

ANCIENT GREECE – Military History

Homeric times (1200-800 B.C.E.) War chariots; horses; 6-9 foot long spears, with a leaf shaped metal tip and a sharp pointed base; short daggers; laminated shields weighing 18-35 pounds—like The Shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*; bronze greaves; bronze breastplate: these were the hard facts on the ground in the warfare which occupies much of Homer's *Iliad*, and which may be considered the main topic of that epic. The use both of bronze and the new metal, iron, the growing metallurgical skills of the post-Mycenean period, and the increasing savvy for military tactics, as opposed to raids: all these developments were behind the fighting that Homer's epics depict. So potent is the sense of military force, throughout the *Iliad*, that one has to wonder whether the poem is a document about force or about grace—that is, the grudging graciousness of an Achilles toward Priam—and in the end a good case can be made for *force*, which has brought both Achilles and Priam to their knees.

800-400 B.C.E. By the end of the ninth century—loosely speaking—the first signs of writing are visible, coinage has started to be minted—with the resulting facilitation of commerce and trade, and by the seventh century the first city-state formations are emerging, themselves in part consequences of communities' increasing ability to defend themselves militarily. (The concept of military encounter has changed, from Homeric days when battle was between individual fighters, much of it hand to hand, and warriors—at least those of heroic lineage—liked to know who they were fighting and who they were about to kill.) With the development of a polis-centered world, in which *polises*—there were some 150 of them throughout the eastern Mediterranean—began to fight one another for products and turf, came the growth of citizen armies.

Citizen fighting forces These citizen armies—rather like the National Guard in the United States—were composed of men in the middle of citizen life, not of professional soldiers; this state of affairs affected the military conflicts which were rife in Greece right through from Solon (638 B.C.E.-558 B.C.E.) to the end of the Peloponnesian War (431 B.C.E.—404 B.C.E.) and the death of Alexander (323 B.C.E.). The tradition of citizen civil defense, in the world of the polis, meant that without regular standing armies it was not possible for opposing forces to engage in large scale battles over a prolonged period of time. During winter it was too cold to fight, and during harvest times it was too devastating to be away from one's fields. The result was that the bulk of the fighting, in the world of the polis, was done by citizens who had trained for war but were not professionals.

Citizen fighters: their equipment and training The military men, who grew up into this polis-defense system—we speak chiefly of Athens about which we know most—were citizens prepared to fight in armor comparable to that in use in Homeric times. These men—propertied farmers and artisans for the most part—found the armor required of them expensive, so that in many households the family suit of armor was kept available at all times and maintained in top shape. When battle time came, these men—at such times called *hoplites*, for the *hopla* or armor they wore—gathered under their local commander, formed themselves into a *phalanx*, a tight row of fighting men with interlocked shields, and spears positioned for buddy protection, and tightly twined together marched forward against the enemy lines, spears and daggers flying, in what would turn out to be a crashing battle of armed body lines. Set battles, lasting typically an hour or so, would decide the outcome of the struggle, the date, place, and duration of which would typically have been arranged in advance by the fighting parties.

Enlargements on the fifth century military scene The hoplite system, described above, was at its seasoned best at the time of the Persian Wars (499 B.C.E.-448 B.C.E.), for the invading Persian armies, vastly outnumbering the Greeks, were unskilled at dealing with the crushing power of a large phalanx. Later in the century, when Athens and Sparta both found themselves fighting to keep the Persians at bay, it was the Athenian navy, fruit of the long honed nautical skills of the Greeks, and of the wealth influx of fast growing fifth century Athens, that confused and then defeated the huge navy of Persia. Like the hoplites, the naval fighters of ancient Athens were mighty for a time; but that time did not long exceed the wars of the fifth century, which were to be followed promptly by the new military audacity and fighting methods of Alexander of Macedon (356 B.C.E.-323 B.C.E.), a man who thought in continents instead of city-states, and had recourse, consequently, to very different strategies of military conquest.

Readings

Hanson, Victor, *The Western Way of War*, Berkeley, 1989.

Kagan, Donald, *The Peloponnesian War*, New York, 2004.

Discussion questions

With Alexander the Great, in the fourth century B.C.E., a vast program of military conquest extended as far as India. What new tools, weapons, and methods of fighting were needed, to advance such a project of world conquest?

What were the economics of war in fifth century B.C. E. Athens? Who made and sold the armor for the hoplites? What did the average householder have to pay for his armor?

In Homeric times fighters often knew one another, and exchanged genealogies prior to fighting. Does anything of this military tradition persist into the fifth century? Was there any such 'personal' element to the fighting between Athenians and Spartans?