

The hoplites (heavy infantrymen) long dominated Greek land warfare as well as perceptions of desirable martial and manly conduct. Some characteristics of hoplite warfare, such as fighting en masse, can be found already in Homer (e.g., *Iliad* 13.129–133). Archaeological evidence shows hoplite weapons in use in the late eighth century. There is a lively debate among scholars about when the Greeks fully adopted the hoplite style of warfare and even about the nature of hoplite warfare itself, with some dating it to as late as the fifth century. The current chapter follows the more “orthodox” view, which suggests that by the sixth century hoplite warfare dominated the battlefield and continued with variations down to the Hellenistic Age.

This chapter discusses hoplite weapons and formations as well as expectations of hoplites on the battlefield. It also examines the supposed impact of hoplite warfare on the politics of Archaic Greece.

## 8.1 Hoplites and Their Weapons

The term hoplite (*hoplitês*) probably means “armed,” although the historian Diodorus of Sicily (15.44.3) argues, possibly wrongly, that it comes from *hoplon*, a later term for shield. The circular hoplite shield was concave, about 1 meter in diameter, made of wooden planks covered with polished bronze, and weighed around 6 kilos (ca. 12–16 pounds). It was held by a supportive arm-strap and handgrip. The Archaic hoplite wore a bronze helmet that often covered his head, ears, nose, and neck. A crest made the soldier look taller. The protection provided by the helmet came at the expense of good hearing and peripheral vision, and by the late fifth century the helmet had been modified so that it protected only the crown of the head. A bronze corselet protected the upper body. Due to its weight (ca. 16 kilos/35 pounds), unwieldiness, and lack of ventilation, the corselet was later replaced by lighter protective gear or was completely discarded. Bronze greaves protected the legs, and, during the early Archaic Age wealthy hoplites even wore bronze foot-guards. The hoplite’s major offensive weapon was the spear, used chiefly for stabbing. It was 2–2.5 meters long, made of wood, with a spearhead and a spike butt. The sword, measuring up to 0.6 meter, was a secondary weapon which the soldier used for hand-to-hand combat and to strike fallen or wounded enemies. In the fifth century a single-edge slashing sword replaced the cut-and-thrust type. All together, the panoply (outfit) could weigh up to ca. 23–30 kilos, and its cost put it out of reach of the poor, although it was affordable to the middle-income and higher class. The equipment was rarely uniform, and starting from the sixth century it became lighter, more selective, and hence within the means of many Greeks.

The soldier shown in Figure 8.1 is part of a frieze that decorated a bronze jar, ca. 530–520, known as the Vix Krater, which was found in the tomb of a Celtic princess in southern France. Most scholars identify the krater as a Laconian product, but Corinthian or Southern Italian origins have also been suggested. The hoplite is shown wearing most of the weapons described above, except



**Figure 8.1** A soldier on the frieze of the Vix Krater, ca. 530–520. The Art Archive/ Archaeological Museum, Châtillon-sur-Seine/Gianni Dagli Orti.

for the sword. The spear in his right hand has been lost. Note the warrior's long hair, which was sported especially by the Spartans. Normally a leather apron riveted to the base of the cuirass (breastplate) protected the groin.

## 8.2 Standing in a Phalanx Formation

The hoplite's weapons were designed to be used for both fighting in formation and individual combat. The scene of hoplite battle in both the Archaic and Classical periods was a combination of conventions, attempts at disciplined conduct, and chaos. Before battle the opposing armies chose a level terrain as their battleground. Following a sacrifice and divination ceremonies, the generals exhorted their armies to battle. The soldiers stood and advanced in a phalanx (rank-and-file) formation, often eight rows deep. Ideally they were supposed to retain their cohesive formation. Indeed, reliance on fellow-soldiers and the desire to attain full protection explain both the strengths and disadvantages of hoplite warfare. The shield held on the left arm offered better

protection to the warrior's left side than to his right. This resulted in hoplites seeking additional protection under the shields of the soldier to their right, and in a movement described by Thucydides in his account of the battle of Mantinea (I) in 418 between Spartan and Mantinean coalitions.

#### Thucydides 5.71.1

The following is something that occurs to all armies. They become over-extended on the right wing when they clash, and both sides thus outflank the left wing of their opponents with their right. This is because, from fear, each man tries to bring his unprotected side under the cover of the shield of the man posted to his right, and believes that the greatest protection lies in the closeness of the interlocking of the shields. And the man most to blame for this is the man standing in the first position on the right wing, for he is always eager to remove his own uncovered side from the enemy, and the rest follow his lead from a similar fear.

#### Question

1. Compare Thucydides' description of the hoplites' line with Demaratus' description of the Spartan warriors in Herodotus (8.6). How do the two passages inform each other?

### 8.3 Hoplite Battles

It is possible that early hoplite battles consisted chiefly of duels between individuals or small groups. In contrast to the Classical period, Archaic hoplites fought alongside light-armed troops such as archers and slingers. The initial onslaught was carried out by the first three ranks. Raising war cries, the soldiers ran toward the enemy, trying to break its formation by stabbing and shoving. The rear ranks watched the battle, and helped when needed by pushing the front ranks or by filling gaps where soldiers had fallen. Close-rank fighting is attested no earlier than ca. 500. When the ranks disintegrated, the fighting changed to hand-to-hand combat. Often, however, the enemy fled, discarding its heavy weapons. Casualties in hoplite battles could be relatively low, though they greatly increased as time progressed. It has been estimated that the victors could lose on average 5 percent and the vanquished about 14 percent of their total strength (Krentz 1985). The victorious side, heavily clad, tended to give up pursuit and claimed victory by stripping the enemy dead of their weapons. The request by the vanquished side to reclaim its dead and wounded confirmed the battle's outcome, and the victor in most cases granted it. In the Classical Age, the winning side asserted its victory by erecting a trophy on the battlefield, made of weapons affixed to a stand.



**Figure 8.2** The Chigi Vase, ca. 640. © The British Library Board. X.423/1337.

The battle frieze shown in Figure 8.2 comes from a Corinthian pitcher ca. 640 that was found in Veii in Etruria. It depicts an early form of hoplite battle. At the center are two rows of warriors holding their spears upright ready to engage in battle. The second spear each holds may indicate that they are in the stage of hurling spears at one another from a distance. Note that the left group has ten legs as opposed to four shields and spears, indicating a longer row of men. The group on the right is about to be joined by running hoplites still far off. The group on the left is also about to be reinforced by warriors who are partly marching, partly running, and who are still not close enough to join the fray. The boy piper in the middle has been interpreted as playing a marching rhythm for the troops, but it is possible that he is sounding the alarm to the men on the left.

### Question

1. Try to reconstruct the contribution to battle made by individual hoplites based on the Vix Krater (Figure 8.1), the Chigi Vase (Figure 8.2), and Thucydides' account (8.2).

## 8.4 Hoplite Ideals

The model hoplite was physically strong, disciplined, and courageous. He maintained the group's male solidarity and contributed to the interdependence of its members. In many Greek states, hoplite values were identical to, or incorporated into, the civic and masculine ethos, which promoted cooperation, solidarity, bodily strength, patriotism, valor, order, and self-control. The seventh-century poet Tyrtaeus wrote poems that instilled these values in young Spartan warriors primarily through fear of shame. Death on the battlefield was noble as opposed to disgraceful flight, and courage and excellence

were equated with standing one's ground in close formation. Tyrtaeus also refers to the mingling of light-armed and hoplites in the fighting. Later they would be separated into different units, with the light-armed suffering lower prestige in comparison with the hoplites.

#### 8.4.A Do Not Flee But Stand Your Ground

##### Tyrtaeus fr. 11 (West)

You are descendants of unconquerable Heracles – so take heart! Not yet does Zeus have his neck turned aside.<sup>1</sup> Do not fear the large numbers of men and do not be dismayed. Let each man hold his shield straight toward the enemy front line, (5) regarding life as being hateful and the black shades of death as being as lovely as the rays of the sun.

For you know how destructive are the works of Ares who brings many tears, and you have great experience of the character of painful warfare. (10) Young men, you have been with those in flight as well as those in pursuit, and you have had a surfeit of both. Now, those who stand at each other's side and dare to advance to fight at close quarters in the front ranks – these die in fewer numbers, and they keep safe the host behind them. But when men flee in fear, all valor [*aretê*] is lost; (15) for no one could put into words all the ills that befall a man if he suffers dishonor. For it is a terrible thing to stab a fleeing man in the back in lethal combat; and shameful is a man's corpse that lies in the dust, (20) his back run through by the point of a spear.

Instead, with both feet set solidly on the ground and biting his lip with his teeth, let each man take a firm stand, covering with the belly of his broad shield his thighs, (25) his shins below, his breast, and his shoulders. Let him brandish his strong spear in his right hand, and shake the fearful crest above his head. Let him learn soldiering from doing mighty deeds, and not stand holding his shield out of range of spears. No, rather let each man come to close quarters and take on the enemy, (30) wounding him with his long lance or sword; and with foot set against foot, and pressing shield on shield, crest against crest, and helmet against helmet, let him fight a man, with sword-hilt or long spear in hand. (35) And you, skirmishers, take cover beneath the shield at your various stations, and strike them with your great stones, hurling at them your smooth spears as you stand next to the heavy-armed.

##### Note

1. The line is unclear, and possibly means that Zeus has not turned away from the Spartans.

Tyrtaeus gives *aretê* (excellence) the exclusive meaning of military courage. Contesting the Homeric forms of excellence in sport, physical strength and beauty, kingly status, and speaking skills, Tyrtaeus dwells on discipline and the courage of standing one's ground. The reward for the dead soldier is

communal honor and (Homeric) fame for him and his family. The surviving soldiers enjoyed the respect of all. About three centuries later, both Plato and Aristotle would criticize Sparta for restricting excellence to military courage at the expense of other virtues, especially wisdom.

#### 8.4.B The Worthy Man in War

##### Tyrtaeus fr. 12 (West)

I would not mention a man, or have any regard for him, for achievement in the foot-race or wrestling, not even if he possessed the stature and strength of the Cyclopes and outran Thracian Boreas, (5) or if he were better-looking than Tithonus and richer than Midas or Cinyras.<sup>1</sup> Not even if he were a better king than Pelops son of Tantalus, and had the sweet-talking tongue of Adrastus – not, in fact, if he had reputation for anything at all, apart from furious strength in battle.<sup>2</sup> (10) For the only worthy man [*aner agathos*] in war is he who can stand the sight of bloody slaughter and who, at close quarters, lunges at the foe. This is excellence [*aretê*]; this is the best prize amongst mankind, the finest a young man can win. (15) This is a benefit alike for the state and all its people – a soldier standing ever firm in the front ranks, completely oblivious to shameful flight, keeping resolute his heart and spirit, and encouraging with his words the man at his side.

(20) This is the man who has worth in war. Quickly he turns the enemy's rugged battle-line, and by his efforts halts the tide of battle. When this man falls in the front ranks and loses the life dear to him, he brings glory to his city, his people, and his father, (25) with many wounds to the front, through his chest, his bossed shield, and breastplate. Young and old alike grieve for him, and the whole city mourns, sorely missing him. His grave and his children are celebrated amongst men, (30) and so are his children's children and his lineage thereafter. Never does his great fame and his name perish and, beneath the earth though he be, he remains immortal – any man, that is, who was doing battle with valor, standing his ground and fighting for his land and children when raging Ares finished him. (35) And if he avoids the doom of death that lays a man out, and with victory has his prayer for glory in the battle fulfilled, all men, young and old alike, honor him, and he goes to Hades having experienced much joy. As he ages, he enjoys distinction amongst the people of his town, (40) and no one wishes to do him harm in respect of his reputation or rights. All yield their seats to him, the young, those of his age, and his elders alike. It is the peak of this *aretê* that each man should now steel his heart to reach, with no cessation of hostilities.<sup>3</sup>

##### Notes

1. Boreas was the north wind. Tithonus was a handsome Trojan youth, whom the goddess Eos (Dawn) took for a lover. Cinyras was the first king of Cyprus.
2. Pelops was Agamemnon's grandfather, who (among other individuals) was said to have founded the Olympics. Adrastus was the king of Argos and the leader of the Seven against Thebes.
3. Reading *hos d'aut' en*.



See WEB 8.5 for the “Battle of Champions” between Sparta and Argos ca. 545, which was inspired by the hoplite and Homeric ethos.

### Questions

1. How does Tyrtaeus relate actions in battle to martial values?
2. What means does Tyrtaeus use to indoctrinate his audience into becoming ideal warriors?
3. What constituted victory and merit according to Tyrtaeus (8.4) and the story of the Battle of Champions (WEB 8.5)?



## 8.6 The Spartan or Hoplite Ideology

The Spartan army was considered the best in the Greek world, largely because it excelled in meeting the standards of hoplite warfare. Herodotus describes the Spartan hoplite ethos in a speech he attributes to the exiled Spartan king Demaratus, who joined the Persian king Xerxes in the invasion of Greece in 480. Demaratus informs Xerxes of the character of Spartan warriors in a way that foretells their fighting to the death in the battle of Thermopylae (for which see 17.11: “The Battle of Thermopylae”). Other Greeks shared the Spartans’ martial values described here.

### Herodotus 7.104.3–5

(7.104.3) Personally, I do not claim to be able to fight ten men, or two men, and I would not willingly fight one-on-one. If it were necessary, however, or if there were some great struggle that stirred my spirit, then I would be the most pleased fighting one of these men who claim to be able to take on three Greeks each. (104.4) That is how it is with the Lacedaemonians. Fighting as individuals they are inferior to no men, but in a body they are the finest warriors alive. For though they are free, they are not entirely free. They have a master, the law, and they stand in far greater awe of it than your subjects do of you. (104.5) At all events, they carry out its bidding to the letter, and its bidding is always the same – it does not allow them to run from battle before any multitude of men, but they must remain in their posts, and conquer or fall. If you think I’m talking nonsense when I say this, then I will remain silent in future – I only spoke on this occasion because I was made to. However, may matters turn out as you wish, Your Majesty.

### Question

1. What was expected of the Spartan hoplite?

## 8.7 Hoplites and Politics

According to Aristotle, the hoplites' contribution on the battlefield was translated into political gains and made the politics of the polis more participatory. Scholars are divided on the merits of his thesis. Some agree with the philosopher, arguing that the dependence of the polis on non-elite hoplites for its security encouraged hoplites to seek and attain political power. Others maintain that hoplites supported tyrants against the established aristocracy, or shaped the dominant ideology and practices of Sparta. Yet there are historians who dispute any link between military tactics and political power. They argue that the commoners had always made a significant contribution to the military, but still remained politically weak. They note that there is no evidence that the army of the polis changed its composition from cavalry, manned by nobles, to hoplites, and that not all hoplites were equal or gained political power. The correlation between political and military dominance, then, simplifies a more complex evolutionary process. The debate is unlikely to be resolved soon.

### Aristotle *Politics* 4.10.10–11 1297b16–28

... The first political organization amongst the Greeks in the period following the monarchies was made up of warriors, and initially of cavalrymen. This is because it was with cavalry that strength and superiority in battle lay. Heavy infantry is useless without tactical configuration, and knowledge of such matters, and fighting in ranks, did not exist amongst the ancients, so that their strength lay in the cavalry. As the city-states grew, however, and armed infantry became more important, more people began to be involved in the political process. This is why what we now call "constitutions" the men of former times called "democracies." Now the ancient constitutions were, naturally, oligarchic and regal in nature; for, given the smallness of their population, the city-states did not possess much of a middle class, with the result that these people, being few in number as well as in terms of political organization, were more ready to accept being ruled.

See WEB 8.8 for a link to depictions of hoplites on Greek vases.



### Review Questions

1. What did the hoplites' equipment consist of and how did it relate to the hoplite formation (8.1–3)?
2. What were the cardinal values that guided hoplites in battle (8.4–6)?
3. To what extent were hoplite warfare and ideals community bound?
4. In what way did the Spartan education of boys and girls (7.15, 7.17) contribute to the Spartans' excellence as hoplites?
5. Try to reconstruct a battle scene using the visual evidence produced here (Figures 8.1, 8.2), Thucydides' description of battle (8.2), and Tyrtaeus' poems (8.4).