

## 11.4. Xenophon / The Battle of Leuctra

In 371 BCE at Leuctra, in Boeotia, on the road from Plataea to Thespieae, the Thebans met and defeated the Spartans. The latter never recovered from the blow this disaster gave to their prestige. The credit for the victory falls to the Theban general Epaminondas, though he is not named by the historian Xenophon (Hellenica, c. 360 BCE), who—as a warm admirer of the Spartans—was not anxious to glorify their most formidable enemy.

Xen. Hell. 6.4. Source: Xenophon. *The Works of Xenophon*. Trans. H. G. Dakyns, Macmillan and Co., 1897

When the Spartan king [*Cleombrotus*] observed that the Thebans, so far from giving autonomy to the Boeotian city states [as demanded], were not even disbanding their army and had clearly the purpose of fighting a general engagement, he felt justified in marching his troops into Boeotia [*from Phocis where he had been*]. The point of ingress which he adopted was not that which the Thebans expected from Phocis, and where they were keeping a guard at a defile, but marching through Thisbae, by a hilly and unsuspected route, he arrived before Creusis, taking that fortress and twelve Theban war ships to boot. After this, he advanced from the seaboard, and encamped in Leuctra in Thesopian territory. The Thebans encamped on a rising ground immediately opposite at no great distance, and were supported by no allies, save their [*fellow*] Boeotians.

At this juncture the friends of Cleombrotus came to him and urged upon him strong reasons for delivering battle. “If you let the Thebans escape without fighting,” they said, “you will run great risks of suffering the extreme penalty at the hands of the state....In times past you have missed doing anything notable, and let good chances slip. If you have any care for yourself, or any attachment to your fatherland, march you must against the enemy.” Thus spoke his friends, and his enemies remarked, “Now our fine fellow will show whether he is really so partial to the Thebans as is alleged.”

With these words ringing in his ears, Cleombrotus felt driven to join battle. On their side the Theban leaders calculated that if they did not fight, their provincial cities would hold aloof from them, and Thebes itself would be besieged; while if the populace of Thebes failed to get provisions there was a good chance the city itself would turn against [*its own leaders*]; and seeing that many of them had already tasted the bitterness of exile, they concluded it were better to die on the battlefield than renew the exile’s life. Besides this, they were somewhat encouraged by an oracle, predicting that “the Lacedaemonians would be defeated on the spot where stood the monument of the maidens,”—who, as the story goes, being outraged by certain Lacedaemonians, had slain themselves. This sepulchral monument the Thebans decked with ornaments before the battle. Furthermore, tidings were brought from the city that all the temples had opened of their own accord; and the priestesses asserted that the gods foretold victory. Cleombrotus held his last council “whether to fight or not” after the morning meal. In the heat of noon a little wine goes a long way; and people said it took a somewhat provocative effect upon their spirits.

Both sides were now arming, and there were unmistakable signs of approaching battle, when, as the first incident, there issued from the Boeotian lines a long train bent on departure—they were furnishers of the market, a detachment of baggage bearers and in general such people as had no hankering to join in the fight.

*[A band of the Spartan allies headed them off, and drove them back to the Boeotian camp... ]*

... The result being to make the Boeotian army more numerous and closely packed than before. The next move was as a result of the open plain between the two armies—the Lacedaemonians posted their cavalry in front of their squares of infantry, and the Thebans imitated them. Only there was this difference—the Theban horse were in a high state of training and efficiency, thanks to their war with the Orchomenians, and also their war with Thespieae; the Lacedaemonian cavalry was at its very worst just now. The horses were reared and kept by the richest citizens; but whenever the levy was called out, a trooper appeared who took the horse with any sort of arms that might be presented to him, and set off on an expedition at a moment’s notice. These troopers, too, were the least able-bodied of the men—just raw recruits simply set astride their horses, and wanting in all soldierly ambition. Such was the cavalry of either antagonist.

The heavy infantry of the Lacedaemonians, it is said, advanced by sections three abreast, allowing a total depth to the whole line of not more than twelve. The Thebans were formed in close order of not less than fifty shields deep, calculating that victory over the [*Spartan*] king’s division of his army would involve the easy conquest of the rest.

Cleombrotus had hardly begun to lead his division against the foe, when, before in fact the troops with him were aware of his advance, the cavalry had already come into collision, and that of the Lacedaemonians was speedily worsted. In their flight they became involved with their own heavy infantry; and, to make matters worse, the Theban regiments were already attacking vigorously. Still strong evidence exists for supposing that Cleombrotus and his division were, in the first instance, victorious in the battle, if we consider the fact that they could never have picked him up and brought him back alive unless his vanguard had been masters of the situation for the moment.

When, however, Deinon the polemarch, and Sphodrias, a member of the king’s council, with his son Cleonymus, had fallen, then it was that the cavalry and the polemarch’s adjutants, as they are called, with the rest, under pressure of the mass against them, began retreating. And the left wing of the Lacedaemonians, seeing the right borne down in this way, also swerved. Still, in spite of the numbers slain, and broken as they were, as soon as they had crossed the trench which protected their camp in front, they grounded arms on the spot whence they had rushed to battle. This camp, it should be borne in mind, did not lie on the level, but was pitched on a somewhat steep incline.

At this juncture there were some Lacedaemonians, who, looking upon such a disaster as intolerable, maintained that they ought to prevent the enemy from erecting a trophy, and try

to recover the dead, not under a flag of truce, but by another battle. The polemarchs, however, seeing that nearly 1000 of the total Lacedaemonian troops were slain, and seeing, too, that of the 700 regular Spartans who were on the field some 400 lay dead; aware likewise of the despondency which reigned among the allies, and the general disinclination on their part to fight longer—a frame of mind not far from positive satisfaction in some cases at what had happened—under the circumstances, I say, the polemarchs called a council of the ablest representatives of the shattered army, and deliberated on what should be done. Finally, the unanimous opinion was to pick up the dead under a flag of truce, and they sent a herald to treat for terms. The Thebans after that set up a trophy, and gave back the bodies under a truce.

After these events a messenger was dispatched to Lacedaemon with news of the calamity. He reached his destination on the last day of the *gymnopaediae* [*midsummer festival*] just when the chorus of grown men had entered the theater. The ephors heard the mournful tidings not without grief or pain, as needs they must, I take it; but for all that they did not dismiss the chorus, but allowed the contest to run out its natural course. What they did was to deliver the names of those who had fallen to their friends and families, with a word of warning to the women not to make any loud lamentation, but to bear their sorrow in silence; and the next day it was a striking spectacle to see those who had relations among the slain moving to and fro in public with bright and radiant looks, whilst of those whose friends were reported to be living, barely a man was seen, and these flitted by with lowered heads and scowling brows, as if in humiliation.