

ANCIENT GREECE

Background Information 4: Warfare

War, rather than peace, was the normal state of affairs for the Ancient Greeks.

Main Reasons for War:

- **Colonization**
 - a) Extensive colonization in the 8th and 7th centuries – mainly seaborne.
 - b) Had to be prepared to fight local inhabitants.
- **Commercial Rivalry**
 - a) Trade
 - b) Competition between city states.
 - c) Traders during the 7th and 6th centuries grew rich enough to challenge traditional aristocracies. New prosperity reflected a change in warfare – replaced hand to hand fighting with heavily armoured *hoplites*. The new 'middle-classes' could afford hoplite armour and weapons, which gave them a claim to the state's power.
- **Self Defence**

Seafaring warfare:

- Greek navy was important due to geographical nature of Greek islands, and their policy of colonization (see above).
- Navy was the most costly instrument of warfare (sheer numbers involved in rowing ships).
- War ships in the 6th / 7th centuries BC were *triaconters* (30 oared) and *penteconter* (50 oars) etc.
- Preferred tactics were to ram enemy boats, rather than board them.

Infantry:

- (see point 'c' of Commercial Rivalry) *Hoplites* were generally citizen landowners – about 30-40% of adult male population.
- A hoplite *phalanx* or formation meant that closed ranks or lines of soldiers formed a nearly solid wall of bronze and wood shields.
- The essence of Greek infantry tactics was its formations and its drill. Battles were between armies, not individuals.

Armour:

- *hoplites* were heavily armoured Greek infantrymen.
- *hoplite* armour consisted of bronze helmets, corselets, greaves, shields (called a *hoplon*, which is where their name *hoplite*, derived from), thrusting spears and the short sword.
- The most important single item was the shield.
- Each warrior-landowner bought his own armour and kept it at home.
- Weapons were designed to inspire terror as much as hurt.
- The fineness of the workmanship of armour was more for generating confidence in the wearer!
- Helmets came in a great variety of shapes and sizes but all served the same purpose in the same way. The most popular was the Corinthian style.

Cavalry:

- Despite impression of Iliad etc, Greek lands were unsuitable for horses.
- Because of this, horses were highly prized, being expensive and difficult to keep.
- Chariots were therefore more symbolic than functional.

Mercenaries:

- Unlike contemporary connotations, *mercenary* means '*being for hire*.'
- Mercenaries were used a lot, especially in the 4th and 5th centuries.
- Being a poor, rugged area, Arcadia provided the majority of mercenaries. One particular group was the '*Ten Thousand*,' a group of some 13,000 men, more than ½ being from Arcadia. (5th C. BC)

Sparta:

Any discussion on warfare leads us to Sparta very quickly! The Spartans were famed for their courage and military achievement.

- Despite Sparta being known for warfare, they were reluctant to undertake campaigns far from home in case of *helot* revolt during the army's absence. The helots were state-owned serfs.
- Only 5% of the population were actually Spartans.
- Full time soldiers owed total allegiance to the state and were liable for military service for between 30 and 60 years.
- Central Spartan values were strength, valour, courage and victory.

Military Training:

- Between the ages of 12 & 18, boys entered a full-time military training cadetship. This was meant to encourage war-like instincts in the children, and included harsh treatment and food shortages etc – as well as military training.