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The Birth of the Hoplite: Sparta's Contribution to Early Greek Military Organization

Introduction

This chapter represents a reworking of the English original of an article which appeared in Italian translation as 'La nascita degli opliti e l'organizzazione militare', in S. Settis ed. *I Greci* Vol. II, Part 1 (Turin 1996) ch. 23. (I am most grateful to Einaudi Editore for permission to re-use the material in this way.) The Italian translation was illustrated and contained an Appendix entitled 'The Nature of Hoplite Battle'. Both the illustrations and the Appendix have been cut from the present version, though some material from the latter has been redeployed here.

The chapter forms part of a debate, still (I hope) ongoing, about the causes, effects and meanings of the development of the hoplite style of phalanx fighting, which became almost *de rigueur* among the more important Greek states during the course of the seventh and sixth centuries. The Spartans were the acknowledged pastmasters of this hoplite art, and I used a discussion of their experience as the focus of an earlier contribution to the debate: Cartledge 1977. If I seem merely reactionary in questioning Kurt Raaflaub's recent assertion that 'The evidence of Homeric and early Greek warfare leaves no space for a "hoplite revolution"' (Raaflaub 1999: 140), then so it must be. Besides the excellent Raaflaub 1999, the second edition of Hanson 1989 (published 2000) also contains exceptionally useful supplementary bibliography.

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War for Shakespeare was the 'great corrector of enormous times'. The advent of so-called 'total' war in the twentieth century provided a horribly prosaic confirmation of that poetic definition. Yet in a sense total war is not a complete novelty in the Western tradition. For the ancient Greeks, too, the wider mobilization of society rather than the outcome of any particular battle was usually the decisive factor in their monotonously regular inter-city military conflict. There is, too, in any society a reciprocal

relationship between the way it performs in war and the nature of the culture that supports it, and in the societies of ancient Greece war was an integral part of their way of life, part of the air the Greeks breathed.¹ So the general renewal of military sociology that is evident in the contemporary historiography of war, placing less emphasis on battlefield manoeuvres than on the relationship between war and society, is especially appropriate for the history of ancient Greece. The 'polemology' now practised by both ancient historians and historical sociologists of ancient Greece deserves the warmest welcome.²

The ancients themselves, however, wrote the history of Greek warfare very differently. The Greeks' chosen topics were invariably specific wars rather than war in general; and there is a marked contradiction between the general explanations for warfare offered by the political philosophers Plato (competition for territory, riches and slaves) and Aristotle (war seen chiefly as a process of enslaving those who deserve to be so enslaved) and the more narrowly 'political' factors urged in explanation by the historians Thucydides and Polybius.³ Here I shall follow the lead of the ancient political philosophers, drawing on the enlarged sense of 'the political' that I have developed elsewhere.⁴

For the study of Greek warfare, or the polemology of ancient Greece, cannot be separated from the project of a general, very broadly 'political' history of ancient Greek civic mentality, social structure and economic organization. Any adequate account of Greek warfare must relate battle experience to its social presuppositions, ideological projections and its value (effective or imaginary) as an instrument of political action. More specifically, since for these Greek thinkers politics (or the political) crucially embraced also economics, and since warfare was seen importantly as a mode of economic acquisition, they found it quite natural to treat warfare – whether inter-state (*polemos*), civil (*stasis*) or irregular (*lêisteia*) – as an integral part of the 'political art' (*politikê tekhnê*). I shall treat the birth of hoplite warfare and early Greek military organization likewise.

However, the state of the available evidence poses major difficulties for any historian of ancient Greece, especially in its earliest historic or proto-historic phases. (The period covered in this chapter will extend from approximately 800 to 500 BC, with special attention to the century or so from 750 to 650.) One unfortunate effect of the general lack of good contemporary evidence has been to encourage an unstable and often indefensible use (or abuse) of absolutely every surviving scrap of literary, epigraphical or archaeological data, especially Homer and the early elegiac poets (Kallinos, Tyrtaios), and figural representations in a variety of media.⁵ It is worth recalling at the outset that they were not intended as faithful historical documents by their creators, that they are open to widely divergent interpretations, and that they are rarely probative. Instead, therefore, in this chapter almost as much attention and interpretative emphasis will be given to the formulation of appropriate models,

and to what has been called 'the logic of contextual analysis' (Bryant 1990: 486) familiar in the discourse of sociological history since Marx and Weber.⁶

Given the congruence of war and politics in ancient Greece, and the importance of ancient Greek politics in the Western cultural and political tradition, it is not surprising that the hoplite phenomenon has for long been the focus of acute interest. All scholars are agreed that by 500 BC hoplites dominated most Greek battlefields: that is, heavy-armed and heavily protected infantrymen bearing a large double-handled shield on their left arm and wielding a thrusting spear in their right hand, massed in a tightly organized and drilled phalanx several ranks deep.⁷ Even after the rise of new arms and new forces in the following century and a half, hoplite mentality continued to dominate Greek civic ideology (see further below). Tradition, as often in the history of war and society, tended to reign supreme in the military sphere.⁸ On the other hand, the twin issues of what a typical hoplite battle might have been like⁹ and of what any one particular hoplite battle was actually like¹⁰ remain fiercely contested scholarly battlegrounds, for ideological as well as technical reasons. Xenophon, for example, knew the military situation of his day as intimately as anyone, and knew what he was saying when he described the hoplite battle of Koroneia in 394, in which he himself fought, as 'unlike any other' in his time (*Hell.* 4.3.16; *Ages.* 2.9: cf. Cartledge 1987: 220; and generally Anderson 1970), but unfortunately he did not pass on his first-hand knowledge unambiguously to us.¹¹

Here, however, I shall confine myself to yet another scholarly battleground, namely the origins and early development of the hoplite phenomenon. Interpretation of these processes over the past sixty or so years has spanned the entire spectrum of logical possibility: from the claim that at any rate the most important Greek cities experienced a full-blooded 'hoplite revolution', through belief in the occurrence of a more or less sudden 'hoplite reform' at different times in different parts of the Greek world somewhere between about 750 and 600 BC, to the view that there was no significant change at all, or at most a gradual evolution, in military tactics and organization in recorded post-Bronze Age Greek history. Why, or rather how, can such sharp differences of opinion exist?

To put it simply, they hinge partly on matters of fact (were hoplite arms, armour and tactics so very different from pre-hoplite? in so far as there were technical, tactical and organizational changes, how quickly did they occur, and how universally?), but mainly on the construction that is placed upon the (relatively few) agreed facts. To schematize, there is, on the one hand, the 'old orthodoxy'. This maintains broadly speaking that there was, if not an outright revolution, at least a very significant tactical reform, the outcome and implications of which were both a developed form of hoplite phalanx fighting on the battlefield and significant political change off it.¹² On the polar opposite side are lined up those 'revisionists' who deny that

within the historical era – that is, beginning with the period of real Greek history from which the Homeric poems issued or to which they chiefly referred – there was any significant tactical change in (massed infantry) fighting whatsoever, and who therefore minimize the role of the military factor in the unquestionable political changes that may be summed up in the phrase ‘the rise of the *polis*’.¹³ A middle position is occupied by those such as Van Wees, who believe there was a change from pre-hoplite mass fighting to hoplite massed warfare but that this did not constitute a ‘reform’, let alone a ‘revolution’.¹⁴

It would take longer, and be a more speculative exercise, to enquire why revisionism emerged in this field of ancient history, and why it has been so widely successful. Part of the explanation no doubt is normal, cyclical, endogenous change, as a new generation of historians inevitably seeks to make ‘progress’ in understanding and explaining the past by rejecting the dominant paradigms of its mentors. Another, and I would guess a larger, part of the answer is to do with the widespread repugnance of the late 1970s and 1980s against structuralist, social-determinist, and especially Marxist theories of historical change – an externalist interpretation that accords well with Benedetto Croce’s dictum that all history is contemporary history. The account that follows is written by a former combatant in this murderous scholarly warfare who has retired from the fray and is content to look on in relative safety from the sidelines.

Homer is often said to have been the Greeks’ equivalent of the Jewish or Christian Bible, at any rate in the extended metaphorical sense that the epics continued to function for centuries throughout the Greek world as an icon of ethnic and cultural self-definition and as a normative benchmark.¹⁵ But to the Greeks the epics were also a sort of history book – if a rather bad one in the view of the more enlightened critics (e.g., Thucydides). And not only to the ancient Greeks: Heinrich Schliemann’s archaeological achievements at Hissarlik, Mycenae, Tiryns and elsewhere were arguably due not least to his conviction that Homer was as much a historian as an epic poet. But the loose analogy with the Bible remains in my view more persuasive.

Like the Bible (whether in its Hebrew, Greek or Vulgate versions), Homer was culturally authoritative for later generations despite the fact that the society or societies whose behaviour and norms the epics describe or presuppose was or were almost unimaginably different from those experienced by their later hearers and readers. Besides, just as Homer got the real world of Mycenaean Bronze Age Greek palace societies very wrong, as we now know from a combination of archaeology and palaeography, so later Greeks perpetrated a no less confused and confusing conflation of their ‘heroes’ – whether ruling aristocrats, hereditary monarchs, or popularly chosen democratic leaders – with the heroes of epic. Alexander the Great is perhaps the *ne plus ultra* of the heroizing phenomenon. The fact that later Greeks were able to identify themselves with the

supposed world or society of Homer should not be taken as evidence of significant continuity, let alone identity, of actual political, social or – what concerns us here – military organization and ideology.

A further difficulty for the historian of ancient Greece who wishes to make use of the epics as evidence are the circumstances of their creation. They were the products of a centuries-long oral tradition unconstrained by properly historical attention to accuracy, authenticity, and consistency – indeed, of a tradition constrained rather to mutate and evolve in accordance with the changing circumstances and expectations of the poets’ audiences. If it is indeed the case that no imaginative poet can be expected to be as consistent and authentically realistic as the historian might wish or demand, then this is true to the ultimate degree of the poets of the Homeric tradition of oral epic.¹⁶ In short, arguments for the existence of a genuinely historical, single and uniform Homeric ‘society’ or ‘period’ or more vaguely ‘world’ seem monumentally unpersuasive.¹⁷ My own view, which the mountain of recent investigation has merely reinforced, is that Homer’s fictive universe remains immortal precisely because it never existed as such outside the poet’s or poets’ fertile imagination(s) – in much the same way as Homeric language was a *Kunstsprache* never actually spoken outside the context of an epic recital.

That does not of course mean, however, that every detail of the *Realien* in Homer must necessarily have been wholly invented or significantly falsified.¹⁸ Comparative study of traditional oral heroic epic poetry, indeed, would suggest that the era in which the tradition attains its narrative crystallization, as in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, is the one that contributes most in the way of historical actuality to the finished product.¹⁹ And that era, the experts are generally agreed, spans roughly the century from 750 to 650. But what betrays the artificiality of the construction as a whole is its unreal or unrealistic combination of details – social practices, metals technology, political ideology and so on – not to mention the divine interference in or control over the affairs of mortal men. That composite artifice is as apparent in the vital details of warfare in the *Iliad* as it is in other fundamental spheres of collective activity.

To give the revisionists their due, however, they have at all events put paid for good to the old idea that the ordinary, non-heroic Greeks at Troy had merely walk-on parts in the unfolding military drama. Excepting the climactic duel of Achilles and Hector, such *monomakhiai* are not militarily decisive, and normally Homeric battles are fought and settled mainly by mass action.²⁰ The seemingly critical importance of heroic duels is an illusion created by the poets’ almost cinematographic device of zooming in on their individual engagements for the sake of dramatic narrative effect.²¹ However, contrary to revisionist orthodoxy, there is all the difference in the world between mass military action, even decisive mass military action, and regular engagements between massed ranks of hoplite phalanxes.

Thus, whereas it is perfectly legitimate to point out that a Homeric battle-description according to which the proximity of one's neighbour's shield is considered an asset rather than a liability implies or assumes the practice of close-order combat, it is quite illegitimate to extrapolate from that to (knowledge of or familiarity with) the existence of developed hoplite phalanx warfare.²² Moreover, 'a constant scattering and rallying of troops is incompatible with maintaining a tight formation', and 'the repeated ebb and flow of battle' such as we find in Homer militates likewise against the inference of regular, massed infantry fighting.²³ Then, there is the further problem of the use of chariots in Homer, for which no straightforwardly 'realist' reading has yet been (or ever will be) able adequately to account.²⁴

How one interprets Homeric inconsistency or ambivalence of battle-description is of course another matter. Narrative artistry, as suggested above, must be one part of the answer. The cumulative nature of the oral epic tradition might be another. Yet more crucial than either of these, I would argue, is the influence of political ideology. For 'the heroic form of mobile, open-field combat' with its 'individualistic hero-ecstasy' enabled the heroes literally to stand out (*ek-stasis*) from the crowd as champions (*promakhoi*),²⁵ and thus to provide suitable political (not necessarily military) role-models for the elites of the contemporary Greek world of c. 750 to 650.²⁶

We shall return later to the properly political dimension of Homeric representation. First, it must be added that a modified revisionist interpretation or re-interpretation of Homer, which allows for implicit or explicit reference there to heavy-armed mass fighting, does have the further merit of being perfectly consistent with the extant contemporary archaeological evidence – both actual finds of arms and armour and representations of them borne by warriors on and off the battlefield.²⁷ This evidence tells us that the one absolutely crucial innovation in equipment – the convex, two-handled body-shield made of wood and with an offset rim of bronze – had been made, possibly first in Argos, by 700. Clearly, such a shield was inappropriate, if not a positive hazard, in any other than massed phalanx fighting, and the most economical explanatory hypothesis is that it was invented precisely to improve the offensive but more especially the defensive efficiency of the already vital infantry warriors.²⁸ So too the invention and adoption of the bronze cuirass and greaves, and of the characteristically hoplite 'Corinthian' helmet, also in the years around 700, point in the same direction. Absolute and total uniformity of equipment either within any one Greek hoplite army or across the entire Greek world is not, however, to be expected and was not achieved all at one go.

Technical innovations have been likened to genetic mutations of micro-organisms in the sense that they may open new geographic zones for exploitation or break down older limits on the exercise of force within the host community. But the Greeks were not especially noted for technical innovation, the reception of which is typically due as much to culture as to

technical invention; and they were no exception to the general rule that military men prefer manageable evolution within stable functional categories to revolutionary breakthroughs in weaponry. So some special explanation seems to be required for this apparent outburst of technical innovation in the military sphere towards 700 BC. Since what demands explanation is not so much the availability of the requisite raw materials and of craftsmen with the appropriate skills as their decisive practical employment, we seem, again, to be being forced to look for broader social and political explanations of the changing military phenomena. Given the absence of good contemporary evidence, it is here above all that modelling and 'situational logic' will have to be called up for duty.

It is comparatively easy to establish a direct connection between hoplite warfare and the rise of particular Greek states. One thinks automatically of those 'conquest'-states and permanent overseas settlements (*apoikiai*) which owed their existence, or their size, shape and nature, in whole or in part to the force of hoplite arms.²⁹ Of the former, Sparta is the classic instance; of the latter, Sparta's only genuine *apoikia* Taras, founded in south Italy at the end of the eighth century in the teeth of native hostility, may serve to illustrate the point.³⁰ It is the indirect connection between hoplite warfare and the rise of the Greek state as such that is far harder to ground empirically, partly because there is enormous scope for controversy over the very definition of 'state', partly because of the condition of the extant evidence.³¹ If I find Aristotle's *Politics* especially helpful in this debate, this is not because I regard him as a reliable historian of early Greece, but because on the basis of his deep reflection upon and analytical understanding of the *polis* of his own day he found it 'natural' and useful to formulate a model of its early historical development in precisely military terms.³² That his model was demonstrably false in certain empirical respects should not be regarded as fatally weakening the value of the model as a tool of historical understanding.

The essential difference for Aristotle between the *polis* and pre-*polis* or non-*polis* societies was that the *polis* was a strong community of (adult male) citizens with defined rights and privileges (especially those of holding office and passing legal judgement).³³ Being a citizen in Aristotelian terms meant among other things being a warrior, a member of the citizen militia, and what sort of warrior you were typically determined in its turn what sort of citizenship you exercised, whether first- or second-class. There was, in other words, in Aristotle's model a strict isomorphism between political power and military function, such that a state in which the dominant military force was cavalry would be ruled by a small landed aristocracy of noble birth and (ideally ancient) wealth, whereas a state which depended chiefly on hoplites would be in Aristotle's terms some form of oligarchy – still ruled by the few (*oligoi*) rather than by the masses, but by the significantly larger percentage of the citizenry who were *hopla parekhomenoi*, that is, able to afford their own relatively expensive hoplite

equipment (as the majority of citizens in any Greek city at all periods never could).³⁴ Let us now try to situate that model in historical context, to relate it to the hypothetical concrete actualities.

The most general context of all is the transitional epoch sometimes known as the 'Greek Renaissance' that definitively put an end to the Dark Age (or Ages) in all but a few remote regions or districts of the Greek world.³⁵ Darkness is no doubt to some extent in the eye of the beholder, and there has been a revisionist tendency to deny the existence of any genuinely Dark epoch between say the twelfth and the eighth centuries.³⁶ But even the most ardently revisionist critic is bound to admit that in several fundamental respects the Greek world of 700 BC was radically different from the Greek world of 1000 BC. Above all, beginning in about 750 there is clearly visible a quite remarkable growth or expansion, both demographic and geographic.³⁷ This was fostered by and fostered in its turn a palpable increase in the long-distance exchange of raw materials and finished goods as well as human beings, including specialized artisans, and possibly some shift from pastoralism to agriculture or agro-pastoral economy.³⁸ The combination of demographic, geographic, and commercial expansion and beneficial interaction with non-Greek cultures impacted on both the economic and the political structures of the leading communities of old Greece.³⁹ It somehow led to the self-conscious crystallization of an ideally autonomous and autarkic *polis* identity;⁴⁰ and that new consciousness in turn expressed itself militarily in a 'veritable epidemic of border wars', as neighbouring communities fought either to gain or to retain adequate civic *Lebensraum*.⁴¹

Hoplites were not well adapted to the broken or mountainous country of which much of mainland Greece consists, nor were they especially well suited to the plundering of mobile property.⁴² However, for the ravaging and more especially the protection of the relatively few level-plain croplands appropriated as their principal economic basis by the newly crystallized *poleis* they were without peer, and that presumably is just exactly why hoplite phalanx fighting was developed, and developed when it was.⁴³ At any rate, as is made crystal clear by the *skolion* (drinking-song) of the Cretan Hybrias among much other evidence, there was a perceived homology between agriculture and warfare, in that the productive functions of the warrior were defined in agricultural terms.⁴⁴ Hoplite warfare was indeed typically conducted for the sake of and indeed physically on top of agricultural territory.⁴⁵

How precisely hoplite phalanx warfare was introduced and developed is another matter. The role played by tyrants, for example, who in several states usurped autocratic power outside or in defiance of the established political order but wielded it somehow with the active or passive support of the majority of hoplites, has been the subject of particularly intense yet inconclusive speculation.⁴⁶ One state no doubt took the lead in one technological or organizational aspect, another in another; but in due course a

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process of 'peer polity interaction' ensured that the hoplite phenomenon was generalized to much if not most of the Greek world by 500.⁴⁷ It is probably significant, however, that non-*polis* Greek communities of the less centralized, less politicized *ethnos* type did not either experience tyrants or develop hoplite forces until later.⁴⁸

In conclusion, it is salutary to revert to the economic dimension of the process in order to recall and emphasize that there would have been no militarily effective forces of hoplites anywhere in Greece – and little or no incentive to create them – but for the existence of a sufficient number of citizens possessing both the economic means and the political will and capacity so to equip themselves. This principle of citizen self-equipment was – with one possible exception (see below) – at the heart of the Greek hoplite achievement, differentiating it radically from the military reforms of patrimonial monarchies like the Assyrian that also depended on the creation and regular deployment of massed infantry armies.⁴⁹ Here, in other words, is one more confirmation of the general rule that the nature of warfare and of the army that conducts it is a reflection of the society from which they spring. However, the change that resulted in citizen-hoplites becoming the determining force of a Greek *polis* was a complex compound of not only technological and tactical but also ideological and above all socio-political factors. It is therefore necessary now to examine those two latter kinds of factors more closely and, where possible, more individually.

Hoplite language – and actuality – were always heavily focused on war's symbolic functions in the construction of identities, borders and boundaries.⁵⁰ Ritualization was of course hardly peculiar to hoplite warfare; compare the mediaeval 'age of chivalry'. But the Greeks do seem to have taken hoplite ritualization to extremes both on and off the battlefield. Age-class organization, rites of passage, male bonding, and pederasty (to name but a few) were all either institutionalized or re-adapted to suit the new hoplite context.⁵¹ Hoplite battle, which was regularly preceded and accompanied by animal sacrifice and other forms of religious devotion, has even been described as 'more ritualistic than rational in its set forms'.⁵² Its ritual challenge to honour certainly allowed full play to the Greeks' ludic, agonistic mentality;⁵³ and the Theban 'Sacred Band' formed in the 370s was but a particularly explicit instance of the engrained tendency of hoplite warfare to regard the hoplite armed force as a sworn and consecrated body, conducting war as a special form of public self-sacrifice.⁵⁴

A specifically hoplite value-system and code of honour were necessarily devised to accompany and reinforce the ritualization of hoplite militarism. Self-discipline and self-control (*sôphrosunê*, *enkrateia*) and all the other qualities that went towards the construction and maintenance of military *taxis* or order (such as rhythmic co-ordination, cohesion, self-sacrifice, collective uniformity and relative egalitarianism) were deliberately fostered. The hoplite's supreme test was to remain 'in rank' or 'in his proper

station' (*en taxi*). This hoplite martial code symbolized the disciplined solidarity of the civic community. Its more narrowly political expression went under the name of *eunomia*, that is, orderly obedience to the agreed rules. That was the title ascribed to poems by both the Spartan hortatory elegist Tyrtaios and the Athenian lawgiver Solon; the latter's vivid use of a shield-metaphor also nicely captures the hoplite value system.⁵⁵

On top of, or rather running right through, all these other hoplite qualities was that of gendered masculinity. Bravery or courage (*andreia*, *andragathia*, literally 'manliness', 'manly virtue') was construed as identical with the sort of innately masculine pugnacity that was demanded by fighting in the hoplite phalanx. The Spartans indeed went as far (too far, in the censorious view of Aristotle) as to identify hoplite virtues with Virtue itself. A revelatory anecdote preserved by Thucydides (4.40) concerns those Spartan hoplites who, to general Greek astonishment, surrendered on Sphakteria in 424. The reason they gave for their surrender was that they had been struck down at a distance by arrows, weapons which were incapable of distinguishing the truly virtuous warriors (*kaloikagathoi*) from the cowards, and which the Spartans therefore dismissed derogatorily as 'spindles' (*atraktoi*) – typically feminine, domestic implements. Had they been fighting face-to-face in phalanx formation against truly brave warriors wielding the manly hoplite spear, then of course (they implied) they would not have surrendered but fought on.

In their attitude to archers these Spartans were typical of Greek hoplite mentality and ideology in general. In actual fact, however, archers and other light-armed troops had by no means been made entirely redundant by the advent of hoplite fighting – indeed, they were probably more useful and used in that style of war than the dominant ideology cared to reveal.⁵⁶ But according to the dominant military ideology, all troops other than hoplites were precisely 'the "Other" warrior' – *l'autre guerrier*, in Lissarrague's apt phrase.⁵⁷ The hoplite was the norm and standard.

Archaeology adds telling confirmation to the literary sources for the hoplite code, both negatively and positively. Negatively, it would appear that soon after 700 individual warrior-graves were abandoned as a cultural form in the Greek hoplite world.⁵⁸ Thereafter when arms and armour were removed permanently from the utilitarian sphere, they were thesaurized by being dedicated to the gods in the more appropriately public communal space of religious sanctuaries, alongside miniature copies of the genuine articles and miniature representations of the hoplites themselves, such as the lead examples dedicated at Sparta to Ortheia.⁵⁹ Some surviving examples of hoplite equipment are remarkable artistic as well as technical achievements. The helmet rescued from the Giglio Island shipwreck off Elba is a conspicuous instance. With its engraving of wild boars and snakes, symbolizing respectively hunting and death, this helmet serves also as a peculiarly concentrated graphic representation of hoplite culture and ideology.⁶⁰ No less symbolically expressive was the use of

painted pottery to depict hoplite ideology; indeed, some of the most powerful scenes in all Greek vase painting are those depicting a woman handing his emblematic shield to her hoplite warrior husband as he departs for the battleground.⁶¹ 'With your shield – or on it', as Spartan wives were supposed to have intoned.

To summarize the argument so far, let us consider an illustrative tale from Herodotus (1.82). In about 545 BC the so-called 'Battle of the Champions' – an agonal, ritualized combat between 300 selected 'champions' on each side – was fought on and for the sake of borderland won some time earlier from the Argives by Sparta. At the end of the fighting just three men remained alive, two Argives and one Spartan. But whereas the Argive survivors quitted the field to report their 'victory' (the egalitarianism of the hoplite ideology is neatly transparent) to their fellow-citizens at home in Argos, the sole Spartan survivor, Othryadas, remained on the battlefield and 'in his proper station' (*en taxi*). He therefore claimed the victory for Sparta and set up a battlefield trophy.⁶² Not surprisingly, however, the Battle of the Champions was not at the time considered decisive either militarily or politically, and it was soon followed by an all-out battle which the Spartans conclusively won. But so deeply symbolic was the original battle felt to be by both sides that it caused the Spartans either to institute new or to modify existing religious rituals, and it induced the Argives to ask for a return match – 125 years later (Thuc. 5.41). In fact, despite such crucial later developments as the rise of the trireme warship (dependent on the musclepower and teamwork of sub-hoplite citizens and hired non-citizens) and peltast mercenaries (hired non-hoplite foreigners), the whole complex of hoplite ideology and values was so deeply entrenched in Greek mentality by 500 that the citizen-militia hoplite model continued to dominate the ideology even of democratic Athens, where the power-holding majority of citizens rowed the militarily crucial warships.⁶³

The precise nature of rule in the early Greek polities, both pre- and post-*polis*, is yet another topic of huge controversy, complicated in this case by the potential availability of the *Odyssey* as well as the *Iliad*.⁶⁴ Later Greek writers, who clearly had few qualms about using Homeric evidence as history, seem mostly to have envisaged the existence of a traditional monarchy 'on fixed conditions' (Thuc. 1.13), hereditary but not absolute, with kings ruling only as long as their fellow aristocrats (who collectively controlled effective military power) were prepared to support them. These monarchies were thought to have somehow given way to republican regimes of an oligarchic type, either more or less narrow aristocracies in the strict sense, or oligarchies of wealth and merit rather than just noble birth. Aristotle, for instance, as we saw above, correlated the evolutionary phase of aristocratic government with the predominance of cavalry warfare.

Modern scholars in their usual sceptical way have questioned the existence in early Greece not only of kings in the sense of genuine monarchs but also of a true hereditary aristocracy, although few if any have

gone so far as to deny the early existence of a developed ideology of aristocracy – ‘always to be the best and among the first’ (*Iliad* 6.208), connoting a combination of birth, wealth, intelligence and skill in council and war.⁶⁵ They have also doubted, more cogently, whether there was ever a stage at which true cavalry warfare was the dominant military mode. The mounted hoplite makes an early appearance in Greek art, but he, like the elite Hippeis of Sparta later on, is plausibly thought to have fought on foot.⁶⁶

Controversy over the use of Homer for political reconstruction has centred in particular on the question whether the epics presuppose, imply or at any rate betray the existence of the *polis* (however defined). According to what was for long the most influential interpretation, the ‘world of Odysseus’ was one in which a Greek’s primary loyalty was to his household (*oikos*) rather than to the community as such; social stratification was vertical (*oikos* against *oikos*) rather than horizontal by class (rich against poor); and the rulers ruled by might and tradition rather than by defined right. But that interpretation, too, has been questioned in the current upsurge of revisionism, in both its sociological and its political aspects.⁶⁷ For my part, I would not presume to endorse any strong view, but my reading of the Homeric epics (virtually the only strictly contemporary written evidence available) does suggest that, if the *polis* is present therein, it is so at most intermittently, and in a latent and undeveloped form. Signally lacking in Homer, it seems to me, is one crucially defining characteristic of the *polis* – the (or a) concept of citizenship. A kind of Homeric patriotism is detectable, no doubt, but not the notion of publicly defined membership in a civic corporation within properly political space.

The case of Hesiod (c. 700 BC) seems to me to be rather different, although it is of course a separate question whether the seemingly more parochial *Works and Days* can be given a ‘panhellenic’ application in the same way as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Hesiod does apparently address an immediate, concrete, contemporary historical situation, that is, the abuse of political power, as he sees it, by the ‘bribe-swallowing’ or ‘gift-devouring’ *basileis* (‘kings’ or ‘lords’) of little Askra in Boiotia. But the properly political basis of these local rulers’ power is not specified by Hesiod, and it may not have been clearly specified in actuality. What does emerge clearly from the poem, however, is that Hesiod can envisage significant political change happening only when – and if – there should occur a change of heart and mind on the part of the rulers, against whom he urges religious or moral rather than secular political or military sanctions. In this respect Hesiod ‘crystallizes the “moral economy” of a *dêmos* in dependency’.⁶⁸ This is not all that far removed from the dichotomous socio-political situation assumed and endorsed by Homer’s Odysseus in the second book of the *Iliad*: on the one hand, there are the kings or lords; on the other, the *dêmos* – a useless mass, not to be taken into account in either war or council. The only important difference from the situation implied in Homer is that

Hesiod appears to be giving shape and voice to an inchoate anti-aristocratic, or at any rate oppositional, political ideology, which in Homer was either suppressed or (in the person of Thersites) savagely caricatured.

Such a dependent and powerless and uniform *dêmos* surely precludes the existence of any significant number of hoplites in Hesiod’s Askra, let alone a fully developed hoplite phalanx. For the viability of the phalanx presupposes some further differentiation of the powerless Homeric *dêmos* into hoplites and sub-hoplites. The former, the *hopla parekhomenoi*, are those who can afford to serve as hoplites, and the hoplite style of fighting implied and required the existence of a sizeable proportion of the citizenry with that economic capacity. And not just with the economic capacity, but also with the political will for self-enrolment. However precisely that will was engendered, it is difficult to separate it from the rise of the *polis* with its basic notion of membership in a civic corporation and its apportionment of political prerogatives in accordance with military function (along the lines of the Aristotelian model).

Rather than add my speculation to that of others on the possible role of Pheidon at Argos or Kypselos at Corinth in either introducing the hoplite phalanx or exploiting the hoplites to usurp sole power, I shall consider briefly the relationship between hoplite military organization and socio-political structure in the two most important *poleis* of early Greece, Sparta and Athens, the comparison and contrast of which will also be instructive.⁶⁹

Sparta was in most respects the classic example of the early Greek ‘hoplite state’. Both in detail and in overall structure Sparta’s military organization was at the earliest possible date made solidary with its social structure and political power-system.⁷⁰ Spartan culture, too, acquired a definitely military cast, evident most notably in Spartan religion and in the martial elegy of Tyrtaios.⁷¹ Yet in two and perhaps three respects Sparta, paradoxically, could not be called a typical or normal hoplite state, for reasons mainly connected with the need to suppress an unfree population (see Chapter 10). First, it turned itself into a fully military society, almost an armed camp, on permanent red alert. Second, all Spartan citizens, not merely as elsewhere the wealthiest 30-50 per cent, became hoplites. Third, though this cannot be demonstrated, it seems likely that hoplite arms and armour were not procured privately by individual Spartan citizens, but were supplied to them centrally from the civic arsenal.⁷²

Athens, in contrast, seems to have been relatively slow to develop a hoplite military organization. The situation here was complicated by the difficulty of effecting the synoecism of the territory of Attica as a whole; warfare between Athens and Eleusis seems to have been ongoing when Sparta had already expanded out of Lakonia into neighbouring Messenia, and control of the island of Salamis was still an issue between Athens and Megara in Solon’s day around 600. However, when the change to hoplism

was effected, it was politically decisive. The 'constitution' attributed to Solon as extraordinary legislator in 594 distributed political power essentially in accordance with military function, the chief beneficiaries being economically defined census-groups called *Hippeis* ('Cavalrymen') and *Zeugitai* ('Yoke-men', i.e. hoplites). Likewise in 508/7, when Kleisthenes' reforms 'established the tribes and the democracy for the Athenians' (Hdt. 6.131), his new tribes formed the basic units of the politically re-empowered hoplite army.⁷³

In other words, despite the many differences of historical circumstances and social structure between Athens and Sparta, there was in both states a strict parallelism between the properly political subdivisions of the citizen body and the constitution of military units – precisely as postulated by Aristotle's model.⁷⁴

I conclude by looking yet more briefly at the relationship between warfare and politics in a narrower sense.⁷⁵ Armed violence makes sense, if the Prussian theoretician von Clausewitz is right, only if it serves political ends. That was at any rate especially true in a world such as that of the early Greeks, where the political was considered primary, warfare was very frequent, and the 'Military Participation Ratio' was high – where, indeed, it was above all through the collective action of warfare that the community of citizens reasserted itself as such again and again.⁷⁶ In these circumstances early Greek hoplite warfare could hardly be anything other than quite literally 'the continuation of state policy, or of political intercourse, with the admixture of other means' (von Clausewitz's famous if often misunderstood dictum).

How, then, might the rise of hoplite phalanx warfare have particularly affected the conduct of Greek foreign policy, of what the Greeks called 'matters of war and peace'? Probably the neatest illustration is the multi-state military alliance formed by Sparta in the second half of the sixth century, which moderns call the Peloponnesian League.⁷⁷ The principal forces of this alliance were the hoplite armies composed mainly by the member-states' *autourgoi*, that is, typically, the self-employed, self-supporting citizen farmers. Members of this novel interstate grouping bound themselves under oath to support each other militarily 'with all strength and in accordance with their capacity' (*panti sthenei katto dunaton*) – and that meant the capacity of the hoplites' strong right arms. But they also bound themselves to 'follow the Spartans wherever they might lead'. To ensure compliance with their wishes, the Spartans saw to it that their allies were governed by compliant oligarchies (Thuc. 1.19). That the allies' compliance was relatively easy to secure followed from the socio-economic fact that the hoplites, the *hopla parekhomenoi*, were the wealthiest 30-50 per cent or so of the citizenry who both could afford and were willing to incur the expense of hoplite equipment and training. Being wealthy and relatively few, they naturally favoured oligarchy, the rule of the few rich. Aristotle would have understood (cf. Cartledge 1977: 12).⁷⁸