History

warfare in ancient Greece

Homeric Warfare

The earliest evidence for Greek tactics comes from Homer's *Iliad*. This gives the impression of a disorganized mêlée, with warriors from each side fighting individual duels. This is probably an unbalanced picture of early Greek warfare, caused by the poet's concentration on the parts played by the champions and heroes. The poem compares the battle line of the Myrmidons (Achilles' elite warriors) to a carefully built wall, the warriors standing with shield touching shield in a solid line. This is likely to have been the position before a battle, with armies drawn up in opposing lines and meeting in this simple formation. The battle probably broke up into a mêlée only after one side had given way, followed by individual duels and single combat. Before and during the battle, missiles such as arrows, stones and javelins rained down on both sides. After one side had broken and fled, chariots would be used for pursuit and escape.

Phalanx

Although the term "phalanx" is found in Homer (probably to signify a group of soldiers fighting together), the term is usually applied more precisely to a military formation used from the 4th century BCE. It may have originated at an earlier date in Sparta, possibly as early as the 8th century BCE. A more disciplined system of fighting was introduced, possibly in the 8th century BCE. Instead of a few long ranks (the previous battle formation), the soldiers were drawn up in many short files. These files were often, but not always, eight ranks deep. Each phalanx was composed of these files of men, with each file being a unit. When one man fell, the soldier behind took his place.

While the phalanx could withstand attacks from cavalry and lightly armed skirmishers, it was too slow and clumsy to be effective against them. Adding cavalry and lightly armed troops to the hoplites of the phalanx gave it a measure of flexibility and also some protection for its flanks. The lightly armed skirmishers could harass the opposing phalanx or protect the flanks of their own phalanx, while the cavalry harassed the enemy. However, the outcome of the battle still depended on the phalanx itself. Usually both sides had cavalry and lightly armed skirmishers, so the advantage of such troops was reduced.

In 390 BCE the Athenian Iphicrates routed a Spartan mora of hoplites with a force of lightly armed troops at the battle of Lechaeum, something that was thought virtually impossible. Lightly armed troops had already proved a serious threat in the battle of Sphacteria (425 BCE), and after the success of Iphicrates, lightly armed troops played an increasingly important role.

The phalanx battle formation developed parallel with improvements in weapons and armor. Before the rise of Macedonia, soldiers of the phalanx were hoplites (heavily armored infantry), who originally carried javelins, a sword and shield, but they were later armed with a long thrusting spear instead of javelins, which enabled them to keep a tighter formation in the phalanx. Soldiers in the phalanx of Macedonian armies were of different types and were not always as heavily armed as earlier hoplites. The term "phalangite," meaning a "soldier of the phalanx," is sometimes used when referring to the later Macedonian armies, where the phalanx consisted of more than one type of soldier.

Hoplites

The heavily armed hoplites fought in a phalanx in close formation, and their tactics were relatively simple. The two main tactics of the hoplite phalanx were to break through or push over the line of the opposing phalanx, or to outflank it. Phalanxes of two opposing armies were drawn up facing each other, four or more ranks deep. The shields of each front rank overlapped to form a defensive wall, and the thrusting spears were held above the shoulder in an overarm grip, so that spears of several ranks could project over the wall of shields. Even with their shields hoplites were very vulnerable to attack if they were not in phalanx formation. To prevent outflanking maneuvers, armies that were seriously outnumbered would try to form up for battle in a place where their flanks were protected by natural obstacles, such as in a pass.

The whole success of a battle depended on the outcome of the initial clash of the two phalanxes. As the opposing phalanxes approached, they would break into a run just before impact, but keep in formation. The opposing shield and spear walls would crash into each other. Each phalanx tried to push forward and break up the enemy phalanx formation.
As one soldier fell, the one behind took his place. The struggle continued until one side broke and fled. While the phalanx was locked together in combat, casualties were few because there was little room for effective use of spears. When one side broke, the fleeing hoplites usually discarded their shields and were then vulnerable to faster, lighter-armed troops, as well as to pursuing hoplites. Casualties were much higher.

The Theban Tactic

In the 4th century BCE there was an important development in hoplite tactics. At the battle of Leuctra (371 BCE), the Thebans, led by Epaminondas and Pelopidas, used a different formation of the phalanx and defeated the Spartans. Instead of the front line of the phalanx being straight, the Theban front line was deliberately slanted forward on the left wing. This meant that the left wing, which was 50 ranks deep, impacted with the Spartan right wing, only 12 ranks deep, before other parts of the front line of the phalanx were engaged. The rest of the Spartan line was engaged by light troops and cavalry. The formation overwhelmed the Spartan right wing, traditionally the strongest part of the phalanx with the best troops. The Spartan attempt to reinforce their right wing was stopped by a charge from the Theban Sacred Band, and the Spartan army broke up into disarray. This was the first use of an echelon attack by a Greek army, and Epaminondas used the same tactics successfully at the battle of Mantinea in 362 BCE.

Macedonian Tactics

With the reforms of the Macedonian army made by Philip II came improved battle tactics. The phalanx was uniformly deepened to between 16 and 20 ranks. The enemy phalanx would first be attacked by a charge from the cavalry, usually situated on the Macedonian right wing. The cavalry would attempt to crash through the enemy phalanx in a wedge formation in order to swing around and attack from the rear, while the Macedonian phalanx engaged it from the front. The Macedonian phalanx might attack with a straight front line, but usually it was deployed obliquely with the right flank leading. In the battles of Alexander the Great, the initial attack was always from the right wing led by Alexander himself at the head of the Companion Cavalry. Other contingents of cavalry covered the left wing.

Hellenistic Tactics

After Alexander the Great tactics were further elaborated, making use of all available tactical elements: attacking in echelon formation, skirmishing, screening heavily armed troops with lightly armed troops and using heavy cavalry to break the enemy line. A new development was the use of elephants. They were usually interspersed among units of lightly armed troops, often as part of the frontal screen, in order to disrupt the enemy cavalry. The phalanx was no longer the most important element in the army and was seldom used as the main thrust of the attack, a role now performed by heavy cavalry. Tactics had developed to the point that an army's different elements had to act as a team to gain success.

Further Information


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