Ancient Greek Hoplites and Their Origins

Jordan Wilde, Western Oregon University

Department
History

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Abstract
The ancient Greek hoplites were heavily armed infantry soldiers, known for wearing extensive armor, carrying a large rounded shield, spears, and a sword. By looking at armor, weapons, tactics, and vases recovered from archaeological digs, along with literature of the time, such as Homer's Iliad (ca. 700 B.C.) and Hesiod's Shield of Heracles (ca. end of the late 8th century B.C.), who and what a hoplite was can be defined. The scholarly consensus has been that eighth century B.C. is crucial in exploring the origins of hoplites. The eighth century sees a dramatic increase in population leading to the rise of city-states and hoplites. In this paper I am going to consider the evidence for the existence of hoplites during the eighth century B.C. and whether or not there is any evidence for their existence before this.

Recommended Citation

The origins of the hoplite are obscure, and no small matter of contention amongst historians. Traditionally, this has been dated to the 8th century BC, and attributed to Sparta; but more recent views suggest a later date, towards the 7th century BC. Certainly, by approximately 650 BC, as dated by the 'Chigi vase', the 'hoplite revolution' was complete. The phalanx formed the core of ancient Greek militaries. Because hoplites were all protected by their own shield and others' shields and spears, they were relatively safe as long as the formation didn't break. A hoplite (from ta hopla meaning tool or equipment) was the most common type of heavily armed foot-soldier in ancient Greece from the... On engaging the enemy the hoplites first thrust their spears, usually over-arm. After that initial contact the opposing lines usually went through a series of pushing and shoving (othismos) and close-quarter fighting with swords which only ended when one side broke ranks. Pursuit of retreating hoplites was usually only over a short distance in order to maintain the protective close-formation.

Hoplites were instrumental in the Greek victories over Persia at the battles of Marathon (490 BCE) and Plataea (479 BCE).