

The Classical Phalanx

Infantry combat transformed

Fifty years after the Persian Wars we finally have our first prose accounts of contemporary battles – and we finally have evidence for the kind of massed collision which is widely but wrongly assumed to have dominated battlefields ever since the introduction of the bronze panoply almost three centuries earlier. In the conflicts of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) and the fourth century, hoplites were drawn up in regular ranks and files, strictly separated from the light infantry and horsemen. It had become a criminal offence for a hoplite to abandon his station. Battles no longer swayed back and forth indecisively but were won or lost in a single great 'push' (*ôthismos*).

What such a 'push' might have been like has been much debated. One view is that it involved a physical massed shove between two crowds of soldiers who crashed into one another at a run, as visualised in brilliantly vivid detail by Victor Davis Hanson:

Both sides literally collided together, creating the awful thud of forceful impact at the combined rate of ten miles per hour The unusual size and bowl-like shape of the hoplite shield helped to create a feeling of absolute protection in the last seconds of the run Perhaps [the hoplite] thought that, if he ran with his shield chest-high and his head lowered, he might not even see the enemy upon impact Veterans of hoplite battle would have known that in the final rush into the enemy phalanx, ... rather than hitting a wall of wood and/or flesh, a point of iron, a plate of bronze, they might be forced into the small gaps *between* the running soldiers ... and begin stabbing at the second or third rank of the enemy phalanx. (1989, 157-9)

In the initial moments after the two sides collided ..., each hoplite pressed with the centre of his shield against the back of the man to his front There are many references to men who were either trampled down or literally suffocated as they stood. Any man who stumbled or fell wounded was in danger of being ground up as the men in the rear lumbered forward, blinded by dust and the press of bodies. (1989, 174-5)

The other view is that classical battle consisted simply of intense hand-to-hand combat in a **comparatively** close formation which ultimately led to one side being **figuratively** rather than literally 'pushed' off the battlefield

by the other. This prosaic view may lack the fascination of the image of a blind stampede followed by a suffocating crush, but it does seem to make better sense of the evidence which suggests that the violence of hoplite battle, great as it was, did not normally take quite such inhuman form.

Rank and file: the classical formation

'Everyone stand in a row, three shields deep' This line from Aristophanes' first comedy, *The Babylonians* (426 BC), is the earliest evidence for battlefield formations drawn up in regular ranks and files.¹ The command was probably a joke, not addressed to soldiers at all – the context is lost – but it implies familiarity with a practice of officers instructing their men before battle to form up in files of a certain length. Formations were normally 'eight shields deep' but precise depths varied from unit to unit: the decision was left to individual officers rather than decided centrally.² A formation shallower than eight might be adopted by an army stretched out in an attempt to surround a city, or on parade.³ There are hints that by the late 370s the Spartans had adopted 12 as their normal depth, and the Thebans habitually fought in very deep formations – depths of 25 and 50 shields are mentioned.⁴ Otherwise only forces which vastly outnumbered their opponents adopted average depths greater than eight, doubling the length of the file to 16 shields.⁵

Every hoplite 'brings his unprotected side as near as possible to the shield of the man drawn up on his right and believes that density of formation is the best protection', said Thucydides (5.71.1). His remark is often cited as evidence that files stood so close together that shields actually touched, allowing each man a space of only three feet,⁶ but clearly what he meant by 'as near as possible' depends on how much room hoplites needed to wield their weapons effectively. A Macedonian phalangite, for instance did require only three feet, since he held his pike (*sarissa*) and small shield steady in front of him and needed minimal room to manoeuvre, but a Roman legionary, who actively wielded his shield on his left arm and his sword in his right hand, required 'at least' an additional three feet of elbow room, a total of six feet (Polybius 18.29.2, 30.6-9).⁷ Ancient authors regarded the Macedonian phalanx as a much denser formation than its classical predecessor: Polybius compared it to Homer's jostling crowds rather than to the hoplite phalanx (12.21.3; 18.29.6) and it was even alleged that the Homeric model had inspired the creation of this new, tighter formation (Diodorus 16.3.2). Classical hoplites must indeed have fought more like Romans than like Macedonians, since they not only wielded their weapons energetically (see below), but instead of the Roman short sword used spears up to eight feet long, pointed at both ends.

The classical phalanx can therefore hardly have operated with intervals of much less than six feet (1.8 m; see Fig. 17), enough for neighbours in the ranks to swing their arms fully extended without hitting one another. The

'protection' of which Thucydides spoke was therefore not direct cover provided by a neighbour's shield, but the general protection of having a friend close by: at six feet a man was still within a spear's thrust from his neighbour which would have deterred enemy soldiers from trying to enter the gap.⁸

We often hear of hoplites drawing closer together, but even when 'joining shields' (*synaspizein*), they did not necessarily stand literally shield-to-shield. One could speak of soldiers 'with shields joined' when they marched at six-foot intervals, and to indicate the minimum three-foot interval one had to specify that they 'joined shields *completely*'.⁹ By the standards of many later armies, the density of classical formations was not high, despite Greek pride in their cohesion. At six-foot intervals, the front line of a general levy of 9,000, eight-deep, stretched out over two kilometres, and even a small expeditionary force of 1,000 would have a front more than 200 metres long.

The individual files which made up these formations were only loosely organised. In the model army described by Xenophon in his *Education of Cyrus*, officers decided each man's place in line, from designated file-leader to file-closer (*ouragos*; 2.2.6, 2.3.22). This was presumably also Spartan practice. In most Greek forces, however, commanders might try to put the better fighters in front and reliable men at the rear – a tactic already known to Homer (*Iliad* 4.297-300) – but they probably had neither the necessary personal knowledge of their men to do so systematically nor the authority to impose their will. A soldier was as likely to choose his own place in line as to be assigned a place by an officer:

Wherever a man stations himself in the belief that it is the best place, or wherever he is stationed by his commander, there he must stand his ground and face danger... and give no thought to death or anything else but shame.¹⁰

There must have been a good deal of shuffling around and jostling for places before battle. The Greek mercenaries who fought for Cyrus at the battle of Cunaxa began to form up in battle-order in mid-morning and when the enemy finally appeared mid-afternoon 'the formation was still being added to by those coming up' (Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.8.1, 8, 14).

Armies on the move found it hard to stay in formation, since hoplites rarely marched in step. The start of the advance was co-ordinated by striking up a hymn, the *paian*, sometimes reinforced by a trumpet signal,¹¹ but essentially everyone moved at their own pace over half a mile or more of a wide stretch of terrain, some walking on roads and paths, others tramping across fields, orchards or rocky ground, still others negotiating ditches or small streams.¹² The pace gradually picked up, and the hymn-singing was replaced by invocations of the god of war, and yells of '*eleleu!*' or '*alala!*' Those who fell behind began to run to catch up. This set off a chain reaction, and by the time there were 200 yards to go, everyone was

running. If both sides ran at a speed of five or six miles an hour the final dash would have lasted only 35-40 seconds, but that would have been enough to rip holes in an already disrupted battle-order.¹³

Experienced fighters might manage to keep from running until they were at a mere 100 yards distance (Xenophon, *Hellenica* 4.3.17) and reach the enemy with a less broken line. Better than average cohesion could also be achieved by deploying elite troops as a highly trained and disciplined front rank behind which the rest of the militia formed up, as the Thebans did for a long time.¹⁴ But most formations – largely improvised on the spot by men thrown together for the first time on the battlefield, without prior training as a unit – were kept together by nothing but the hoplites' best efforts to stay 'as near as possible' to their right-hand neighbours for cover. This not only kept the battle-order roughly intact but even led to some 'bunching' during the advance: the cumulative effect of hundreds of men each drawing a few inches closer to their neighbours was a marked contraction of the front line.¹⁵

Only the Spartans managed not to run at all, but to march in step the whole way. They sang hymns and moved 'slowly, to the music of many pipers stationed among them, not for religious reasons, but so that they might advance smoothly as they walked to a rhythm and their formation was not torn apart, as tends to happen with large armies during the advance' (Thucydides 5.70). They also wore garlands, at least up to the point where they halted to perform – much later than anyone else, and deliberately within sight of the enemy – their pre-battle blood sacrifice. This last-minute halt provided a chance to dress the ranks again. At Nemea in 394 BC, the Spartans sacrificed when the enemy was a mere 200 yards away: in other words, they stopped at the exact moment that their opponents began to run.¹⁶ Apart from having the practical advantages stressed by Thucydides, the slow march, hymns, pipers and garlands could not fail to remind onlookers of a religious procession. The Spartans' disciplined march was an all the more unnerving sight because it suggested that they saw themselves as serenely advancing to the ritual slaughter of their enemies.

If most classical Greek hoplite formations were loose by Spartan standards, they were nevertheless very much tighter than anything the archaic age had seen. Generals and a few other high-ranking figures might still be accompanied by their shield-bearers or even their horses in the battle-line,¹⁷ but otherwise attendants were banished to the rear, and horses were confined to the cavalry, normally stationed on the wings. Light-armed no longer had a place within the phalanx, but stood before, beside or behind it.¹⁸ Above all, the classical hoplite had lost his individual mobility: once he had taken his place, he was supposed to keep to it as closely as possible, for as long as he could.

Fighting and pushing: the mechanics of combat

'He crashed into the Theban army head-on – and as they threw shield against shield they pushed, they fought, they killed, they died' (Xenophon, *Hellenica* 4.3.19). Laconic as it is, this description of king Agesilaus and the Spartan army at Coronea in 394 BC is among the more detailed classical accounts of what exactly happened when charging armies met. Elsewhere, in his eulogy *Agesilaus* (2.13-14), Xenophon was happy to elaborate:

There were no screams, yet there was no silence either, but the kind of sound made by fury and combat When battle ceased, the place where they had fallen upon one another was a sight to behold: the earth red with blood, the corpses of friend and foe lying side by side, shields shattered, spears smashed, the naked blades of daggers taken from their sheaths, some on the ground, some stuck in bodies, some still held in hands.

Such graphic detail, however, was not something that classical Greeks looked for in a sober historical account. As a result we hear little of the actual experience of combat, and there is plenty of room for disagreement in piecing together what happened in a clash of phalanxes.

Xenophon's picture of the clash between Thebans and Spartans at Coronea is sometimes taken as evidence that hoplite battles began with a full-speed, shield-to-shield collision.¹⁹ It was not, however, a normal opening charge, but occurred late in the battle. The Theban and Spartan armies had each already been victorious on their own wing, and then turned round to face one another: the Spartans must have walked in step as usual; the Thebans 'tightened their ranks and advanced forcefully' (4.3.19). Neither side ran. This particular 'crash' must have involved simply marching towards one another and engaging in hand-to-hand combat.

When armies did charge at a run, it was certainly not in order to give greater force to the first thrust of spear or shield. A hoplite would have needed a run-up of 15 metres at most to reach his optimum speed, and running more than ten times as far would only have weakened his impact. In any case, human psychology suggests that very few hoplites would have charged blindly onwards until their shields or spears hit an immovable object, and human physiology suggests that those who did would have ended up sprawling on the ground, if not skewered on an opponent's weapon. A hoplite ran, rather, to relieve his pent-up emotions, to minimise his exposure to missiles – and, with any luck, to frighten the enemy.²⁰

Most soldiers must have slowed down in the last few seconds and ground to a halt 'within spear-thrust' (*eis doru*; Xenophon, *Hellenica* 4.3.17; 7.1.31). The moment was caught in Euripides' version of the legendary duel between Eteocles and Polyneices:

When the roar of the Tyrrhenian trumpet gave the signal for blood-red battle, like a fire-beacon, they flew towards one another at a terrifying run. Their beards wet with foam, they engaged, like boars whetting their savage tusks. They lunged with their spears, but ducked behind their round shields to make the iron spearheads glance off harmlessly. If one man noticed the other raising his eyes above the rim, he wielded his spear hoping that the tip would catch him. (*Phoenician Women* 1377-85)²¹

The running charge does not end in a collision, but leads to cautious yet forceful hand-to-hand combat. Soon Eteocles lands a blow so hard that his spear snaps on impact (1396-9).²²

The first two ranks of the phalanx could reach the enemy with their weapons, but what the rear ranks were supposed to do is not immediately obvious. If allusions to battles being decided by a 'push' or by the 'weight' of armies were meant literally, the rear ranks must have piled into the backs of those in front and physically shoved them forward. On the other hand, in ancient Greek, as in English, one could describe a drive forward as a 'push' even if it did not involve bodily pushing,²³ and speak of the 'weight' of pressure even if it was not physical: for example, 'the weight of courage' might win the day.²⁴ If these expressions were meant figuratively, the other ranks might simply have stood by, waiting their turn.

If classical hoplite battle was a concerted physical shoving-match, front-rank soldiers could have done no more than lunge blindly at the enemy while being almost crushed to death by their comrades.²⁵ What little evidence we have for conditions in the front line paints a different picture. Men who fall are able to get up again without being trampled, and there is enough room for the dead and wounded – from generals to ordinary soldiers – to be carried out of battle by men from the rear ranks or attendants.²⁶ Hoplites carry their spears either lowered in an underarm position or levelled overarm above their shields, and they are able to alternate between the two in combat – not an easy manoeuvre and one that certainly requires a good deal of elbow-room.²⁷ Combat actions mimicked by war-dances, normally performed in hoplite armour, included

the avoidance of all blows and shots by sideways dodging movements, by yielding completely, by jumping up in the air and by ducking low, as well as the opposite, postures relating to offensive action which try to imitate the launching of arrows and javelins, and all kinds of blows. (Plato, *Laws* 815a)

In these dances the hoplite shield was 'extended this way and that', just as Sophanes was said to have fought 'always swinging his shield around, never keeping it still' during the Persian Wars, and a Homeric hero took pride in his skill in wielding a shield 'to the right and to the left'.²⁸ The variety of ways of striking the enemy and the range of movements designed to parry blows or avoid being struck once more imply a good deal of elbow-room.

Another indication that weapons were wielded actively and freely is the fact that weapons training was said to pay off not only during flight and pursuit but brought 'some benefit also in battle proper, when one needs to fight in formation alongside many others'. If some dismissed such training, it was not because in the crush of hoplite battle one needed no skill with weapons, but because the Greeks subscribed to a strong ideology of amateurism.²⁹

A soldier in the front rank might also use his shield for physical pushing. As he delivered blows with spear or sword, he could force his shield against that of his opponent in an attempt to drive him back or knock him off balance. One manoeuvre, the 'Thessalian feint', involved suddenly pulling back one's left side and shield, so that the pushing opponent would lose his balance and tumble forward. This trick, of course, required space to step back and could not have been pulled off with the rear ranks pushing one forward.³⁰ When we read that 'they pushed, they fought' at Coronea, or that 'a hard fight and pushing of shields' took place at Delium, we should presumably envisage *this* type of individual pushing, which occurred regularly in the course of close combat, rather than a tactic of concerted pushing by the entire front rank, let alone by the entire formation.³¹

The big 'push' which decided battle by driving one side or the other off the battlefield was the culmination of all these individual efforts of fighting and pushing. Conceivably, close combat degenerated into a collective shoving contest as more and more weapons broke and the rear ranks thrust themselves forward. But if battles were really decided by the physical pressure of the crowd, it is hard to see how certain armies could hold out against an opponent drawn up in a much deeper formation. At Delium, 25 ranks of Thebans did not overwhelm the eight ranks of Athenians but only slowly 'pushed' them back (Thucydides 4.96.4). At Leuctra 50 ranks of Thebans were initially being beaten by 12 ranks of Spartans, although the latter were ultimately 'pushed back by the mob' (Xenophon, *Hellenica* 6.4.12-14). Like a tug-of-war in which one team is three or four times as large as the other, these battles should have been over in seconds if they had been decided by the weight of the masses.

Xenophon believed that a phalanx only two deep could in theory stand its ground against any number of opponents. In his view, 'phalanxes too deep to reach the enemy with their weapons' were a waste of manpower since 'all but a very few' were inactive.³² To illustrate his point, Xenophon described a fictional battle in which a two-deep Persian phalanx easily defeated an enemy drawn up thirty deep, and was only slowly driven back by an Egyptian force which was not only a *hundred* deep but for good measure equipped with large shields specifically designed for physical pushing (*Education of Cyrus* 7.1.33-4). Of course this was an unrealistic scenario, because in practice casualties would soon create large gaps in a phalanx so shallow and heavily outnumbered. Nevertheless, the fact that

an experienced and thoughtful soldier like Xenophon could believe that theoretically a phalanx which kept its formation and suffered no casualties could hold its ground even when it was outnumbered fifty-to-one shows that he did not envisage the 'push' as a concerted mass shove. He assumed that pushing was confined to the front rank and fighting to the first two ranks.

While the front line remained intact, the rear ranks will thus have remained largely passive, but as the men ahead of them began to fall, or perhaps retreated wounded or exhausted (see below), they moved forward to close the gaps. The 'weight' of a formation was therefore not the physical but the psychological pressure which it brought to bear: the deeper the enemy's formation, the larger the number of soldiers ready to take the place of casualties, and the slimmer one's chances of breaking through. The prospect of having to fight one's way through not just eight, but 16, 25 or 50 ranks was deeply demoralising.³³ The final 'push' was the moment when the army's collective and sustained fighting efforts caused the opponent to run, otherwise described as 'breaking' and 'turning' the enemy.

Battles might be over quickly or last until nightfall.³⁴ When an entire army broke, battle was over: it was almost unheard of for beaten troops to rally and charge again. The fluid formations of earlier centuries had been able to regroup, but the tight order of the classical phalanx was impossible to restore once it had been lost.³⁵ Victorious troops, on the other hand, did try to maintain cohesion in pursuit, which meant that they could not pursue very fast or very far, but also that they were able to resume fighting if necessary. It happened often enough that only one wing – usually the right wing – broke through, while other sections of the army were broken by the enemy. The successful troops might then turn round to help their beleaguered comrades or, if these were beyond rescue, to attack enemy contingents returning from pursuit in disorder, as for instance the Spartans did in the battle of Nemea (394 BC). The behaviour of the Athenians in the same battle was probably more typical of armies which lacked the Spartans' discipline: four regiments broke through the ranks of their opponents and pursued them at length, oblivious to the fact that behind their backs the other six Athenian regiments were being massacred.³⁶

For victorious troops on *both* sides to maintain their battle-order, turn round, and fight a second full-scale engagement was almost unknown. When this happened between Spartans and Thebans at Coronea, an amazed eyewitness called it 'a battle like no other fought in our time'. Even on this unique occasion only one trophy was set up: the expectation that battles were decided in a single clash had become too ingrained for exceptions to be made.³⁷

Andreia: the mentality of the classical hoplite

Without a chance to run or recover, without second chances of any kind, combat in classical Greece was a physically and psychologically draining experience, far more so than Homeric or archaic combat had been. No hoplite could sleep well or enjoy his food before battle. A few were so nerve-racked that they lost control over their bladder and bowels.³⁸

Preparation for battle required much confidence-building. The careful maintenance of equipment helped to steady nerves: 'he who whets his spear, whets his spirit'. Apart from sharpening their blades, hoplites might polish or repaint their shields. Spartans made a point of carefully dressing their long hair.³⁹ Everyone anxiously watched the skies for divine signs in the flight of birds, or in sudden thunderstorms and other unusual natural phenomena. Seers offered animal sacrifice to propitiate the gods and read the omens. In addition to more usual offerings, just before the hoplites marched into action the throat of a ram or goat was cut, in a blood sacrifice (*sphagia*) symbolic of the occasion.⁴⁰ Generals rode along the ranks to harangue the troops, reminding them of what was at stake and talking up their chances of winning. The long, polished speeches which we find in most sources must be literary fictions: real harangues apparently consisted of series of short pep-talks, and might be abruptly cut short when the enemy began to advance.⁴¹ Meanwhile, a watchword such as 'Zeus the Saviour and Victory' was passed down the line like a Mexican wave – repeatedly, if there was a delay before action. Collective yelling, like singing and whooping during the charge, no doubt helped to get soldiers in the right frame of mind.⁴²

No amount of morale-building could suppress fear enough to ensure that hoplites would fight as tenaciously as they were meant to. 'Citizen armies will stand their ground to the death ... for they regard flight as shameful and death as preferable to that kind of survival', Aristotle claimed (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1116b18-21), but in practice they rarely did. No Spartan army ever again fought to the death after the archetypal last stand at Thermopylae – one force notoriously surrendered when surrounded at Sphacteria in 425 BC – and we hear of more Greek armies turning tail before battle had even begun than of armies which fought to the bitter end. The only Greek state which could claim to have lived up to the ultimate hoplite ideal on more than one occasion was Thespieae, a small Boeotian city. Seven hundred Thespieaeans shared the Spartans' fate at Plataea, and their feat was matched by Thespieaeans contingents at Delium in 424 and Nemea in 394 BC.⁴³ Indeed, hoplites were not always expected to fight to the death: a man who fell and got up to fight again three times was regarded as exceptionally brave even for a Spartan (Xenophon, *Hellenica* 5.4.33), which suggests that the badly wounded or exhausted would normally retire, without loss of face.

In classical hoplite combat, it was vital that soldiers contained not only

their fear, but all their emotions. Anger in particular could be a threat to the cohesion of the phalanx. Thucydides hinted that the 'keyed-up and angry', and by implication disorderly, advance of the Argives was a factor in their defeat at Mantinea (5.70), while the death of Teleutias in an angry charge inspired Xenophon to warn that 'to proceed against enemies in a rage but without good sense is an utter mistake' (*Hellenica* 5.3.7; see above, p. 25). Fighting under the influence of anger was positively excluded from the definition of 'courage' (*andreia*, literally 'manliness') offered by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*:

People feel pain when they are angry, and pleasure when they take revenge: those who fight from these motives are aggressive, but not brave, for they do not act for the sake of what is noble or according to reason, but are driven by emotion. (1117a6-9)

Aristotle also felt that drunks can never count as brave because they 'become optimistic' about their chances of victory (1117a14-15), a philosophical observation matched by a more pragmatic critique in Xenophon, who blamed Sparta's defeat at Leuctra in part on alcohol. King Cleombrotos had convened a war council after breakfast, and 'people say that they continued drinking until noon and that the wine made them a bit keen'.⁴⁴ The ideal hoplite was sober and in control of his emotions, a happy 'medium between fear and recklessness'.⁴⁵

If in these respects greater demands were made on classical hoplites than on their archaic or Homeric predecessors, basic combat motivations remained much the same. A love of honour (*timê*) and a sense of shame (*aidôs*) were the key ingredients of true *andreia*, which

stems from a sense of shame, from striving for what is noble, namely honour, and avoiding reproach, because it is disgraceful Citizens stand their ground in the face of danger on account of the punishments imposed by law and the reproaches of fellow-citizens, and for the sake of honours.⁴⁶

Shame remained as powerful a force as it had ever been. 'I shall not shame these sacred weapons' were the opening words of the oath sworn by Athenian ephebes when they became eligible for service.⁴⁷ Legal sanctions for cowardice were only haphazardly enforced in Athens, but the social consequences were severe. We get an idea of the relentless verbal abuse hurled at cowards from the treatment in Athenian comedies of Cleonymus, a politician who allegedly dropped his shield in the battle of Delium. For many years afterwards, every single surviving comedy by Aristophanes contained a couple of jokes about Cleonymus the 'coward' and 'woman'. Ten years after the battle, Aristophanes was still mocking the 'Cleonymus tree' which 'in winter sheds its shields' (*Birds* 1473-81). An earlier play featured Cleonymus' son singing Archilochus' famous song about leaving behind his shield (see p. 172): when he gets to 'At least I saved myself',

another character cuts in: 'and brought shame on my parents' (*Peace* 1295-1304).⁴⁸ The boundaries of shameful behaviour had been redrawn since the archaic period, but the role of shame as such was undiminished. In Sparta, too, the social ostracism of 'tremblers' and their public humiliation as half-men, obliged to shave off half their beards, was no less painful than their loss of citizen rights.⁴⁹

The main honours attainable for a classical hoplite were shared with the whole army: the respect of fellow-citizens for the living; a public funeral for the dead (see pp. 145-7). This did not mean that love of honour became a less important motivation, merely that honours were more equally distributed. The Homeric and archaic custom of awarding 'prizes' of booty according to merit had been abandoned in Athens by the start of the Peloponnesian War. Instead, a single olive wreath or 'crown' was designated as *the prize* (*aristêion*) and awarded by the generals to the man judged bravest of all.⁵⁰ The very existence of this prize is further confirmation that classical battle still allowed scope for individuals to stand out in man-to-man combat and had not become an anonymous scrummage. At first, this symbolic prize probably did still come with an item of booty, as in the case of the wreath and panoply presented to Alcibiades, wounded in action at Potidaea in 432 BC, but by the mid-fourth century crowns were awarded on their own.⁵¹ Beyond this, there was no regular system of military decorations, although one-off rewards might be offered – sums of 3,000 and 10,000 drachmas for being the first to scale a city-wall are mentioned.⁵² A more egalitarian ethos appears to prevail, although, as in previous centuries, social rank continued to be a factor alongside merit: the very rich and powerful Alcibiades was happy to admit that he had been awarded the prize 'on account of my status', when it really should have gone to the man who had saved his life, the brave but poor Socrates (Plato, *Symposium* 220e).

With honours came fame, which extended to soldiers' families as well. 'The whole earth is a grave monument for famous men', Pericles is supposed to have said in his Funeral Oration, as he told parents of fallen Athenian hoplites to 'lighten your spirits with the thought of their good reputation, for love of honour is the only thing that does not grow old'. He also assumed that competition for fame would drive some people to resent and reject praise lavished on the war-dead out of sheer envy.⁵³ In Sparta, after the battle of Leuctra,

one could see the relatives of the dead parading around in public, bright and beaming, while few relatives of reported survivors were to be seen, and those few walked around disgruntled and dejected. (Xenophon, *Hellenica* 6.4.16)

Such fanatical family rivalry is chilling testimony to the continuing importance of honour and fame on the battlefield, even if these things were now to be won collectively.

Solidarity among peers continued to count for more than obedience to officers in maintaining discipline, and was extended to all fellow-soldiers: 'I shall not abandon the man beside me, *wherever* I stand in line,' Athenian ephebes swore.⁵⁴ In practice, the next man in line was still quite likely to be a kinsman, friend or lover, and these primary loyalties will have been a major force in combat. Certainly, homosexual relations were seen as a powerful means of creating cohesion and spurring soldiers on to fight their hardest, as demonstrated by the institutionalisation of homosexuality in Thebes' elite Sacred Band, which proved its value by fighting to the death at Chaeronea in 338 BC.⁵⁵ A less dramatic but perhaps more typical illustration of the important informal role which erotic ties between men could play in combat is Plato's half-joking suggestion that the ideal reward for an outstanding fighter would be a kiss from all the younger men and boy-attendants in the army (*Republic* 468bc).

Patriotism, of course, was also always a factor:

Go forward, sons of Hellas, set free your fatherland, set free your children, wives and ancestral gods, and the graves of your forefathers!

Gaze upon the true power of our city every day, and become her lover.⁵⁶

These feverishly nationalistic slogans represent a still higher key of intensity than anything found in Homer or archaic poetry, and in this respect they are characteristic of developments in battlefield mentality: the classical hoplite was not 'a wholly new type of man' (see p. 165), but in many ways a more intense and more controlled version of the Homeric hero.⁵⁷

The transformation of the phalanx

Almost all modern interpretations of Greek warfare assume that the hoplite mentality and battle-order described by Thucydides, Xenophon and their contemporaries had **existed for centuries**. The contrary evidence from archaic poetry, archaic art and Herodotus is variously explained away as unreliable, untypical or irrelevant, and the classical model is projected back 200 years or more. If we take the early evidence seriously, however, we find significant differences between archaic and classical combat, and we must conclude that the formations and tactics of the Peloponnesian War were not much more than a generation old.

We have no explicit evidence for this transformation, and it may seem strange that such dramatic changes should have occurred in the early classical period without leaving a record. But our information on institutional military change is limited and haphazard. The epoch-making creation of the Macedonian phalanx, for example, at a period for which we have otherwise abundant evidence, is attested by only a single sentence in

a much later source.⁵⁸ It is therefore not so surprising if developments taking place in the far less well-attested first half of the fifth century can only be inferred from indirect evidence.

There are in fact good reasons why the classical phalanx could only have emerged in the classical period. When hierarchical personal ties bound men together, as they did in archaic Greek society, horsemen operated alongside their followers on foot, while heavy- and light-armed men fought in unequal pairs.⁵⁹ As we shall see (pp. 233-5), drastic social and cultural changes in the late sixth and early fifth centuries BC established greater state control in political and military institutions, while promoting more egalitarian as well as more exclusive citizen communities. Only at this stage did it become possible and desirable to separate horsemen from their former followers and organise them into distinct elite units, and to separate hoplites from light-armed. By 480 BC this development was still going on – hoplites continued to be mobile and accompanied by light-armed in their battles against the Persians – but it was quite far advanced in Sparta, where it may have been completed with a reform of military organisation soon after the Persian Wars. Elsewhere, classical hoplite tactics probably took rather longer to become established. In Athens, the final segregation of heavy and light infantry may have taken place as late as the mid-fifth century, with the creation of two large specialist corps of cavalry and archers.⁶⁰

The transformation of the phalanx did not stop here. Commanders tried out new roles for their newly specialised troop types. Cavalry and light-armed soon found their niche in protecting the flanks of the phalanx in action and the backs of hoplites in flight; they also chased the enemy in pursuit, something which hoplites now found hard to do effectively without abandoning their denser, more static formations.⁶¹ Much ingenuity was expended on compensating for the tendency of the phalanx to drift to the right during the advance. While this drift had the advantage that it often allowed an army to outflank and encircle the enemy on the right wing, it also meant that armies were vulnerable to being overwhelmed in turn on their left. Strategies to cope with such a turn of events ranged from the simple expedient of setting of troops in ambush at a point where they could attack the encircling enemy wing in the rear, to the complicated and nearly disastrous sideways troop movements attempted by the Spartans at Mantinea in 418 BC. The most successful solution was found by the Thebans: their successes at Leuctra in 371 BC and Mantinea in 362 BC owed much to a 'slanted' advance, in which a strong left wing moved forward fast to force a quick breakthrough while a weak right wing held back to avoid being broken in turn.⁶²

The radical tactics of the Thebans were not the only innovation of the 370s, a dynamic decade in the history of hoplite warfare. The Spartans increased their standard depth to 12 men, as well as adding another level to their already sophisticated command structure.⁶³ The Athenians, mean-

while, took the first steps towards a system of regular training and more efficient methods of mobilisation,⁶⁴ and may also have experimented with an entirely new troop type: towards the end of the decade, the general Iphicrates appears to have created a hybrid soldier, equipped with a version of the light shield, light body-armour and light boots of the peltast, yet armed not with javelins but with a long sword and – crucially – a heavy spear, one-and-a-half times or even twice as long as the normal hoplite weapon.⁶⁵ Spears of such length, 10-15 feet, could only be wielded with both hands and would have necessitated a still more static style of fighting: only straight-ahead underarm thrusts could be delivered, without the possibility of overarm thrusting or active manipulation of the shield, which would have had to be suspended from the shoulders rather than carried on the arm.⁶⁶ This style of fighting would have made a much denser formation possible, and indeed necessary.

The experiment failed to take off in Athens, which continued to arm its citizen hoplites in the conventional manner, but some fifteen years later, in 356 BC, Philip II of Macedon created a force almost identical to the one pioneered by Iphicrates. Macedonian infantrymen carried a small shield suspended from the shoulders and a pike 12 to 16 feet long; they stood in a tight phalanx, almost literally shoulder-to-shoulder with their neighbours, leaving just enough room for the levelled pikes of the rear ranks to pass between them, protruding well in front and overlapping with their own. Instead of running into battle Macedonian soldiers had to march in step, and instead of fighting with one hand and pushing with the other, they simply pushed and stabbed with the pike alone.⁶⁷ This type of fighting required a professionalism which not even the Spartans could match, and was made possible only by a total transformation of the Macedonian army. The infantry became a standing force, subject to constant formation-drills and 35-mile training marches in full gear – including a heavy load of provisions and tools since personal attendants were banned.⁶⁸

The Macedonian phalanx, in its extreme density, was the logical culmination of centuries of slow development towards ever more exclusive close combat in ever closer formation. Its superiority became self-evident when in little more than 30 years it conquered the Balkans, Greece and the Near East as far as Pakistan. Yet Greek city-states did not even try to adopt its tactics until a century or more later, when first the cities of Boeotia, then Sparta, and finally the Achaean League formed their own Macedonian-style phalanxes in an attempt to match the armies of the Hellenistic kings and become major players on the international stage.⁶⁹ The other Greek cities could not follow suit, for the same reason that Iphicrates' experiment had not worked earlier: even states which were in principle prepared to abandon their traditional ethos of amateurism and elitism, such as Athens, lacked the manpower and money to maintain standing armies – and the Macedonian way of war made demands on skill, stamina and co-ordination which only fully professional forces could meet.