

SOLDIERS AND STRATEGIES

Ancient Greek Warfare

Military History

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Introduction

Most soldiers of Ancient Greece were not warriors by trade but by necessity. Mainly landowners (farmers and herders), the Hoplite, or Greek infantryman, was called to be a soldier in times of crisis...he was not a paid, permanent professional. So what was it that inspired the Greek footman to battle? More likely than not, it was the defense of his family and his land. In conflicts such as the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars, failure could mean the loss of everything the combatant held dear. Thus,

it is no surprise that the individuals who made up the armies of Ancient Greek city-states were fierce, disciplined and persistent fighting men. From the cliffs of Thermopylae to the plain of Marathon, the Greek soldiers, through deed and determination, earned their place in history.

I. Greek Soldiers

Discipline and collaboration; these were the qualities that won many battles for the Greeks. It was necessary to equip the Greek farmer both with a healthy respect for these qualities just as much as the proper attire. The requirement for service in the army was based on land ownership. Those who were landholders were also expected to protect the polis from invaders just as the city required the farmer to protect its collective honor and interests. The relationship was entirely



logical. In a hostile and dangerous classical world where there were many outside threats, the farmer depended on the city-state's army to protect his cherished soil and family. The rest of the army, besides the heavily armored landholders, consisted of tenant farmers, merchants and other employees of the wealthy who made up light auxiliary troops such as archers, peltasts and slingers. The **Olympic Games**, a peaceful contest between city-states, mirrored the importance of war and military training. There were events like running, the javelin throw and wrestling...all of which had their basis in soldiering. In fact, the "Marathon" was a long run based on the trek of Pheidippides, a young Greek soldier who ran 26 miles from the Battle of Marathon to Athens to carry a message of victory. War was a central part of Greek culture; statues of the gods were dressed in armor, philosophers like Plato and Aristotle praised the virtues of war (Socrates even fought in one), and it was a major theme in artwork on vases and temple walls. All of the aforementioned factors might explain why the Greek warrior was so dangerous: he fought because he wanted to, not because he was coerced to.

II. Arms and Armor

For a very long time in history, the Ancient Greek warriors fought in what is now known as "The Bronze Age"; Bronze was the strongest material available for armor and weapon construction. However, as the Greeks were exposed to iron weapons during their "Dark Age", they adopted this more powerful metal in the weaponry. The Greek soldier's equipment gave him a great balance of offensive and defensive power. In the hands of a well-trained and disciplined soldier, these tools made him far superior to most of the enemy adversaries from outside of Greece. Though their weapons did "pack quite a punch", it was their defenses that mainly set them apart in the world of their time.

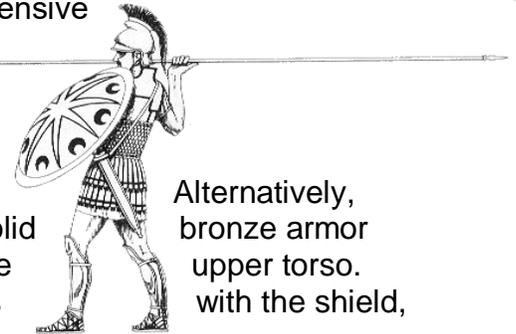
Greek armor evolved greatly from the time of the Trojan Wars to the Peloponnesian Wars. However, one distinguishing feature was standard for the citizen soldier: the **hoplon**. The hoplon was a large, round shield that was taller than half the man's height that used it and it benefited from a very sturdy construction. With a bronze face, wooden core and leather backing, it provided three layers of protection. Greek soldiers would often decorate their hoplons with paintings of faces, wild animals, mythical creatures or words, to aid in their identification and to celebrate their individual importance. The hoplon was carried in the left hand, while weapons were wielded with the right. Besides its use as a shield, the hoplon was known to be used by the Spartans as a sort of makeshift stretcher; wounded Spartan soldiers would be carried from the battle atop it. Therefore, it was a saying among Spartan wives, who also valued strength and sacrifice, "**Come back with your shield or on it!**". Since the hoplon was the key possession of every Greek soldier, these men are more commonly known as "**Hoplites**". Hoplites had other defensive equipment at their disposal including the **panoply**, helmet and greaves. The panoply was a sleeveless jacket, including a short skirt over the upper thighs, constructed of inter-woven leather strips and bronze scales.



It was the "body armor" of the Greek soldier. Some hoplites wore the cuirass, two pieces of solid bronze that connected to offer complete protection of the upper torso. Hoplites also dyed or decorated their panoply as for it was a treasured and expensive piece of equipment: and something he had to purchase himself. In fact, this was true of all of the Hoplite's battle attire and weaponry, it was paid for by the bearer. The Hoplite's defenses also included a very ornate helmet, often the of the **Corinthian style** (seen left), crested with horsehair. Rounding out the Hoplite's armor

was a pair of greaves, bronze shin pads that protected the lower leg: a favorite target of enemy swordsmen.

The Hoplite's weapons were impressive and sturdier than most enemies. Like the knights of the Middle Ages, Greek militiamen had their sword and spear specially crafted by a weaponsmith. Though each sword and spear was specially made, city-states usually issued specifications to the citizenry to provide some uniformity. The Hoplite's sword, usually the curved "**falcata**" or straight "**xiphos**", was around two to two-and-a-half feet long and was sharpened on the sides and at the tip. Therefore, it could be used for slashing or thrusting; however, given its weight and length, it was more commonly used in the former method. Hoplites were excellent swordsmen, but this was only their secondary offensive skill. The real weapon of the soldier was the spear, and it was the tool that would make the Hoplites infamous to their enemies. Around six-and-a-half feet long, the Greek "**dori**" was tipped with an iron head and also featured a bronze butt-spike at its other end. In the event that the head was snapped, the spear could be turned around and the spike became an emergency weapon. The spears were well-made and carefully crafted, but it wasn't their individual characteristics that made them so deadly, it was how the Greeks used them in massed formations that enhanced their value.



Alternatively, bronze armor upper torso with the shield,



III. The Phalanx

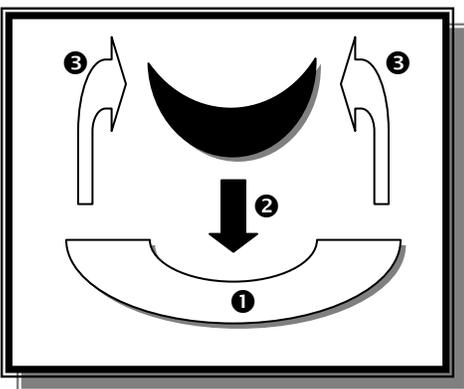
Soldiers who work alone, rather than as a team, have about as much likelihood of success as 12 football players on a field who have never played or trained together: none. The ancient Greeks were often fighting with inferior numbers against outrageously populated enemy armies. Therefore, teamwork and tactics became an important feature of the Greek army. One was taught, through constant training and practice, to have faith in the ability of the hoplite fighting beside him. The

phalanx was the most basic but most vital Greek tactical innovation. It consisted of many columns and rows of hoplites, using the collective weight of their offensive and defensive attributes. A phalanx was basically a tight square of Greek infantry with the front appearance one of overlapping shields(hoplons) and a set of bristling spears. Hoplites marched in close order, so that a hoplite's shield protected the arm of the man to his left. When a man fell, the soldier behind him would step up to his place, keeping the front rank full and impenetrable. Soldiers in the phalanx were trained to march fast and slow, and to make turns in unison, which mediated, to some extent, the bulkiness of the

phalanx. The marching order was loose during march, with greater space between Hoplites, but it tightened up and became compact during battle. However, since the soldier on your right's shield protected you, there was a tendency for phalanxes to sway in that direction during battle. Officers fought in the front rank of the phalanx, where the hoplites with the best armor fought. As a tool of warfare, the phalanx was superior in its day. Many Persians soldiers would learn the hard way that their great numbers would melt away in the face of the well-coordinated phalanx. The Romans would develop a trick or two to defeat the phalanx: but that is another story.

IV. Land Tactics

It should be realized about ancient Greek battles that communication on the battlefield was very limited. There were no wireless radios or satellite communications to coordinate movements and responses. The pot-like Corinthian helmet greatly obscured sound, and the din of metal on metal created a dominant noise that drowned out commands. Therefore, Ancient Greek generals had to rely on pre-scripting a battle plan, and hoping that maneuvers and timing were executed as directed after the engagement began. The net effect of this limited communication was the reliance on simple tactics and pre-determined strategies that could only be altered during a battle with the greatest of difficulty.

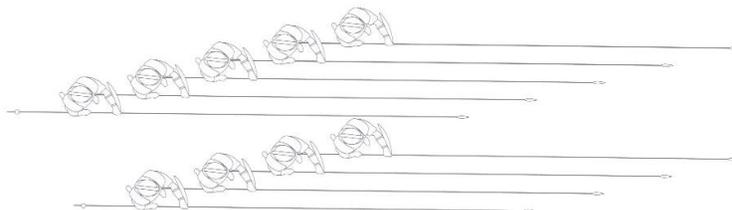
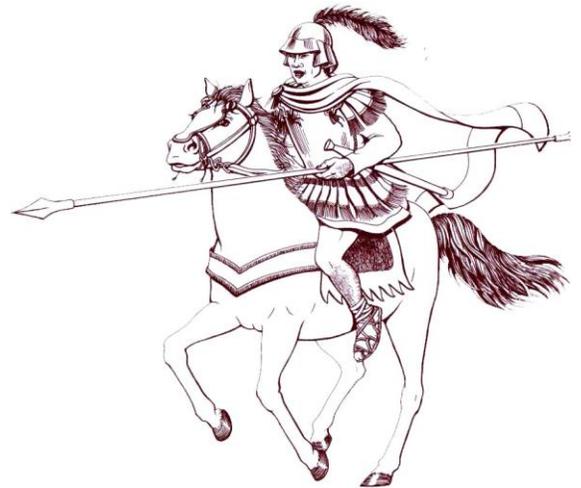


The use of the phalanx was only one aspect of Greek military tactics. Though Greek soldiers often found themselves better equipped than their adversaries(unless they were fighting each other), it was not merely their weapons and armor that gave them the edge but also their strategic thinking. Greek armies, being so heavily armed, liked the “**strategic withdrawal**” as a means to achieve victory. In a strategic withdrawal, one feigns retreat to draw the enemy into the vacuum left by a backwards movement(see left). While this is going on, the flanks are strengthened and then used like the jaws of a trap, claspng down on the sides of the enemy who has now driven into the empty space. This was the approach used by the Athenians and Plateans at the Battle of Marathon which dealt a crushing blow to the Persian invasion of Greece. Throughout most of Ancient Greek military history, there was generally little attention given to battlefield maneuver and strategy. The strong phalanx, which often bore through enemy lines, was employed without much

consideration of a general scheme while in battle; this would be left up to later innovators such as Alexander the Great.

V. Macedonian Advances

The Greek phalanx won many a battle against superior Persian numbers and other strong adversaries, yet it would fall to another force in the 4th century B.C. What could cause the seemingly invincible to fall? The answer was improvements on the Greeks' own tactics. Philip II of Macedon had studied the militaries of the Greek city-states in the South, and learned from their ways. However, he realized that to defeat them he would have to go beyond their expertise. He hired Greek mercenaries and used spies to become familiar with Greek tactics, especially the phalanx; he would improve this martial backbone. Philip's improved the phalanx by deepening its ranks from the standard eight men to sixteen. Yet, this depth would provide little advantage unless he equated such numbers into more "hitting power". Thus, he extended the length of the spear from seven feet to as long as twenty-one feet and turned it into a long **sarissa(pike)**, such that men deeper in the phalanx could use their weapons at the same moment the front ranks made contact with the enemy; when Greek phalanxes came up against Macedonian ones, they were facing two to three more spears than they offered themselves. However, the sarissa required a two-handed grip, so the hoplon was abandoned in favor of a smaller, circular shield. Thus, rather than being called hoplites, Macedonian troops were called "**phalangites**"(soldiers of the phalanx). Another improvement of Philip's was his use of cavalry. Greek forces sometimes used horsemen but rarely and in small numbers. The strongly armored Greek hoplites had proven so impervious against the light cavalry of the Persians, the disdain for such ancillary branches of the army seemed useless. However, Philip's cavalry was fast, strongly armored in its own right and could maneuver around phalanxes and attack from the weak rear and right flank. Alexander the Great perfected the use of cavalry by using even larger numbers(up to 2,000 men) and using them as shock troops: spearhead contingents to break enemy lines. His equestrian faction was so important to his battles that Alexander dubbed it his "**Companion Cavalry**". Not only did this title reflect the honored position of the cavalry in his army, it was an accurate name as Alexander often rode in the front lines of this select force, leading the charge. Alexander further enhanced the potential of the army which he inherited from his father by using more advanced tactics. Whereas most armies of the classical age simply deployed in a long line and charged, Alexander shifted his units around on the battlefield like chess pieces, using the special capabilities of each unit where they were most needed. When skirmishers were needed to disrupt an advancing enemy, they were sent forward. When phalanxes were needed to encircle the enemy, they were ordered to the flanks. When the pivotal moment arrived in a battle and the outcome seemed in doubt, Alexander plunged his Companion Cavalry at the enemy center, snapping in two like a twig. Furthermore, Alexander could count on a professional, **regular army**. Whereas Greek and Persian forces were temporarily levied farmers who had sparse experiences working together, Macedonian soldiers were full-time militiamen, and grew ever more skilled at their craft over many years in service.



1. What profession(s) did most Greek soldiers pursue in peacetime?

2. What yearly ritual in Ancient Greece was a testament to the emphasis on military prowess?

3. Why were Greek infantrymen named "Hoplites"?

4. Besides shields, what other equipment did Greek hoplites wear or use?

5. Translate the following:

panapoly:

xiphos:

falcata:

dori:
6. What were squares of Greek infantrymen called?

6. What the effect of the limited ability of officers to communicate with their troops on the Ancient Greek battlefield?
7. Explain a "strategic withdrawal"...

8. List three advances made by the Macedonians to Greek military tactics...
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
9. What were Macedonian infantrymen called?
10. Explain the difference between Greek Hoplites and the regular army of the Macedonians?