

Armies and Navies

Lecture 11: *A matter of resistance*

The Othismos

- The Othismos is the mass-shoving of hoplites in battle.
- It is one of the most important matters of debate regarding hoplite warfare.
- There are two connected debated matters:
 - The hoplite line formation
 - The existence of the othismos

The Phalanx

- The phalanx is the close-packed formation of the classical hoplite.
- The usual phalanx was 8 lines deep but there are instances of deeper phalanxes being used by the Greeks.



The Traditional View

- The traditional view is that the hoplite line was closely packed and that the othismos took place throughout the duration of the battle.

The line

- A very important matter of debate is the formation of the hoplite line in the phalanx.
- Traditionally hoplites are thought to stand next to each other in a straight line with shields overlapping, essentially shoulder to shoulder.

Evidence of the close-packed formation

- Just before the battle joined, King Agis resolved upon the following manoeuvre. All armies are alike in this: on going into action they get forced out rather on their right wing, and one and the other overlap with this adversary's left; because fear makes each man do his best to shelter his unarmed side with the shield of the man next him on the right, thinking that the closer the shields are locked together the better will he be protected. The man primarily responsible for this is the first upon the right wing, who is always striving to withdraw from the enemy his unarmed side; and the same apprehension makes the rest follow him.
Thucydides 5.71

The Othismos

- The traditional view is that the othismos took place throughout the battle.
- Essentially the rear lines shoved the soldiers in front of them with the ultimate aim to smash through the opposite phalanx.

Evidence for the Othismos

- Hippocrates had got half through the army with his exhortation, when the Boeotians, after a few more hasty words from Pagondas, struck up the paeon, and came against them from the hill; the Athenians advancing to meet them, and closing at a run. The extreme wing of neither army came into action, one like the other being stopped by the water-courses in the way; the rest engaged with the utmost obstinacy, shield against shield. Thucydides 4.96

The Other Side

- A number of scholars have disagreed with the traditional view arguing in favour of a more open type of fighting, where the othismos is only part of the battle.

The open line

- While the hoplites were closely packed together, they were in a more loose formation than the traditionalists assume.
- In such a formation, the first lines of the opposite sides fought in hand-to-hand essentially one-to-one battles.
- The rear lines were mainly used to provide reserve fighters for those fallen in the first line.

The judicial othismos

- The othismos had a place in hoplite battle but it was a tactic rather than a constant feature of battle.
- A phalanx would perform the othismos at some point in the battle, usually towards the end, in order to break the formation of the enemy.

Evidence of the othismos as tactic

- and while he was yet calling upon her thus, the Tegeans started forward before them and advanced against the Barbarians, and forthwith after the prayer of Pausanias the offerings proved favourable for the Lacedemonians as they sacrificed. So when this at length came to pass, then they also advanced against the Persians; and the Persians put away their bows and came against them. Then first there was fighting about the wicker-work shields, and when these had been overturned, after that the fighting was fierce by the side of the temple of Demeter, and so continued for a long time, until at last they came to justling; for the Barbarians would take hold of the spears and break them off. Herodotos 9.62

Issues to consider: Positioning

There are two possible ways for the hoplite to position his body:

1. Frontal with the shield held in front of him straight down
2. Sideways with the shield held in front of him slanted forward

Issues to consider: Length of battle

- Battles were generally very long in the Greek world.
- It would be extremely difficult for all the hoplites to sustain shoving and fighting for such long periods of time.
- Moreover there is also this story reported by the Carthaginians themselves, who therein relate that which is probable in itself, namely that while the Barbarians fought with the Hellenes in Sicily from the early morning till late in the afternoon (for to such a length the combat is said to have been protracted) Herodotos 7.167

Issues to consider: Mache and othismos

- The armies now came to close quarters, and for a long while fought without either giving ground. Meanwhile there occurred some claps of thunder with lightning and heavy rain, which did not fail to add to the fears of the party fighting for the first time, and very little acquainted with war; while to their more experienced adversaries these phenomena appeared to be produced by the time of year, and much more alarm was felt at the continued resistance of the enemy. At last the Argives drove in the Syracusan left, and after them the Athenians routed the troops opposed to them, and the Syracusan army was thus cut in two and betook itself to flight. The Athenians did not pursue far, being held in check by the numerous and undefeated Syracusan horse, who attacked and drove back any of their heavy infantry whom they saw pursuing in advance of the rest; in spite of which the victors followed so far as was safe in a body, and then went back and set up a trophy. Meanwhile the Syracusans rallied at the Helorine road, where they re-formed as well as they could under the circumstances, and even sent a garrison of their own citizens to the Olympieum, fearing that the Athenians might lay hands on some of the treasures there. The rest returned to the town. Thucydides 6.70

Was there fighting in the hoplite battle?

- The traditional view in arguing in favour of the othismos as the entirety of hoplite battle has essentially made fighting obsolete.
- One of the main arguments in favour of this is that Athens until the latter part of the fourth century did not provide official training to its hoplites.
- But the evidence is not that clear-cut.
- **I tell you, because military training is not publicly recognised by the state, you must not make that an excuse for being a whit less careful in attending to it yourself.** For you may rest assured that there is no kind of struggle, apart from war, and no undertaking in which you will be worse off by keeping your body in better fettle. For in everything that men do the body is useful; and in all uses of the body it is of great importance to be in as high a state of physical efficiency as possible. Xenophon Memorabilia 3.12.5

The Debate and You

- Different scholars have different opinions on this debate.
- It is up to you to decide which side you think has the most convincing argument.

Questions?

Follow-up Reading

- G. L. Cawkwell 'Orthodoxy and Hoplites' *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 39, No. 2 (1989), pp. 375-389 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/639380>
- A. J. Holladay 'Hoplites and Heresies' *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 102, (1982), pp. 94-103 Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/631128>
- Robert D. Luginbill 'Othismos: The Importance of the Mass-Shove in Hoplite Warfare' *Phoenix*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Spring, 1994), pp. 51-61 Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1192506>