



Historical Association
The voice for history

Write your own Historical Fiction 2022

The Sacred Band of Thebes

by Jemima Freeman

The sun beats down on the arid, pale dust of the plain, pulsing out its heat waves to the pounding of the war drums. The air simmers with the metallic stench of iron, heady with anticipation of the blood yet to be spilled. I lick the sweat from my lips and gaze forwards.

In the distance, the Spartan army holds its position as still and strong as if it were a natural formation, the only sign of animation being the fluttering of their hair and tunics in the breeze. It appears more like one, monstrous apparition than a collection of soldiers, sneering down and asking: “What are these Thebans thinking, that they challenge the might of Lacedaemon? They, a disgraced city state, to oppose the greatest military force in Hellas?”

All of a sudden, the signal is given – from which side, I have no idea – and we charge. The world becomes a haze of red as we approach the wall of bright, painted Spartan shields. Instinctively, I hold my own shield up and feel the impact of a spear that judders my whole arm. Breaking the spear point against the ground, I keep running.

Within seconds, the melee has overwhelmed me, but I feel a strange sense of calm, my heartbeat echoing within my ears. I grip my sword tighter, let the carnal part of me take over, honed from years of training. To the next Spartan that approaches me, I am wildfire incarnate, swift, destructive, swinging my sword into his throat as I scream the cry of Ares. Another, and another, I send to Hades while blood rises around me and the screech of metal rings in my ears.

Like a Maenad in a Bacchic frenzy, I am scarcely aware of what I have done until, panting, the dust leaves my eyes and I see the mass of bodies strewn in my wake. The rest of the Spartans are fleeing. Others rush at me – but, no, these are not Spartans, they are my own comrades, slapping me on the back, lifting me in the air, shouting my name with elation!

“Nikos, you broke through the Spartan phalanx!”

“You killed some of their strongest fighters!”

“Nikos, you are the saviour of Thebes!”

“Nikos!”

“Nikos!”

“Nikos.”

“Nikos.”

“*Nikos!*”

I startle upright to the low rumble of laughter around me. As my senses flare up, the smell hits me like a physical blow: a pungent, acrid miasma of male bodies packed together in a confined space, overlaid with the musky waft of leather and urine from the tanned animal hides that make up our tent. Eyes watering, I blink and wait for my nose to become accustomed to the smell once more.

Sunlight trickles in through the dark skins hanging over the tent entrance. Its thin rays glint off piles of armour and weapons, stored inside with us in case we are attacked by night, and dimly illuminate a scene of muscular, olive-skinned men in various stages of dress and wakefulness.

The source of my own awakening lies beside me, directly beside me, in fact, as I turn my head and find his eyes glaring inches away.

“Move your leg,” Leocrates growls through gritted teeth.

I look down.

Oh.

In my unconscious movement, I have flung my leg on top of his, where he was recently skewered by an arrow in a raid. No wonder his voice sounded strained; he must be in immense pain. Hastily, I remove my leg from his, and he breathes a sigh of relief.

“Why did you not just push me off?” I ask, sitting up.

After a moment, he flexes his leg, then sits up in turn. “You were putting pressure on the wound,” he explains, more with weariness than genuine resentment, “so I could not move you without causing more pain for myself.”

“Ah,” I grimace apologetically before helping him up. For a moment, we stand before each other in nothing but our loincloths, before the urgent cry of a war trumpet outside breaks our reverie, transforming the mood of the whole tent into one of quiet urgency.

The Spartans are coming. Perhaps even now, as we pack up our equipment, their vast force is marching across Hellas towards Thebes, led by the feared general Cleombrotus. There is no time to lose.

Swiftly, I don my chiton and sandals, before picking up my armour and weapon. As I tighten the straps on my breastplate, I run my fingers over the roaring lion engraved on the shoulder, feeling, as I always do, a warm swell of satisfaction when I remember the day Leocrates presented it to me.

I had been coming home from a day in the fields and Leocrates had been waiting outside my father’s house. Back then, he was one of several older men trying to win me over, but from the day he first invited me to one of his symposiums, it was clear my father approved of him the most, and my affection soon followed suit. He was wealthy, influential, part of the aristocracy, renowned for his courage and diplomacy in bringing errant towns back under Theban control. It was flattering to know that I had gained his attention – and who better to mentor me through my manhood?

He stood outside the portico with two slaves behind him, one carrying a shining breastplate, the other leading a dark ox which looked richer than my family’s earnings in a year. As I drew level, I saw that he himself was carrying a delicate drinking cup engraved with the same lion insignia, which he held out to me and spoke:

“Nikos, son of Aetion, just as Ganymede was Zeus’ cup-bearer, who served him and loved him, will you become mine, to serve and love me? I offer you in return these gifts, and the promise to guide and aid you whenever you are in need.”

With joy whirling around my heart, I had grinned and accepted his proposal. Then, Leocrates stepped forward, grasped my chin, and pulled me towards him, closing his mouth over mine in a kiss. Instantly, the cicadas’ chorus and ox’s huffing and the distant cries from the town cut off, leaving only perfect silence and the soft scrape of his stubble on my cheek. Sparks shot through my body as if I had just drunk undiluted wine from an amphora – both Aphrodite and Dionysus, it seemed, shared splinters of their father’s all-consuming lightning. I softened like wax beneath his warm fingers.

When we parted, I could see my own hungry fire reflected in his eyes, but only for a moment, before he stepped away again and gestured to the slave to bring forward the breastplate.

“Nikos,” he said, his tone turning grave, “before you agree to this, there is something else you must know. You have yet to serve in the army, correct?”

“Yes,” I replied, “but I have learned from my father, and I am enrolled for the next war we fight.”

Leocrates nodded. “You may have heard of Gorgidas, then. He is one of our leading generals, who was recently engaged trying to regain control of some of the pro-Spartan *poleis* in our territory, a campaign which I joined him on. Though we were successful, there remain more *poleis* of this kind throughout Boeotia, and Gorgidas believes that, if we are truly to eradicate Spartan influence, we will need a much stronger army than we have now. Also, Athens and Sparta have already tried to subdue us with a peace treaty, and our refusal is bound to anger them.

“As a result, Gorgidas is raising a band of soldiers supplied entirely of men and their beloveds. This legion is to be trained far more thoroughly than average hoplites and stationed as a standing army in Cadmea. I wish to join-” He gazed directly into my eyes. “- and I wish to have you fight by my side. That is the condition for accepting this breastplate. Will you join me?”

Of course, I had said yes, though when he kissed me on that hazy spring afternoon, I had not quite imagined that I would still be by his side seven years later. A different general leads us now, since Gorgidas died, but Pelopidas is no less harsh as we stumble out of the tent and fall into formation with the rest of the men – 300 in total, 150 couples.

“Listen up!” He yells, “The Lacedaemonians are encamped just over 5 stades away, near the village of Leuctra. We will make a sacrifice, then we will join the main army to stage our attack. Remember that Epamonindas is the commander of the whole army and we will follow his directions, but when we are in the battle itself, your orders come from me and me alone. Now, let us sacrifice, and then let us win glory for Thebes!”

“Glory for Thebes!” The cry echoes after him from all sides.

Our priest comes forth leading two heifers, an opulent offering for the campaign. Their soft, pale coats look stark against the barren landscape, starker still when the priest slits their necks and their blood gushes down, bright crimson gushing onto the amber dust.

“Indestructible Ares, hear our prayers!” The priest calls, “Grant favour to our soldiers in the battle to come, so that we may achieve noble glory! And Cadmus, founder of our city, may you bestow on us the passion to defend the foundations you built so long ago! Give us strength like that of Hercules, born in Thebes, to undertake this labour of our own, fighting the Lacedaemonian army!”

With his final words, we set about making fires to cook the meat. Leocrates and I both assist fetching firewood. I am walking back to the camp, with him behind me, when I suddenly hear a series of thuds and Leocrates cursing.

Instantly, I spin round. He is on one knee cradling his wounded leg, the logs having spilled from his arms.

“Leocrates! What happened?” I ask him, kneeling down myself.

“Agh, just my leg, it’s nothing,” he says. I can tell he is trying to underplay the pain he is in, but his watering eyes make it clear.

“You need to see the camp doctor. Come on, he may be able to sort it before the battle.”

“No-“ Leocrates winces as he tries to stand. “I’ll be alright. I hit it on the stump back there, that is the only reason it hurts.”

I look around but I don’t see a stump.

My stomach twists in knots; I was feeling confident for the battle ahead, but what happens if I don’t have Leocrates by my side? We have trained for years together, side by side, learning the movement of each other’s bodies so well that we barely have to use words to coordinate our attack. I can fight on my own, of course, but together we are as strong as three men.

Gorgidas knew what he was doing when he created an army of lovers. Two men sharing such an intimate bond inevitably increases their virility and courage, and with this strength, our unit had been trained specially to break through battle lines and weaken the enemy’s most formidable points for the main infantry to finish off.

“Can you fight?” I murmur to him, knowing what his answer will be already.

“Yes.” He nods firmly and stands up, as if to prove the point.

I believe him. Despite my worry, my concern for his health, I believe that he will persevere through this injury to fight at my side. Or, at the very least, I believe that he is stubborn enough to fight if only so that he dies by a Spartan sword, rather than to an arrow wound.

He picks up his firewood and I pretend to ignore the way his jaw locks as his teeth grind together.

We return to camp and finish our meat in an uneasy silence. Now the morning mist has evaporated, everyone can see the mirroring pillars of smoke from Spartan fires, a grim reminder of the enemy awaiting us.

Shortly afterwards, we stand to attention as Epamonindas, riding through on horseback, organises the soldiers, but when we hear his orders, I am not alone in my mutter of surprise.

“What is he thinking?” I whisper to Leocrates, who shrugs.

Typically, each army is about twelve men deep, with their strongest fighters placed in the honoured position in the right flank of the army. Epamonindas, however, directs the strongest fighters to the left flank, and moreover arranges it *fifty* men deep, whilst the other flanks are left with only four to eight men in depth!

We turn to Pelopidas in confusion.

“Trust your commander,” he encourages us. “We will lead the infantry and break through the strong right flank of the Spartans, leaving the rest of their army vulnerable. In turn, our own central flanks have been ordered to advance more slowly, and the ones to the right even more slowly than that, so that our weaker sections will not be exposed to direct fighting until we have destroyed the most powerful soldiers.”

I frown. I have never fought like this before – to my knowledge, such a tactic has never even been tried before – but it is not my place to question.

In position, I run my hands once more over the lion on my breastplate and share a glance with Leocrates standing beside me. It is a glance of strength. A glance that says, ‘I will fight for you, and you will fight for me, and we will be unstoppable’.

The sun beats down on the arid, pale dust of the plain, pulsing out its heat waves to the pounding of the war drums. The air simmers with the metallic stench of iron, heady with anticipation of the blood yet to be spilled. I lick the sweat from my lips and gaze forwards.

Despite the distance, the Spartan army appears impossibly vast, with superior numbers, fighters, armour. My throat dries up as I look at it, and I can’t help but question what we are thinking, to challenge the might of Lacedaemon.

All of a sudden, the signal is given – from which side, I have no idea – and we charge. The world becomes a haze of red as we approach the wall of bright, painted Spartan shields. I keep expecting for instinct to take

over but I am terrifyingly aware of everything, the shouts and the steel and the sweat clamping down my hair and the slow run of Leocrates, who is undeniably limping but somehow keeping up with me.

Ahead of us, the Spartan army seems to swell, and I realise they are fanning out, trying to go round our side and engulf us.

“My men, with me, to the left!” I hear Pelopidas shout over the din and, though I cannot distinguish him from the fray, I follow the swerve of our section as we rush to stop the Spartans from outflanking us. We meet with a crash of metal.

Now, instinct kicks in, my arm guiding my sword and my legs pumping forward before I can even register that I have made my first kill of this battle. Leocrates and I fight as we said we would, side by side, and it is a dance of iron and power that we lead into the fray, cutting down those around us. Fighting off one opponent, I turn to see a hulking Spartan bearing down on me before I have time to raise my shield- But his strike never comes, and I see Leocrates’ sword slide out from his ribcage.

Together, we attack another enemy, and another, and another, and another, until time and faces blur and the sun wanes overhead. Exhaustion settles into my bones and I can see Leocrates’ brow is drenched with sweat, but we continue, until all of a sudden, there is no longer any resistance. I look up. I can scarcely believe the sight that greets me.

The Spartans are fleeing!

The dead lay scattered across the battlefield, but our army still stands, and the greatest military force in all of Hellas is retreating in fear of us across the plain. The undisputed power, defeated by a disgraced city state.

“We defeated the Spartans!” I exclaim, my voice hoarse. “We defeated the Spartans!” I repeat with more strength, “Leo-“

Turning to Leocrates, I halt suddenly, panic crashing over my elation in a wave.

He is collapsed in the dust behind me, leaning against the body of a dead man. His breath comes in heavy pants and his face is pale – too pale.

“Leocrates?!” I cry, “What- what is wrong? Is it your leg, is it-?” Without waiting for him to reply, I tear off the bandages around his leg and take a deep, shuddering breath.

No, no, no, no, no-

The wound is raw scarlet and swollen, oozing with pus. All the signs of infection are there. I have seen this before, seen men killed by nothing more than a scrape mistreated. And now it has come for my Leocrates.

How could I not notice? I beg myself. I was so focused on winning glory for myself that I didn't look after him properly, and now he is going to die.

"Nikos," He gasps. I fling myself beside him, pick up his head and cradle it in my lap, holding his body as it shivers with unnatural chills. His face looks like a ghouls, with his eyes and lips ringed in pink against his chalky face.

"I'm here," I whisper, tears rolling down my cheek. I open my mouth to reassure him, to tell him that it will be okay, but then I stop myself. He knew that he was going to die, I assume, before the battle started. Yet rather than choose the easy route, to flee from the fighting and rest in his last hours, he chose to honour himself and me by fighting with me. To lie to him would be to disrespect his courage.

"I'm here." I repeat.

"I want you," he stammers, "I want you to look after my wife and son. Be good to her." He smiles, his eyes glazing over.

"I will." I think of his wife – Andrea, her name is, a girl around my age. Their son was a mere infant when I last saw him. The thought that Leocrates will never see him grow up makes my heart break, but at least he has a legacy. He will live on in his heir.

"I love you," I choke, "I will always love you, for everything you have done for me."

I hold him there until I see his chest relax. I sit with his corpse as his spirit departs for Hades. All around me, cries echo round the plain, joy mingled with grief as we count our dead, others holding their beloveds in their arms. And, above it all, people shouting that we have won.

I stare at his blank face until my tears dry up and I imagine his family and mine, safe at Thebes because of his sacrifice. Only then do those hollow words begin to form meaning:

We have won.

We have won...