regulations. Training soldiers to maintain ranks, maneuver collectively, and even remain in battle requires that they learn and are accustomed to a certain level of discipline. Military discipline is acquired and reinforced through various parts of service including training and learning how the unit works in battle, getting to know one's comrades in arms, and getting accustomed to the society of the army. That the Macedonian army under Philip II and Alexander III was generally a well-disciplined army is beyond doubt (e.g., Art. Anat. 1.11.8–9, 6.1.1–3; Polyb. Strat. 4.2.10).

Examinations of military unrest in Macedonian armies have referred to all such incidents as either 'mutiny' or something nebulous, as if mutiny was the only form of unrest. Privileging the modern term 'mutiny', or the Latin seditio, or even the Greek anakos, has hamstrung the debate. Not every incident was a mutiny. Ancient authors in all periods used an array of terms in Greek and Latin to describe varieties of military unrest and so must modern historians examining those events. Military-sociologists and modern military historians have developed a varied and useful vocabulary for treating unrest by soldiers. This vocabulary provides a level of distinction and standardization that allows differentiation of scale and significance which is currently lacking from many discussions of unrest in ancient armies.

Military unrest emerged in one of several forms including military conspiracy, mutiny, expression of grievances, and insubordination. The first two categories are the more serious manifestations of indiscipline. The other categories are not necessarily threatening in and of themselves and are, thus, not well attested in the sources, but they do reflect problems within the military and the complexities of unrest. Additionally, historians recognize that military leaders usually treated sleeping on duty and panicked flight in battle as serious forms of military unrest. Listed in roughly descending order of size and seriousness, these terms permit a more nuanced and realistic discussion of unrest in any military context, including that of the ancient world. What follows is a brief discussion of the terms 'military conspiracy', 'mutiny', 'expression of grievances', and 'insubordination'. What will become

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6 Carney 1996, 24–31. The Antigonean inscriptions recording military regulations regarding discipline and punishments are products of a later period and cannot be assumed to derive from any regulations or laws in effect in the fourth century; they may derive from earlier precedents, but to date there is no epigraphic evidence that they do; see Hatzopoulos 2001, esp. 151–67.

7 MacMullen 1984, 440–456; Phang 2008, 37–73. Although both discussions focus on the Roman army, aspects of their discussion can apply to other ancient armies including the Macedonian.


9 Kaege 1981; Rose 1982; Briche 2003, 65–76 and idem 2014. Cornells Lanniers work (1969; 2003) on strikes and mutinies is important to understanding how a mutiny can progress, but because his research is limited to modern naval mutinies some of his conclusions do not apply to incidents in ancient armies. For example, the type of mutiny/strike he called (1969) a 'promotion of interest protest' would lump together most mutinies and all expressions of grievances in ancient militaries and so is too imprecise to use effectively.

10 Discussed and defined in Briche 2003, 65–76, esp. n.203 (currently under revision for publication).


12 For discussions and historiography see Badian 2012, 434–39; and Heckel 1992, 25–33.

forms of unrest, there were other types of indiscretion that were usually non-violent. Among these 'lesser' forms of unrest, an expression of grievances was the most peaceful. These less notorious varieties were often agitated, but non-violent, in nature. Communications in which soldiers, often acting collectively, sought to protest various grievances, real and illusory, and to protect their interests.

The expression of grievances was distinct from mutiny and insubordination, even if there were only shades of difference between this type of episode and some other forms of insubordination. Like a mutiny, an expression of grievances was collective, but the latter could include both soldiers and officers, whereas a mutiny was nearly always confined to non-officers. Also, in addition to being peaceful, an expression of grievances did not include a total resistance to authority through a refusal to follow orders or engage in combat. An expression of grievances could emerge in an assembly, but was not limited to such gatherings. Such peaceful forms of unrest were important because they could be larger in breadth and scale than any other manifestation of indiscipline, and were more likely to be successful without resulting in punishment or retribution for their participants. They were important because they could be broader in breadth and scale than any other manifestation of unrest, and were less likely to be successful.

Compared with their Roman counterparts, Macedonian soldiers seem to have been less inclined to employ this peaceful form of unrest, but it did occur. The most famous Macedonian example of an expression of grievances is the unrest in Alexander's army at the Hyphasis River in 326.

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I. Insubordination

The most common type of unrest, insubordination, includes a variety of lesser crimes and misdemeanors by individuals and groups. Officers and soldiers alike could take part in all these lesser forms of unrest. Chief among these crimes were disobedience or failure to follow orders, defection, desertion, and dereliction of duty.

Disobedience could include an act of purposeful intent to commit unrest, similar to...
mutiny, but by an individual, or it could be as simple as a man leaving his post. One
could argue that in the event that an officer exercised his own initiative without intending
to commit disobedience and it turned out badly, he could be charged with a lesser crime,
but it was still considered to be insubordination. There were many possible reasons for
disobedience, including a desire to assert one's own judgment or an excess of caution, as
well as negligence or basic incompetence; in all the cases the offender made a choice of
commission or omission. Although individuals often engaged in these actions, they could
involve groups of men and units. Desertion is a form of insubordination usually conceived
of as an individual action and is more typical of soldiers than of sailors. Desertion was
certainly considered to be unrest and was treated accordingly, but it actually provided
soldiers with an alternative to more serious forms of unrest. Soldiers could walk away
from growing tensions, if they could get away unseen. Sailors, however, were stuck aboard ship
or in lands far from home and so usually had to mutiny to achieve relief from onerous
service. Defection could be by an individual or include entire units. During the Diadoch
wars entire armies occasionally defected. Since sources more readily report details of these
large-scale actions, defections dominate the record of lesser forms of unrest.

Furthermore, there were some incidents that ancient leaders treated as insubordination
even though these actions did not really involve a rational choice and action on the part
of the offender. When a man panicked in battle, it might have an impact only on the
individual or it could contribute to a larger unit panic. Although some leaders do make
a calculated decision to flee, other soldiers are not necessarily making a rational choice
to panic. Neuroscientists have now shown that military panic is in large part caused by
neurophysiological responses to perceived stimuli on the battlefield and that the way these are
manifested for one man may be different for others.22 That physiological fact does not make
panic any less of a problem for armies, but at least it explains why some men panic when
others do not. Similarly, for some men, sleeping at a post was a physiological response rather
than a choice. Regardless, they all faced the insubordination charges because their act was
contrary to good discipline and ancient commanders assumed that the men had made rational
choices. Punishment set an example, but was not going to stop a physiological response.

Examples of insubordination in the Macedonian army of Philip II and Alexander III do
survive. During his battle against Onomarchus in 353, parts of Philip's army panicked and
fled (16.35.2). Diodorus does not report the punishment, if there was any. Alexander had
some troubles but the best examples of insubordination were: the 'indisciplined company'
following Parmenio's execution (Diod. 17.81.1; Curt. 7.2.35–38; Just.12.5.4–8); the
execution of Menander in Bactria for deserting his post (Plut. Alex. 57.2); and Alexander's
punishment of malingering at the assault on Aornus in 326 (Arr. Anab. 4.29.7). Despite
the problems in our sources we do learn about enough incidents of insubordination and
about some punishments to draw some conclusions about discipline in the Macedonian
army. The importance of this unrest by soldiers lay in the potential for unexpectedly broad
consequences despite what seemed like minor insubordination.

21 Brice 2015.
22 Heidenreich and Roth 2014, forthcoming.
to them reveals why some armies were more stable and successful institutions than others. Waldemar Heckel has, in his treatments of the unrest at the Hyphasis, highlighted the importance of understanding such incidents and the men who were behind them. No military historical treatment of Philip II or Alexander III or both can be complete without a consideration of military unrest.

Bibliography

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