

Armies and Navies

Lecture 9: Homeric Warfare

The problems of Homeric warfare

- Date of the Homeric poems
- Understanding the Homeric poems
- Modern debates on the hoplite reform

Homeric dates

- There have been several dates proposed for the Homeric poems.
- There is a debate both for the date of the composition of the poems and a date of the “Homeric” society
- There are arguments that the society depicted in Homer can be dated from the Mycenaean period to the 8th century BCE.
- It is now generally accepted (although there are still some dissenting voices) that Homer composed the poems sometime in the 8th century BCE.

Is Homeric warfare consistent?

- There are three positions regarding Homeric warfare:
- Homeric warfare is not consistent either to itself or to any known type of ancient warfare.
- Homeric warfare represents early hoplite warfare.
- Homeric warfare is consistent within itself and represents open formation infantry warfare.

Inconsistency?

- Fantastic details
- Inconsistency of arms and armour
- Use of chariots in a non-logical way
- Combat that does not look realistic.

Hoplite warfare?

- This has been argued by Latacz (*Kampfparanese, Kampfdarstellung und Kampfwirklichkeit in der Ilias, bei Kallinos und Tyrtaios*)
- The main aspect of Homeric warfare is essentially phalanx warfare of the hoplite type, i.e. massed infantry charges in close formation.
- The descriptions in Homer of what the heroes do is considered to be the fight of the promachoi before the actual mass charge.

Open formation infantry warfare?

- Argued by van Wees (“The Homeric Way of War: The 'Iliad' and the Hoplite Phalanx (I)” *G&R* 1994)
- Homer presents open formation infantry warfare and thus incorporated both missile warfare and chariots as means of transportation in the battlefield.

Questions **you** need to consider!

- a. Is Homeric warfare consistent?
- b. Is it possible, even if not probable?
- c. Does it represent an actual type of warfare of the archaic or pre-archaic periods?

The heroes

- Homeric heroes are superhuman.
- They have greater strength, stamina and talent than an ordinary human.
- But the son of Tydeus grasped in his hand a stone—a mighty deed—one that not two men could bear, such as mortals now are; yet lightly did he wield it even alone. [305] Therewith he smote Aeneas on the hip, where the thigh turns in the hip joint,—the cup, men call it—and crushed the cup-bone, and broke furthermore both sinews, and the jagged stone tore the skin away. Homer *Iliad* 5.300-8

The hero and the aristeia

- A number of heroes in Homer, such as Achilles, Hector and Diomedes are provided with an aristeia.
- An aristeia is essentially a series of combats where the hero kills a large number of opponents and turns the tide of battle.
- The great question is whether the hero, or this depiction of the aristeia, is a realistic part of warfare or whether it is just a fantasy to provide greater admiration for the hero.

Mass warfare

- There is a great debate as to how the mass of fighters take part in battle.
- Latacz suggested a close formation hoplite-style phalanx.
- for they that were the chosen bravest abode the onset of the Trojans and goodly Hector, [130] fencing spear with spear, and shield with serried shield; buckler pressed on buckler, helm on helm, and man on man; and the horse-hair crests on the bright helmet-ridges touched each other, as the men moved their heads, in such close array stood they one by another, and spears in stout hands overlapped each other, as they were brandished, [135] and their minds swerved not, but they were fain to fight. Homer *Iliad* 13.129-35

Open formation mass warfare

- Using anthropological studies of tribal societies, mainly in the Pacific islands.
- Masses of warriors congregating without set formation.
- After the initiation of battle there is considerable space between warriors or groups of warriors.

Homeric description

- A great problem that scholars have had is that Homeric description of warfare seems impossible in reality.
- The blow by blow accounts of the fights of individual heroes seem to suggest that the mass of the armies were staying in the background or being idle.
- Yet tribal societies seem to have a similar system of describing battles in essentially blow by blow accounts of individual fights in spite of what happens around them in the battlefield.

The Anthropological Evidence

- 'We met on the mountainside near Wihun. A man of our side, named Maigi, threw a spear at a man of their side, named Wea. He missed. Then a man of their side threw a spear and hit my cross-cousin from Ahalaseimihi. Then I was angry and threw a spear at Wena, a big man of their side, and missed ...' Mead "Introduction" in Gardner & Heider *Gardens of War* (1974), p.viii



Why open formation is better?

- No evidence of interlocking shields
- There is evidence of heroes moving around the battlefield freely.
- Use of chariots as transportation for leaders in the battlefield.
- Use of missiles simultaneous with infantry combat.

Missiles

- Descriptions of battle in Homer always include missiles (stones, arrows, etc.)
- There are two ways for missiles to work in an infantry battle:
- Over the heads of the massed infantry in combat
- Through the clusters of soldiers in open formation.

Arrows Over our Heads

- But the Locrians followed not with the great-hearted son of Oïleus, for their hearts abode not steadfast in close fight, seeing they had no brazen helms with thick plumes of horse-hair, [715] neither round shields, nor spears of ash, but trusting in bows and well-twisted slings of sheep's wool had they followed with him to Ilios; with these thereafter they shot thick and fast, and sought to break the battalions of the Trojans. So the one part in front with their war-gear, richly dight, [720] fought with the Trojans and with Hector in his harness of bronze, and the others behind kept shooting from their cover; and the Trojans bethought them no more of fight, for the arrows confounded them. Homer *Iliad* 13.711-21

Arrows All Around Us

- The Lokrians are unique in Homeric warfare.
- Usually heroes and ordinary soldiers throw missiles or fire arrows in the middle of other combat.
- Thus there are hero archers, such as Teukros or Paris.
- So, this type of missile combat necessitates an open formation.

The Promachoi

- It has been suggested, mainly by Latacs, that before the mass infantry charge a number of warriors would fight (almost as if in exhibition) in the space between the two massed armies.
- Yet, in Homer individual combat, as the heroes engage in, is shown throughout the course of battle, not only in the beginning.
- A hoplite-style phalanx cannot accommodate this type of combat but open formation can.

Chariots in Homer

- It has long been suggested that the use of chariots in Homer is inconsistent with any type of chariot fighting we know about from other historical periods.
- Chariots should be used as battalions of mobile missile cover, as common in the Bronze Age Near East.
- But Homer depicts chariots mainly as means of transportation from and to the battlefield and inside the battlefield (the chariot-taxi!)

Chariots and Open formation

- Under the open-formation argument, then the use of chariots as means of transport rather than as means of combat is possible.
- Chariots in this argument provide mobility and prestige to the warrior leaders.
- Also, in Homer only leaders have chariots, thus there is no possibility of battalions of chariots working together, since leaders would accompany their footsoldiers in battle.

Homer and Hoplite Warfare

- It is up to you to decide whether Homer describes mass formation hoplite-style warfare or open formation infantry warfare.
- The main reason debate this issue has to do with the possible dating of the beginnings of phalanx warfare in archaic Greece.

Homeric Society and Warfare

- The Homeric society and the Greek society of the classical period are both similar and different.
- Homer concentrates on the individual hero and his exploits, while in the classical period the soldier was considered first and foremost a part of a formation, a community.
- However, the matters of courage in the battlefield and individual bravery, as well as the ugliness of war, remain constant in Greek literature from Homer to the end of the classical period.

Questions?

Follow-up Reading

- *Iliad* Book 13
- Hans Van Wees 'The Homeric Way of War: The 'Iliad' and the Hoplite Phalanx (I)' *Greece & Rome*, Second Series, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Apr., 1994), pp. 1-18, Stable URL:
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/643127>