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CHAPTER 9

Not Patriots, Not Farmers, Not Amateurs: Greek Soldiers of Fortune and the Origins of Hoplite Warfare

JOHN R. HALE

In the eighth and seventh centuries BC, Greek soldiers adopted a new way of making war that has become known as the hoplite tradition. Hoplites were heavily armed infantry who carried large shields or *aspides*—circular, convex, and manipulated with double grips—and who typically confronted their opponents in phalanx formation. The first hoplites appeared on the historical scene in the mid-eighth century BC, and remained an essential part of Greek life throughout the Archaic and Classical periods.

What circumstances gave rise to the invention of hoplite arms and tactics? And who exactly were the first hoplites? To answer those questions, we must identify the precise contexts—chronological, geographical, social, and military—in which Greek hoplites first appeared. Were hoplite innovations triggered by class struggles between farmers and aristocrats?¹ Or by an arms race among emerging Greek city-states—one that was launched when the men of each polis almost simultaneously took up the new equipment and tactics?² Or were the innovations adopted as symbols of social status and class identity?³ All these possibilities have their adherents. This paper presents an alternative context for the origin of hoplite warfare, and tracks early hoplites into a realm where private enterprise, not public service, was the guiding star.

The mainstream of current scholarly opinion is united in regarding the polis or city-state as the breeding ground of the hoplite phalanx. The combatants are envisioned by some scholars as patriotic citizens⁴ and sturdy agriculturalists defending their fields, and by others as members of a competitive leisure class, but the social and geographical context is always the polis. In accordance with these prevailing views, a tradition of military amateurism is invoked to account for the seeming simplicity of hoplite tactics.⁵ Thus the classic and natural opponent of one city-state's army of hoplites is assumed to be a second army of Greek hoplites, a mirror image of the first.

Hanson links the rise of hoplites to the agrarian sector of Greek society. He outlined his theory in *Warfare and Agriculture in Classical Greece* (1983) and has worked it out in detail thereafter in a succession of books and articles. In Hanson's reconstruction, when a pre-Classical Greek landscape of large aristocratic estates gave way to a polis surrounded by small farms, a brand new military situation emerged.

It led to the formal creation of hoplite weaponry and finally face-to-face, near-ritual duels between agrarian phalanxes. In sum, yeomen emerged from the anonymity of the old mass to reinvent the Greek phalanx as the private domain of heavily armed, mutually dependent small farmers. This “invention” of hoplite warfare was not some utopian enterprise, the “construct” of some agrarian conspiracy. Instead imagine its birth far more pragmatically, as the result of one group of agrarians, perhaps first on the island of Euboea or in the Peloponnese at Argos in the late eighth century, reinventing and rearming the “phalanx” and thus finding themselves invincible on the battlefield. Other agricultural communities were also forced to go “hoplite” to defend their property.⁶

Hans van Wees, though in agreement with Hanson about the centrality of the polis to this issue, locates hoplites in a very different social milieu. In his book *Greek Warfare: Myths and Realities* (2004), van Wees relegates Hanson’s fighting farmers to the category of myth, and presents as the opposing reality a set of leisure-class hoplites, motivated by *pleonexia* (“greed for more”) and the quest for high social and political status.

Despite some sense of respect for the toughness of farmers and shepherds, however, the model hoplite was not the working man whose fitness for war derived from hard labour, but the man of leisure who owed his fitness to dedicated physical and mental training. Those who theorised about the ideal state agreed that soldiers should not cultivate land, or do any productive work, but live off the labour of others and devote themselves to war and politics.⁷

The central role played by the city-state in these two contrasting visions gains some support from historical, literary, and artistic evidence. Greeks were indeed fighting other Greeks at an early stage in the evolution of hoplite warfare—in the Lelantine War, for example, and in the momentous Spartan and Messenian wars. Nevertheless, I believe that the theaters of war that originally gave rise to the hoplite tradition lay far from the gathering places and plowed fields of the polis, and equally far from anything that can be described as a civic mentality or ideology.

Judging from archaeological discoveries of Greek arms and armor, as well as artistic representations, the heavily armed hoplite began to evolve in the eighth century BC. By about 650 BC, the hoplite had emerged as both the archetypal Greek fighting man and a dominant figure in Mediterranean warfare. Even at that early date, there were already two distinct strands within the hoplite tradition. The strand that monopolizes modern historical discourse is indeed polis-centered and patriotic.

Fair and good [*kalòn . . . agathòn*] the man who falls fighting in the front rank, dying for the fatherland.⁸

The exhortations of the poet Tyrtaeus (mid-seventh century BC) have been traditionally linked by both ancient and modern historians to one or the other of the Spartan-Messenian Wars that eventually led to the complete subjugation of Messenia.

The other major “patriotic” war of this age was the Lelantine War between the Euboean cities of Chalcis and Eretria. In that shadowy conflict, each city was aided by allies from the Greek mainland or the eastern Aegean.⁹ One specific inter-polis battle may also be assigned to the mid-seventh century: the battle of Hysiae near Argos. This battle is mentioned by Pausanias, and dated by him, using a surprising synchronism with an Olympic victor and an Athenian archon named Peisistratus, to 669 or 668 BC. At Hysiae soldiers from Argos were said to have scored a victory over Spartans.¹⁰

There were other battlefields where Greek met Greek in the seventh century. A war that broke out between the islanders of Paros and neighboring Naxos during the lifetime of Archilochus (mid-seventh century) may have involved not only a well-attested sea battle but also fighting on land.¹¹ Several generations earlier at Paros, a late eighth-century mass burial or *polyandria* of some 150 Parian soldiers may have commemorated the dead from an earlier Naxian war, or from an expedition even farther afield.¹²

How frequent were classic hoplite battles—those phalanx-to-phalanx shoving matches, held like rituals on open plains between neighboring city-states? Lyric poetry and vase paintings provide our only contemporary evidence, since later Greek historians took only sporadic interest in military affairs before the Persian Wars. Were these combats so common that they became mere background noise, taken for granted by ancient historians and therefore underrepresented in the historical record? Such might be the implication of the eminently quotable description that Herodotus put into the mouth of the Persian commander in chief Mardonius, addressing King Xerxes.

From what I hear, the Greeks are pugnacious enough, and start fights on the spur of the moment without sense or judgement to justify them. When they declare war on each other, they go off together to the smoothest and levellest bit of ground they can find, and have their battle on it—with the result that even the victors never get off without heavy losses, and as for the losers—well, they’re wiped out.¹³

Although the “dramatic date” of this passage in its narrative context is 480 BC, the date of composition may be as late as the 420s, with the author either satirizing or deploring (or both) the situation of his own time. Herodotus presents hoplite battles as commonplace yet ceremonial, and also as being extremely costly in human lives. Hanson, although a proponent of ritualized hoplite battles, argues that in reality the early Greeks who served as hoplites had to devote most of their time to farming; hence wars and battles were few. “Hoplite battles were themselves singular and brief. They were also not frequent before the fifth century.”¹⁴ By Hanson’s own tally of hoplite warfare in the seventh and sixth centuries, “there were not more than a dozen important campaigns in the historical record involving the major Greek city-states in more than two hundred years.”¹⁵

This observation fits well with Hornblower’s claim that in Greek literature and art “the prominence of war is disproportionate to its frequency and significance in practice.”¹⁶ Yet such sporadic warfare would seem unlikely to stimulate or sustain any cultural tradition, especially a highly specialized military tradition. If the hoplite

tradition was *not* fostered through regular combat between Greek city-states, then we must look elsewhere for the conflicts that offered long-term and consistent training in the arts of war. Just such conflicts existed outside the Greek homeland, in the wider Mediterranean world.

Away from the polis, a more extensive and detailed historical record bears witness to the second strand of early hoplite warfare: campaigns undertaken by Greek soldiers of fortune. These men fought not on the fields of Greece but overseas, as pirates, raiders, mercenaries, bodyguards, land-grabbers, and generals for hire. Archilochus of Paros presents their philosophy, which is utterly antithetical both to the “good death” advocated by Tyrtaeus and to the ritualized combat described by Herodotus.

Some Thracian is waving the shield I reluctantly left by a bush, a flawless piece.
So what? I saved myself. Forget the shield. I will get another, no worse.¹⁷

The Greek soldier of fortune of the Archaic age, like his better-known successors of the fourth century, ventured abroad in search of gain and glory. A drinking song asserts the view of the man who fights for himself, not for his city.

I have great wealth: a spear, a sword, and the fine leather shield which protects one's skin. For with this I plough, with this I harvest, with this I trample the sweet wine from the vines, with this I am called master of serfs. Those who dare not hold a spear, a sword, or the fine leather shield which protects one's skin, all cower at my knee and prostrate themselves, calling me 'Master' and 'Great King'.¹⁸ (Athenaeus 695f–696a, Page)

The mysterious “Hybrias the Cretan,” to whom these verses are attributed, is known only from the quotation of this skolion in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae*. Archilochus of Paros, however, was a real seventh-century Greek who, by his own account, served both the God of War and the Muses.¹⁹ Archilochus enjoyed drinking the same Ismaric wine that Homer's Odysseus had prized as booty from a shore raid in Thrace. When Odysseus' company of Ithacan soldiers took Ismaric wine from the Kikones, Odysseus was concerned to ensure an equal division of the loot.²⁰ Archilochus sees the matter from the entrepreneur's point of view.

In my spear is my kneaded barley bread, in my spear is Ismaric wine,
and I drink it leaning on my spear.²¹

For early Greek soldiers like Archilochus, warfare became at times a career. These men were professional soldiers, not amateurs. They sought the good things in life not through a display of arms as status symbols, and still less through agricultural labor, but through wielding their weapons successfully on one battlefield after another.

The evidence for this branch of Greek military activity has been summarized by van Wees in two sections of his book *Greek Warfare: Myths and Realities*. He has given these sections the evocative titles “An Army of Wanderers: Mercenaries, Exiles, Adventurers” and “Epikouroi: Mercenaries and Other Outsiders.”²² Their unimportance in his overall scheme of Greek warfare, however, is indicated by a simple page count: 10 pages are devoted to these fighters out of a main text of 240.

Instead of considering that freebooters like Archilochus may have been a primary influence in the evolution of Greek warfare, van Wees ties their activities back to his central focus: the civic tradition. “The abundance of men, citizens and itinerants, who were prepared—indeed keen—to fight for personal prestige and wealth reinforced the willingness of Greek cities to wage war for the honour and profit of the community.”²³ He concludes by contrasting these “outsiders” to the Greek “ideal of the citizen-soldier.”²⁴ Yet as we shall see, these soldiers of fortune did in fact lead the kind of highly specialized and professionalized military life, with continuous months and years devoted to the pursuit of war, that Hanson, van Wees, Hornblower, and many other modern scholars routinely deny to the citizen-soldiers of the classical Greek polis. It is time to consider the possibility that hoplite arms and tactics evolved outside the realm of the polis, and not within it.

The Crucible: Eastern Mediterranean Warfare in the Eighth Century BC

In his article “Traders, Pirates, Warriors: The Proto-History of Greek Mercenary Soldiers in the Eastern Mediterranean,”²⁵ Nino Luraghi presents evidence to show that Ionian Greek soldiers were fighting as mercenaries for the kings of Assyria as early as 732 BC. In that year the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III captured Damascus in Syria, and his soldiers plundered the city. Several bronzes that appear to be loot from the royal treasury of Damascus have turned up in excavations at three sanctuaries of the Ionian Greeks: those of Athena at Miletus in Asia Minor, of Hera at Samos in the Aegean, and of Apollo at Eretria on Euboea. These heirloom bronzes consist of elaborate frontlets and blinkers from the headgear of chariot horses. Inscriptions on the pieces themselves identify their previous owner as King Hazael of Damascus.²⁶

Stratigraphic contexts at the Greek sanctuaries assign this cluster of finds to the eighth century, thus supporting a direct link to the Assyrian campaign. Luraghi concludes that these Near Eastern bronzes were dedicated by soldiers from three different parts of Greece who took part in the sack of Damascus, and who made gifts to their gods for bringing them home not only alive but rich with oriental booty.²⁷ If the men from Eretria and Samos and Miletus who collected royal loot from Damascus were prehoplite soldiers, then their presence in the Assyrian army provides a context for the subsequent invention of hoplite arms and tactics. If, on the other hand, these Greeks already fought as hoplites, then we might regard their heavy armament and disciplined close-order formation as the features that made them desirable mercenaries in the eyes of the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser.

Snodgrass has observed, “The very large round shield of sheet bronze carried by Assyrian infantrymen, though it had only a single central hand-grip, must have influenced the evolution of the Greek type.”²⁸ If Luraghi is right that Ionians fought in Tiglath-pileser’s army in 732 BC, then the campaigns that involved the conquest of Damascus would provide a specific context for Snodgrass’s theoretical interactions between Greek and Assyrian soldiers.

There was another aspect of eighth-century conditions in the Near East, however, that provides a background for the appearance of Greek soldiers of fortune at

Damascus. Viking-like, the Ionians were at this time venturing overseas in their long ships not only to serve as mercenaries (as the Vikings did in a later age at Byzantium) but even earlier as piratical raiders. Ionian attacks on coastal cities in the Levant between 738 and 732 BC are repeatedly documented in royal Assyrian correspondence. Let us consider the record of these seaborne attackers.

Several years before the capture of Damascus, a royal Assyrian official named Qurdi-Ashur-lamur learned from a mounted messenger that seafaring men “from the land of Iauna” (i.e., Ionia) had come ashore on the coast of the Levant and attacked a number of cities.²⁹ Qurdi-Ashur-lamur marshaled his forces and set off to confront the invaders. When the Ionians saw the Assyrian troops approaching, they retreated to their ships (empty-handed, the official assured Tiglath-pileser, his king) and then vanished into the open sea. The threat of these armed seaborne Greeks was serious enough to warrant building new fortifications and shifting more Assyrian troops to the coastal area.

The Ionians persisted. During the reign of Sargon II in 715 BC, the royal annals recorded that the king—a usurper who had seized the kingship after a career as a general— assembled a fleet of ships on the Syrian coast and personally led a counterattack against the Ionians at sea. According to the texts, Sargon intended to stop both their deadly raids on Tyre and Cilicia and also their disruptions of commerce. He succeeded. The annals repeat many variations of Sargon’s subsequent boast: “I caught like fishes the Ionians who live in the midst of the sea of the sunset.”³⁰ This poetical phrase suggests that the troublesome raiders were known to be islanders from the Aegean. They may in fact have been Ionians from as far off as Samos and Euboea. The ethnic term “Iauna” or “Iavan” eventually became the generic name for Hellenes throughout the Near East.

King Sargon’s son and successor Sennacherib defeated a Greek army in a land battle in Cilicia, probably in 696 BC. Two years later Sennacherib is said to have repelled an Ionian fleet in an engagement off the Cilician coast. The royal annals for the year 694 BC record that Ionian seafarers had been captured by the king and subsequently pressed into service in the Assyrian army.³¹ These Greek warriors then continued their military careers under new management, far from home. Did this transformation of raiders into mercenaries repeat a pattern already established in the reign of Tiglath-pileser, four decades earlier? In any case, such Near Eastern adventures foreshadow the exploits of Greek soldiers of fortune in Egypt, which we will consider shortly.

No surviving Greek historical source preserves any record of these early encounters between Ionians and Assyrians. It may be, however, that the traditional narrative material in the *Iliad* was reshaped by Homer to reflect the contemporary epic of Greek fleets voyaging eastward to assault walled towns beyond the sea. Some scholars have in fact suggested that horse-shaped Assyrian siege towers of the eighth century directly inspired the “Trojan Horse” of Homeric tradition.³² In any case, the archaeological discoveries and Assyrian records prove the reality of—and also provide solid dates for—these early military contacts. The subsequent history of the Greeks shows their importance. As Luraghi concludes,

If the arguments presented in this paper are accepted, the history of Greek mercenaries begins considerably earlier than is usually thought. Its roots

would lie in the activities of pirates-traders from Euboea, the Cycladic islands, and Asia Minor, who seem to have started their business in the Levant in the third quarter of the 8th century. They were the ancestors of the Greek mercenaries who fought for almost every single Near Eastern kingdom from the mid-seventh century to the age of Alexander the Great.³³

The final century of the Greek mercenary tradition looms large in the historical record, thanks to the career and writings of Xenophon. Mercenary armies of the fourth century BC have been closely examined in books by H. W. Parke³⁴ and Matthew Trundle.³⁵ The existence of these later Greeks who fought for personal gain has been regarded as an unfortunate outcome of the Peloponnesian War, a degeneration and debasement of the original patriotic, polis-centered tradition of hoplite warfare. Study of the eighth century evidence, however, shows that Xenophon and his companions were in fact reverting to type. Mercenary service and raiding expeditions were part of the environment in which Greek hoplites evolved. Was this type of warfare directly linked to the appearance of hoplite arms and tactics?

The young fighting man of Euboea or Samos or Miletus whose cry was "Eastward, ho!" would follow the path of the rising sun to the margins of mighty empires. There he experienced a kind of warfare very different from the ritualized hoplite battle attested elsewhere in our sources. His company issued not from the walls of his home city, but from oared ships beached on an alien and hostile coast. The situations he faced while wading ashore or proving his worth to foreign kings shaped his approach to war. His arms and fighting methods were designed to score victories, not against others of his own kind, but against non-Greek chariots, horsemen, and lightly armed troops, or in assaults on walled towns. As for agricultural pursuits, our young soldier of fortune took up arms not to protect a farm that he worked himself but, I would suggest, to escape from the routine drudgery of farmwork altogether.

One important work of ancient art may in fact show Greek soldiers fighting in an eastern war of the eighth or early seventh century BC. The oldest-known representation of hoplite soldiers in a phalanx-like formation appears on a silver bowl that was found in a tomb at Amathus, Cyprus (fig. 9-1).³⁶ This Amathus bowl was probably created in a Cypro-Phoenician workshop in the late eighth or early seventh century BC, and belongs to a type of vessel that was popular from the Near East to Etruria.³⁷ On the surface of the bowl, embossed or engraved motifs from Near Eastern and Egyptian art fill the central roundel and two surrounding circular bands. The outermost band, however, which runs around the bowl's rim, is decorated with a battle scene rendered in a more naturalistic style.

Here, troops of various types are engaged in combat at a walled city, some attacking, others defending. The towering fortifications appear to be constructed of ashlar masonry, with crenellated battlements. The attacking army has chariots drawn by pairs of horses, cavalry armed with spears and bows, and archers on foot wearing long Assyrian overcoats and tall conical hats or helmets. Along with these standard elements of Near Eastern warfare there appears a line of four hoplites who are striding or running forward. Nearby, some unarmed men are hacking away with double-bladed axes



FIGURE 9-1. Amathus bowl. Source: "Traders, Pirates, Warriors: The Proto-History of Greek Mercenary Soldiers in the Eastern Mediterranean," Nino Luraghi, *Phoenix*, Vol. 60, No. 1/2 (Spring - Summer, 2006), pp. 21-47. Published by: Classical Association of Canada. After Myres, *JHS*, 1933. Reprinted by permission of Nino Luraghi and *Phoenix*.

at date palms and fruit trees in the orchards outside the city. (Could this custom have been picked up by Greeks fighting in the Near East, and carried back home to become part of the "hoplite tradition"?)³⁸

Chief interest rests with the line of hoplites. They wear crested Ionian or Corinthian helmets, along with fringed tunics and greaves. Over their heads they brandish spears. Circular shields cover their bodies from jawline to hip. The shields display blazons: swirling rays, a sunburst or star, and, on the shield of the leading soldier, a crouching griffin or winged lion. Luraghi has suggested that the artist employed an unusual artistic convention to show that the hoplites are advancing in line, abreast. "Notice the interlocking legs of the warriors, visually conveying the close order of the phalanx, a detail that does not occur, to the best of my knowledge, in other depictions of rows of warriors in Phoenician metalwork or in Assyrian art."³⁹

The hoplites are shown approaching a scaling ladder that a nonhoplite has just placed against the city wall ahead of them. On the other side of the city, troops are already climbing a similar ladder. These soldiers hold their pointed shields over their heads to protect themselves from the defensive thrusts of a bareheaded spearman on the tower above (or perhaps also from missiles and rocks). Once the running hoplites begin to climb their ladder, however, they will encounter another hoplite, fighting in

defense of the city. He also is equipped with an emblazoned shield and a crested helmet, and will certainly attempt to ward them off with his own spear. Among the other defenders are archers and spearmen without heavy armor.

It appears, therefore, that mercenaries equipped as hoplites are fighting on both sides in this example of Near Eastern art. The only visual distinction between the hoplites inside and outside the walls is a stippled pattern on the defending hoplite's helmet. Thus by the end of the eighth or early in the seventh century, soldiers armed as hoplites and arrayed in close formation were fighting as self-contained units embedded within eastern armies that included archers, chariots, cavalry, and lightly armed spearmen. At this date and in this corner of the world, the originals of the hoplite figures on the Amathus bowl are most likely to have been Greek soldiers.

One other possible point of origin for these particular mercenaries is Caria, in the southwestern corner of Asia Minor. Herodotus (1.171.4) credits the Carians with inventing helmet crests, shield devices, and shield grips or handles, and then passing them on to the Greeks. All these items can be plausibly connected to the hoplite tradition. Snodgrass, however, has denied the reality of the Carians' claims to these military inventions.⁴⁰ There is no mention of Carians in the surviving Assyrian records to parallel the references to Ionian Greeks.

A Widening Stage: Early Greek Mercenaries in Egypt and Beyond

In about 664 BC, shiploads of Ionian and Carian "Bronze Men" (i.e., hoplites) landed on the shores of the Nile delta and proceeded to loot and pillage the land. So successful were these raiders against the local forces of horsemen and lightly armed troops that an Egyptian ruler promptly engaged them as mercenaries.

According to Herodotus,⁴¹ this farsighted Egyptian king was Psammetichus I, founder of the Saite or twenty-sixth dynasty, who ultimately owed his throne to these soldiers from overseas. Subsequent rulers of the dynasty continued the tradition of hiring mercenaries, so that within a century of the first landing of the original "Bronze Men" up to thirty thousand Carians and Greeks were said to have been employed in Egyptian armies.⁴² An immense fort at Daphnae (modern Tell Defenneh in northeastern Egypt) served as one of their bases.⁴³ The ruins of the fort have been excavated, revealing not only Greek pottery from the seventh and sixth centuries BC but also quarters that in the estimate of the excavators could have accommodated approximately twenty thousand troops.⁴⁴

About seventy years after the first recorded landing of Greek soldiers in the delta region, a group of their successors inscribed their names on one of the ancient colossi of Ramses II at Abu Simbel, far up the Nile in southern Egypt, where they had traveled in the royal service. These mercenaries came from eastern Greek islands and cities, including Teos, Ialysos, and Colophon.⁴⁵ Their inclusion of ethnic identifiers after their names at Abu Simbel suggests that as soldiers of fortune they had not settled down permanently in Egypt and "gone native."

In addition, the tradition of service in Egypt was apparently being passed down within Greek families. The graffiti show that one Greek mercenary had actually been

named “Psammetichus” by his father Theocles, who had presumably fought for another pharaoh a generation earlier. The same royal Egyptian name of Psammethicus even found its way into the family of Periander, tyrant of Corinth.

A remarkable archaeological discovery in Syria reinforces the impression that in the seventh century more “Bronze Men” may have been fighting overseas in the eastern Mediterranean region than in Greece itself. In fact, the earliest Greek hoplite gear ever recovered from an actual battle site comes not from a plain in Euboea or the Peloponnese but from the Syrian city of Carchemish on the Euphrates River. The *hopla* or gear in this case probably belonged to Greeks in the Egyptian army.

In about 605 BC the Egyptian king Necho—who, like his forefathers, manned his garrisons, field army, and trireme fleet with tens of thousands of Greeks—led his forces north to Carchemish to challenge the power of Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylonia. Necho lost the battle, and during the fierce fighting two of his Greek mercenaries apparently lost pieces of their bronze hoplite armor (if not indeed their lives). These artifacts were unearthed at Carchemish during the 1911–14 excavations conducted by a British archaeological team that included T. E. Lawrence, later known as “Lawrence of Arabia” and a bit of a soldier of fortune himself.

One of the items was a bronze greave of Archaic type, discovered in the ruins of the city gate along with arrowheads and the bones of horses and humans. The other was a bronze hoplite shield found in “House D” outside the walls of Carchemish. This building had been destroyed by fire. Alongside the shield, the diggers found items inscribed with the cartouches of the pharaoh Necho and his ancestor Psammetichus I, as well as hundreds of arrowheads, some javelin points, and a sword. The device on the Greek shield was the head of the gorgon Medusa, surrounded by writhing snakes and circular zones decorated with horses and other animals.⁴⁶ House D may have served as an Egyptian supply station or even the royal headquarters of Necho during the siege.

Here again in this conflict between Babylonians and Egyptians, just as in the fighting depicted on the Amathus bowl, Greek soldiers of fortune seem to have been employed on both sides. Nebuchadnezzar II followed up his victory over Necho at Carchemish in 605 BC by campaigning southward to the old Philistine city of Ashkelon and ultimately to the borders of Egypt itself. By this time (if not long before) the Babylonian king was certainly employing Greek mercenaries. One of these men, a soldier named Antimenidas from Mytilene, defeated a Goliath-like champion in one of the enemy armies. Antimenidas happened to be the brother of the poet Alcaeus (late seventh century BC), who wrote congratulatory verses to mark the mercenary hero’s homecoming to his native Lesbos. It is interesting to note that Alcaeus’ verses seem to imply that by this time Greeks had actually seen the houses of Babylon itself.

You have returned from the ends of the earth, Antimenidas, with the gold-bound ivory hilt of that sword with which, as you fought for the Babylonians who dwell in houses of long bricks, you did a great deed, preserving them all from evil by killing a fighter who lacked only a palm of standing five royal cubits high.⁴⁷

Greek hoplites of the seventh and early sixth centuries, then, seem more likely to have been professionals fighting in foreign wars than part-time amateurs fighting for

their own cities at home. Is there a connection between these two strands of hoplite warfare—between Greek versus Greek wars on the home front, and mercenary service abroad? It may be that the sporadic wars between city-states and political factions in the seventh and sixth centuries were fueled in part by returning mercenaries, to take up the observation of van Wees quoted above. To use van Wees's terms, the large number of individuals who fought for their own prestige and wealth would "reinforce the willingness of Greek cities" to fight for communal honor and profit.⁴⁸

Antimenidas came back to Lesbos from his glorious stint in the Babylonian army at about the time that war broke out between men of Mytilene and some seafaring Athenians who were attempting to settle at Sigeum near the Hellespont. A Mytilenean civil war followed soon after. The soldier-poet Alcaeus fought in both conflicts, and (echoing Archilochus) frankly admitted that he had lost his shield in an engagement with the Athenians. The victors carried it off as a trophy and (Alcaeus imagines) hung it up in a temple.⁴⁹ Here, perhaps, we can see the "soldier of fortune" mentality brought home to roost on Greek soil, in "patriotic" contests between armies of different city-states.

Wars of limited scope between Greeks on the home front may have been spurred by competition to possess the river of gold, slaves, and other riches that was flooding the Greek world as veterans like Antimenidas returned from the eastern wars, flush with pay and booty. At the same time, warfare between factions or city-states could have functioned as an incubator that inculcated toughness, fighting skills, and martial spirit among each new generation of young warriors. The seemingly pointless battles described by Herodotus could thus have contributed to a very practical outcome. Strengthened by athletic training and hardened to the rigors of hand-to-hand combat in local battles, Greek soldiers could have maintained their extremely profitable monopoly on providing heavily armed infantry to wealthy monarchs overseas.

Snodgrass has aptly described the mercantile nature of the tradition. "It was the Greek infantryman himself who was found to be more widely exportable than either ideas or objects on their own; in particular his services were keenly sought in the role of mercenary."⁵⁰ The most lucrative opportunities for ambitious Greeks during the period we call Archaic lay outside the Hellenic world, not within it.

Viking warfare holds up a distant mirror to the two strands of Greek hoplite warfare. On the one hand, the Norse sagas recount the dynastic struggles and homegrown conflicts between nascent states in the Vikings' home realm—Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. In these home-front contests, Viking armies even practiced a close counterpart to the ritualized and "agonal" Greek hoplite battle—a "battle of the hazelled field," where two armies met by appointment in a big fenced enclosure. On the other hand, historians have reconstructed—from the sagas of the Vikings and the chronicles of foreigners who were their targets—the relentless overseas raids, sieges, mercenary service, and settlement missions that eventually carried Vikings and their fleets of long ships from Byzantium to Newfoundland.⁵¹

Which branch of war mattered most to the Vikings? Clearly, in the long run, the overseas campaigns and raids counted for much more than the dynastic wars within the Baltic and the North Sea. Seaborne expeditions, by vastly increasing Viking wealth,

territory, and contacts with the outside world, did more to shape Viking warfare, society, and culture than did the conflicts between the rival kingdoms. As it was in Scandinavia from AD 800 to 1000, so it had been, I would suggest, in Archaic Greece.

If one considers the impact made by rovers, raiders, and mercenaries on ancient Greek economy, society, and culture, as well as the number of “man-hours” involved in their professional careers, the overseas campaigns undertaken by soldiers of fortune clearly constituted the “main event” of Greek military history in the seventh century BC. By contrast, battles between Greek city-states appear to have been in this early period a sporadically performed and—always excepting the Spartan conquest of Messenia—rather unproductive sideshow.

Hoplite Origins: Of Halls and *Hetairoi*, Ships and Shields

In his book *The Other Greeks*, Hanson observes that the early city-states of Greece owned few warships. He reasons that since the Greek polis was essentially agrarian, and since farmers by nature distrust ships and the sea, modern scholars can rule out “overseas involvement”⁵² as the stimulus for military or cultural innovations. However, ships and seafarers often appear in early Greek art, and the Assyrian documents show that Greek ships were venturing regularly to the eastern Mediterranean in the eighth century BC. The nearly contemporaneous waves of Greek settlement expeditions to coastal sites from Asia Minor to Sicily also presuppose the existence of large fleets.

As far as the eighth century BC is concerned, it is indeed hard to believe that any Greek polis possessed a state-owned fleet. But if city-states could not provide ships for overseas campaigns and colonization, then who did? A new evaluation of archaeological evidence from the earliest overseas settlements suggests that ambitious individuals, not city-states, were the driving force behind eighth-century Greek expansion.⁵³ In all probability, the owner of every *naus* or longship in the Greek world before the age of the tyrants was an individual aristocrat or an aristocratic clan. No one else would have had the resources needed to acquire the raw materials, compensate the shipbuilders, protect and maintain the finished vessel, and assemble the crew of rowers that was required to propel the ship on its voyages. (A pirate or *leistos* could have performed the same functions, but the occupation of pirate chief may have been no more than a temporary role assumed by opportunistic aristocrats.)

In the eighth century the Greek city-state was only beginning its process of evolution. At that time the upper end of Greek society still centered on a much more ancient focal point: the aristocratic feasting hall. Here, the owner of an ancestral estate displayed his riches and power. Standard equipment included iron firedogs for the open-air roasting of spitted meats—forerunners of modern Greek souvlaki. The firedogs were often forged in the shape of long, low warships with pointed rams, and were so highly prized that they were often buried with their owners.⁵⁴ The fires banked under the spits made these halls “smoke-filled rooms” where deals and destinies were decided. As the assembled men accepted the food and wine, they also tacitly

recognized the paternal and dominant status of the aristocrat who was the founder of the feast. They became bound to him as *hetairoi* or companions.

The poet Alcaeus from Mytilene, brother of Nebuchadnezzar's champion Antimenidas, composed a vivid description of one such great hall where young Greeks could "get on board" and prove their worth through prowess in fighting.

The great hall [*mégas dómos*] is ablaze with bronze; ranks of bright helmets cover the ceiling and spill white horsehair crests, ornamentation for masculine heads. Glistening metal greaves, legs' rampart against the arrow's force, hang on the wall on unseen pegs. Fresh linen corselets and hollow shields clutter the floor; here are blades from Chalcis; here, belts in abundance and tunics. From the moment we took on this job [*ergon*], these are things we could not forget.⁵⁵

The *ergon* or "work" that called for the distribution of these arms and weapons must have been an enterprise that, if successful, would increase the wealth and fame of every man involved. As for the personality, background, and worldview of the aristocrat who was tempted away from his inherited lands, we can turn to Homer's *Odyssey* for a vivid portrait. The speaker is a fictional Cretan (one of Odysseus' own false identities), the illegitimate son of an aristocrat named Castor, who shared with his half-brothers in the division of the estate after his father's death.

To me they gave a very small portion, and allotted a dwelling. But I took to me a wife from a house that had wide possessions, winning her by my valor, . . . Such a man was I in war, but labor in the field was never to my liking, nor care of a household, which rears comely children, but oared ships were ever dear to me, and wars, and polished spears, and arrows. . . . For before the sons of the Achaeans set foot on the land of Troy, I had nine times led warriors and swift-faring ships against foreign folk, and great spoil continually fell to my hands. . . . Thus my house at once became rich, whereupon I became feared and honored among the Cretans. . . . then to Egypt did my spirit bid me voyage with my godlike companions [*hetároisin*], when I had fitted out my ships with care. Nine ships I fitted out, and the host [*laós*] gathered speedily. Then for six days my comrades [*hetairoi*] feasted, and I gave them many victims.⁵⁶

As Homer reminds us in this passage, the Greek aristocrat needed a following of armed companions or *hetairoi*, not only for the sake of his own prestige and glory, but also for very practical purposes of security, survival, and military success. He and his family attracted these followers by offering them hospitality, sustenance, entertainment (including the singing of bards), weapons, and a share in the profits. The existence of a common source for shields and other arms—namely, the aristocratic leader, who also patronized smiths, bronze workers, and other craftsmen—may help account for the startlingly uniform appearance of early hoplite companies in Greek art. Fortune-seeking young men were eager to find a place in such a retinue, for the great halls were jumping-off places for all sorts of opportunities. The hosts planned overseas expeditions not only for warfare but also for trade and new settlements, ceremonial

visits to guest-friends, and religious missions to remote sanctuaries. Homer admired the men who crowded into these noble halls, provided they honored their obligations. Hesiod, the farmer-poet of the *Works and Days*, despised them.

Some seaborne expeditions involved coastal raiding, piracy, and mercenary service abroad—the domain of the soldier of fortune. Because early Greek warships were galleys propelled by rowers—thirty, fifty, or even more being required for each vessel—the owner of the ship had to attract large numbers of men for every expedition. A company consisting of an aristocratic leader and his followers would launch one or more *makra ploia* or “long ships” from a beach near the great hall. In these galleys, which were rowed *auteretai* (by the soldiers themselves), the adventurers set out on their voyages. The men formed a “company” in both senses of the English term—a fellowship of kindred spirits, and an entrepreneurial partnership.

Once aboard, the soldiers hung their circular shields along the ship’s railings, making a fearsome and very Viking-like show of strength. Round shields are ideal for use at sea, as they have no sharp corners to chip or cause damage or injury. Unlike long oblong shields (which are in other respects better suited to phalanx formations), round shields can also be lifted clear of the water as the men waded to the beach. Assyrian artists depicted Phoenician warships with rows of circular shields in the eighth century. As noted earlier, Vikings followed the same tradition. On reaching land, Vikings typically formed a *schildborg* or “shield wall” for the initial collision with the defending enemy force. Among Greek soldiers of fortune, the Athenian commander Iphicrates shows exactly how the maneuver was carried out.

Iphicrates was sailing with 100 thirty-oared ships near Phoenicia, where the beach was covered with standing water. When he saw the Phoenicians marshaling on the shore, he gave orders, when he raised the signal, for the steersmen to drop anchor from the stern and to make the landing in formation, and for each of the soldiers [*stratiôtai hoplisamenous*] to lower himself armed into the sea at his oar and to preserve this formation. As soon as he [i.e., Iphicrates] thought the water shallow enough, he raised the signal for disembarking. The thirty-oared ships landed in formation because of their anchors, and the men, throwing themselves in formation before the ships, advanced. The enemy, amazed at their formation and daring, began to flee. Iphicrates’ men in pursuit killed some, captured others, seized a great deal of plunder, which they put on the ships, and encamped on land.⁵⁷

This forming of a phalanx in the sea belongs to the fourth century BC, but similar “D-Day” and Normandy-like conditions must have faced Iphicrates’ predecessors three centuries before, and may have generated the same response from those earlier “Bronze Men.” Certainly it is a truth, universally acknowledged, that a landing on a beach held by enemy troops constitutes one of the most difficult of all military challenges.

Once formed at the sea’s edge with the purpose of forcing a landing, the phalanx could maintain itself on land whenever the enemy continued to challenge the invading Greeks. The poet Mimnerus (c. 630–600 BC) describes such a scene.

So the men of the *basileus* charged when he gave the word of command, making a fence with their hollow shields.⁵⁸

The *basileus* (king or lord) in this passage may have been either the aristocratic leader of the Greek force, or the foreign monarch who had engaged them as mercenaries. On flat plains the early hoplites came into their own, and could successfully withstand attacks of a “home team” composed of archers, slingers, lightly armed infantry, cavalry, or even chariots. The horses of Asiatic and Egyptian armies would have been no more able to break the hoplites’ wall of glittering bronze shields than the horses of Marshal Ney’s French cavalry were able to face the squares of British bayonets at Waterloo. Should a horse have come too close, even a lone hoplite stood a chance of fending the animal off with his heavy convex shield, or even inflicting a wound with a slash of the shield’s blade-like rim. Once the enemy forces were driven back behind their city walls, the hoplites’ shields provided superior protection from stones and missiles as the Greeks attacked the gates and fortifications.

To sum up, the Near Eastern and Egyptian evidence suggests that ambitious Greeks may have initially trained as heavily armed fighting men for success in raiding. Ultimately they discovered (or their erstwhile opponents discovered) that, armed and trained as hoplites, they were supremely desirable as soldiers for hire by monarchs throughout the eastern Mediterranean. The aristocratic Greek leader presumably distributed the loot from raids, and negotiated with foreign kings and chiefs for mercenary pay and shares of booty. Rich with these winnings, an upwardly mobile young Greek might dream of one day presiding in his own great hall, and commanding his own warship filled with *hetairoi*.

Greece was a harder land than most. Starting in the eighth century, its sons began to surpass all other dwellers around the Mediterranean in sheer physical strength and toughness, the ability to wield the heavy hoplite arms and carry them over long distances, and a fierce and battle-ready mentality. The cost of this mastery was the physical training required to manage the shield for long stretches of time. From this necessity sprang the masculine Greek mania for physical fitness, the idiosyncratic Greek pride in displaying and depicting their muscular, naked physiques, and the corresponding scorn for the stereotypical pale, soft, untanned bodies of Asiatics. As men who had developed a marketable skill, these early Greeks resembled not only Vikings but also the Swiss pikemen of the Middle Ages, likewise famous as mercenaries, and likewise native to a harsh and rocky homeland. The Ionian mercenaries serving Near Eastern and Egyptian rulers founded a Greek tradition that endured through the campaigns of Xenophon and the Ten Thousand down to the “world wars” of Alexander the Great and his successors.

After the loot from the shore raids and captured towns was divided, the adventurers of early times reboarded their ships for the return voyage to Greece. The homeward passage was enlivened by celebratory toasts and drinking bouts. Archilochus is our eyewitness to the scene.

But come, make many a trip with a cup through the thwarts of the swift ship, pull off the covers of the hollow casks, and draw the red wine from the lees; we won’t be able to stay sober on this watch.⁵⁹

Archilochus and his fellow soldier-poets expressed a uniquely Greek consciousness of the individual as master of his destiny. The peculiar nature of the newborn Greek polis, so much at variance with the ancient Near Eastern model, reflected the entrepreneurial spirit and worldview of these far-voyaging military professionals as they returned home with their hard-won riches, or created new Greek communities abroad. Their successful exploits became an economic engine that pumped vast wealth and cultural baggage from more advanced cultures into the formerly impoverished Greek heartland. By the sixth century BC these soldiers of fortune had extended the limits of the Greek *oikumene* from the coast of Iberia to the Black Sea, and from the Libyan desert to the northern lagoons of the Adriatic. The armed adventurers of the eighth and seventh centuries BC may have been the true progenitors of Classical Greek civilization. I believe that they were also the first hoplites.

Notes

1. Hanson 1999, p. 223. "Do these innovations in arms tell us how *geōrgoi* took land or influence away from entrenched landowners?"
2. Hanson 1999, p. 224.
3. Van Wees 2007, pp. 273–99.
4. Mitchell 1996, pp. 98–101.
5. Concerning the apparent absence of elaborate tactics in hoplite warfare, see Hanson 1989, pp. 19–26, a chapter titled "Not Strategy, Not Tactics."
6. Hanson 1999, p. 224.
7. Van Wees 2004, p. 55.
8. Tyrtaeus fr. 10, West.
9. Herodotus 1.13 and 5.99; Thucydides 1.15. For a list of the opposing allies, see Murray 1993, p. 76.
10. Pausanias 2.24.7.
11. The fragmentary inscriptions that relate to this war between Paros and Naxos are presented in Gerber 1999, pp. 16–33.
12. Zaphiropoulou 2006, pp. 262–65.
13. Herodotus 7.9b, translated by de Sélincourt.
14. Hanson 1999, p. 299.
15. Hanson 1999, p. 300.
16. Hornblower 2007, p. 22. See also Shipley 1993, p. 1.
17. Archilochus fr. 5, Gerber. Translation by D. Mulroy.
18. Skolion of Hybrias the Cretan, in Athenaeus 695f–696a (Page).
19. Archilochus fr. 1, Gerber.
20. Homer, *Odyssey* 9.39–46 and 9.193–215.
21. Archilochus fr. 2, Gerber. In his own translation for the Loeb edition of *Greek Iambic Poetry* (1999, p. 79), Gerber prefers to translate *en dori* as "on board ship" or "under arms," rather than the more common "on my spear." The reference to campaigning is clear, regardless of which meaning is preferred.
22. Van Wees 2004, pp. 40–43 and 71–76. On Greek mercenaries see also Hunt 2007, pp. 140–44.

23. Van Wees 2004, p. 42.
24. Van Wees 2004, p. 76.
25. Luraghi 2006.
26. Luraghi 2006, pp. 38–39.
27. Luraghi 2006, pp. 40–42.
28. Snodgrass 1964a, p. 66.
29. For translations and detailed discussion of these Assyrian documents, see Luraghi 2006, pp. 31–33, and Niemeier 2001, p. 16.
30. From the “Little Annals,” line 9; see Luraghi 2006, p. 31.
31. Luraghi 2006, p. 33.
32. Anderson 1970, pp. 22–25.
33. Luraghi 2006, pp. 41–42.
34. Parke 1933.
35. Trundle 2004.
36. Myres 1933, pp. 25–39.
37. Luraghi 2006, p. 36.
38. For Assyrian destruction of orchards as part of siege warfare, see Cole 1997, pp. 29–40.
39. Luraghi 2006, p. 37, note 86.
40. Snodgrass 1964b.
41. Herodotus 2.152.
42. Herodotus 2.163.
43. Herodotus 2.30.
44. Petrie 1888, pp. 47–96.
45. Tod 1946, pp. 6–7.
46. Woolley 1921, pp. 121–29 and figures 43–46, plates 21, 22, and 32.
47. Alcaeus fr. 133 Edmonds.
48. Van Wees 2004, p. 42.
49. Herodotus 5.95.
50. Snodgrass 1980, p. 110.
51. For an overview of Viking arms and warfare, see Griffith 1995.
52. Hanson 1999, p. 290.
53. Osborne 1998, p. 268.
54. Whitley 2001, p. 96.
55. Alcaeus fr. 19, Edmonds (tr. D. Mulroy).
56. Homer, *Odyssey* 14.210–51, tr. Murray (rev. Dimmock).
57. Polyaeus 3.9.63, tr. Krentz and Wheeler.
58. Mimnerus fr. 13a, Gerber.
59. Archilochus fr. 4, Gerber.

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