THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

ANCW20022 Ancient Greece:

History and Archaeology Essay

Greek Battle Strategy And Its Victory Over the Achaemenid Empire

Luke Hedt – 832153

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The early fifth century BC was a pivotal period in the formation of the Hellenic identity, marking the decisive point between the period of *póleis* Greece and the true Hellenic period. The cornerstone of this identity formation was the defeat of Persia in the Greco-Persian Wars, beginning in 499 BC with the Ionian Revolt. But what brought about the defeat of Persia? What tactics were the Greeks employing in the period that brought about their victories? This essay will attempt to address these questions, discussing how their strategies and arms and armour were instrumental in the defeat of Persia in the Greco-Persian Wars.

The Greek City States were not a cohesive unit at the outbreak of the fifth century BC as we tend to think of them today. Rather each urban centre (the *polis*) controlled the land around it, and considered itself a separate However, most of the Greek city states often equipped themselves rather similarly, copying the armour style of Sparta, the most effective fighting force in the locality. The Greek armies are famous for their *hoplite* infantry units, heavily armoured spear infantry with a distinctive large wooden shield. The shield is the most important common component, appearing first with the identifiable double handle in pottery art circa 700 BC.[1]The shield was an integral part of infantry kit, being the key defence in battle, protecting the soldier's front from both the spears and swords of the enemy infantry, and from arrows from the sky. Most artistic interpretations of hoplites tend to resemble the pottery style in **Figure 1**, spear in the overhand position and the shield protecting the left-hand side of the body.

Figure 1: Pottery art of a Greek Hoplite attacking a Persian Archer, circa 450 BC.

Source: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 2017

The widely accepted view is that these depictions are in a 'heroic' pose, and not reflective of real spear techniques. An alternative idea exists that the technique is actually early hoplite tactics and not just an artistic pose,[1] however the technique has several issues from a fighting perspective. Firstly, holding the spear in such a way loses one of the main advantages of a long spear; keeping the enemy at a distance. To get a balanced spear in the overhand grip, you're required to keep over half the spear behind your back. Not only do you lose the reach here, but you're probably going to hit the man behind you in the head because you can't see what you're doing. It would be far more likely that any weapon held this way would have a large counterweight on the butt of the spear, keeping it short and balanced, but the Greeks never used such weapons in art, and none have been found. Secondly, such a hold is very taxing on the biceps. As strong as Greek men may have been in antiquity, it seems unlikely that anyone could be bothered holding a spear up for the duration of a fight when you can use your elbow as a lever in an under-arm grip.

Several schools of thought exist regarding the early hoplite formations. The main two argue the density of formations, based on where the man held his shield. Victor Davis Hanson argues that the shield implies a tight formation wherein a solider must rely on his right-hand neighbour's shield for protection, and that the shield was an adaptation for a more useful dense formation.[2] Certainly this is quite a possibility for the well trained Spartans, with a trust built up over a lifetime of training together. However for the less professional Ionian armies, it seems less likely that a man would be willing to trust his life to someone he's barely trained with. Certainly in the context of the Battle of Marathon, wherein the Athenians 'were sent forth and charged the foreigners at a run,'[3] Van Wees' argument of the hoplites taking a more side-on position behind the shield fits much better. This formation would also require no dependency on your fellow soldier,[4] making it more

1. Wees and Viggiano 2013, 57
2. Hanson and Keegan 2009, found through Wees and Viggiano 2013, 58
3. Herodotus 1920, Book 6.112.
4. Wees and Viggiano 2013, 58.

adaptable to the one-on-one confrontations pictured in the pottery art.

Hoplite armour from here tends to vary a lot more. The hoplites were usually drawn from the classes that could afford the equipment,[5] so each hoplite was probably armoured differently, with gear missing if it couldn't be purchased. The next main pieces of armour a hoplite would be wanting were usually their Corinthian helmet (the famous horsehair ones, though they didn't always have the horsehair) and probably a pair of greaves. Van Wees argues that due to a limited number of greaves in archaeological finds, perhaps only a third of hoplites wore them,[6] possibly given that military kit was expensive. Certainly a helmet would have been a priority over leg armour given how delicate the human head is. Finally, a hoplite would wear a corselet, bronze body armour held together with leather and bronze banding. About one in ten hoplites wore the corselet,[7] based on archaeological findings. As the rarest part of the main kit, it was probably the most expensive, and least necessary given the hoplite would have a shield to keep enemy weapons out of his torso. Most hoplites would have also carried a sword, in case his spear broke or for whatever reason he needed to engage in close combat with an enemy. This was not an uncommon practice, though it was usually not the primary weapon of choice as the spear has the advantage of length.[8]

The Persian Empire was one of the most formidable fighting forces in the world in the early fifth century BC, having been formed mere decades prior with Cyrus the Greats' rebellion against the Median Empire. The general consensus for the Persian equipment is somewhat mixed. Herodotus mentions several times that during the campaigns in Greece that the Persians lost due to being under-equipped and under-armoured. 'They wore no armour over their clothing, for they fought as it were naked against men fully armed,'[9] Herodotus writes. This particular phrase comes from the account of the battle of Plataea,

5. Wietzel and Wheeler 1970, 38.
6. Wees 2004, 50.
7. Wees 1997.
8. Snodgrass 2006.
9. Herodotus 1920, Book 9.63.2.

near the end of the Greco-Persian War, so it's possible that this is in reference to a tired, flagging who have lost supplies and are ready to withdraw.[10] However Herodotus does reference several types of body armour in his *Histories*. Charles (and Herodotus to an extent) separates the main types of Persian body armour into ethnic groups, suggesting that there was a difference between Median, ethnic Persian and Egyptian cuirasses,[11] with the Persian style being an iron scale type, the Median being some kind of unclear distinction from this, and the Egyptian being a linen cuirass.[12] This armour was usually worn under the soldier's tunics, they'd get hot under the Iranian sun if left bare.

Figure 2: Immortals as depicted in a mural in Susa, circa 510 BC

Source: *Musée du Louvre*, Paris, via Iranian Historical Photography

The entire Persian Grand Army was something of a combination of the militaries of their conquered nations, as well as various mercenary soldiers. The army had a good balance of the standard ancient military divisions; archers, infantry and horsemen. The archers were the first line of attack, lining up behind shield bearers and firing volleys into the enemy lines, thinning them. Most of the art surrounding Persian archers pictures them un-armoured with a composite bow.[13] Interestingly the infantry unit made famous by Herodotus, the *Immortals*, are often pictured with a bow and a quiver as well as their spear and shield (for example, see **Figure 2**.) This is somewhat of an odd combination of weapons for an infantry unit, however given their status as the best troops in the empire, the Persian *principia* if you will, clearly it was expected that a Persian solider could wield such a combina-

10. Charles 2012, 267.
11. Herodotus 1920, Book 1.135.
12. Charles 2012, 260-2.
13. Dhwty 2015.

tion. Herodotus also makes several references to the Persian infantry being armoured with wicker shields, and most modern interpretations suggest they were oval shaped (See **Figure 3**) or large body-sized rectangles. The immortals also carried short spears with adorned counterbalances of silver or gold, slings, and swords or large daggers (some modern interpretations also have a spiked handaxe as in **Figure 3**, however this isn't mentioned by Herodotus.) The counterbalances were likely to relieve wrist-strain, as well as display rank, rather than change the overall style of spear use.

In 512 BC, the Ionian states began a revolt against the Persians, who had begun to enact enormous taxes on their satraps, the Ionians having joined the empire in order to avoid a Spartan invasion years prior.[14]Athens joined the expedition in 499 BC, sending part of a fleet to sack the Persian satrapy of Sardis. The houses, however, were made of reed, and as one soldier set a building on fire, the entire city burned to the ground.[14]

Figure 3: Modern Reconstruction of Immortals

Source: Farrokh 2013

Darius, the King of Persia, naturally was furious at the loss of Sardis, Herodotus claims he cursed vengeance on Athens and the Ionians.[15] The Ionian revolt didn't last long, with Ionian cities quickly falling to the Persian armies before a reasonable force landed at Marathon. [16]The Athenians marched to Marathon to oppose the Persian army at the behest of Miltiades, who argued that a siege could put Athens at risk of treachery from inside. At Marathon, the armies faced off in their respective camps for three days, neither making a move. The Athenians didn't want to take on the Persians on the open plain, as the Persians had cavalry, archers and a numerical advantage.[16] They also probably hoped for the Spartan force to arrive, who famously claimed to not wish to march until the full

14. Green 1996a, 19-21
15. Herodotus 1920, Book 5.105.

moon. [17]

Attempting to slip the cavalry away and attack Athens with the help of some Attic traitors, a scout serving in the Persian camp warned Miltiades, the Greek commander of the lack of cavalry.[18] The Persians had set up their defensive line no more than a mile from the Greeks, and Militades sensed a victorious moment coming. He ordered a charge 'at full run' at the Persian lines,[19] hoping to dodge the Persian arrow-fire. The Greeks used much longer spears than the Persians, who didn't even have their immortal unit with them at the time, so there was little issue keeping the Persian infantry at bay once the lines were engaged, and they had nothing to fear from arrows or cavalry. Also, they were men fighting for their freedom, not conscripted soldiers. The Greeks had no issues creating a route on the wings, and disengaged from here to tackle the more experienced troops who had broken through the lines in the centre. The Persians lost 6,400 men in this battle,[20] and Athens could finally claim a military victory against the greatest force on Earth.

A nation resisting Persian subjugation could never stand for long without becoming the Emperor's target once again, and the Greek states were no exception. Darius' successor Xerxes would attempt to sack Greece for its worth and prove that Persia had military dominance in all her Empire. So once again, in 480 BC, the Persian's sailed for Greece, landing just North of Thessaly. The Thessalonians had promised Persia full support for the invasion,[21] though Morris and Powell argue that the site was unsuitable for defence as there was a second entry to the town, allowing the army to be easily flanked.[22] Either way, the armies the Greeks mustered, with Sparta finally willing to join to defend the nation, set up a defensive line at *Thermopylae*. The Greeks knew they couldn't take on

16. Green 1996a, 30, 32
17. Herodotus 1920, Book 6.106.
18. Green 1996a, 35.
19. Herodotus 1920, Book 6.112.
20. Green 1996a, 37.
21. Green 1996d, 52.
22. Morris and Powell 2010, 260.

the Persian armies on the open plain, they were far outnumbered. Herodotus put the Persian army size at five million men,[23] though in reality it was probably between eighty thousand[24] and five hundred thousand,[25] more than enough men to take on Greece.

Thermopylae was an ideal location for a defensive stand. The narrow passage between the mountains and the sea meant that only a small force could be engaged at any one time, removing numerical advantages and flanking as an option, so in theory the Greeks could hold the pass so long as they had men still breathing. The Greeks also had the advantage of longer spears, and well trained men.[26] Despite having the Immortals present at the battle, who supposedly were superior fighters to even the Spartans,[27] their shorter spears meant that they couldn't inflict damage on the hoplites. The Persian arrow fire also didn't seem to concern the Spartans, one of whom joked 'if the Medes darken the sun, we shall have our fight in the shade.'[28] Despite a relentless Persian onslaught, the Greeks held all the advantages, even pulling off a successful feigned retreat, a dangerous but effective move. Eventually, a pro-Persian traitor, Ephialtes, showed the Persian army a way behind the pass, allowing the stalemate to become a slaughter. King Leonidas of Sparta, so the legend says, dismissed the Peloponnesian troops after learning of the treachery, trying to avoid mass slaughter, and remained with only three hundred Spartiate, that is, Spartan citizens and warriors, for the final battle. All three hundred Spartans were killed, including Leonidas, unable to fight on two fronts.[29]

The other great land battle of the Greco-Persian Wars was Plataea. The Greek Allies attempted one last stand after the sack of Athens, forming up across the plain from the Persians, on the high ground at Plataea. Outnumbered between two or three to one,[30] the Allies needed every advantage available, and the high ground ensured a direct charge

23. Herodotus 1920, Book 7.185-6.
24. Kim 2017.
25. Morris and Powell 2010, 285.
26. Green 1996b, 135.
27. Kim 2017.
28. Herodotus 1920, Book 7.226.
29. Green 1996b, 139-42.
30. Herodotus 1920, Book 9.31-2.

would be too costly, and it proved to be. The Persian commander Mardonius started cavalry hit-and-run tactics to try and lure the Greeks down the hill, but an Athenian archer band was able to kill the cavalry commander, forcing retreat.[31]The Greeks were able to form up a better defensive position, though the details of which are fiercely disputed.[31] Mardonius was beginning to become frustrated after several days of inaction, and despite the warnings of his soothsayers, started attacking the Greek supply lines.[32] The Greeks were forced to withdraw to the front of the Plataean City, a couple of regiments at a time, wherein the Persians began an all-out assault. The Spartans tried their false retreat again, but instantly called for help from the withdrawing Athenians, who complied instantly. [33]Against all odds, the Greeks began to win the battle, with the Persians out of position. Pausanias, the Greek commander, ordered them to 'take no prisoners,' and only called off the bloodthirsty men when but three thousand Persians still breathed.[33] This marked the final appearance of Persia in the Greek mainland in the fifth century BC.

Overall Greece should have had no chance against the Persians, being overall undertrained and outnumbered for most of the war. However a combination of bad luck and bad commanding, as well as superior equipment and a cause for which to fight gave the Greeks victory in unlikely circumstances.

31. Green 1996c, 246-7
32. Plutarch 1914, *Arist.*15.
33. Green 1996c, 265, 270

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