

# HOPLITES AND TRIREMES WARFARE

“ TYRTAEUS,  
HOMER, PLUTARCH,  
XENOPHON, AND  
EURIPIDES

Here is courage, mankind's finest possession, here  
is the noblest prize that a young man can  
endeavor to win,  
And it is a good thing his polis and all the people  
share with him  
When a man plants his feet and stands in the fore-  
most spears  
Relentlessly, all thought of foul flight completely  
forgotten,  
And has trained his heart to be steadfast and to  
endure,  
And with words encourages the man who is stationed  
beside him.

“ Tyrtaeus, untitled poem,  
late seventh century BCE

The poet Tyrtaeus was expressing the feelings of many Greeks when he composed these verses. It seems that the Greeks admired soldiers and thought bravery was the highest virtue.

Someone once said that ancient Greece was a place where once in a while peace broke out. Of course, this is an exaggeration. Still, when they weren't actually fighting, the Greeks were usually preparing for war, recovering from war, or keeping an eye on their neighbors in case they were getting ready to attack.

So even in the rare times of peace, war was never far from anyone's mind. The Spartans, for example, had built their whole society around preparing for conflict. Reminders of war were everywhere in Sparta.

Athenian culture wasn't as organized around the military, but the Athenians knew that their city's patron deity, Athena, was also the goddess of war. Any time an Athenian went into



her temple, the Parthenon, the towering statue of the goddess in full armor loomed over the visitor. In her huge hand she held the figure of the goddess Nike, or victory.

Even Greek sports were a kind of preparation for war. The most important events in the Olympics were wrestling, racing, and other events that conditioned men for battle and tested their courage and physical skills.

War was so important that one deity wasn't enough to take care of it, so the god Ares presided over battle. Athena had many other functions, but all Ares cared about was fighting. It didn't matter to him who was right or wrong, as long as blood was shed. In the *Iliad*, a long poem mostly about war, the poet Homer has Ares's father, Zeus, calling him "most hateful of all the gods who hold Olympus. Forever quarreling is dear to your heart, war and battles."

Athena was ferocious, too. But she didn't seem to enjoy fighting, seeing it as a necessary means to an end rather than as fun, like Ares.

So what were the Greeks always fighting about?

There are many causes of war. Sometimes a nation will claim that it is trying to bring justice or a better form of government to an oppressed nation. Two other important reasons are conquest and economics. There's not really much difference between the two, since power and wealth go together. Strictly economic reasons for war would include gaining control over trade routes, controlling an area that has assets that you want, and plundering the conquered area for goods.

Since the threat of war was constant, most Greek cities were well fortified. Even back in Mycenaean times, towns had huge defensive walls to protect the inhabitants from raids. Settlements were frequently built on hills, which could be more easily defended, and high walls protected them. Sparta was an exception. Their city was in the middle of a plain and the Spartans scorned putting up defensive walls. They were daring anyone to attack.



The god of war Ares (left) battles a giant, while another giant lies dead on the ground. In works of art, Ares is usually shown with helmet, shield, and spear.

“” Homer, *Iliad*, about 750 BCE



Greece is a land of rough mountains, beaches, plains, and sea. Armed forces had to be prepared to fight in many kinds of terrain and against enemies with many kinds of weapons. Since so much of Greece is coastline, and boats are an efficient way to get around, attack by sea was common from the earliest days.

A major improvement in naval warfare came in the sixth century BCE, with a boat called the trireme. It was quickly and easily built. It was light, which made it easily maneuverable, but also fragile. A trireme had sails, but no rudder, so the sails could be used only if the wind was blowing in the direction that the boat needed to go. The major source of power was the oarsmen. A trireme could cover over 200 miles without stopping, at a speed of about 9 miles per hour. This might not sound like much, but it was breathtaking in those days.

Fighting on land was also crucial. Early in the history of Greek warfare, men riding on horseback and in chariots were a major force in land battles. Since both horses and chariots were terribly expensive, only the wealthiest men could afford them. Most soldiers marched and fought on foot. The usual method of fighting was for the two opposing armies to stand far apart and throw spears at each other.

*Greek ships were amazingly fast and easy to handle. They were sometimes powered by both wind and muscle, as is this modern replica. The three rows of oars identify this boat as a trireme. If it had two rows, it would be a bireme. It took a great deal of skill and practice for the oarsmen to row swiftly without getting their oars tangled.*





But as the *poleis* and democracy grew, so did the idea of more people defending their homeland. Starting in the seventh century BCE, a new kind of soldier became the backbone of most Greek armies: the heavily armed *hoplite* (from *hoplon*, the word for “shield”). Hoplites were *really* heavily armed—the helmet, breastplate, greaves (shin guards), sword, and shield weighed between 50 and 70 pounds. This would be a burden today and must have seemed even heavier then, when people were generally smaller than they are now.

These weapons were made of expensive metal, but still, they cost less than a horse and its equipment, not to mention a chariot. This meant that more men could fight for their *polis*. As middle-class men contributed more to the military, they started demanding more rights in politics. So the changes in the army and the growth of democracy grew hand in hand.

Hoplites moved in an organized unit called a phalanx, rows of soldiers usually 8 to 12 men deep. The main tactic was for two opposing armies to advance slowly upon each other and, when they were about one hundred yards apart, to break into a run and start fighting. Both sides would be yelling a war cry as they went.

Ancient war must have been deafening—the rattling armor, the whinnying horses, the shouting men. Homer says in the *Iliad* that when the Greeks and Trojans met,

Not such is the roaring against dry land of the sea’s surf  
As it rolls in from the open under the hard blast of  
the north wind;

“Tactic” comes from *taktike*, which means “the art of arrangement.” It now means a plan, especially of battle.

66 Homer, *Iliad*, about 750 BCE

Chariot horses had to be strong and swift, and highly trained not to run away from the terrifying noise and chaos of battle.







Bronze armor was very expensive and only the wealthiest soldiers could afford a complete set, like this Sicilian one. The curved implement on the right is a strigil, used to scrape dirt and sweat off the skin.

Not such is the bellowing of fire in its blazing  
 In the deep places of the hills when it rises inflaming  
 the forest,  
 Nor such again the crying voice of the wind in the  
 deep-haired  
 Oaks, when it roars highest in its fury against them,  
 Not so loud as now the noise of Achaians [Greeks]  
 and Trojans  
 In voice of terror rose as they drove against one  
 another.

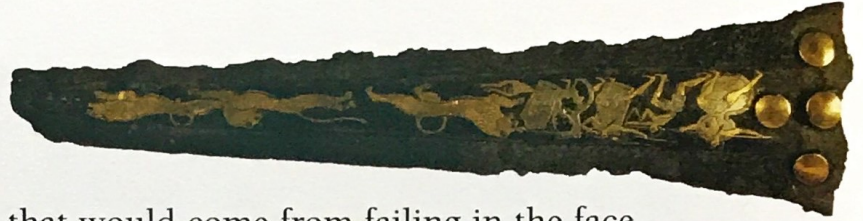
Phalanx war differed from the earlier form of combat, like the Trojan War described by Homer, where soldiers threw spears from a long distance. Now the warriors on the same side stood close together with their shields overlapping to make a solid wall. The two sides would be pressed against each other and fighting was face-to-face. It was noisy, chaotic, terrifying, and bloody. In at least one case the generals put friends and relatives near each other so that soldiers would be motivated to fight to save not only their own lives, but the lives of people they loved. In his *Life of Pelopidas* the biographer and essayist Plutarch notes that

a band of men united by ties of love is truly indissoluble and unbreakable, for each man . . . fears the disgrace

☐☐ Plutarch, *Life of Pelopidas*, about 100 CE



Weapons were for show as well as for fighting. This dagger-sheath with very expensive decoration demonstrates its owner's wealth.



that would come from failing in the face of the other, and each will stand his ground in the face of danger in order to protect the other.

The aftermath of the battle wasn't much better. The historian Xenophon describes it like this in his *Life of Agesilaus*:

“ Xenophon, *Life of Agesilaus*, early fourth century BCE

Now that the fighting was at an end, a weird spectacle met the eye, as one surveyed the scene of the conflict—the earth stained with blood, friend and foe lying dead side by side, shields smashed to pieces, spears snapped in two, daggers bared of their sheaths, some on the ground, some embedded in the bodies, some yet gripped by the hand.

#### A MONUMENT TO ARMS

After a battle, the victorious side would construct a monument made of arms and other objects they had taken from their defeated enemy. They called it a *trophaion*, from a word meaning “defeat.” The word “trophy” derives from *trophaion*.

Survivors on the losing side were executed, or held for ransom, or taken into slavery, which was often a death sentence.

Civilians didn't fare any better. Soldiers often burned houses, fields, and property in order to weaken their enemy even further. If their homes were destroyed, people not taken as slaves or killed outright might starve to death or die from exposure.

So warfare was brutal and ugly. Both soldiers and civilians died painful deaths. Towns were destroyed, farmlands were made useless, and families were torn apart. The playwright Euripides showed the pain felt by both the victor and the vanquished in his play *The Trojan Women*, about the aftermath of the Trojan War. A Greek messenger reluctantly has to tell the wife of the Trojan prince Hector the harsh fate that her young son is to suffer:

“ Euripides, *The Trojan Women*, 415 BCE

He must be thrown from the high walls of Troy.  
If you are wise, you will not cling to him.  
No, bear your sorrows with a noble heart.  
Do not imagine you have power when you don't. . . .  
If you do anything to make the army angry,  
This boy will lie unburied on the ground.