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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

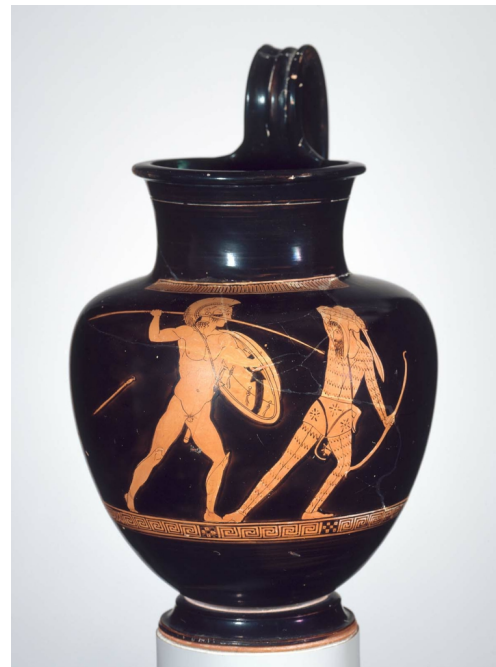


Figure 1: Pottery art of a Greek Hoplite attacking a Persian Archer, circa 450 BC.

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 soldier 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, circa 510 BC

Source: *Musée du Louvre*, Paris, via 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, 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,⁷ 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,⁸ based on archaeological findings. As the rarest part of the major armour parts it was probably the most expensive, and least necessary given the hoplite would have a shield to keep weapons out

4. Herodotus 1920, Book 6.112.

5. Wees and Viggiano 2013, 58.

6. Wietzel and Wheeler 1970, 38.

7. Wees 2004, 50.

8. Wees 1997.

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.⁹

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 Great's 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 in the period.¹⁰ 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'¹¹ Herodotus writes. This particular phrase comes from the account of the battle of Plataea, 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.¹² 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,¹³ 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.¹⁴ This armour was usually worn under the soldier's tunics, they'd be rather uncomfortable in the hot Iranian sun over the tunic.

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

9. Snodgrass 2006.

10. Kim 2017.

11. Herodotus 1920, Book 9.63.2.

12. Charles 2012, 267.

13. Herodotus 1920, Book 1.135.

14. Charles 2012, 260-2.

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.¹⁵ 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 soldier could wield such a combination. Herodotus also makes several references to the Persian infantry being armoured with wicker shields, which is unsurprising for infantry units. 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.)

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 become satraps in order to avoid a Spartan invasion years prior.¹⁶ 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.¹⁶



Figure 3: Modern Reconstruction of Immortals

Source: Farrokh 2013

Darius, the Great King of Persia, naturally was furious at the loss of Sardis, Herodotus claims he cursed vengeance on Athens and the Ionians.¹⁷ The Ionian revolt didn't last

15. Dhwtly 2015.

16. Green 1996a, 19-21

17. Herodotus 1920, Book 5.105.

long, with Ionian cities quickly falling to the Persian armies. At this point, Darius could claim revenge for Sardis had been fulfilled, but he wasn't done with the border country yet. A small subset of the Grand Persian Army landed at Carystus and burnt the crops when resisted, before sailing for, and taking Eretria before landing at Marathon.¹⁸ The Athenians marched to Marathon to oppose the Persian army at the beach-head, at the behest of Miltiades, who argued that a siege could put Athens at risk of treachery from inside, for no one knew who supported the Persians bar the conspirators themselves. At Marathon, the armies faced off at each other 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.¹⁸ They also probably hoped for the Spartan force to arrive, who famously claimed to not wish to march until the full moon.¹⁹

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.²⁰ The Persians had set up their defensive line no more than a mile from the Greeks, and Miltiades sensed a victorious moment coming. He ordered a charge 'at full run' at the Persian lines, the infantry taken by surprise at the almost suicidal attack.²¹ Callimachus, the Athenian second in command, lined his troops in a deliberately loose formation, and ran as fast past the arrow-fire as they could. 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,²² and Athens

18. Green 1996a, 30, 32

19. Herodotus 1920, Book 6.106.

20. Green 1996a, 35.

21. Herodotus 1920, Book 6.112.

22. Green 1996a, 37.

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,²³ 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.²⁴ 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 the Persian armies on the open plain, they were far outnumbered. Herodotus put the Persian army size at five million men,²⁵ though in reality it was probably between eighty thousand²⁶ and five hundred thousand,²⁷ 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, immaterialising numerical advantages. It also removed flanking as a tactical strategy, 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.²⁸ Despite having the Immortals present at the battle, who supposedly were superior fighters to even the Spartans,²⁹ 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 that 'If the Medes darken the sun, we shall have our fight in the shade.'³⁰ The Persians wouldn't budge though, and the immortals, living up to their name, replaced a man each time he

23. Green 1996d, 52.

24. Morris and Powell 2010, 260.

25. Herodotus 1920, Book 7.185-6.

26. Kim 2017.

27. Morris and Powell 2010, 285.

28. Green 1996b, 135.

29. Kim 2017.

30. Herodotus 1920, Book 7.226.

fell. The Greeks held all the advantages though, 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.³¹

Discounting the Battle of Salamis, which was not a land battle, and the burning of Athens, which was a political screwup, the other great 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,³² the Allies needed every advantage available, and the high ground ensured a direct charge 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 pin the cavalry commander and he was killed with a spear through the eye.³³ The Persians lamented, and the Greeks were able to form up a better defensive position, though the details of which are fiercely disputed.³³ Mardonius was beginning to become frustrated after several days of inaction, and despite the warnings of his soothsayers, started attacking the Greek supply lines.³⁴ The Greeks were forced to withdraw to the front of the Plataean City, each regiment 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.³⁵ The tide turning after several short engagements, and the fact that the Greeks were much better armoured, the Allies began to win the battle, against all odds. Pausanias, the Greek commander, ordered them to ‘take no prisoners,’ and only called off the bloodthirsty men

31. Green 1996b, 139-42.

32. Herodotus 1920, Book 9.31-2.

33. Green 1996c, 246-7

34. Plutarch 1914, *Arist.*15.

when but three thousand Persians still breathed.³⁵ 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 under-trained 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.

35. Green 1996c, 265, 270

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