

# Justified Ancients - battle of Issus 1

This is an account of a refight of the Battle of Issus on 3 June, 2007 using the Justified Ancients rules.

## Sources

The OB and terrain for the battle are based on those found at [http://www.ancientbattles.com/Issus/Issus\\_wab\\_scenario.htm](http://www.ancientbattles.com/Issus/Issus_wab_scenario.htm). For troops, I used 15mm figures based for DBM, with 3-6 bases of figures representing each unit. Most units were four bases deployed in 2 ranks, but I used a depth of 3 for the Kardakes and Persian levies. Companions and Thessalians I deployed in a wedge of 3 bases, which looked nice. I introduced a few house rules for the battle - see the appendices at the end.

## Terrain

Briefly, the battle was fought on a coastal strip of the Mediterranean, about 3 miles wide and bordered by steep hills. A river crosses the plain, and the Persians are deployed defensively on the north bank. Alexander is approaching from the south, and needs to defeat the Persians to re-establish his supply line to Greece. The river is too shallow to be a serious obstacle, but has steep banks (apart from the area nearest the sea) which have been partially fortified by the Persians. They are impassable to cavalry, except at a ford about two miles from the coast. This battle was fought on a table 5' long and 3' wide. which was big enough to give the right troop density. See the URL at the start of this article for maps.

## Order of battle

I scaled down the Persian forces, as the figures quoted in the histories look rather large - too large to sensibly fit on the battlefield. The Macedonians are still outnumbered, and should have a hard fight to reproduce Alexander's success in this battle. If you are interested, see the full OB I used at the end of this article. Each unit represents about 1000-2000 soldiers, giving a figure scale of about 1:100.

From the coast to the hills, the Persian forces are as follows:

6 units of Loose Order (LO) light cavalry (in Justified Ancients terminology), 3 units of LO heavy cavalry, 1 unit LO light infantry (missile), 2 units Close Order (CO) medium infantry (Kardakes in deep formation), 6 units CO heavy infantry phalanx (Greek mercenary hoplites), 1 unit LO light infantry (Mardian bowmen, missile) protecting the ford, 2 units CO medium infantry (Kardakes in deep formation), 2 units skirmishers. In front of this line are several additional skirmisher units. Behind the centre is Darius and a unit of LO heavy cavalry, and behind the infantry near the ford are a unit of LO medium cavalry and another of skirmish cavalry. Finally, behind the Persian lines are four large units of levies (poor, untrained CO medium infantry). The Persian left wing is commanded by Darius (commander-in-chief), and the right wing by Nabarzanes.

Against this, Alexander brought the following troops, also deployed from the coast:

2 units of LO heavy cavalry (Thessalians), 1 unit of LO heavy cavalry (Greek), 2 units of LO medium infantry (Thracians and Illyrians), 5 units of CO heavy infantry (pike), 2 units of CO heavy infantry (Hypaspists), 2 units of LO heavy cavalry (Companions), 1 unit of LO medium cavalry (Prodomi), 1 unit of LO medium infantry (Greek Peltasts). In front of the line are three units of skirmishers, and to the rear are four units of CO heavy infantry phalanx (Greek hoplites). The left wing is commanded by Parmenion, the centre by Coenus, and the right by Alexander. With three generals, and better command ratings, the Macedonians have substantially better command and control.

In the historical battle, there were some additional units engaged in skirmishing in the hills, but I have left them out to keep the size of the battle down. Historically, they had no effect on the outcome.

### **Let battle commence!**

Alexander advances along the whole line, with the Companions lining up with for the ford. Nabarzanes advances the mass of Persian cavalry near the coast, hampered by poor command and control and the fact that his best heavy cavalry is positioned towards the rear and behind the end of the infantry line. With a 3:1 numerical superiority, he has the resources to defeat Parmenion's Thessalians, if he can only bring it to bear effectively!

The Hypaspists pull ahead of the advancing Macedonian pike, and attempt to cross the river, just below the ford, led by Alexander in person. The Persian Mardian archers fail to stop the Macedonians, and are quickly overrun and destroyed. The second Hypaspists attempts to force its way across the river downstream, but is met by a resolute defence from the Persian hoplites, and is forced back across the river in disarray and with casualties. Above the ford, the Macedonian Greek peltasts also try to force a river crossing, but are driven back by sustained missile fire from skirmishers on the far bank.

At the opposite end of the line, the Persian cavalry attacks along a broad front and engages both units of Thessalians in a bloody to-and-fro struggle. One unit of Persian horse charged a unit of Illyrian peltasts, who could not withstand their charge and were pursued deep behind the Macedonian lines. Coenus brought up two units of Greek hoplites from the reserve to deal with the Persian cavalry break-through, but these were disordered by the fleeing Illyrians and then charged by the Persian cavalry before they could redress their lines. The hoplites fell into disarray and were forced back. Parmenion attempted to fill the gap in his lines with his Thracian peltasts, who charged another unit of Persian horse but were soundly repulsed. The Thracians fled and Parmenion was forced to commit his last reserve of Greek cavalry to protect the vulnerable Thracians from being ridden down.

The lead Hypaspist unit, now across the river, charged into contact with the Persian Kardakes, and broke them with little trouble - though leaving their own flanks dangerously exposed. Alexander ordered his Companions forward, and they crossed the ford and charged another unit of Kardakes on the far side, only to be driven back by a hail of javelins. A unit of Persian hoplites turned and charged onto the flank of the exposed Hypaspists, routing them utterly! Alexander barely escaped with his life, and joined the lead Companion cavalry unit at the ford. He needed to rally them quickly if he is to stop the attack from faltering. A panicked Darius ordered his cavalry reserve and levies to start moving to reinforce his right flank.

Meanwhile, the Macedonian Greek hoplites finally managed to reform their ranks, and drove the Persian cavalry back into a unit of Macedonian skirmishers - the Persians broke and the survivors fled for their lines. Parmenion's Thessalians also had good luck fighting on the coast, and had managed to rout the two far right Persian cavalry units in quick succession.

A quick summary of the situation: The Macedonians had lost one unit of Hypaspists and one of Illyrians; the Persians had lost three units of cavalry, one of archers and one of Kardakes. However, the Persians had stabilized the position at the ford, and were in a position to bring their heavy cavalry into action against the Thessalians. The battle was by no means over!

One of the Thessalian cavalry units was charged by two Persian cavalry units, and could not withstand them and fled. The Persian cavalry pursued the heavier Thessalians, and managed to stay in contact. The Thessalians would be attacked next turn in the rear, and the fight was unlikely to go in their favour! The remaining Macedonian Hypaspist unit tried to force a river crossing, and made slow headway against stiff resistance from the Greek mercenaries. The Macedonian pike started crossing the river, in preparation for an attack along the line. Alexander led the Companions in a second charge on the Persian Kardakes, only to be driven back again by a storm

of missile fire. At the far end of the line, the Macedonian Greek peltast unit managed to cross the river, only to be charged on the flank by a unit of Persian skirmishers. The peltasts were initially driven back, but then rallied and destroyed the Persian skirmishers.

Back on the beach, the fleeing Thessalians somehow managed to hold off their pursuers, while the Greek cavalry drove off the Persian cavalry unit which had been threatening the shaky Thracians. Elated with their success, they charged on into the Persian heavy cavalry, routing them in turn and causing a second shaken Persian cavalry unit to be carried away by the heavy cavalry's flight! Suddenly Parmenion was not just holding the Persians - he was threatening to chase their entire cavalry flank off the battlefield.

Meanwhile, back at the ford, the Persian hoplites charged the Macedonian Companions and drove them back to their own side of the river. With the steady Greek phalanx defending the ford, chances now looked slim for the Companions to break through, even with Alexander's personal leadership. The Macedonian peltasts which had managed to cross the river looked very exposed and vulnerable to the Persian cavalry which Darius has brought up, and so they withdrew. At the same time, the remaining Hypaspists were also driven back by the determined Greek hoplites, and were forced to discontinue their attack. The Persians had driven off the finest of the Macedonian army and their right flank looked secure behind the river.

The situation on the other end of the battlefield could not be more different, however. Parmenion's Thessalians seemed unstoppable, driving back and breaking the remaining units of Nabarzanes' cavalry. Darius ordered his cavalry reserve and levies to move to reinforce his right wing, but the troops had little space to manoeuvre and were slow to respond to their new orders. With no reserves to commit, Darius watched helplessly as the Thessalians surged across the river and charged into the flank of the Kardakes protecting the river bank.

The Kardakes held off the initial charge, and even managed to turn and face their attackers. The Thessalians could make no further progress against the Kardakes, but the left-most unit of the Macedonian phalanx was now able to cross the river unopposed, and charged into the flank of the Kardakes, breaking their morale. Seeing his infantry line crumbling, and fearful of having his retreat cut off by the Unengaged Thessalians, Darius fled the battlefield, ending the battle in a decisive Macedonian victory!

## **Lessons learned**

Deep formations of LO cavalry are very fragile - every 'flee' result seemed to cause one or more depletions in the rear ranks. If I played it again I would try leaving a larger gap between the Persian cavalry front rank and rear rank, but this would make it hard to get the troops into action at all.

LO infantry is very vulnerable to charging cavalry, and putting skirmishers in front doesn't help. Of course, if you make your missile fire roll, the cavalry fail to charge home and have to take a turn to recover (and lose their fatigue marker) before they can charge again. During this time they are vulnerable to a counter-attack from your cavalry.

Skirmishers really didn't do very much except get in the way, particularly for other javelin-armed foot. They work better in front of non-missile-armed phalanxes.

It is really frustrating (and probably realistic) when your troops won't do what you want them to! Several times I had heavy cavalry in an excellent position to charge, but the troops failed their order roll and just sat there, waiting for the enemy to redeploy.

Having to roll a dice for every unit to move seemed like it would be a big overhead, but it really doesn't take long. It would be easy to add rules for "group moves" if you wanted to allow formations to move together. I would certainly allow supporting units to move together on a single die roll, though that's not in the rules.

The house rules for sub-generals worked OK. Without them, making order checks would have been a lot harder for both sides, and the battle would probably have dragged, especially by the beach 18”+ from both generals).

Some of the unit classifications need tweaking. The Mardian archers should be SK light infantry missile. Most of the skirmishers should be missile too (I didn’t realize SK could be Missile at the time). I’d probably give the Persians less cavalry on their right but make some of it into deep formations.

## Conclusion

The mechanics work surprisingly well and give believable results with little record-keeping. The rules are easy to learn but require careful reading to pick up some of the nuances (such as effects of interpenetration and disorder). They are easy rules to customize and seem flexible enough to represent most of the troops in this era. I look forward to trying them again for some of the other battles of this period.

## Appendix 1: House rules

1. Heavy infantry move 2” rather than 1”, but do not get an extra 1” for charging or fleeing.
2. The “general’s unit” combat bonus is not restricted to CO troops (this is a misprint in the rules).
3. Cavalry who are charged from more than 2” away and within 45 degrees of their facing and are not fatigued may attempt to respond with a **counter-charge**. To counter-charge, the defender must pass an order check of 3+. If successful, the defending cavalry is moved forward 1” towards the charging unit (wheeling if necessary) and becomes fatigued before the charging unit moves into contact. Both units count as charging in the first round of melee. The defender may not fire missile weapons or javelins if it attempts to counter-charge, whether or not it is successful.
4. Armies in larger battles may include sub-generals. These function as a general in the Justified Ancients rules, except that:
  - Their command rating may not exceed that of the commander
  - They do not provide any bonus in combat

## Appendix 2: Scenario rules

1. The river is treated as follows:
  - From the sea to the Greek hoplites - no obstacle
  - from the start of the Greek kardakes to the start of the higher hills (apart from the ford) - steep and partially barricaded on the Persian side. Horse troops cannot attack from the river to the Persian bank, and it takes them half a move to leave the river on the Persian bank. CO infantry in the river are disordered. Any troops attacking from the river to the Persian bank may not claim charge advantage.
  - At the ford - wide enough for only one unit to cross. CO units entering the ford are disordered. No combat effects.
  - In the higher hills - impassable to any troops except foot skirmishers. Takes a full move to enter or exit river on either bank. Troops attacking from the river cannot claim charge advantage.
2. Macedonian Hypaspists are treated as LO troops when moving. In difficult going, they are not disorganized and fight as CO but lose their phalanx bonuses.
3. The higher hills are difficult terrain. The lower hills are clear terrain.

4. Darius may not join a Persian unit. If any Macedonian unit gets within 12" of Darius with no directly intervening Persian unit, Darius immediately flees the battlefield and the battle ends with a Macedonian victory. If Alexander is killed, the result is a Persian victory.

### **Appendix 3: Order of Battle**

Unit identification numbers refer to the map and Order of Battle at [http://www.ancientbattles.com/Issus/Issus\\_wab\\_scenario.htm](http://www.ancientbattles.com/Issus/Issus_wab_scenario.htm).

#### **Persian Army**

1. LO light cavalry, trained (2 units)
2. LO light cavalry, trained (2 units)
3. LO light cavalry, trained (2 units)
4. LO heavy cavalry, trained
5. LO heavy cavalry, trained (2 units)
6. LO heavy cavalry, trained
7. LO medium cavalry, trained
8. SK light cavalry, javelin, trained
9. CO medium infantry, javelin, trained
10. CO medium infantry, javelin, trained
11. CO heavy infantry, phalanx, trained
12. CO heavy infantry, phalanx, trained
13. CO heavy infantry, phalanx, trained
14. CO heavy infantry, phalanx, trained
15. CO heavy infantry, phalanx, trained
16. CO medium infantry, javelin, trained
17. CO medium infantry, javelin, trained
18. SK light infantry
19. LO light infantry, missile
20. SK light infantry
21. SK light infantry
22. LO light infantry, missile
23. SK light infantry - Excluded from the battle
24. SK light infantry - Excluded from the battle
25. SK light infantry - Excluded from the battle
26. LO light infantry, poor, untrained
27. LO light infantry, poor, untrained
28. LO light infantry, poor, untrained
29. LO light infantry, poor, untrained

A. General: Darius (-1)

B. Sub-general: Nabarzanes (-1)

#### **Macedonian Army**

1. SK light infantry, trained - Excluded from the battle
2. SK light infantry, trained - Excluded from the battle
3. SK light infantry, trained - Excluded from the battle
4. LO medium cavalry - Excluded from the battle
5. LO heavy cavalry, trained, high morale
6. LO heavy cavalry, trained, high morale
7. SK light infantry, trained
8. LO medium cavalry, trained
9. LO medium infantry, javelin, trained

10. CO medium infantry, phalanx, trained, high morale (hypaspists)
11. CO medium infantry, phalanx, trained, high morale (hypaspists)
12. CO heavy infantry, phalanx, trained
13. CO heavy infantry, phalanx, trained
14. CO heavy infantry, phalanx, trained
15. CO heavy infantry, phalanx, trained
16. CO heavy infantry, phalanx, trained
17. LO light infantry, javelins
18. SK light infantry, trained
19. LO heavy cavalry, trained
20. LO heavy cavalry, trained
21. LO heavy cavalry, trained
22. CO heavy infantry, phalanx, trained
23. CO heavy infantry, phalanx, trained
24. CO heavy infantry, phalanx, trained (2 units)
25. CO heavy infantry, phalanx, trained
26. LO light cavalry

A. General: Alexander (+2)

B. Sub-general: Parmenion (0)

C: Sub-general: Coenus (0)