The Battle against Alexander in the Far West
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Figure 1: Satellite image of Crete indicating location of Phalasarna.

Phalasarna is a Hellenistic harbor city on the far West coast of Crete (fig 1). Fortifications from the early Hellenistic period include towers, long walls with bastions, and a harbor completely enclosed by the city walls (fig 2). Systematic excavations in the port area began in 1986 and have continued to this day. One of the questions raised by the magnificent buildings that have been uncovered is how the inhabitants in what is now a sparsely inhabited corner of the island found the resources in the fourth century BC to build monuments whose scale and ambition would make them impossible to reproduce today. The answer lies in the battle between Macedonia and Persia[1].

In October and November of 333 B.C, Alexander the Great was in pursuit of the Persian army under king Darius. He had just defeated them at the battle of Issus in Asia Minor, and now headed towards the coast modern-day Lebanon to capture the Phoenician coastal towns allied with Persia, to protect the rear of his army before he turned for attack towards the East.

At the same time, a large number of Greek mercenaries who had fought with the Persians[2] retreated to the 200 ships they had anchored along the Phoenician coast. Ancient authors give their number as 8000, but the true figure is probably closer to 4000. Under the leadership of Amyntas of Macedon, Thymon of Rhodes, Aristomedes of Pherai, and Vianor of Aetolia, they made their way via Cyprus and Egypt to the Aegean. Their goal was to unite with the Spartan army and plan the next steps of their military campaign.

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[1] A similar account has been published by a collaborator, Sekunda, N., "The Date and Circumstances of the Construction of the Fortifications at Phalasarna", Horos 17-21 (2004-2009) 595-600. The primary account of modern excavations is Elpida Hadjidaki, Preliminary Report of Excavations at the Harbor of Phalasarna in West Crete, *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 92, No. 4, (Oct., 1988), pp. 463-479. See also Elpida Hadjidaki, The Roman Destruction of Phalasarna, in *Archaeology of the Roman Empire*, Nick Higham, ed., BAR International Series 940 (2001) pp. 155-160. Available at http://phalasarna.org.

2   The number seems to be excessive. It is more likely to have been 4.000 men, since the number of their ships was 200.
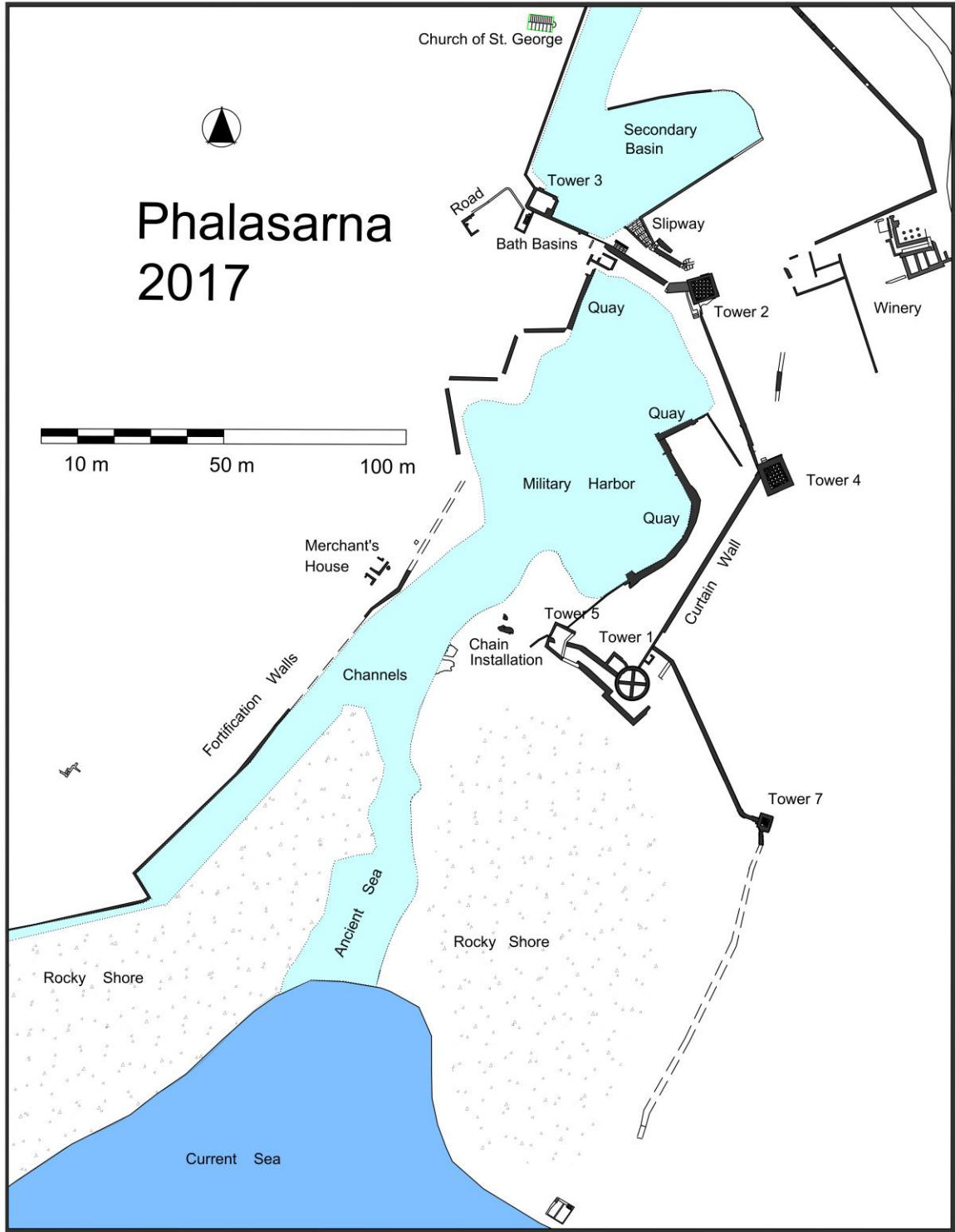
Figure 2: Map of Phalasarna Harbor

The Kings of Sparta were the last warriors of mainland Greece to stand against the Macedonian attack on the Persian empire. Alexander's request to join them in conquest met the reply that the Spartan tradition from the depths of history was to lead and not to be led[3]. Throughout the course of the Macedonian campaign in Asia Minor, the Spartans energetically sought their rapid departure and return to Macedonia.

Part of their strategy was to join forces with the powerful Persian navy manned by Phoenician sailors and bring the war to sea, reconquering the Aegean, and threatening Macedonia: "it was simply the traditional Persian strategy, using Phoenician sea-power, Greek allies, and liberal subsidies in gold. [4]"

Accordingly, King Agis III of Sparta rushed to the headquarters of the Persian fleet at anchor in Sifnos with 100 ships, and asked for financial support. The Persians took for granted naval supremacy-- Persians were "masters of the sea"--and the bulk of their fleet consisted of the Phoenicians from the Syro-Palestinian coast, who were some of the greatest seafarers of antiquity. The Persian fleet also included a large number of Greek Cypriots and Greek mercenaries. Sparta's hopes were not disappointed. The Persian admirals Pharnabazus and Aftofradatis gave Agis 30 silver ingots and 10 fast triremes, capable of speeds of 6-8 knots. The triremes were low vessels rising only of 2.15 m above the sea with a shallow keel of draft only 1 meter. Their length was 37 m, width 4.8 m, and they could carry a highly trained crew of 180 skilled in rapid and coordinated maneuvers.

Figure 3: Cape Kastri, site of the acropolis of ancient Phalasarna

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3   Arrian, 2.17

4   Burn, A.R. " Notes on Alexander's Campaigns, 332-330. The Persian Counter-Offensive 333-332", *Journal of Hellenic Studies,* 72 (1952) 82

Agis sent the money and triremes to his brother Agesilaos, directing him to pay the salaries of the crews, and to sail directly to Crete to settle the affairs of the island for the benefit of Sparta[5].
The Spartan fleet of Agesilaos was already anchored at the naval base of Cape Tenaron in the Laconian Gulf, located just 90 nautical miles from the nearest point of Crete, which was the town of Phalasarna. Phalasarna had family ties and contacts with Laconia and the Phoenicians that stretched deep into the past.

The city of Phalasarna was built on a tall cape called Kastri on the Grambousa peninsula overlooking the sea, with steep cliffs on one side that provided it with strong natural defenses (fig.3) The city had a natural lagoon, and other advantages in its natural setting that made possible the rapid construction of fortresses and a naval base. The inhabitants were closely tied to the sea as merchants and sailors. In addition, they were well trained in military matters, and Cretans were particularly famed as archers. Indeed, Cretan archers played an important role in Alexander's army.

Phalasarna's geographical location made it possible to control the sea routes to and from northern Africa and the islands of the neighboring Cyclades, a fact which served perfectly the plans of the Spartans and the Persians. Furthermore, pulling Crete away from the control of Macedonia had additional military significance, since Cretans were among the most important mercenaries working for Alexander. All of these considerations must have influenced the Persian-Spartan alliance in the choice of a naval base.

The ancient historians Diodorus (17.48.2) and Curtius (4.1.40) confirm that Agis, assisted by mercenaries from Issus and Persian gold sailed to Crete, which he acquired for the benefit of Persia and Sparta. Modern historians including Burn and Bosworth, among others, agree that these plans of the Persian/Spartan alliance were an important part of the attempt to counter Alexander, since the Persians had superiority at sea[6], while on land they were at the mercy of the Macedonian phalanges.

Thus it is most likely that work on the fortifications and widening the harbor of Phalasarna began in earnest in November of 333 BC, supported by the 30 silver talents and 10 triremes sent by the Persians, bringing into existence a naval base to support Persian and Spartan aims on Crete and in the Aegean. The work proceeded quickly given that winter was arriving, and the travel from the Peloponnese across the Aegean would remain difficult until March. However, it was essential that the work proceed quickly to enable control of Crete and prevent Alexander from acquiring additional archers.

How quickly could the work have been accomplished? The number of men available was large. The Phoenician and Greek crews of the 10 triremes sent by the Persians must have numbered around 2000. The 4000 Greek mercenaries who had fought for Darius and fled Issus must have made their way to Crete; those at least who survived after the murder of Amyntas in Egypt, one of their four leaders. In any event, it is entirely possible that there arrived in Phalasarna as many as 6000 men, if one includes additional forces from the Spartan navy.

The city itself had a population of up to 6000; this one can conclude from the fact that 150 years later in 172 BC it was able to send 1500 mercenaries to assist the king of Macedonia[7]. With a workforce in the thousands, assuming they were paid to work on the fortifications full time, the work could be

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5 «ἀποστέλλει παρὰ τὸν ἀδελφὸν τὸν αὑτοῦ Ἀγησίλαον ἐπὶ Ταίναρον. καὶ παραγγέλλειν ἐκέλευσεν Ἀγησιλάῳ, διδόντα τοῖς ναύταις ἐντελῆ τὸν μισθὸν πλεῖν τὴν ταχίστην ἐπὶ Κρήτης, ὡς τὰ ἐκεῖ καταστησόμενον»
6   Burn, supra n. 3. Bosworth, A.B. "The mission of Amphoterus and the outbreak of Agis' War" *Phoenix* 29 (1975)33-43.
7   Livy, 42.51.7. It is suggested that Phalasarna had at least 2000 men 20-60 years of age. That means that there were another 2000 women and 2000 children.

completed quickly. For example, if three men could quarry and finish three stones in a day, then the stones needed for the several kilometers of walls visible today could have been readied by 500 men in as little as three months.

The Greek and Phoenician shipbuilders and engineers who worked in cooperation with the architects of Phalasarna seem to have played an important role in the design of the harbor, for what they built was a closed harbor, known as a "cothon." The cothon is an artificial basin built behind the coast, connected to the sea by an artificial channel. This is what we find at Phalasarna, and the invention of this type of harbor is attributed to the Phoenicians.

Figure 4: 4th c quay with bollards in situ.

The natural basin that had previously existed was transformed quickly into a harbor capable of sheltering at least 20 warships. Two natural fissures in the rocks were artificially carved, creating a central channel to the sea, whose mouth was probably closed with a chain. The second fissure was used to assist with the circulation of water and to avoid the rapid silting of the harbor. The carving apparent in the natural rocks at the sides of the channel is reminiscent of the technique used by Phoenicians at

Athos during the campaign of Xerxes against Greece[8]. Similar carving of channels was known at the Phoenician strongholds of Tyre, Sidon, Arados, and Mahroud[9]. Large artificial loading platforms were created from massive stone blocks, and followed the natural ancient coastline in a semi-circular arc. The docks still have bollards *in situ* with carved holes that could be used with tie ropes to secure the ships (fig. 4)The arrangement of the stonework in the walls used a technique known as *φορμηδόν και παρά μήκος,* ancient terms for a method developed in Athens.

The rocky coast was made of a soft sandstone, and provided the quarries from which all the stones were taken to produce the fortifications. The engineers created a tall defensive wall of approximately 60 meters in length to protect the southern side of the harbor from the open plain below the city of Phalasarna. They connected it with long walls that protected the acropolis and ran along the base of cape Kastri. Where the walls met they were reinforced with at least 5 towers; the result was a closed harbor, completely surrounded by defensive walls, as described by the ancient geographer Scylax[10]. All the buildings have ornate moldings and carvings, representing the pride of ancient Greek architecture (fig. 5).

Figure 5: Round tower guarding the entrance to the port of Phalasarna.

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8   Herodotus, 7.10
9   H. Frost, "Recent Observations on the Submerged Harbourworks at Tyre*", Bulletin du Museé du Beyrouth*, 24 (1971) 103-111, H. Frost, "Ancient Harbours and Anchorages in the Eastern Mediterranean", in *Marine Archaeology: a Nascent Discipline*, Manual Series, UNESCO, 1.7 (Paris 1974) 75-94, H. Frost, "The Offshore Island Harbour at Sidon and Other Phoenician Sites in the Light of New Evidence", *IJNA,* 2**(1972)** 75-94, and H. Frost, "Mediterranean Harbours and Ports of Call in the Bronze and Iron Ages", *Les Grades Escales, Transactions of the 10th Colloquium of the Commission Internationale de l' Histoire Maritime with the Société Jean Bodin*, (Brussels 1974) 35-41.
10 *Scylax,* 47.

The walls at the base of the acropolis extend over 550 meters. In places they are double, and there are bastions to support catapults and towers to house soldiers at intervals of tens of meters. They connect with the walls surrounding the harbor. A smaller artificial basin north of the main artificial harbor is also surrounded by walls, but those were added at a later date and probably were associated with dockyards or to store water.

It appears that at Phalasarna, the engineers succeeded in creating fortifications worthy of the standards set in Athens by Themistocles and later perfected by the Macedonian kings. It was possible with the assistance of money provided by Persia, the organization provided by Sparta, technology provided by Phoenicians and Cretans and the favourable physical location of Phalasarna.

The naval operations of the Spartans and Persians lasted only for a year (autumn of 333 until late summer 332 BC). During this time Alexander was preoccupied with the siege of Tyre, the Spartan-Persian alliance with a possible fleet of 160 ships recaptured the islands of the Cyclades, parts of Crete, Kos, Lesvos, Chios, Tenedos, and the cities of Miletus and the coast near Bodrum in Asia Minor. Phalasarna must have been involved in these actions, particularly the conquest of Crete.

Alexander, not for nothing called Great, had anticipated the plans to take the war to sea. «..οι *Πέρσαι......αυτοί ξύν πλείονι στόλω μεταγάγοιεν τον πόλεμον ες την Ελλάδα, Λακεδαιμονίων μεν εκ του ευθέως ημίν πολεμούντων..»* Unperturbed, he proceeded with the battle on his own terms, and besieged the Phoenician island stronghold of Tyre from land. The siege took seven months, and required Alexander's engineers to construct an artificial pier 1200 m in length from the shore to the island, built on a base of rocky fill 66 m wide, and with towers strong enough to house siege engines. Eventually the city fell, and in this way Alexander destroyed the main Phoenician base from which was supplied the Persian fleet. The Persian fleet quickly collapsed, and by the summer of 332 BC Macedonians had reconquered all the Aegean islands apart from Crete. Pharnabazus, admiral of the Persians was captured at Chios together with Greek Aristonicus of Methymna commanding 5 pirate ships (*ημιολίες ληστρικές*, Arrian,3.2-4) but escaped to Kos and from there fled to Crete. "At the end of the year [332 BC], Crete seems to have been largely in the hands of Perso-Spartan alliance," says Bosworth[11]. At the same time, pirates became increasingly active on Crete encouraged by the Persians themselves.

Finally, in June of 331 BC Alexander sent both general Amphoteros, brother of general Craterus, with at least 100 Phoenician and Cypriot ships and a portion of 30,000 silver talents to Peloponnesian sympathizers to stop enemy actions in Sparta[12]. According to Curtius, naval operations of Amphoteros in the Aegean included not only eradicating from Crete the last traces of the Perso-Spartan alliance, but also eliminating the pirates: "Amphoteros, admiral of the fleet, was sent to Crete which was occupied by the Persian and Spartan armies. He had the particular order to clear the sea of pirate ships, which had the sea at their mercy, as the two kings (Alexander and Darius) were at war.[13] "

The final event in this campaign was the major battle in Megalopolis of Messenia in April 330 BC. The armies of the Spartans under Agis met with Macedonian troops under the command of the regent Antipater. The result was the complete defeat of the Spartans, the heroic death of Agis III, as described by Curtius,[14] and ultimately the undisturbed march of Alexander to the heart of the Persian Empire.

11 Bosworth, A.B. , supra n. 6, page 33.
12 Arrian, 3.6.3 . Diodoros, 17.48.1. Curtius, 4.1.37.
13   Curtius, 4.8.15
14   Curtius, 6.1.1-16.

Figure 6: Black-glazed amphora from Phalasarna showing Alexandrian influence. 260 BC.

All of these events took place quickly, in the space of nineteen months, making it difficult to know for sure whether the harbor-works and fortifications at Phalasarna saw any use by the powers that built them. However, I find it impossible to believe that Spartans managed to occupy Crete without the convenient base at Phalasarna playing an important role.

Ancient historians make no further mention of Crete until 324 BC, when Harpalus, Alexander's friend attempted to take refuge there upon accusations of fraud (Diod. 17.108.8; 18.19.2; Curt. 10.2.3). We have no means of telling how extensive or successful Amphoteros' activities had been.

The monuments surviving at Phalasarna still attest to the presence on Crete of Spartans and Persians for about nineteen months (Nov 333- June 331 BC). Unintended consequences of Alexander's campaign had decisive effects on inhabitants of regions far away. Residents of Phalasarna suddenly found that their small city on the edge of Crete had acquired a military harbor and massive fortifications, facts that would shape the life of the city for centuries to come.

Phalasarna became a maritime power. The citizens engaged in raids and piracy; they created a colony at Antikythira[15], and outposts along the West Cretan shores. They traded and exchanged ideas with other Mediterranean ports from North Africa and Egypt to Italy and Rhodes, as attested by archaeological finds. (fig. 6) . This power is what led to the city's downfall, as Romans attacked in 69 BC to eliminate piracy in the Aegean, and destroyed Phalasarna completely, along with many other Cretan city-states.

Thus, so great was Alexander's influence that nearly forgotten efforts to stop his military advance could alter the course of history far from his battlefields. There is no example of such influence better than the city-state of Phalasarna.

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[15] Tsaravopoulos, A., "Inscription IG V 1 and the inscribed lead slingshots from the castle of Antikythira", *Horos*, 17-21 (2004-2009) 327-348. (in Greek)