History

land warfare in ancient Greece

The famous land battles of ancient Greece were primarily collisions of heavy infantry, who met on open ground by mutual consent. Cavalry remained secondary, partly due to the mountainous Greek terrain and partly due to technical matters, such as the small size of Greek horses and the absence of stirrups. It took the tactical genius of the Macedonian king Philip II and his son Alexander the Great (mid-300s BCE) to make cavalry at least partly effective against infantry.

It is less obvious why light-armed foot soldiers were underemployed until the 400s BCE. Commanders in mountainous Greece might have been expected to develop guerrilla tactics using projectile troops—javelin men, archers, and slingers. However, for social and psychological reasons, such tactics did not arise among the major Greek states until the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE). Instead, the Greeks (a sporting people) tended to think of war as a manly and consensual contest of strength. "Whenever the Greeks declare war on one another, they go find the most smooth and level piece of ground and fight their battle there," states an observer cited by the historian Herodotus (ca. 435 BCE). In classical Greece, as in Europe of the 18th century CE, brutal warfare was conducted along certain gentlemanly guidelines.

Greek military history falls into three major phases: (1) Mycenaean and post-Mycenaean warfare, around 1600–750 BCE, (2) the age of the hoplite, or heavily armed infantryman, around 650–320 BCE; and (3) the era of the Macedonian-developed phalanx, perfected by Alexander the Great and employed by his successors. The Hellenistic Age (around 300–150 BCE) saw larger armies, commanded by absolute monarchs, battling for vast tracts of land in the eastern Mediterranean and using such innovative war "machines" as elephants. In the end, phalanx and elephant fell to the superior maneuverability of the legions of Republican Rome (100s BCE).

To understand Mycenaean warfare, modern scholars rely on such archaeological evidence as arms and armor from burial sites and artistic depictions of soldiering on surviving artwork. Also helpful if approached cautiously are the battle descriptions in Homer's Iliad (written down around 750 BCE but purporting to describe the Trojan War, fought around 1220 BCE).

Mycenaean warfare (somewhat like medieval European warfare) revolved around armored noblemen who would take the field at the head of their kinsmen and retainers. These warlords are commemorated in such Homeric heroes as Achilles and Diomedes. In battle, such champions would seek out their social equals on the enemy side, to duel it out with javelins, jabbing spears, and stabbing swords. As iron was yet unknown, the choice metal for war was bronze. The most dramatic Mycenaean armament—the body-covering shield of oxhide, stretched on a wooden frame, such as Ajax (1) carries in the Iliad—was obsolete by about 1450 BCE, replaced by wooden shields faced with bronze. Chariots were used for war—perhaps to convey champions across the plain to the fighting, or perhaps for chariot battles, on the model of contemporary Egyptian and Hittite warfare. The rough terrain of Greece does not generally lend itself to chariots, but the plains of argos and boeotia would have sufficed.

The depressed years of the Dark Age (1100–900 BCE) continued the Mycenaean pattern on an impoverished scale. War was still a job for aristocrats and their followers. Bronze armor became scarcer then, but iron—more plentiful than bronze—made its first appearance, in swords and spear points.

The emergence of the hoplite (after 700 BCE) eliminated the old, individualistic approach to war. Henceforth battles were decided not by dueling champions but by large concentrations of armored hoplites, arrayed in tight rows, who fought by pushing with their spears and shields in an organized effort to break the enemy formation. The hoplite era includes the most famous conflicts of mainland Greece: the Persian Wars and Peloponnesian Wars (400s BCE), and the wars of Sparta and Thebes (300s BCE).

The precise origins of hoplite warfare are unclear. It is known that in 669 BCE the army of Argos decisively defeated a Spartan force at Hysiae in the eastern Peloponese; evidence suggests that the Argives at this battle were the first Greeks to use large-scale hoplite tactics, against Spartans who were still fighting in the disorganized old manner.

The hoplite's name came from his new-style shield, the hoplon, made of bronze-faced wood. The hoplon was round, wide (about three feet in diameter), heavy (about 16 pounds), and deeply concave; in battle it enclosed the soldier's torso while extending toward his neighbor on the left. Other hoplite armament included a bronze helmet and breastplate, a six- to
eight-foot-long jabbing spear, and a stabbing or slashing sword of forged iron, for use after the spear had broken. A hoplite's armor, weighing about 60 pounds, would not be worn on the march, but would be carried in wagons or by personal slaves or servants.

One difference between the hoplite and previous Greek warriors was that the hoplite was nearly helpless on his own. He remained an effective fighter so long as he stayed grouped with his fellows. Should soldiers leave the battle formation—whether by turning and fleeing from the rear ranks or by breaking ranks in front to chase an enemy—the whole structure was endangered. This obligation to stand fast in battle shaped the classical Greek values of steadfastness, calmness in danger, and the ability to endure fatigue and pain.

Another difference between the hoplite and the armored warrior of prior centuries was that the hoplite was probably not an aristocrat. (Aristocrats comprised the cavalry at this time.) The hoplite was a middle-class citizen, levied in defense of his city-state and fighting against analogous citizens in the enemy army. Cities henceforth relied for their defense on large numbers of uniformly equipped citizens, not on a few noble heroes; the coming of the hoplite thus saw the democratization of warfare.

Ancient writers use the word othismos, the "push," to describe hoplite battle. Down to the 300s BCE, the battle line typically was formed six to eight rows deep, with a front of several hundred men. The men in the first three rows advanced with spears leveled; behind them, the soldiers held their spears pointing upward. As the two armies collided, sometimes at a full run, the front ranks of both sides met the enemy spear points while thrusting overhand with their own spears. But at the same time, the rear ranks kept pushing forward—each man actually leaning his shield into the back of his countryman ahead and shoving him toward the enemy. The armies tried to push each other apart.

For the front hoplites, battle must have been hellish and exhausting. There are tales of soldiers dying of suffocation, pinned upright by the press of men. More usually, of course, soldiers died of wounds—possibly to the neck or genitals (areas not always protected by shield or breast plate), or possibly to the head or chest (the armor splitting under the spear point). When a hoplite fell, the man behind him took his place with leveled spear, and most men who went down alive would be very lucky not to be trampled to death.

The heart of the battle, the excruciating othismos, lasted probably less than an hour. As one army started to get the worst of it, soldiers on that side would begin fleeing (rear rows first), and suddenly the entire losing army might be reduced to a chaotic rout as every man dropped his shield and spear, running in panic. Then the cavalry might come into play, either in slaughtering a fleeing enemy or in covering its own side's retreat.

Unlike modern armies, the Greeks did not usually make war all year long. The campaign season lasted from March until October, when weather conditions were right for encamping and moving large numbers of men. Furthermore, since most Greek soldiers were farmers by trade, the end of summer usually saw a consensus to stop campaigning and go home for the autumn sowings and vintage. One reason for the military superiority of Sparta in the 500s to 400s BCE was that its citizens were professional soldiers; they had no job but war. (Their fields at home were worked by a society of serfs, the helots.)

In strategy, hoplite warfare was very simple, and relied on an element of cooperation between antagonists. The aggressor army would march into enemy territory, and the defending army would march out to meet it. Defenders did not like to stay confined behind their city walls—the Athenian statesman Perikles' strategy for the Peloponnesian War was unique in its passive defense. Rather, defending armies would come out to protect the farms of the countryside, upon which the city's food supply might depend.

The size of hoplite armies could vary greatly. At the Battle of Plataea, against the Persians (479 BCE), the allied Greek force was said to number over 38,000 hoplites. At the Battle of Mantinea (418 BCE), the opposing armies had about 3,600 hoplites each, plus light-armed troops. Other armies, fielded in local disputes, might be much smaller.

By the late 400s BCE military minds had begun adjusting hoplite tactics. It had long been observed that an army's right wing tended to outperform its left wing—partly because the better troops were stationed on the right, but partly because the battle line itself would drift rightward on the approach to battle, as each man leaned right to gain the protection of his neighbor's shield; this rightward drift meant that each army advantageously outflanked the other on the right. To increase this advantage, the Boeotians at the Battle of Delium used a fortified right wing, 25 rows deep, and defeated an Athenian army (424 BCE). In the Classical period, the city of Sparta developed a military force that was superior in many ways to the armies of other Greek city-states. Every Spartan boy received extensive military training, and boys' upbringing included...
the teaching that dying in battle, protecting one's city, was the most honorable fate possible. The Spartan army also had excellent equipment and supplies. The Spartans' superior tactics involved speedily gaining the upper hand on their right wing and then wheeling the right wing leftward, rolling up the enemy from the side. However, at the Battle of Leuktra (371 BCE), the Theban general Epaminondas beat the "invincible" Spartans by stacking his left wing 50 men deep and crushing the 12-man-deep Spartan right wing before it could destroy him.

Theban triumphs partly inspired the innovations of King Philip II of Macedon (reigned 359–336 BCE) who brought land warfare into its third stage with his development of the formation that modern scholars call the phalanx. To make his Macedonian peasantry effective against Greek hoplites, Philip forged a new-style heavy infantry—lighter-armored than hoplites and equipped with an innovative, 13- to 14-foot-long pike, the sarissa. The phalanx formation consisted of about 9,000 such infantry, arrayed 16 rows deep, with the first five rows presenting their pikes forward. On the model of Spartan organization, Philip's phalanx was articulated into 1,500-man battalions, for maneuverability. A well-trained phalanx enjoyed advantages over a hoplite army in terms of its weapons' reach and probably its level of fatigue. (The phalanx men were not crowded together as closely as the hoplites, nor were they so heavily armored.)

In battle Philip employed the phalanx mainly for defense—to halt and punish an enemy attack—while using his cavalry to charge against any gap that opened in the enemy formation. The phalanx was the anvil; the cavalry was the hammer. The superiority of Philip's tactics was proven at the Battle of Chaironeia (338 BCE), where his troops totally defeated a hoplite army of allied Greeks. The hoplite age was passing, 330 years after the Battle of Hysiae.

Philip's innovations helped produce the spectacular victories won by his royal son, Alexander the Great (reigned 336–323 BCE). In military history, Alexander opened the door to further development of cavalry, under Persian influence and using larger Persian horse breeds. More important, Alexander's conquests changed the social-political basis of ancient warfare, by creating several large and wealthy Greco-Macedonian kingdoms around the eastern Mediterranean. The incessant warfare of these Hellenistic kingdoms—particularly Ptolemaic Egypt against the Levantine Seleucid Empire (274–168 BCE)—saw the use of huge, unwieldy phalanxes, upward of 20,000 men. These kingdoms were constantly trying to perpetuate a Greco-Macedonian soldiering class, so as to reduce reliance on mercenaries.

When the armies of Rome began to invade the Greek world, various features of the Roman military made it immediately superior to the Greek forces. The Romans fought the Greek phalanxes with their more flexible legions, with their built-in reserves. Such advances in land warfare organization and tactics led to Rome's eventual conquest of the Mediterranean and other lands.

**Further Information**


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