

During the campaigns of Alexander the Great against the Persians and Indians, some of his most effective, exotic and unsung troops were Thracians, a people who lived north of the Greek world in what roughly corresponds to modern Bulgaria and European Turkey. Ancient historians considered the Thracians savage, brave and unpredictable fighters: Thucydides, for example, wrote that, "like all the most bloodthirsty barbarians, they are particularly bloodthirsty when things are going all their own way." Herodotus added that, "if the Thracians could be united under a single ruler, or combine, they would be the most powerful nation on earth, and no one could cope with them."

Alexander's Thracians consisted mainly of infantry peltasts who fought in a looser formation than the close-packed ranks of the phalanx, but in a denser formation than the light troops and cavalry. The name peltast comes from the use of a crescent-shaped (but sometimes round) shield, the pelta. The combination of their loose formation, their use of the pelta, and their lack of body armour enabled the Thracians to evade the charges of more heavily equipped troops and yet have an advantage over lighter troops, such as archers and javelin-men, in hand to hand combat. According to Arrian, Thracians were also quite useful for "inflicting wounds at long range," occupying high ground, dislodging opposing troops, conducting ambushes, and pursuing broken enemy forces. They also fought more effectively in rough terrain than any other troop and could be used to screen the phalanx from opposing missile troops. These peltasts numbered around 1200 to 2000 in all.

Alexander's army also had approximately 600 noble Thracians forming a light cavalry. Some were armed with javelins, but most of them carried a lance (kontos). The latter were known as the Prodromoi or Fore-runners since they were a reconnaissance regiment. They did not carry shields and fought in multiples of the Macedonian Eile of 64 horsemen, under the command of an Eilarches. Their formation took the shape of a diamond or rhomboid, with Plagiophylakes (Plank Closers) on the wings and an Uragos (Troop Closer) on the rearward point.

The Thracian uniform for cavalry and infantry consisted of a tunic (usually black), cloak, foxskin cap, high fawnskin boots, and, in some cases, greaves. Only wealthy nobles would wear light armour, and some peltasts would wear a metal skull-cap under their foxskin cap. The tunic was sometimes patterned at the hem or all over in bright colours. The cloak was made of heavy material and was brightly decorated in zig-zag, geometrical and meander patterns in red, red-brown, pale blue, green and off-white. Many Thracians dyed their hair blue and wore tattoos, while others favoured reddish hair. Beards were worn on the chin only, or with long sideburns.

Cavalry weapons consisted of several 3½ to 5 foot long javelins, or a 12 foot long lance (kontos). Daggers and slashing swords (machaira) were secondary

weapons. The peltast's shield was made of wickerwork covered in hide, and was painted in bright colours like hoplite shields. Infantry weapons included several 3½ to 5 foot long javelins, or a 9 foot long thrusting spear, or both. The majority of soldiers would carry javelins and the rhomphaia, a 2 foot long scythed blade on a 2 foot helve. This was wielded with two hands, and was capable of cutting right through hoplite and cavalry armour. Secondary weapons consisted of daggers, swords, and even clubs. A few men would also use a bow, and once the arrow or javelin supply had been depleted stones became the the main missile weapon. All Thracian units used a dragon-shaped wind sock for a standard.

Alexander's Thracian cavalry were commanded by Agathon, and the peltasts were under Sitacles. At Granicus (334 B.C.), Issus (333 B.C.), and Gaugamela (331 B.C.), the Thracians were stationed on Alexander's left wing, either in the van of the army or as a flank guard. A unit of peltasts were stationed so as to guard the baggage camp at Gaugamela; they continually beat off the attacks of Persian noble Horse-guards and Indian cavalry, taking heavy casualties themselves. After Alexander's death, the Macedonian successor generals saw the value of the Thracians and hired them as mercenaries en masse.