

ANCIENT HISTORY

Hoplite Warfare Essay

Greek warfare was revolutionised during the 7th century BC, through technical innovations – particularly that of the shield now referred to as the hoplon. From this, derived the hoplites: infantry men or foot soldiers who were heavily armed and protected and fought in ranks. They were usually comprised of the aristocracy until the ‘new rich’, the wealthy traders, emerged and could too afford the expensive armour and weaponry required for hoplite warfare.

The hoplites were heavily protected. This is known from the breastplate and helmet, dating back to the 8th century, found in Argos. Perhaps the best form of defence of the hoplite is the hoplon. It was fundamentally comprised of wood and weighed about 16-20 pounds, making it a potential offensive weapon. Other such weapons included the pike and the dagger, used for long and short-ranged attacks, respectively. A depiction of a hoplite carrying a shield and sword is evident on an Attic vase which dates back to 510-500BC. The hoplites were protected bronze breastplates, bronze greaves and bronze helmets which most of the time also covered their necks and obstructed their peripheral views and hearing.

Greek warfare was usually planned and in daylight. Kagan describes that “what the Greeks do most of the time is fight one another” and therefore a suitable battle ground was necessary. Flat terrains were usually chosen to maintain the integrity of the hoplite phalanx. Herodotus recalls: “Once the Greeks go to war they choose the best and smoothest place to go down and have their battle on that”. This is also evident at the Battle of Marathon in 490BC, when a flat terrain was chosen so that the Greek hoplites had an advantage over the Persian cavalry. Hoplites were not usually trained because there were no specific manoeuvres, skills or technicalities. Before a battle, the general of the hoplites would provide them with a meal and wine. According to Plato’s Symposium, this bonded the warriors together. It also gave them a feel of bar room militancy which got them enthusiastic about the battle, making them more excited to go to battle and kill the opposition.

The hoplites fought in a formation known as the hoplite phalanx. Kagan describes the hoplites as “heavily armed infantrymen who fought in a solid block” – which is what the phalanx was. It was usually eight ranks deep with each rank closely behind the one in front. To maintain this formation, a rhythm, was played by the flute or an oboe-like instrument. In this formation, it was important that the battle line held their hoplons in the correct position, up against their shoulder, as it not only protected them but also the right side of the person adjacent to them. It was an important requirement to maintain the stronghold and prevent any obstruction to the hoplite phalanx.

Kagan states that “there is a tremendous amount of pride that goes into victory and a tremendous amount of shame that goes into losing”. A battle was signalled as being over if: the enemy ran away, rights to the land were won; burial was able to take place without any pre-granted permission. Burial was an important aspect of Greek culture as it allowed the person’s soul to proceed safely into the afterlife. Another thing that was important was honour. Parents often told their sons before battle “with your shield or on it”, which ultimately meant they had to either die or come back with their shield; they had to fight with honour. Kagan states “anybody who fights any other way is a coward”.

It is commonly believed that democracy emerged from hoplite warfare. The bonds and respect that each soldier had for another was believed to be the reason why hoplite warfare was so successful. This led people to believe that if they worked together, they too would be successful. Hoplite warfare also led to the overthrow of aristocracy after many disagreed with their methods of ruling.

Many advocates of hoplite warfare have argued that the hoplites have had a lust for political influence; influence that they felt was compatible with their wealth and military status. They argue

that the overthrowing of aristocracy was a means of them fulfilling that desire. Such examples included Pheidon of Argos and Cleisthenes. However, others such as Raphael Sealy argue that the hoplites were a conservative group and would not support the political reign symbolised by tyrants. There has also been much debate concerning how hoplite warfare emerged. Some argue that it was instantly while others such as Kagan and Hans Vans Wees state that it happened over a few hundred years. Van Wees states that “the classical hoplite formation was a slow change to an even denser and cohesive heavy infantry formation”.

In conclusion, hoplite warfare revolutionised Greece. It led to the overthrow of aristocracy and the beginning of tyranny. It was also the most commonly used form of warfare and helped to victories in battles such as that of Marathon and Plataea and Mycale.