

The Archaic Phalanx

Infantry combat down to the Persian Wars

The warriors of Euboea shaved their foreheads, samurai-style. A local historian explained that they did so in order to prevent the enemy from grabbing them by the hair. The Euboeans were indeed among the first to gain a reputation for excellence in hand-to-hand fighting:

Not many bows will be drawn, no great number of slings extended, when the god of war stirs up trouble in the plain: it will be the woeful work of swords, for that is the kind of fighting in which these men are experts, the spear-famed masters of Euboea.¹

The emergence of soldiers like these, exclusively dedicated to hand-to-hand fighting, and the development of a close-order formation are the two main strands of the history of Greek infantry combat. The introduction of the hoplite shield and bronze body armour was an important step in this direction but only a first step on a long road. Vase-paintings and fragments of songs show that heavily armoured infantry long continued to fight in a loose formation and to mingle in action with horsemen and light-armed. Archaic infantry combat was in many ways closer to Homer's heroic clashes than to the battles of the classical period.²

Dark Age combat and the first hoplites, c. 720-640 BC

Hair-grabbing, sword-wielding warriors are among the earliest human figures to be represented in Greek art (Fig. 12), and the sword is the single most prominent weapon in battle scenes painted on Athenian vases from c. 850 to 700 BC. The size and number of swords found in graves of this period confirms that Dark Age warriors were no strangers to close combat, despite their light shields and lack of metal body armour.³ At the same time, Dark Age swordsmen also fought at long range with throwing-spears or arrows.⁴ Vase-paintings suggest that spearmen and bowmen stood side by side, and that the latter played a more prominent role than they were to do in later centuries. Archers make up about a third of all warriors,⁵ and they stand in the front-line as the equals of spearmen: equipped with



Fig. 12. Combat with swords on the leg of an Attic Middle Geometric stand, c. 850-760 BC (Toronto, Ontario Museum 957X245).

sword and helmet, and sometimes a shield, they are almost always face-to-face with an opponent, and are repeatedly shown killing an enemy with a shot in the head or throat (Fig. 13).⁶

Around 720-700 BC, a desire for greater protection in hand-to-hand fighting inspired the introduction of the bronze panoply and the large double-grip shield which created the hoplite. The new shield was so heavy that it needed to rest on the bearer's left shoulder as well as his lower arm. Hoplites therefore adopted a sideways-on stance, left shoulder and shield turned towards the enemy, left foot forward, right foot placed well back for balance (see Plate IV). Poets evoked the stance of soldiers 'leaning their shields against their shoulders' and exhorted men to stand 'legs well apart, both feet planted firmly on the ground, biting your lip'.⁷ Hoplites would

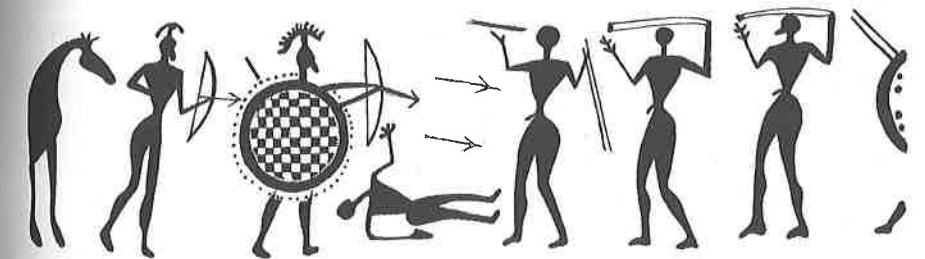


Fig. 13. Archers and slingers in combat. Above: central part of a scene of combat on a late eighth-century amphora recently discovered on Paros. A light-armed and a heavy-armed archer fight a spearman (apparently armed with three javelins) and two slingers over a fallen warrior. The slingers shown here are unique in Greek Geometric art. Not shown in the drawing are a line of six or seven horsemen and three footsoldiers with pairs of spears and round shields standing behind the combatants on the left, and two footsoldiers with pairs of spears and round shields on the right. Right: fragment of an Attic Late Geometric I krater, c. 750 BC (Louvre A 528).



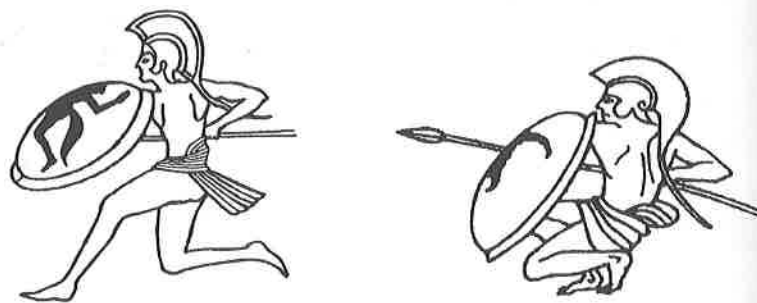


Fig. 14. Hoplites running and squatting with left shoulder turned forwards, torso almost at a right angle to the shield, on (left) a terracotta plaque from Athens, c. 520-510 BC (Acropolis Museum 1037) and (right) an Attic red-figure cup, c. 520-10 BC, from Chiusi (Louvre G25).

even squat and run with their left shoulders twisted forwards (Fig. 14).⁸ Since the shield was tilted back against the shoulder, its lower edge projected a couple of feet in front of its bearer (Fig. 15; Plate IV) and provided cover not only for his upper body but for his 'thighs and shins below'.⁹ Archaic poets speak of shields striking against one another with 'a terrible din' as the protruding lower rims of the shields clashed in accidental collisions and in deliberate shoving designed to expose an opponent or throw him off balance.¹⁰

The hoplite shield thus served as something of an offensive weapon as well as providing excellent protection. It is a common misconception that the shield failed to offer much cover for the bearer's right flank while offering too much cover on the left, so that hoplites were forced to stand close together and in effect shelter behind the redundant left-hand halves of their neighbours' shields (see Fig. 16). This would be true if hoplites had stood frontally opposed to the enemy, like wrestlers, but since they actu-

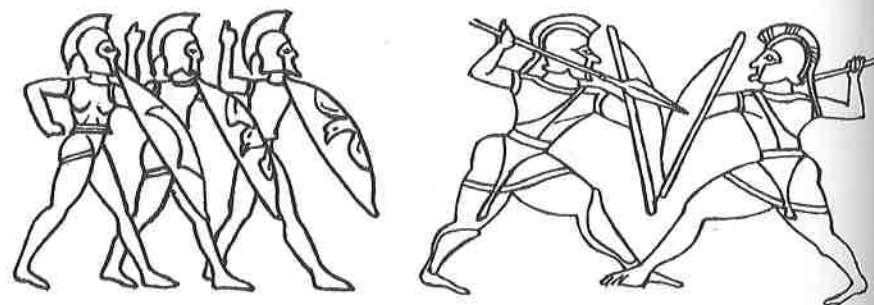


Fig. 15. Profile views of hoplite shields as carried in combat, tilted back against the left shoulder, on (left) a Middle Protocorinthian vase, the Berlin *aryballos* attributed to the Chigi/Macmillan Painter, c. 650 BC, from Kamiros (Berlin inv. 3773), and (right) a Siana cup by the Heidelberg Painter, c. 560 BC, from Boeotia (Athens, NM 435).

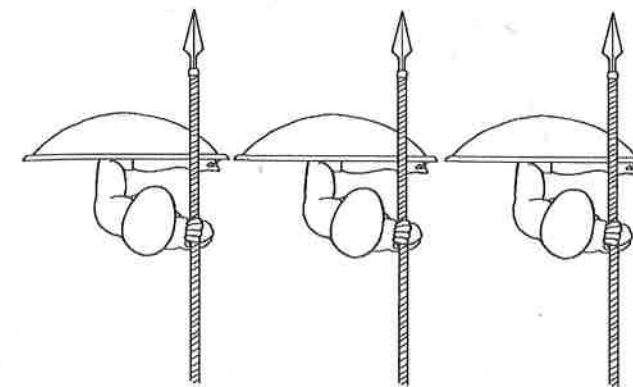


Fig. 16. Phalanx formation, assuming three-foot intervals and a frontal stance.

ally stood sideways-on, like fencers, they automatically found themselves behind the centre of their shields, well covered on both sides (Fig. 17; Plate IV). Of course the hoplite's right flank was relatively 'unprotected', as classical Greeks said, but only to the extent that *any* kind of shield carried on the left arm leaves the bearer's other side comparatively vulnerable. The hoplite shield did not presuppose or dictate a dense formation but could be used to equally good effect in open-order fighting.¹¹

Indeed, for two generations or more after the introduction of the new shield hoplites must have fought in a quite open formation because they continued to use their spears as missiles, which requires a good deal of room for manoeuvre. Vase-paintings show that a pair of spears continued to be standard hoplite equipment until at least 640 BC. One or both of these weapons might be fitted with a throwing-loop – a string wound around the fingers so as to make the spear spin when thrown, giving it greater speed and force – which leaves no doubt that they were designed to be used as

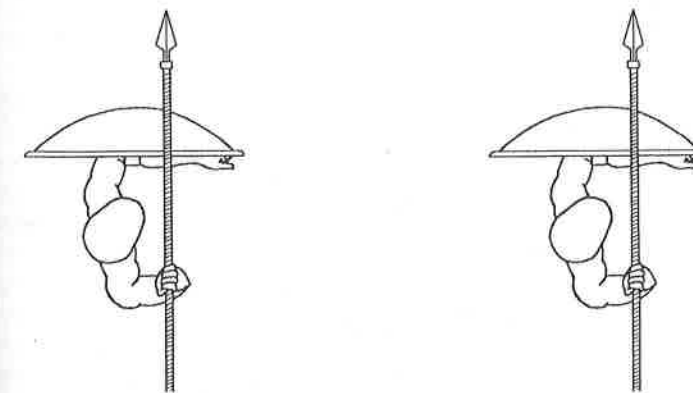


Fig. 17. Phalanx formation, assuming six-foot intervals and a sideways-on stance.

missiles.¹² Songs composed by Archilochus of Paros and Callinus of Ephesus between 680 and 640 BC alluded to battle as 'the thud of javelins', an expression (also used in the *Iliad*) which suggests that spears were used primarily as missiles.¹³ Hence Callinus poignantly urged the young men of his native town to 'charge forward with raised spear' and 'throw your last javelin as you are dying' (F 1.5, 9-11).

Archers continued to fight alongside spearmen, but from the early seventh century onwards they were represented in art, not as independent fighters, but as unarmoured men kneeling or squatting behind hoplites (Fig. 18).¹⁴ The *Iliad* vividly describes how this works: the archer 'stands under the shield' of a heavy-armed soldier, but every so often jumps out, 'looks around to see if he can shoot someone in the crowd', fires a shot, and quickly returns to the cover of the shield, 'like a child to its mother' (8.266-72; cf. 4.112-15; 15.440-4). Close co-operation between spearmen and bowmen, unattested in earlier art, must have been a new tactic, made possible by the large new shields and encouraged by the greater emphasis on close combat.

The number of archers in archaic art is minute compared to the number of hoplites – and much smaller than in Geometric art – but it does not follow that the archaic phalanx included only a handful of them. Their rarity in art was not a reflection of their small numbers in archaic armies, but of their lower prestige. As close combat came to be ever more highly valued, and as light-armed became dependent on hoplites for protection, their status fell, and artists began to represent them less often. Similarly, the *Iliad*, which contains some dismissive remarks about the effectiveness of archery (5.204-16, 11.385-95) features only a few named bowmen, but many 'arrows flying from bowstrings' are a constant presence in the background.¹⁵ In any case, the large quantities of arrowheads which have been found in excavations prove that archery in some form continued to be a major part of archaic Greek warfare.¹⁶

Painted battle-scenes of this same period also feature other new themes, such as flight and pursuit and groups of hoplites charging into action. The latter in particular have often been seen as the first representations of close-order mass fighting in the manner of the classical phalanx, they show at best a single line of hoplites, who might be the front rank of a phalanx or merely a schematically rendered crowd.¹⁷ The most elaborate battle scene appears on a Corinthian jug of c. 640 BC, the Chigi vase (Plate XVIII). In the centre of the scene are two small groups of hoplites raising short spears and holding a larger spear in reserve. It is clear from a picture of a pair of spears at the far left of the scene that they have throwing-loops attached. In other words, the two front lines are about to hurl javelins at one another, and contrary to appearances are evidently meant to be standing some way apart. On the right are seven running hoplites, the first few with spears half-raised as they approach the enemy. On the left, we find nine hoplites, also running, but apparently still at

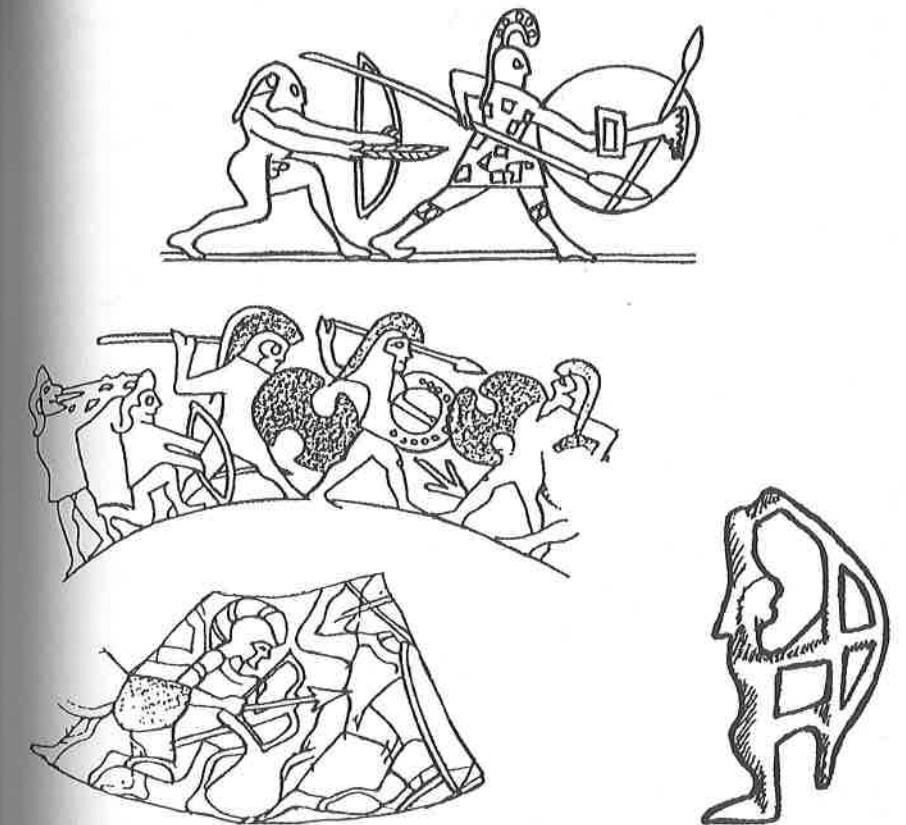


Fig. 18. Squatting archers. Top: detail of Middle Protocorinthian aryballos, 690-80 BC, from Iechalon (Corinth Museum CP-2096). Centre: detail of Middle Protocorinthian aryballos, 675-650 BC, from Perachora. Bottom left: detail of Middle Corinthian pyxis, 600-575 BC, from Perachora. Bottom right: Laconian Lead II figurine of a kneeling archer, c. 620-580 BC, from Sparta (Sparta Museum).

some distance from the action since none of them have their spears at the ready yet. On the far left, two more men are putting on their armour and getting ready to join combat with a pair of throwing-spears. The groups in this scene are all different in size, move at different speeds, and make use of missiles, so they cannot represent close formations, let alone a phalanx organised in regular ranks.¹⁸ The Chigi vase rather calls to mind the fluidity of the Homeric battlefield, where individuals and small groups advance at their own pace, and crowds come running up from the rear when embattled frontline fighters call out for help.¹⁹

Even in full armour, a hoplite was quite capable of moving back and forth across the battlefield in the Homeric manner. The equipment was not so cumbersome that it imposed a static form of combat.²⁰ Classical

hoplites charged at a run over at least 200 yards, and ran still further in flight and pursuit, even if some threw away their shields in order to go faster. Images of running hoplites, as on the Chigi vase, are common in archaic art (see also Figs 14, 21A). Running in armour actually became an Olympic sport in 520 BC.²¹ But of course the weight of the panoply did slow a man down, and the persistence of the lighter Boeotian shield until c. 480 BC shows that some hoplites continued to opt for greater mobility rather than greater protection.²²

In flight, the hoplite might be forced to discard his shield. For classical Greeks it was a disgrace and a crime to throw away one's shield, but not so in the early seventh century:

One of those Saians is showing off with a shield, a perfect piece of armour, which I dropped beside a bush, unwillingly. At least I saved myself. Why should I worry about a shield? Let that thing go to hell! I'll get myself another one, just as good.

Judging by the tone of the poet, Archilochus (F 5 West), running away from the enemy, though embarrassing, was not wholly unacceptable behaviour in the fluid, mobile battles of his time.

Tyrtaeus' phalanx, c. 640-600 BC: close combat, missiles and mobility

The next crucial step in the development of the hoplite phalanx came soon after 640 BC, when, as countless images show, the majority of soldiers abandoned the use of throwing-spears and fought exclusively hand-to-hand with a single thrusting spear and sword.²³ The change is reflected also in the songs of Tyrtaeus, composed during Sparta's war of conquest in Messenia in the late seventh century BC,²⁴ which for the first time made an explicit distinction between the light-armed and the heavy-armed (FF 11.35; 23a.14). Tyrtaeus encouraged the light-armed to use missiles, while he constantly appealed to the hoplites to fight the enemy face-to-face:

Go near, strike with a long spear or a sword at close range, and kill a man. Set foot against foot, press shield against shield, fling crest against crest, helmet against helmet, and chest against chest, and fight a man, gripping the hilt of a sword or a long spear.²⁵

The poet also urged solidarity within the ranks. 'Stay together when you fight, lads', he said. 'Speak words of encouragement to the next man as you stand beside him.'²⁶ Exhortations to stand one's ground and warnings against running away formed another major theme.²⁷

Tyrtaeus' songs may have advertised the virtues of hand-to-hand combat in close order – which is why they were still sung and cited in the classical period – but they reveal that late seventh-century hoplites re-

mained far more mobile than their classical successors. They needed encouragement not just to hold their position in the line, but to make their way to the front in the first place. 'Dare to move into close range and towards the frontline fighters [*promachoi*].' 'Do not stand with your shield beyond the range of missiles.' A badly damaged fragment appears to describe a battle against the Messenians during which 'some stand face-to-face' with the enemy while 'others are beyond the range of missiles'. A soldier who 'remains among the frontline fighters without pause', rather than drop back from time to time, is praised. When and how far to charge forward or hang back was evidently a matter of individual choice.²⁸ The same freedom of movement is attested in the *Smyrneis* of Tyrtaeus' contemporary Mimnermus, which celebrated the deeds of a great warrior 'racing among the frontline fighters'.²⁹ Appeals to go in close, stick together, and stay at the front were urgent precisely because they were addressed to hoplites who did not have a fixed station in a tight battle order, but were quite mobile.³⁰

Late seventh-century hoplites continued to fight in an order sufficiently open for light-armed men and mounted hoplites to mingle. When Greek mercenaries and hangers-on at the Lydian court first encountered the Medes, during the reign of Cyaxares in the late seventh century, they were struck by the separation of different types of fighting men in the Median army. The story grew up that Cyaxares had been 'the first to put spear-men, archers and horsemen in a separate formation each; before him, they were all indiscriminately mixed up together' (Herodotus 1.103.1). Evidently the Greeks themselves at this time did not yet differentiate tactical units in this way: heavy infantry, light-armed and horsemen still stood together in a single motley crowd.

How Greek light-armed operated at this time emerges from a few lines in which Tyrtaeus briefly turned aside from his habitual exhortations to the hoplites:

You, light-armed, squatting under a shield here and there, must throw great rocks and hurl smooth javelins while you stand close by the heavy-armed. (F 11.35-8)

The light infantry was scattered 'here and there' among the hoplites, 'squatting' for cover behind the latter's shields, in the manner of archers as represented in Homer and archaic art.³¹ Tyrtaeus' references to 'standing beyond the range of missiles' indicate that light-armed were present in large numbers. He highlights the 'great rocks' which clatter against soldiers' helmets (F 19.19-20; cf. 19.2), and in a very scrappy fragment he speaks of 'savage missiles', 'many men hurling sharp javelins' and 'light-armed fighters ... running forward' (F 23a.10-14). At the end of the seventh century, Alcaeus, another poet with much combat experience, spoke of greaves as 'a defence against the forceful missile' (F 140.10 L-P),

as if the greatest threat to a soldier were not the hoplites' spears and swords, but the arrows, stones and javelins of the light-armed.

Alcaeus, like Archilochus before him, was not ashamed to publicise the fact that he had dropped his shield in battle: a poem addressed, via a friend, to the people of his home town, said: 'Alcaeus is safe, but men from Attica hung up [his armour] in the sanctuary of Grey-eyed Athena' (F 428a L-P). Running away from the enemy was clearly still not the utter disgrace it would later become, because formations remained open and fluid, breaking and rallying with relative ease. The Spartans, desperate to force a decision in the Second Messenian War, found it necessary to station their troops in front of a deep trench, making it impossible for their men to run away, and forestalling the kind of undecisive surges back and forth across the battlefield familiar from the *Iliad*, which must have continued to characterise most contemporary battles.³²

The hoplites' new exclusive concentration on close combat may have been accompanied by the first steps towards their organisation in centrally mobilised units – three tribes in Sparta (Tyrtaeus F 19.8-9) – rather than in privately raised war bands. There is perhaps also a hint of a more abstract notion of patriotic duty in war. Tyrtaeus remarks that a good performance in battle is 'a shared blessing for the *polis* and the entire people' (F 12.15). Otherwise, motivating factors were what they had been in previous generations: the defence of 'fatherland', family and friends, the avoidance of shame for oneself and one's family, and the quest for fame and respect for oneself, family and country.³³ The importance of individual fame, however, may have been toned down a little. In an early seventh-century battle exhortation, the poet Callinus had promised that 'the entire people' would regard a brave warrior 'as their bulwark, for by himself he matches the deeds of many', so that 'he will be the equal of the demi-gods during his lifetime' (F 1.18-21 West). Tyrtaeus, more modestly, promised immortality only after death (F 12.27-34); during his lifetime, the brave warrior would merely have everyone's 'respect' – meaning that his fellow-townsmen would not insult or injure him, and 'all will give up their seats for him – the young, the men of his own age, and even his elders' (F 12.35-42).

Images of combat in the sixth century

For four or five generations between Tyrtaeus and the Persian Wars the written record of military developments is a blank. Only a few scraps of poetry so much as mention war. On the other hand, thousands of painted and sculpted scenes of warriors and combat survive, the majority dating to the sixth century. Whether they illustrate episodes from heroic legend or show anonymous hoplites in generic battle scenes, these images usually feature heavy-armed men fighting in pairs or small groups, occasionally joined by an archer, a couple of horses or even a chariot. There is rarely

any sign of regular order (Plates XIX, XX). Scholars who believe that the phalanx reached its classical form no later than about 650 BC dismiss sixth-century art as representing a heroic style of combat long since abandoned, if it ever existed.³⁴ As we have seen, however, the phalanx was still open and fluid in the days of Tyrtaeus, Mimnermus and Alcaeus, and it is entirely possible that it remained so through all or most of the next century. Sixth-century scenes of heroes and unknown soldiers in combat, therefore, may well be based on contemporary reality, and reflect a loose, mixed formation still in use at the time.

Two dozen or so images show hoplites in a line, running or marching into battle, standing ready to fight or running away, but they contain nothing to indicate that tactics had developed beyond their late seventh-century level.³⁵ An early sixth-century painting offers a rare glimpse of the rear ranks in action (Plate XXI): a fairly typical scene of six men fighting hard over a fallen comrade is enlivened by the addition of a second group behind them, consisting of five or more hoplites who strike a crouching pose, some almost down on one knee, others merely stooping slightly. They do not raise their spears for action, but hold their weapons horizontally or rest them on the ground pointing diagonally forward. The painter clearly had in mind the kind of scenario described by Homer and Tyrtaeus, in which the 'multitude' stand some way behind the 'frontline fighters'. Their unglamorous appearance, however, crouching behind their shields for safety, is never described in the surviving epics or exhortations, and the artist presumably drew inspiration from life rather than literature. Such scenes are rare, but it is hardly surprising that archaic artists usually did not bother to put nervously cowering crowds in their pictures.³⁶

Crouching for safety, at a distance from the enemy, only makes sense if there is a danger of being hit by missiles. The occasional token archer still featured in sixth-century battle scenes, and very rarely a slinger or stone-thrower.³⁷ This was not just an artistic cliché, as is clear from the many figurines of archers in the familiar kneeling combat pose found among the countless lead figurines dedicated at sanctuaries in Sparta throughout the century.³⁸ In Athenian art, archers were an exceptionally popular subject, which featured on some 750 surviving vases, most dating to between 525 and 500 BC. These archers commonly stand, walk or run beside hoplites, and on about a hundred vases they take an active part in battle or ambush amongst the heavy infantry. Sometimes hoplites fight over the body of a dead Bowman (Figs 19, 20). Nine out of ten archers are in Scythian dress, and their exotic appearance helps explain why they were popular with artists when ordinary archers were much more rarely portrayed: painters liked the contrast between 'barbarian' bowmen and Greek heavy infantry. Scythian archers had no precedent in epic poetry, nor is the idea of putting them among hoplites likely to have been an artistic fiction designed purely for symbolic effect – Thracian peltasts, equally exotic and also often represented in Athenian art, were not shown

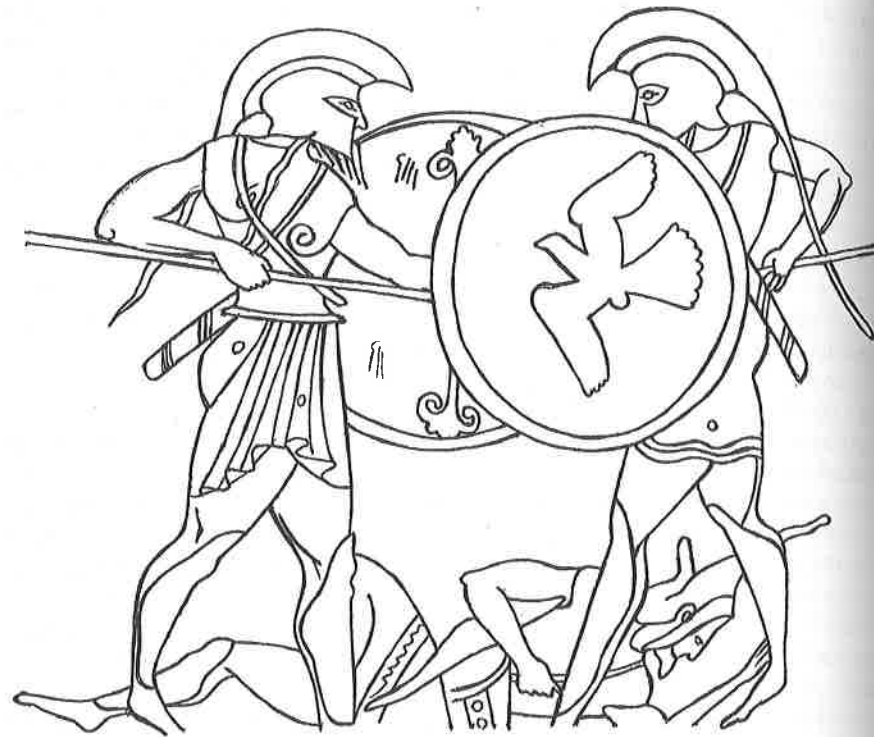


Fig. 19. Archer fallen in combat between heroes, on a black-figure amphora showing Diomedes and Hektor fighting over 'Skythes', late sixth century BC (Musée Pincé, Angers).

mingling with hoplites in this way. In all probability, Athens did employ Scythian mercenaries at the time, and these did operate as shown, mixed in with a loose hoplite formation, rather than as a separate, independent force.³⁹

Archaic vase-painters occasionally show hoplites followed into action by their chariots and charioteers, in the Homeric style, or more often by a pair of horses controlled by a squire, a practice which has no precedent in epic.⁴⁰ The heroic-looking chariots are represented with some concern for plausibility: whereas horses and squires stand facing battle and will have to turn



Fig. 20. Archers taking part in mass combat between hoplite armies, on a black-figure kylix of c. 550 BC (sold on the antiquities market in Basle).

round to retreat, the less manoeuvrable chariots are turned round already and stand facing away from the action, ready to leave in a hurry when their master remounts (Plate XX). Charioteers never carry hoplite shields, which would interfere with their control of the reins, but only Boeotian shields, slung across the back and leaving both hands free (Plate XXII). Such realistic touches support the literary evidence which suggest that even in the sixth century chariots might be used as transports in war (see above, pp. 59-60). Horses and chariots sometimes appear in the thick of battle, and one remarkable painting shows three lines of seven running hoplites, each group about to be joined by an eighth running hoplite whose horses are galloping beside him (Fig. 21A). The horses are clearly envisaged as mingling with the infantry in the epic manner.⁴¹

Some hoplites, especially mounted hoplites, are portrayed as carrying pairs of throwing-spears or light Boeotian shields, or both, until about 480 BC (see above, p. 50). Every single one of the two dozen Athenian vase-paintings of a hoplite arming himself in the presence of a Scythian archer, for example, has the hoplite picking up two spears (Fig. 22).⁴² Throwing-spears and light shields are usually dismissed as unrealistic, heroising elements, but if the infantry formation remained as loose and open as the artists suggest, a minority of hoplites – perhaps the elite – may well have used such equipment and continued to practice a more mobile, missile-based style of fighting, long after the single thrusting spear and the heavy shield had become the norm.

So far as we can tell from the iconography, the Greek style of fighting throughout the sixth century remained much the same as in the time of Tyrtaeus. The first hints of change come only at the end of the century: mounted hoplites begin to fade from the vase-painters' repertoire, soon followed by hoplites with throwing-spears and Boeotian shields, and from about 500 BC Spartan archer figurines no longer kneel in combat pose, but instead stand up straight, with their bows unstrung. We know that for most of the fifth century there were indeed no bowmen in the Spartan army.⁴³ The strict separation of hoplites, light-armed, and horsemen characteristic of the classical phalanx, therefore, may not have emerged until the very end of the archaic period.

Herodotus' phalanx: the Persian Wars

The *Histories* of Herodotus contain the first surviving narratives of historical Greek battles, beginning with Athens' defeat of a Persian invasion force at Marathon in 490 BC. The battles of the Persian Wars, as described by Herodotus, in most respects sound much like later hoplite battles, but some surprising twists suggest that they were not fought in quite the same way.

By the time Herodotus collected second-hand stories about Marathon from people who had known veterans of the battle (6.117.3), Athens'

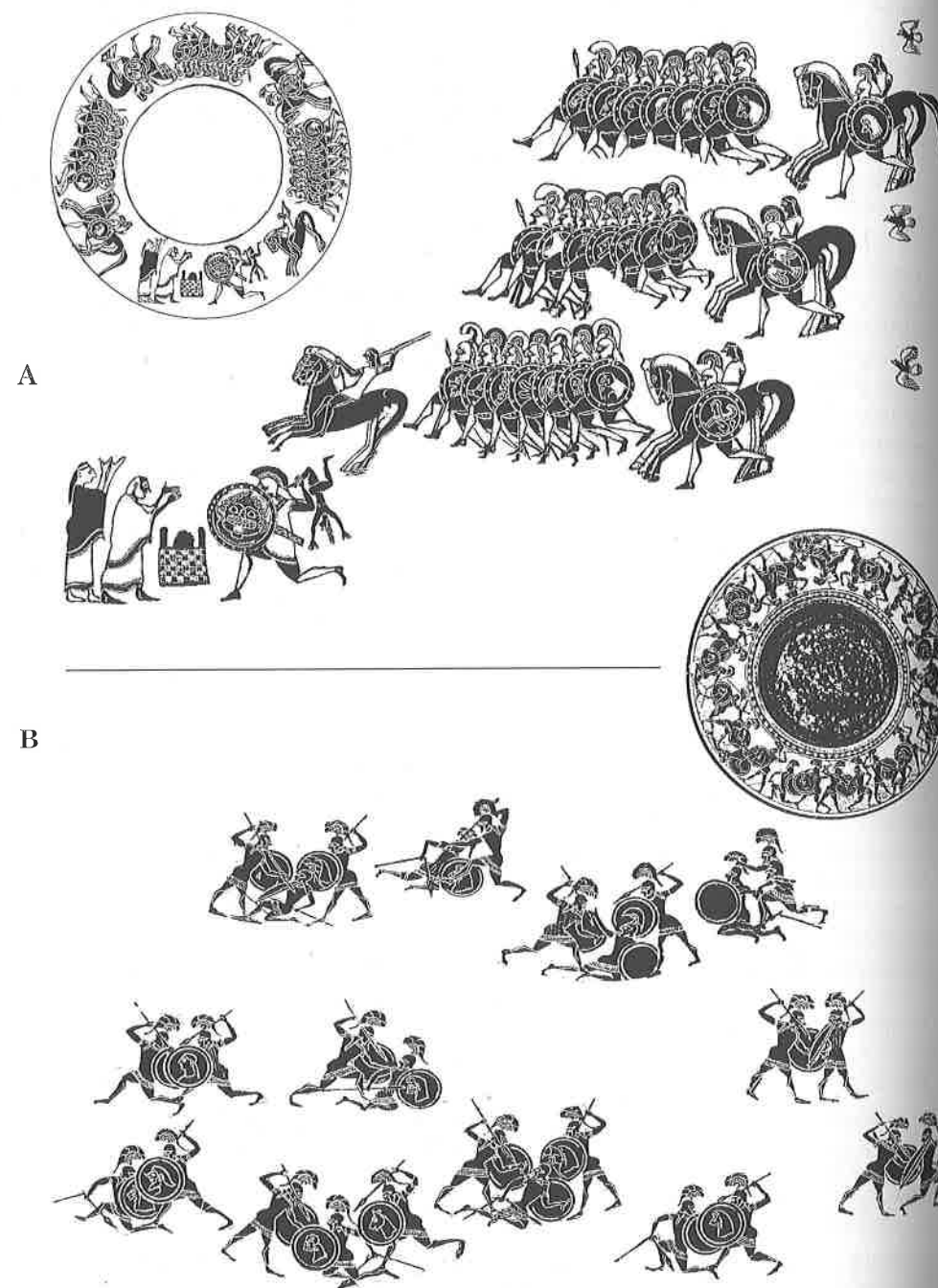


Fig. 21 (opposite). Two mass combat scenes, after the C-Painter, c. 570-560 BC. The charge in (A) and the massacre in (B) were originally painted in a single narrow band on a circular vessel, as shown in the insets, but are here projected to give a more lifelike impression of what these scenes represented. (A), from the lid of a lekanis (Naples Museum), shows the sack of Troy. Neoptolemus swings the dead body of Hector's son Astyanax towards Priam and Hecabe or Andromache, who have taken refuge at an altar (cf. Fig. 6 above). Behind him, two cavalymen lead a charge of three groups of eight hoplites, the eighth man accompanied by his horses and squire. (B), from a tripod pyxis (Louvre CA 616) shows the massacre of a routed army; the sequence of figures from top to bottom and left to right corresponds to the sequence from left to right in the original. In the majority of scenes (9 out of 12), a fallen warrior, whose spear is usually broken, is (about to be) killed by an enemy. The third figure in some of these scenes is either another enemy joining in the kill (bottom line, second left) or a comrade coming to the rescue (top line, second right, where the victim stretches out his arm in supplication). In the remaining scenes, the enemy still offers some resistance while running away or retreating.

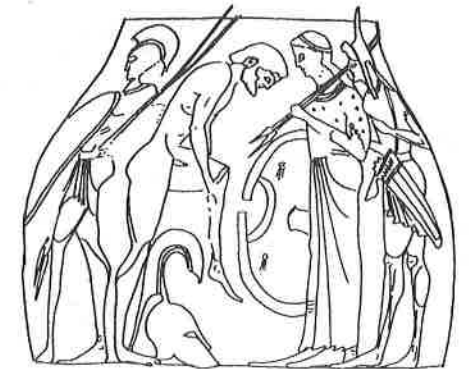
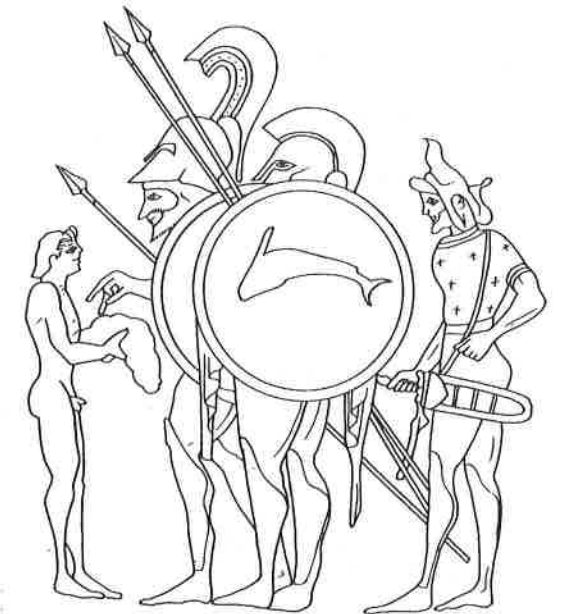


Fig. 22. Late archaic hoplites equipped with pairs of spears. Above: a departure scene on a black-figure olpe of c. 510 BC (sold in the antiquities market at Freiburg). Below: a hepatoscopy, a reading of omens from the liver of a sacrificial animal, prior to departure for war, on a black-figure amphora of c. 530-510 BC (Brussels, Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, inv. R 291).



victory had been elevated to mythical status and ranked alongside such feats as defeating the Amazons and sacking Troy. Monumental paintings of these three triumphs were on display in the town square. Epiphanies of gods and heroes, and the haunting of the battlefield by the ghosts of fallen soldiers had all become part of the story.⁴⁴ Some of this mythologising rubbed off on Herodotus' account, which presented Marathon as an ideal version of a classical hoplite battle. The hoplites alone faced the Persians, he said; no horsemen or archers were present (6.112.2). Actually, the Athenians went so far as to mobilise their slaves for this battle, so there was surely a levy of all available manpower to meet the threat, as one would expect, including poor citizens who fought with any weapons they could lay their hands on. Within a generation, these non-hoplites had been written out of the picture.⁴⁵ Herodotus went on to make the Athenians inventors of the hoplite tactic of charging the enemy at a run ('the first Greeks known to us' to have done so, 6.112.3), which is blatantly untrue since running into battle had long been common practice. What is more, the Athenians allegedly ran eight times the normal distance: almost a mile instead of a 200-yard dash.⁴⁶

No less remarkable was the course of battle itself. In classical hoplite clashes, it was quite common for one section of an army to pursue a routed enemy, unaware – or regardless – of the fact that their compatriots or allies elsewhere were being slaughtered. Sometimes a victorious wing retained enough cohesion and showed enough solidarity to leave their defeated opponents alone and instead turn back to help comrades in trouble, but this did not happen often.⁴⁷ Yet at Marathon, not one but *both* Athenian wings are supposed to have spontaneously abandoned pursuit of the Persians and turned round to help their friends struggling in the centre, managing to 'join forces' in the process (6.113.2). Nothing like it ever happened in classical Greek battle because hoplite armies did not have the degree of control and cohesion required.⁴⁸ Herodotus' account of Marathon does not tell us much about the realities of warfare at the time; it presents us with a story of ideal hoplite behaviour pushed to heroic extremes.

In his build-up to the battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC, Herodotus praised the hoplite virtues of the Spartans who '*together* are the best of all men', 7.104.4): their strength lay in solidarity. Yet in the battle itself, the Spartans proved themselves 'absolute experts' against the 'inexpert' Persians, not by superior cohesion in close-order combat, but by pretending to flee, then suddenly rallying to massacre their scattered pursuers (211.3). Neither the Spartan army nor any other hoplite force in the classical period ever executed such feints, which were regarded as the trademark tactics of light infantry. The select Spartan force at Thermopylae apparently fought in an order almost as fluid as that of the earliest hoplites. The culminating 'great push' (*ôthismos*) in which 'the Greeks, thanks to their excellence, drove back their opponents four times' to gain control over the dead body of king Leonidas (225.1) presents a scene that might have come

straight out of the *Iliad*. If these Spartans came to be revered as perfect hoplites, it was for their exemplary spirit in refusing to surrender – not for their tactics (7.225.3).⁴⁹

In preliminary skirmishes at Plataea the following year, 300 picked Athenian hoplites teamed up with a group of archers to face the Persian cavalry. When one of the archers shot the Persian commander, the hoplites 'were immediately on top of him' and seized his corpse, calling the rest of the Greeks to their aid (9.21-2). The scene is again more reminiscent of Homer and archaic art than of the hoplite ideals evident in the story of Marathon and shared by Herodotus.

The final victory at Plataea, by contrast, was won by a mass charge of Spartans and Tegeans. When they had broken through the barricade of wicker shields set up by the Persians,

finally a hard-fought battle took place by the temple of Demeter, and it took a long time before they got to the final push [*ôthismos*], since the barbarians would grab hold of the Greeks' spears and snap them. The Persians were not inferior in courage or strength, but they were unarmed as well as unskilled and not equal to their opponents in intelligence. Dashing forward one by one, or banding together in groups of ten – more or less – they fell upon the Spartans and were destroyed What did them most damage was that their outfits lacked armour: they competed as light-armed against hoplites. (9.62.3, 63.2)

So the secret of the Spartans' success was their superior armour – a judgement which some in antiquity found outrageous⁵⁰ – with a bit of help from their superior cohesion in battle order.

Yet Herodotus believed that the Spartan army at Plataea incorporated vast numbers of light-armed: '35,000 light-armed helots protected the 5,000 Spartans', he said, 'seven of them stationed with each man'. He repeated this last phrase three times, adding for good measure that these light-armed belonged to 'the Spartiate formation' and that 'every single one was equipped for war' (9.28-9; cf. 9.61.2). This emphatic explanation of the role of the helots is remarkable, especially since they had been ignored at Thermopylae. Herodotus was evidently trying to describe something unfamiliar, an arrangement no longer used by the Spartans. It has plausibly been suggested that the Spartan hoplites formed a single rank, with seven helots drawn up behind each man.⁵¹ Not only is this one of the few ways in which the hoplites could retain some cohesion despite being 'protected' by so many light-armed each, but about a decade later the Spartans are said to have fought a battle at Dipaea in a formation only 'one shield deep', presumably with many helots stationed behind them (Isocrates 6.99). At both Dipaea and Plataea, the Spartans were vastly outnumbered by their opponents, so they may have been forced to adopt the shallowest of hoplite formations in order to match the length of the

enemy line, and to rely on a mass mobilisation of helots in order to fill out their ranks.

Among the other Greeks, the number of light-armed was roughly the same as the number of hoplites 'since there was one with each man'. Herodotus made it quite clear that these were 'combatant light infantry', not personal attendants,⁵² yet somehow they were associated with individual hoplites. The most plausible scenario is that these light-armed attached themselves to hoplites and relied upon them for cover in combat, in the manner familiar to Homer, Tyrtaeus and archaic vase-painters, but no longer practised in Herodotus' own generation. If so, the Spartans were ahead of their contemporaries in segregating hoplites from light-armed, which may have contributed to their reputation for maintaining exceptional cohesion in the ranks.

Not even Spartan close order, however, entirely precluded displays of individual heroism in front of the thin red line. At Plataea, Aristodemus 'accomplished great deeds, *stepping outside the formation* and fighting in a rage' (9.71.3). The Spartans refused to reward his valour, not because he broke rank, but because they felt that he had been suicidal rather than truly brave.⁵³ Herodotus put this down to envy, and insisted that Aristodemus was 'by far the bravest man, in our opinion' (9.71.2-4; cf. 7.231). He clearly regarded charging ahead of one's comrades as acceptable behaviour, and implied that the Spartans normally also regarded it as acceptable.

It was said that the best of the Athenians, Sophanes of Decelea, tied himself to the spot with an iron anchor 'whenever he drew near the enemy and came within range, so that the enemy, when they dashed forward from their formation, would be unable to move him' (9.74.1). True or not, the story takes it for granted that it was normal for Greek hoplites – Boeotians at Plataea, Aeginetans earlier in Sophanes' career (6.92.3; 9.75) – to 'dash forward from the formation' (as opposed to dashing forward *in* formation) in combat, just as Aristodemus did.⁵⁴

Herodotus' stories about Thermopylae and Plataea were no doubt influenced by the battle narratives of the *Iliad*, and by epic-inspired poems such as the recently discovered elegy on the Battle of Plataea composed by Simonides soon after the war.⁵⁵ But his account was not a purely literary heroic fiction, since it also drew on eyewitness testimony, at least for Plataea (9.16), and had to satisfy audiences which included many experienced militiamen and at least some veterans of the Persian Wars. If Herodotus occasionally sounded like Homer, it was probably because in some respects early fifth-century Greeks still fought like Homeric heroes. After all, Greek warfare at the time did still contain 'heroic' elements such as champion combat, mounted hoplites, and conspicuous warrior burials.⁵⁶ Booty was still shared out according to merit, as in the Homeric world, with spectacular prizes for the greatest men.⁵⁷ All these things point to a society which greatly valued individual achievement in combat, and which

is likely to have continued practising a form of combat which left scope for displays of personal prowess.⁵⁸

If hoplites of the Persian Wars could still drop back without shame and charge forward with honour, and if most hoplite formations still included light-armed troops, we can understand why Herodotus, unlike later historians, had no information about the precise depth of formations: there were no regular files.⁵⁹ Hence also Herodotus' failure to mention *tropaia*: trophies were not yet set up because battles were not normally decided by a single breakthrough but tended to swing back and forth in the Homeric manner.⁶⁰ Finally, a style of fighting which still gave scope to individual prowess explains why tradition remembered outstanding individual warriors and why Herodotus, unlike his successors, spent much energy on establishing which contingents and individuals performed best in battle.⁶¹ If this is indeed how the Greeks fought, they can hardly have operated in much closer order than the Persians did. The superior cohesion of the phalanx in the early fifth century would therefore have been not so much a matter of greater physical density as of greater co-operation and solidarity among the soldiers – a quality praised as characteristically Greek already by Homer.⁶²

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The key stages of development of archaic combat were thus, first, the introduction of hoplite armour at the end of the eighth century, which produced a fluid mixture of missile- and close-range fighting of the kind portrayed in the *Iliad*,⁶³ and, second, the exclusive dedication of most hoplites to hand-to-hand combat in the late seventh century, which gave rise to the sort of battles envisaged in the exhortations of Tyrtaeus. When the next significant changes occurred is hard to say, but the artistic evidence suggests that it may not have been until c. 500 BC that hoplites, horsemen and light-armed began to be segregated, and Herodotus' *Histories* suggest that this development was still incomplete at the time of the Persian Wars.

The impact of the Persian Wars themselves was mainly ideological. It added two new dimensions to hoplite claims of superiority: the notion that Greeks fought of their own free will, in obedience to the law (Herodotus 7.104.4), while barbarians only fought 'coerced by the whip' (7.103.4; 223.3); and the idea that a hoplite never gave ground but fought to the death, lunging with his spear until it broke, slashing with his sword until it snapped, then punching and biting until the end (7.225.3).