

ARMIES AND NAVIES

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?

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

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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?

- Do the follow-up/preparatory reading on Moodle.