

# GOING IT ALONE AT GAUGAMELA

A Solo Wargamer Utilizes HAIL CAESAR and Pretends that He is Alexander the Great

By Chris Hahn

How does one fit, let alone refight, the battle of Gaugamela on a six by four-foot tabletop? The answer - both sarcastic and serious - can be supplied in just two words: very carefully.

According to E.W. Marsden, Lecturer in Ancient History in the University of Liverpool, the Persian frontage at this final clash between Alexander the Great and King Darius III totaled roughly 5,300 yards or 4,846 meters (*The Campaign of Gaugamela*, 33). Dividing this calculated distance by 72 inches yields a working ground scale of one inch of playing surface being the equivalent of 73.6 yards, which we can round up to 75 yards or 68.5 meters. While this approach does allow one to satisfy the first half of Featherstone's "law" - the one that reads: "To refight any historical battle realistically, the terrain must closely resemble both in scale and appearance the area over which the original conflict raged . . ." (*Battle Notes for Wargamers*, 10) - the figured ground scale is a bit problematic when it comes to representing the troops present. For example, Professor Marsden explains that the Greek mercenaries employed by King Darius occupied a frontage of 125 yards (33-34). At the established ground scale of one inch equals 75 yards, these hired troops would take up just 1.6 inches of tabletop. Assuming a requirement of one yard per rank, then this sixteen-rank formation would require a stand or movement tray 0.21 inches deep. The calculated frontage would have to be split, however, as Professor Marsden did his math based on a body of men 2,000 strong. (The Greek mercenaries were deployed in two units of 1,000. See Notes to Diagram II in *The Campaign of Gaugamela*.) As much as I appreciate and strive to adhere to Featherstone's "law," moving a block of miniatures on a tray measuring 0.8 inches wide by 0.21 inches deep, borders on the ridiculous.

Based on the math, the rational if also admittedly subjective answer to the original question has to be a respectfully stated "One cannot fit, and should not attempt to refight Gaugamela on a small tabletop." (To each his own, of course. In the course my Internet research on this battle, I stumbled across Nik Harwood's 2mm treatment of this epic engagement. He did not supply the dimensions of his battlefield, but I would guess that it was much smaller than 24 square feet.) If I am not going to fit - let alone refight - Gaugamela on a tabletop, then what am I going to do? Why do I feel the need, or why do I want, to refight Gaugamela anyway?



If I may answer the second question first. The idea to attempt Gaugamela developed at the end of May, 2012. I do not recall the specific moment when the decision was made, but I believe it had something to do with flipping through *Warfare in the Classical World*, seeing the diagram and caption on page 81, and saying something like, "Oh, that looks interesting. I wonder if I could do that?"

As the idea took hold, my reasons for wanting to stage the battle in miniature evolved. I wanted to learn more about the engagement. What better way to do so than by setting it up as a wargame? The second and third reasons were also of a personal nature. The school year over and having the summer off (so to speak), I thought I might engage and entertain myself by pretending to be Alexander the Great. I wondered if I could do a better job than he did on the improved plain of Gaugamela. On immediate reflection, I guess one could replace the word “reasons” with the word “goals.” As the project took shape, a fourth goal came into focus. By researching and refighting Gaugamela, I hoped to entertain at least a small percentage of the readership of the LONE WARRIOR BLOG.

Turning to the first question, the one asking what was I going to do, well . . . my first executive action was to get rid of the table and forget about the first half of Featherstone’s “law.” Freed from these reasonable constraints, I could focus completely on how best to represent the various troops and formations present at Gaugamela.

In addition to the synopsis found in *Warfare*, I made use of the Society of Ancients 2004 Battle Pack. In addition to this nine-page print out, I made arrangements to secure Professor Marsden’s book. (Relevant sections of this detailed study were copied so that I could underline, make notes in the margin, etc.) In addition to these sources, I also benefitted from the notes and orders of battle generously supplied by Mr. Stephen Phenow, the resident expert of the Armati rules forum. (In searching through the message history on this forum, I discovered that Mr. Phenow actually walked a portion of the field at Gaugamela. I confess that I am a little envious of his experience.)

These then, were the primary sources for my “research” of the engagement. They were supplemented by additional material - some good, some not so good - found on the Internet.

The second half of Featherstone’s “law” reads: “. . . and the troops accurately represent the original forces” (10). While the listed sources were extremely helpful in figuring out how many of this kind of infantry or cavalry were present and what their abilities or qualities were, they



were also conflicting and confusing on some points. For brief example, Mr. Phenow does not include the mercenary infantry under Cleander (on the Macedonian right) in his order of battle. The gentlemen of the SOA upgrade the Thracians under Sitalces on the Macedonian left to “average morale close combat troops.” They also reduce the number of these troops from 5,500 to 4,500. And Marsden explains or suggests that on both wings of the Macedonian deployment, the infantry was arranged in depth, so as to be screened by cavalry. (See pages 66 and 67, Paragraphs 3 and 4.) This specific deployment brings us, or me, back to the slippery slope of ground scale.

My interpretation of the studied material produced (after a couple of false starts, it must be admitted) what I will call acceptable orders of battle. In HAIL CAESAR terms, the Persian host consisted of 81 units, formed into 11 divisions. These formations were arranged in three battles: the left, center, and right. A similar deployment was determined for the Macedonians under the young Alexander. However, he only had 57 units under his command. These formations were organized into 8 divisions. Given these totals, it seems that a prudent course would be to offer just a sample of my completed orders of battle.

Using a “figure” to soldier scale of 1:25, I determined that 80 Companions were needed. These hard-charging cavalry were organized into five units of 16 figures. Referencing the ‘Size of Units’ Table on page 16 of HAIL CAESAR, these squadrons were ‘Standard’ units. Each unit was given the values listed for Heavy Cavalry on page 88. As for special characteristics, I rated the Companions as Drilled, Elite 4+, armed with the Xyston (Lance), as Stubborn, and as Tough Fighters. The Royal Squadron was given the additional characteristic of Valiant.

The Phalangites were organized as 60-figure units. These six “brigades” were rated as large units, so their values were slightly better than those listed on page 94 of Mr. Priestley’s rule book. These veteran pikemen were also rated as Drilled, Elite 5+, and Stubborn. Each “brigade” also enjoyed the benefits of the Phalanx +2 rule.

While certainly more numerous, the formations making up the Persian host were of a lower quality, generally. As I provided two examples for the Macedonians, the same number of examples will be provided to the formations under King Darius.

On page 43 of his analysis, Professor Marsden makes a reference to “the obviously high quality units like the Parthians, Sacae, Massagetae, and Bactrians, . . .” The gentlemen of the SOA match the numbers established by the professor, but “define” the Parthyaean cavalry as “unarmoured skirmishing horse archers of average morale. Unwilling to engage in close combat and ill equipped to do so.” In his Armati order of battle, Mr. Phenow uses a similar spelling, and allows the Persian right wing two units of Light Cavalry. These non-key units have a break point value of 2, and a fighting value of 1[0]0 +1. Going with the majority interpretation, I decided to field four units of Parthian horse archers in their own division. I modified the unit values listed on page 89 so that the Short and Long Range factor was 2 instead of 3. I also decreased their Stamina Level from 6 to 5. I gave these four “regiments” the special rules of Feigned Flight, Parthian Shot (how could I not?), and Wavering.

On the left of the Persian line, there was a mixed unit of cavalry and infantry. In his Notes on Diagram II, Professor Marsden lists the strength of this unit as 6,000. The gentlemen of the SOA divide this into 4,000 horse and 2,000 foot. The troopers are described as “javelin armed and armoured in partial armour such as linen or lamellar corselets. Also armed with other close combat weapons such as swords and axes. Poor morale, weak in close combat and limited skirmishing ability.” The poor bloody infantry are estimated as “probably mixed unarmoured missilemen using bows and slings. Unwilling to fight in close combat and ill equipped to do so. Probably in a relatively dispersed formation.” In Mr. Phenow’s order of battle, there is no Persian “division” on the left of the line.

He does list a single unit of Persian Foot in the center battle, however. These troops are rated as 5[1]1 +1, and armed with spears. He makes no mention of the cavalry component of this contingent. For my battle, I modified the SOA interpretation slightly. I deployed 3,000 cavalry and 3,000 infantry. Three units of Light Cavalry were given Clash factors of 6 and Sustained factors of 4. Their Stamina points were reduced to 5. Three other units of Light Cavalry were given the same ratings, but “penalized” with the special rule of Wavering. The three infantry units were set up as Light Infantry Archers (page 93 of HAIL CAESAR), but had their Long Range factor reduced to 2 and their Stamina level reduced to 5. In addition to Wavering, these open order infantry were rated as Levy.



At about 7:30 in the evening of June 14, 2012, I stood back and admired my work. My reconstruction of Gaugamela in miniature (ahem . . .) would never ever make the cover of *Wargames Illustrated*, or any other respectable hobby publication, but that was perfectly fine. Making the cover of a wargaming magazine was never listed as one of my goals, and was never one of the reasons for embarking on this project. At the acknowledged risk of committing the sin of Pride, I was pretty pleased with the way it turned out - this part at least! On an 80.5 square foot section of basement floor (the long sides of the crude and lower back-unfriendly battlefield measured 11.5 feet, while the short sides measured 7 feet), I had successfully replicated Diagram II from Professor Marsden’s text. On an 80.5 square foot section of basement floor, I had arranged 81 units of Persians. They waited in a massive double-line of cavalry, intending or hoping to prevent Alexander and his 57 units from repeating their historical victory, from repeating their march into history.

### **A Short Summary of the Refight**

Over six days in mid June of 2012, six game turns were completed. A seventh turn was contemplated, but on reviewing the state of the field and the state of the Persian host, it was decided to call the game. In the six turns played, Alexander had lost just five units. (Three were allied cavalry, and two were foot skirmishers.) And while there were four units on the battlefield that were shaken, not a single one of his eight divisions had been broken. In contrast, these six turns witnessed the destruction of 22 Persian units. The scythed chariots and elephants were all gone. Two-thirds of the Persian light infantry were gone. A fair number of cavalry squadrons had been put to the sword (or xyston), and consequently, to flight. Three divisions of the Persian army were retiring, having been broken by losses. Though there were only two units in this massive body of cavalry and foot that were marked as shaken, it’s fair to comment that the morale of the entire Persian host was rather shaken.

Unable to make any inroad against formed phalanxes armed with pikes or long spears, King Darius saw the sanskrit on the wall and ordered his surviving formations to withdraw from the plain.

First blood in this brief re-engage was actually drawn by the Persians. The Scythian cavalry on the left-front of the battle line scored hits against the Macedonian light cavalry screening Cleander's infantry. The Macedonian and Greek horse soon closed the distance, and melees were soon joined. Though the light lancers and Greek horse under Menidas were eventually overwhelmed by sheer numbers, the infantry of Cleander presented a wall that could not be broken. The Companions under Philotas made their presence known; two of the five squadrons engaged numerous Persian formations and put all challengers to rout. These local victories were not without cost, however, as the two squadrons of Alexander's heavy cavalry became shaken in the process. It was Philotas, though, and not Alexander, who was in the thick of the fighting and ultimate success on the Macedonian right. Bessus found his division assailed on its right, and the Persian horse on the far left of the line found itself too close to the medium infantry of Cleander. It was a scene often repeated across the field: Cavalry did not fare well against steady phalanxes armed with long spears or pikes.



On the Macedonian left, Mazaeus could not get his regiments moving quickly enough. Due to some excellent die rolling, Craterus and the anonymous commander of the supporting line of Greek medium infantry were able to march their formations across almost the entire width of the field. Attempts to slow this movement with scythed chariots and elephants proved monumentally unsuccessful. Indeed, the brigades of Coenus and Perdikkas swatted away these advances as if they were gnats. The Sakai and Parthian horse archers attempted to slow the Macedonian march, but their arrows were ineffective against the shield-bearing and bristling-with-pikes formations. The Parthians and Cappadocians were pressured by the Thessalians under Philippos. Both contingents were soon galloping in the opposite direction, much reduced in number. The short-lived success of the Armenian cavalry was countered when its parent division was broken. Again, Mazaeus was hamstrung by awful die rolls. Being on the far right of the Persian line, it was doubted that better command rolls would have allowed him to influence the action anyway. As King Darius learned, it was one thing to order subject cavalry to

charge a solid wall of sarissas, but it was quite another to make them carry out that order.

Unable to offer resistance against the arrangement of pikes, the various cavalry formations could only give ground.

With the exception of the suicidal charges of a small group of chariots and an even smaller group of elephants, not much happened in the center of the large battlefield. King Darius was essentially an observer, unwilling to commit or undecided about committing his division. If he advanced against the phalanx, then he would have the Hypaspists on his exposed left. If he remained in place, then he ran the risk of being pinned by two or three brigades of the phalanx as well as being attacked on either flank by victorious Companion or Thessalian cavalry. The combined division of Persian light infantry and cavalry to his left proved a disaster. This was exemplified late in the reflight, when elements of this division engaged the Thracians of Balacrus. Terrible dice were rolled in the melee resolution, followed by even worse dice in the morale phase. Two units of Persian light infantry evaporated, while the cavalry contingent was either held or forced to retreat. Efforts to flank the Thracian line were thwarted by the presence of Companion cavalry, held in reserve by Alexander.

### Assessment

In mid June of 2012, Alexander's victory at Gaugamela was repeated, but it was not replicated. The Companions were not led by their king (I, played a cautious Alexander, and stayed behind the front line fighting), and did not play a pivotal role in the miniature engagement. The steady advance of the phalanx and of the second line of Greeks (the third line seemed content to just stand there) was the decisive factor, even if its brigades never truly came to grips with the enemy. The Persian king was never under any substantial threat. His assembled host, while defeated, was not destroyed. It seems that cavalry, especially the average type commanded by average leaders, does not pose a serious threat against formed phalanxes carrying long spears or even longer pikes. At the same time, it is rather difficult to engage cavalry in close combat by maneuvering phalanxes.



The subtitle of this report and the brief account of the researched wargame suggest, I admit, an Alexandrian bias. I did try to play the Persians as best I could, however. I stuck to the history, adopting the strategy as reported by Professor Marsden on page 44 of his analysis. My attempt to envelop the Macedonian flanks proved completely unsuccessful. The dice, or gods of the dice, were against me. Fortune, or perhaps just simple luck, seemed to favor Alexander as completely. Which struck me as a bit odd, as I did not follow Alexander's battle plan in the reflight. I was conservative with the Companions and with committing myself to actual combat. I was less conservative with the phalanx and its supporting as well as flanking formations, but even here, I was not able to engage the enemy. I was only able to push them back, to force the multiple masses of cavalry to yield.

In this specific sense, the wargame was perhaps more frustrating than fun. Where and when combat was joined, I often found myself growing slightly frustrated by the numbers of dice required, the number of rolls required, and the number of times I had to consult this or that page of the rules to make sure I was on track. While I appreciate the give and take of the process, to say nothing of the advantage throwing a leader into the melee can have, I can also appreciate that this process can become a bit cumbersome for the solo player. Perhaps Gaugamela is a contest more suited for competitive play? Along that same line, perhaps HAIL CAESAR is less suited to for solo play?

On reflection, I found that I was more entertained by and more engaged during the preparation of the wargame than in its play. This discovery was, to say the least, a bit disconcerting, as I thought that entertainment and engagement should be split equally between preparation and play. I hope that it is a temporary condition, a product of the choice of historic engagement and selection of miniature rules as opposed to something else more serious. Sufficed to say, I think I will have to be more careful and perhaps even more cautious with regard to my next solo wargaming project.

On review, I can honestly state that I did learn quite a bit more about Gaugamela. I also learned quite a bit more about the forces and personalities involved. To be certain, there is subjectivity and interpretation involved when it comes to studying the historical sources, or works of reference based on the historical sources. I think, in large part, I got Gaugamela right. This is not to suggest that my representation was perfect, however. It is only to remark that, based on the sources and rules used, I believe I was able to put together a pretty good refight of the third and final contest between Alexander the Great and King Darius III. As to whether or not I entertained the reader with this report, well . . . I can only hope. I can not, I dare not assume.