THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

ANCW20022 Ancient Greece:

History and Archaeology Essay

Greek Battle Strategy

And Its Victory Over Persia

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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 and Carthage in the First Sicilian War.

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 (and usually superior, especially in the case of Athens) entity to the other cities that would now be considered Greek. A person's city of origin was usually considered more important than their 'Greekness.' It was a more prominent identifier, to be from Athens or Halicarnassus as in the case of Herodotus, than to be Greek prior to the Greco-Persian Wars.[1] 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.[2]The shield was an integral part of infantry kit, being the key

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

Source: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 2017

1. Kim 2017.

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.

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 a heroic pose,[2] however the pose has several issues from a battle perspective. Firstly, holding the spear in such a way loses one of the main advantages of a spear; keeping the enemy a spear's-length away. 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 such weapons don't appear in art or archaeology. In some Persian art involving the immortals a small metal ball-weight can be observed, as in **Figure 2**, however it is so small it's probably only to relieve wrist-strain. The centre of balance on these spears would still be about half way up the spear. 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.[3] 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

2. Wees and Viggiano 2013, 57
3. Hanson and Keegan 2009, found through Wees and Viggiano 2013, 58

professional Ionian armies, it seems somewhat 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,'[4] 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,[5] making it more adaptable to the one-on-one confrontations pictured in the pottery art.

Figure 2: Immortals as Depicted in a Mural in Susa.

Source: Iranian Historical Photography

Hoplite armour from here tends to vary a lot more. The hoplites were usually drawn from the classes that could afford the gear,[6] so the standing armies may not have always been armoured the same, 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) and probably a pair of greaves.

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. Throughout the Greco-Persian Wars of the fifth century, it's rather unlikely that the arms and armament of the Persian military evolved too much, they were after all, the greatest army on earth, and their commander Mardonius(?) did manage fatal overconfidence in both the battle of Marathon and Plataêa.

In 512 BC, the Greek states were becoming restless with Persian rule. Despite being

4. Herodotus 1920, Book 6.112.
5. Wees and Viggiano 2013, 58.
6. Wietzel and Wheeler 1970, 38.

somewhat indirect rulers of numerous Greek cities in Ionia, only requiring a small tax from their subjects, the idea of being beholden to another nation was insulting to the Greek cities.

As a warning to all his satraps(?), Darius had to react to the Ionian insurrection. A plan to take Athens and subjugate its leaders was formed, and troops sailed for Greece at once from the Persian heart.

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 the Persian's sailed for Greece, landing just North of Thessaly. Blah Blah Thermopylae.

With the Spartans' defeat secured, Xerxes continued marching South for Athens, intending to burn her, and that he did. The Athenians asked for advice from Delphi, which was cryptic as ever. Blah Blah burning Athens, run to the ships.

With nothing but the Athenian Navy left, Persia was lead into a trap by Themistocles in Salamis. Big battle, many sink, much death, win Greece.

Plataea and Mycale, ie Persia gets slaughtered against all odds, and Greece gains a Hellenic identity, naming themselves around Thessaly, where no battles were fought and nothing really happened except they got some horses so lol?

Sicilian War, Carthage takes on the Sicilian Greeks and gets its arse handed to it.

Overall Greece should have had no chance against the Persians, and the Carthaginians probably should have been bigger baddies than they were lol.

List of Figures

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