

Hoplites: Problems, Solutions and Explanations

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Abstract: This paper examines closely several commonly accepted models of the manner in which hoplite warfare worked in antiquity. Generally through the logical deconstruction of descriptions of hoplites in action such as those in Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon. The seemingly counterintuitive charge of the hoplite force at Marathon against the Persian army contrasted to the slowly advancing Spartan army at the battle of Plataea. A cornerstone of the paper's analysis centers on the difference between professional armies, such as the Spartans or the Theban sacred band and non-professional armies, employed by the Athenians and most other city-states. The difference between professional and non-professional armies is of great importance in considering the means in which they combat each other. The paper also revisits glossed-over points in the mechanics of hoplite warfare such as the "othismos" which can be interpreted in many ways; it attempts to shed some clarity on this concept in particular by examining the use of the word by ancient authors. The article also studies the Greek hoplite in military situations where it was unsuccessful, looking specifically at the failure of the allied Greek force at Chaironeia against the Macedonian pike phalanxes. This helps further clarify the strengths and weaknesses of hoplite armies.

To construct a working knowledge of warfare in Archaic and Classical Greece, one must understand the specific capabilities of the soldiers themselves; and when the subject is archaic and classical Greece, the most ubiquitous type of soldier is the hoplite. So, if knowledge of archaic and classical warfare is effectively a discussion about hoplite warfare, what can be said of hoplites? The answer is far more complex than previously thought. The most commonly accepted model is that of heavily armed and armored infantrymen in close formation moving as a singular unit. This model however shows many problems and contradictions when examined more closely. This tendency to overlook contradictions in the nature of hoplite warfare was likely the fault of the ancient sources, who would have been writing for an audience familiar with the mechanics of hoplites on the battlefield. These sources are also open for a variety of interpretations by different scholars from different disciplines; including classics, military history and archeology. The inconsistency of sources regarding the mechanics of hoplite warfare makes it all but impossible to generate any one perfect model that encapsulates all examples of hoplite warfare, however by generating and scrutinizing as many models as possible, we can hope to gain a better understanding of hoplites on strategic, operational and tactical levels.

The first aspect of hoplite tactics which presents confusion is the final charge into battle, performed at the battle of Marathon in 490 B.C.E by the Athenian hoplites against the Persian mixed force and at Delium where there was a clash between Athenian and Theban hoplites and their respective supporting troops. The most immediate problem with the hoplite charge is that it appears to eliminate one of the chief advantages of a hoplite phalanx, namely its close formation, as soldiers would break ranks and spread out through the charge; particularly at Marathon where Herodotus claims that the hoplites ran for an entire mile to meet the Persians at speed.¹ At Delium, both forces ran at each other, for the Thebans this makes sense as they begin the battle situated on top of a hill but Thucydides claims that the Athenians also ran into this battle. If the run at Marathon seems not at the Athenian's best interests, the battle of Delium makes just as little sense; what did they hope to gain by charging uphill at an enemy with superior numbers in a superior tactical position?

An advantage that could be gained from this run would be the momentum generated by the sheer weight of a large force of hoplites. This is especially relevant at Marathon where the Athenian hoplites were facing off against a Persian army that was much larger but also much lighter. "The dress of these troops consisted of the tiara, or soft felt cap, embroidered tunic with sleeves, a coat of mail looking like the scales of a fish, and trousers. For arms they carried light wicker shields, quivers slung below them, short spears, powerful bows with cane arrows".² It is possible then that despite the Persian force being larger, they did not have a significant advantage in sheer weight over the Greek force and were overrun by the momentum of the heavier hoplites. This theory of hoplite momentum can also explain the Athenian charge at Delium, Thucydides does not give a specific distance for how far the armies run but this can be interpreted as the distance being so small as to be inconsequential, perhaps just barely enough to necessitate a run. If the distance is small, this explains the Athenian's upward charge, which could have been aimed to cut short the amount of space the Thebans had to build up their momentum before smacking head on into the Athenian front line. The countercharge was not effective here in stopping the superior numbers of the Theban forces and the Athenians were defeated.

This explanation for the hoplite charge does not however explain the need for as long a run as Herodotus describes at the battle of Marathon; surely it does not take a force of hoplites a mile to build up the speed required, if anything such a long run would have slowed and tired the army. Going back to Herodotus' description of Persian soldiers, the army he is describing would be very mobile, versatile and well equipped to fight at range. This is precisely the kind of battle that a heavily armored and slow moving force of hoplites is not prepared to fight. Polybius says of Greek warfare that: "They entered into a convention among themselves to use against each other neither secret missiles nor those discharged from a distance".³ Since the Persians were non-Greek, the Athenians were expecting them to fight "dirty" and sought to pre-empt the advantage by deploying their troops wide⁴ and advancing quickly to restrict Persian mobility, forcing the Persians to fight in hoplite terms, up close, which they were not prepared to do.

The hoplite tendency to charge into battle could also be seen as indicative of poor training and panic which are intrinsic to the nature of Hoplite warfare. "There is little ground for believing that hoplites received much training, as opposed to the well known exception of the Spartans and the Theban sacred band".⁵ For a force of hoplites, giving up the benefits of mutual defense and charging forward is a very dangerous maneuver. The battle of Chaironeia in 338 B.C.E provides an excellent example of this danger, when Phillip's forces feigned a retreat in order to lure the allied Greek soldiers into a charge⁶ the only part of the Greek force which were not immediately wiped out were the Theban sacred band who did not break rank to pursue the Macedonians. While Chaironeia provides a dramatic example of hoplite discipline gone awry, it can be seen as simply a contest of generalship that was won by Phillip II against the allied Greeks.

The nature of the hoplite phalanx strongly implies that a great deal of order and control is needed to effectively use a group of hoplites against an opposing force. Thucydides describes the Spartans as marching with flute players to keep rhythm and keep them in uniform step maximizing their efficiency.⁷ This would no doubt have been practiced by the Spartan army in their regular exercises. The problem with this is that Sparta is the only city-state that had the necessary resources to support a standing professional army. Xenophon says of Athenian army training: "military training is not publicly recognized by the state"⁸ this statement carries a peculiar weight; it implies that there is a value for training for the military, but it is not conducted by the state. This could mean that military training was commonly done from father to son, who would also presumably pass down his equipment. Since hoplites were expected to provide their own equipment this would be a good way of circumventing much of the cost of a hoplite's panoply. This however raises the question of where would one learn the group tactics necessary to be an effective member of a phalanx? If the clattering charges of hoplites at Delium and Marathon are any sign of standard operating procedure for Athens then it could be the most effective way of using hoplites that did not have the training, unlike their Spartan counterparts, who move in step and advance slowly.

Critics of the power of hoplite armies such as Josiah Ober make the case that hoplite warfare is nothing but an elaborate means of dueling, whereby one city-state will challenge the honor of another by occupying their fields and be expected to be met by a force of defending hoplites, there will be a short battle and to the victor will go the spoils.⁹ The main problem with this theory is that hoplites rose to become the most popular means of fighting wars by their defeat of foreign armies that had nothing to do with the Hellenic agonal, honor based system supported by Ober and the like. These battles, namely the defeat of the Persians at Marathon and at Platea demonstrate the strength of hoplites completely removed from the agonal system. This shows that hoplite phalanxes were far more than the dueling gloves of the rich non-aristocratic citizens who fought in and became influential because of the institution of hoplite warfare. This is not to say that the notion of agonal honor had nothing to do with warfare at the time, Herodotus even writes Militades as saying in a rousing speech to the Athenian leadership on the eve of the battle of Marathon: "if we fight before the rot shows in any of us, then, if god gives us fair play, we can not only fight but win".¹⁰ Honor was undoubtedly a key aspect of hoplite warfare, but this should not detract from the evidence that supports hoplites as effective soldiers and not merely duelists.

The lessons learned by the Persians at Marathon and Platea

influenced much of the non-Greek world, who then began employing Greek hoplite mercenaries as shock troops to add extra muscle to their armies and they were as effective in this theatre as they were in Greece. "The variety of forces which hoplites encountered was very great – cavalry, mounted archers, archers on foot and, no doubt chariots and elephants".¹¹ This also does much to refute the idea that the staying power of hoplite tactics was due to a suppression of new military technology by the hoplite class. "In 375 we are told that the great king encouraged a common peace among the Greeks because he was in great need of Greek mercenaries".¹² In short, if foreign generals, as late as 375 who have no investment in the prosperity of this sub-aristocratic class of Greek society find hoplites useful on the battlefield, then we are likely greatly overestimating the power wielded by this social strata.

Once groups of hoplites were in combat with each other, how exactly did they fight? Much of the debate on the style of fighting implemented by a phalanx of hoplites concerns the amount of space left in between individual hoplites in battle formation and how this affects how weapons can be used. Cawkwell makes the point that hoplites in very tight ranks face dangers not only from enemy spears but those of their comrades behind them.¹³ This is a good point; however there is the possibility that heavy friendly casualties was an accepted downside of the practice of hoplite warfare in general as "even the victors never get off without heavy losses."¹⁴ Cawkwell uses this point to suggest that hoplite formations must have been more open than previously thought, and that protection was created more from the pointy wall of spears than from interlocking shields. This is supported by the success of Macedonian infantry that employed the sarissa, longer than the normal hoplite spear and a much smaller shield giving them both an offensive and defensive advantage.¹⁵ This model holds up very well for explaining how troops such as the Athenians, who were likely trained individually, could have fought alongside each other effectively.

This model is however unnecessary for professional soldiers such as the Spartiates, the Theban sacred band or the numerous mercenary hoplite phalanxes which became popular in Egypt and the near east. If we know that these professional hoplites moved in a synchronized manner, it stands to reason that they also fought in a synchronized manner. This would have enabled their ranks to be much closer without risk of doing damage to one another and making greater use of their shields.

The relative success of the Theban sacred band at Chaironeia shows how useful this approach could be. The non-professional allied hoplites who, according to Cawkwell's model, may have relied on the length of their spear for protection and were easily cut down by Philips' sarissa bearing infantry. Those same infantry had a much more difficult task in attempting to break through the well formed wall of shields put up by the sacred band, who were eventually taken down only after the rest of the allied Greek hoplites were destroyed and the Macedonians could swarm them en masse.¹⁶

A significant blind spot in our understanding of hoplite warfare appears when one attempts to examine the relationship between hoplites and their lighter support troops. One of the only sources that provides any detail in the amount of support troops, the battle of Delium, appears to almost completely dismiss any significant effect they would have had on the outcome. In Thucydides' account of the battle of Delium he gives the numbers of each army, 7000 hoplites on each side, the Thebans had 1000 cavalry and it is

implied that the Athenians have a comparable amount. The Thebans have a huge advantage in the number of light troops, 10000 compared to the Athenians who had “no properly armed light troops.”¹⁷ Prior to the battle the substantial force of Theban light infantry appeared very useful in the preparation of fortifications at Delium itself as a source of convenient labor for whatever construction was required. This is perhaps the reason why we rarely hear about the role of lighter support troops, they are not necessarily expected to do much in the way of the actual fighting but serve to construct defensive infrastructure. This is also a logical assumption as those who had the resources to be hoplites would likely consider themselves to be above such labor.

Once the battle begins Thucydides describes that: “No contact was made between the extreme wings of the armies”¹⁸ (where we are told all of the cavalry on both sides is located). This shows that both sides had very little interest in the effective use of their cavalry or else they would have known (or at least the Thebans would have, this being their territory) where to deploy them to actually be of use in the battle. The only mention of the light support troops during the actual battle is that the Thespian support troops had given way to the Athenian advance resulting in disaster for the Thespians, who were then surrounded. So from this we can infer two primary uses for support troops: in a logistical capacity, light troops building fortifications, cavalry scouting, etc. and to be used as filler for the front lines to ensure that no gaps are left between hoplite contingents who are expected to do more of the actual fighting.

In this scholarly discourse of hoplite tactics, the word *othismos* is brought up again and again; it is discussed as something not unlike a scrimmage in rugby or football and is translated in texts as pushing or pressed. The controversy surrounding the exact tactical nature of the *othismos* appears to stem from a misinterpretation of the ancient texts. Thucydides describes the fighting at Delium: “on the right, where the Thebans were, they got the better of the Athenians, pushing them back step by step at first and keeping up their pressure.”¹⁹ Why in this case is the word ‘pushing’ taken to mean a physical shoving action? There is no mention here or anywhere else in Thucydides that pushing an army back is meant to be taken as a literal pushing rather than referring to an unflinching advance, from which your opponents can either back away from, allowing you to gain ground or be killed.

Herodotus’ account of the battle of Plataea supports this theory that *othismos* does not actually refer to physical pushing using similar language to Thucydides: “Sometimes singly, sometimes in groups of ten men – perhaps fewer, perhaps more – they fell upon the Spartan line and were cut down. They pressed hardest at the point where Mardonius fought in person ... While Mardonius was alive they continued to resist and defend themselves ... after his death, and the destruction of his personal guard – the finest of the Persian troops – the remainder yielded to the Lacedaimonians and took to flight.”²⁰ The Spartan hoplites are in this example clearly not participating in a game of scrimmage; they are advancing confidently and killing those who get in their way. This has a tremendously demoralizing effect on the Persian troops that can be seen in that they are making futile attempts to whittle down the strength of the phalanx and are met with spearpoint. Were the Spartans and Persians participating in some kind of shoving match all of the above would happen at once, not sequentially. Furthermore there would certainly not be the space for participants to enter and/or leave battle with them at different times. The reason why the tactics of the *othismos* appear nonsensical and scholars cannot

agree on how they work is because the word *othismos* is not a literal description of the action of the phalanx but rather is being used to describe its effect on a tactical level.

Through the logical analysis of models of hoplite warfare and coupling that with a close re-examination of historical accounts, we can work towards generating a clearer picture of what warfare in the archaic and classical periods looked like and this picture is invariably more complicated than any one existing model. The problem with existing models is that they try to incorporate all hoplite warfare in the ancient Greek world into one unified model which will simply not work. During this period of Greek history, the separate city states on the Greek peninsula and all around the Aegean were vastly different and their relationship between one another was constantly shifting. With a geopolitical environment this complex it is futile to attempt to apply a singular basic model for the means in which wars were fought that is expected to hold up regardless of time, place or participants. It is much wiser instead to focus one’s energies on what fundamental aspects of ancient warfare from varying sources and disciplines work within the context of different examples to generate a case by case understanding of warfare in the ancient Greek world.

Endnotes

- 1 Herodotus, book 6, 113.
- 2 Thucydides, book 4, 96.
- 3 Polybius book 13, 3.
- 4 Herodotus, book 6, 113
- 5 Holladay, pg 94
- 6 Markle, pg 495
- 7 Thucydides, book 5, 70
- 8 Xenophon, 3.12.5
- 9 Ober, pg 32
- 10 Herodotus, Book 6, 111
- 11 Holladay, Pg 100
- 12 Holladay, Pg 100 (referencing Diodorus)
- 13 Cawkwell. Pg 85
- 14 Herodotus, book 7, 9
- 15 Markle, pg. 483
- 16 Rahe, pg 84
- 17 Thucydides, book 4, 90-96
- 18 Thucydides, book 4, 96
- 19 Thucydides, book 4, 96

20 Herodotus, Book 9, 65

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