V. Hanson, The Western Way of War, Oxford, 1989.

# 1 *Ordinary Things, Ordinary People*

He talked to me at club one day concerning Catiline's conspiracy—so I withdrew my attention, and thought about Tom Thumb.

—*Samuel Johnson*

More than five years ago I wrote in a small monograph, *Warfare and Agriculture in Classical Greece,* that the favored way of initiating infantry battle between classical Greek city-states at war, which was to devastate farmland, was a paradox of the highest order. Nearly all of our ancient literary sources make it clear that the Greeks themselves believed that the ravaging of grainfields, orchards, and vineyards was a serious affair. And we have traditionally assumed that the entire premise of Greek warfare was that the belligerents mutually assumed that further attacks by invaders against farmland must be checked by decisive infantry battle on the plains of Greece in order to save the livelihood of the defenders. Yet upon closer scrutiny a variety of disturbing indications from Greek literature, archaeology, and epigraphy suggested that, in fact, nearly the opposite seemed to be true: the sheer difficulty of destroying trees, vines, and acres of grain virtually ensured that comprehensive destruction was unlikely. Instead, farming continued immediately after the departure of the invaders, or in the very midst of their occupation, times when we might have imagined that destroyed farmhouses, ruined grainfields, and stumps in place of orchards and vineyards made such an enterprise impossible for an entire generation to come. For example, despite the shrill complaints of Attic farmers portrayed in Aristophanes' comedies concerning their losses to Spartan ravagers, elsewhere in those very plays (first produced during the

Peloponnesian War) there are plenty of references both to farm produce and to being able freely to move about in the countryside. Even the somber historian Thucydides, who presents the most detailed narrative of Spartan ravaging during the Archidamian (431–425) and Dekeleian (413–403) phases of the Peloponnesian War, presumes that the actual long-term losses to Athenian agriculture were not great. Why then did men march out to fight when the enemy entered their farms?

The rationale of Greek battle between heavy infantry of the classical period cannot be that it was a preventative to agricultural catastrophe but, rather, we must consider that it arose as a provocation or reaction to the mere *threat* of farm attack. The mere sight of enemy ravagers running loose across the lands of the invaded was alone considered a violation of both individual privacy and municipal pride. Usually a quick response was considered necessary, in the form of heavily armed and armored farmers filing into a suitable small plain—the usual peacetime workplace of all involved—where brief but brutal battle resulted either in concessions granted to the army of invasion, or a humiliating, forced retreat back home for the defeated. Ultimate victory in the modern sense and enslavement of the conquered were not considered an option by either side. Greek hoplite battles were struggles between small landholders who by mutual consent sought to limit warfare (and hence killing) to a single, brief, nightmarish occasion.

Ironically, most city-states (Athens of the late fifth century B.C. being the notable exception) never questioned the effectiveness of enemy ravaging of croplands, which continued before and after these ritualized set battles, yet we can be sure that the greater danger to any landholding infantryman was painful death on the battlefield, not slow starvation brought on through loss of his farm. The Greek manner of fighting must be explained as an evolving idea, a perception in the minds of small farmers that their ancestral land should remain at all costs inviolate—*aporthetos*—not to be trodden over by any other than themselves, land whose integrity all citizens of the polis were willing to fight over on a moment's notice. At the end of the fifth century B.C., after two hundred years of hoplite warfare, Athens and other communities learned that it might be more advantageous to remain inside the city walls and dare the enemy to ruin their farm estates; the formalized ritual of pitched hoplite battle was then questioned and thus jeopardized. The rapid growth of auxiliary troops and siegecraft in the ensuing fourth century accompanied these new ideas and ensured that battle thereafter would be relentless rather than episodic, expanded rather than confined, a new opportunity for the victor to seek not a benign humiliation but often the unconditional surrender and subjugation of the defeated. In short, the entire notion that infantry battle was integrated irrevocably with agriculture was cast aside.



In my earlier work I felt that a proper understanding of agricultural devastation was significant chiefly in economic terms: we should not attribute civic upheaval during periods following even lengthy hoplite wars to wartime farming losses since so little actual damage was done in the countryside. However, there were, I realize, military implications as well that concerned the very nature of Greek battle. Infantrymen marched out not to save their livelihoods nor even their ancestral homes, but rather for an *idea:* that no enemy march uncontested through the plains of Greece, that, in Themistocles' words, "no man become inferior to, or give way, before another." (Ael. *VH* 2.28)

The initial ideas which led to that study a few years ago did not, I must confess, originate solely from a close reading of Greek literary and historical texts, or walks in the Attic countryside, or examination of epigraphical collections—although I argued such sources do confirm the general outlines of my thesis. Instead, it was my practical interest in the difficulty and frustration of removing fruit trees and vines on a small farm in the San Joaquin Valley of California that suggested that these problems could only have been magnified (as they had been in my grandfather's time on farms without tractors and chain saws) where the process was not an occasional, bothersome task for a forgotten fraction of the population, but a real worry in the mind of every

citizen of the classical polis. I was struck also by how overly sensitive, how irrational, were our present-day neighbors (and myself) to the slightest incursion of their farms by troops of urban young hunters or the weekend horsemen who trespassed so freely. Convinced that our electrical pumps, sheds, irrigation pipes, and orchards had been ruined or at least "tampered with" by these invaders, on inspection we rarely found anything other than the occasional bullet hole or manured alleyway.

Obviously, then, I do not believe that we should imagine classical Greek society frozen in time and space, as a cultural standard maintained over the millennia, for a small elite. Humanists in our universities who look back to the fifth century B.C. to find solace in the excellence of Greek literature, art, or philosophy, all too often conceive of an image of a society that never existed. They picture writers, artists, philosophers, and other men of genius, but they do not picture them as related to the vast majority of Greek people and their "petty" concerns and, worse yet, they divorce them from the very physical landscape they inhabited. In their hands classical studies have grown only more rarefied and isolated from those who surely need its guidance now more than ever: all serious and hardworking citizens of *our* polis. All too many scholars—as any visitor to the learned societies' conventions can attest—have somehow convinced themselves that classical Athens was a community similar to their own universities, a notion that is not only demonstrably false but also dangerous: this attitude has virtually ensured that only scarce resources are invested in their own limited interests, which in turn casts a further veil over the Greeks and removes them yet a further generation away from the rest of us. A good example is found in the relative neglect by classicists of ancient Greek agriculture. Nearly eighty percent of the citizens of most ancient city-states were employed in farming, and questions of food supply affected nearly all their economical or political discussions. Yet, until recently not more than a half-dozen books were devoted to the subject. Modern scholars have been far more interested, ironically, in "pastoralism,". the artificial and detached



view of the countryside created by just a few ancient escapists, who like their modern admirers were often far removed from the concerns of contemporary society. Nor do the social scientists do us any better if they investigate the role of labor, slavery, women, family, and kin relationships in order to discover some structure in classical society that validates their ideas about contemporary politics—for inevitably they have a political agenda.

Rather, classical Greece still offers us the best—perhaps the only intellectual—explanation for how the pragmatic concerns of our own daily existence in Western society have been addressed and solved. If we concentrate on mundane and ordinary activities—the mechanics of ancient farming or fighting, to take a small example—we can discover in a well-documented, brief period in history that honesty and clarity of expression in all types of inquiry were of vital concern to the pragmatic Greeks of the fifth century B.C., to the men like Socrates, Sophocles, and Pericles who were stonemasons, soldiers, farmers, and businessmen. This process is inevitably a circular one: contemporary issues of vital concern, which we began by thinking so simple, inevitably become complex when we discover the unexpected ways in which Greek experience shared them, which in turn brings us a renewed appreciation for the versatility and novelty of the Greek legacy.

Of course, one naturally sees the ancient Greece one wants to see. For example, if there is a dangerous tendency among contemporary military strategists to make the experience (and thus misery) of soldiers in battle forever of only secondary concern, whether at the tactical level on the battlefield or in the global vision of the nuclear planner, Greek history can, I suppose, provide the supporting intellectual framework: strategy and tactics in the abstract sense are, after all, Greek words for generalship and troop arrangement. Yet the architects of the Somme, Schweinfurt, Vietnam, and other misadventures to come draw on the experience of their own counterparts, the fourth-century B.C. armchair tacticians or the Hellenistic pedant, not on the world of Aeschylus and Socrates, who knew the Greek battlefield

as ordinary hoplites in the Athenian phalanx. The example of classical Greece insists that there was, is, and always must be a connection between the adolescent unshaven men who kill and either those who order or we who ignore them.

The only prerequisite in any investigation of classical Greece is that we must always consider the seemingly ordinary as well as the extraordinary if we are to understand and thus learn from the most profound lessons of these most practical of men. And while today the university is the last island in America where we can learn the necessary philological skills to study ancient Greece, the university surely has not, will not, and cannot teach us how to use the knowledge we acquire. That task is an individual affair, unwelcomed by many classical scholars. But the rewards of turning to classical Greece to investigate the ordinary are great, for the ultimate answers are always of a moral nature, and have a far greater likelihood to be applicable and comprehensible to nearly every one of us.

# 2 *A Western Way of War*

> Therefore, though the best is bad,
> Stand and do the best, my lad;
> Stand and fight and see your slain,
> And take the bullet in your brain.
>
> —*A. E. Housman*

> War which was cruel and glorious has become cruel and sordid.
>
> —*Winston Churchill*

Firepower and heavy defensive armament—not merely the ability but also the *desire* to deliver fatal blows and then steadfastly to endure, without retreat, any counterresponse—have always been the trademark of Western armies. It was through "hammer blows," thought Clausewitz, that the real purpose of any conflict could be achieved: the absolute destruction of the enemy's armed forces in the field. Here, too, can be found the genius of Napoleon, who saw, as Jomini conceded, "that the first means of effecting great results was to concentrate above all on cutting up and destroying the enemy army, being certain that states or provinces fall of themselves when they no longer have organized forces to defend them." (Earle 88) It is this Western desire for a single, magnificent collision of infantry, for brutal killing with edged weapons on a battlefield between free men, that has baffled and terrified our adversaries from the non-Western world for more than 2,500 years: "these Greeks are accustomed to wage their wars among each other in the most senseless way," remarked Mardonios in 490. According to Herodotus, Mardonios was the nephew of Darius and commander of Xerxes' armada on the eve of the great Persian invasion of Europe. "For as soon as they declare war on each other, they seek out the fairest and most level ground, and then go down there to do battle on it. Consequently, even the winners leave with extreme losses; I need not mention the conquered, since they are annihilated. Clearly,

since they all speak Greek, they should rather exchange heralds and negotiators and thereby settle differences by any means rather than battle." (7.9.2) Herodotus' account suggests awe, or perhaps fear, in this man's dismissal of the Greek manner of battle and the Greek desire to inflict damage whatever the costs. Perhaps he is suggesting that Mardonios knew well that these men of the West, for all their ordered squares, careful armament, and deliberate drill, were really quite irrational and therefore quite dangerous. All the various contingents of the Grand Army of Persia, with their threatening looks and noise, had a very different and predictable outlook on battle. In Herodotus' view here, the Persians suffered from that most dangerous tendency in war: a wish to kill but not to die in the process.

Americans, despite their Revolutionary tradition of surprise attacks and ambushes by a motley collection of guerrilla frontiersmen, are the most recent captives of this classical legacy; American armed forces in recent wars have sacrificed mobility, maneuver, grace, if you will, on the battlefield in exchange for the chance of stark, direct assault, of frontal attack against the main forces of the enemy and the opportunity to strike him down—all in the hope of decisive military victory on the battlefield. "When war comes," reasoned twentieth-century American infantry strategists, "there should only be one question that is ever asked of a commander as to a battle and that one is not what flank did he attack, nor how did he use his reserves, nor how did he protect his flanks, but did he fight?" (Weigley 6) Like the classical Greeks, who employed no reserves, flank attacks, or rear guard, American thinkers have given more importance to the immediate application of power against the enemy than to the arts of maneuver and envelopment. We have at least professed that victory was achieved solely by frontal assault until one side cracked. "Maneuvering in itself will not gain victories," declared the Americans. "The combat is the scene of the greatest violence in war. As it is the only set act in war from which victory flows, we should be prepared to achieve victory at any cost no less than the price of blood. All preparations in war must aim at victory in battle." (Weigley 7)



In this last generation, however, it has become popular (like Mardonios in Herodotus' history) to dismiss if not ridicule this manner of warfare, this legacy of single, head-on battle bequeathed to us by the Greeks. The heavy infantry, the tactics of direct assault, and the very firepower of American and European armies, which once captured the public imagination as somehow "heroic," have proven embarrassingly ineffective in the postcolonial conflicts and terrorist outbreaks of the era since the Second World War, as the men of the West have become bogged down in the jungle and the mountainous terrains of Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. The traditional, continental armies of the Western democracies should not have been introduced there for both political and strategic reasons ("the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time"). Instead, the guerrilla and loosely organized irregular forces, the neoterrorists who for centuries have been despised by Western governments and identified with the ill-equipped, landless poor, now command attention, fear, or even admiration, not merely on political grounds, or even through any brilliance of combat, but rather because of their uncanny success at ambush and evasion of direct assault: they seek not to engage in *but rather to avoid infantry battle.* This failure to lure the North Vietnamese army into a Western-style shootout is what finally paralyzed the huge land army of the United States and forced it to abandon the entire theater:

> When the hideous Battle of Dak To ended at the top of Hill 875, we announced that 40,000 of them had been killed, it had been the purest slaughter, our losses were bad, but clearly it was another American victory. But when the top of the hill was reached the number of NVA found was four. Four. Of course, more died, hundreds died, but the corpses kicked, counted and photographed and buried numbered four. Where, Colonel? And how, and why? Spooky. Everything up there was spooky, and it would have been that way even if there had been no war. You were there in a place where you didn't belong, where things were glimpses for which you would have to pay, a place where they didn't play with mystery but killed you straight off for trespassing. *(Herr 95)*

And so Mao Tse-tung, Ho Chi Minh, and Fidel Castro became

media favorites to many, figures whom even the most diehard traditionalists might grudgingly admire. Their military success brought along with it political credibility, as the freedom fighter who lies confidently in wait for the Westerners' clumsy, unaware phalanx, a dinosaur-like, noisy body of men that lumbers forth too late, in vain bringing enormous firepower to bear against an enemy who is no longer there. Our nineteenth-century heroes Wellington, Grant, and Sherman have now faded somewhat, and perhaps, too, we have lost our admiration for that gallant, murderous charge of Cortez and his small band, men who, like Xenophon's Ten Thousand before them, through disciplined formation and superior body armor and armament sliced a way through a sea of swarming Aztecs and thereby earned their heroic salvation:

> The number of the enemy was double that of the Christians, and it seemed as if it were a contest which must be decided by numbers and brute force, rather than by superior science. But it was not so. The invulnerable armor of the Spaniard, his sword of matchless temper, and his skill in the use of it, gave him advantages which far outweighed the odds of physical strength and numbers. After doing all that the courage of despair could enable men to do, resistance grew fainter. *(Prescott 2.65–66)*

We still need to study the origins of Western battle if for no other reason than the flicker of curiosity we feel, our morbid fascination with the frightful collision of men who, attacking in massed formation, like their Greek hoplite predecessors, do not wish to harass their enemy but prefer instead to seek victory in the rawest, if not, as Mardonios said, the silliest sense: battle where they face their enemy at arm's reach to kill and be killed. Tyrtaios, the seventh-century Lyric poet who wrote for the Spartans in the second Messenian War, could simply say of the Greek battlefield, "no man ever proves himself a good man in war unless he endures to face the blood and slaughter." (12.10–11) He was referring to men who were clearly not cowards, yet not extremists but, rather, courageous amateurs who had somehow found a way to face the enemy without flinching. Whatever the



future of infantry battle in the nuclear age, this inner craving for a clear decision, despite the carnage, will not fade; it cannot since, as the Greeks discovered, it resides in the dark hearts of us all. Yet it is essential to remember its moral imperative is to end the fighting quickly and efficiently, not simply to exhibit brave resolve.

This Western mode of attack has been so successful that we have essentially eliminated the very chance that it will take place again in our lifetime. We have put ourselves out of business, so to speak; for any potential adversary has now discovered the futility of an open, deliberate struggle on a Western-style battlefield against the firepower and discipline of Western infantry. Yet, ominously, the legacy of the Greeks' battle style lingers on, a narcotic that we cannot put away.

The cagey Spartan general Brasidas in the fifth century B.C., during a forced march through the hostile frontier of Macedonia, for the first time in European history defended this preference for direct battle and the accompanying disdain for the tactics of evasion. In a rousing speech to his troops, Thucydides tells us, he reminded his men:

> To the unexperienced these opponents present an image of fear: they are formidable in their numbers and nearly unendurable with all that shouting. The empty brandishing of their weapons offers a display of their taunts and threats. Yet, these men are not quite the same when it is a question of charging those who stay their ground. Since they do not have any formation, once under duress they have no shame at all in abandoning their position. To run away and to stand firm, these are all the same in their eyes, and so their courage can never really be tested. Battle is an individual affair to them and consequently everyone has a ready excuse to save his own skin. They think it is safer to bully you without any risk to themselves rather than meet you in pitched battle. Otherwise, instead of all this, they would join battle. Therefore, you realize clearly that the fear which they instill, in reality, is quite small, although granted it is annoying to the eye and ear. *(4.126.4–6)*

There is in all of us a repugnance, is there not, for hit-and-run tactics, for skirmishing and ambush? Does there not hide a feel-

ing, however illogical and poorly thought out, that direct assault between men who, in Brasidas' words, "stay their ground" is somehow more "fair" and certainly more "noble" an opportunity to show a man's true character and test it before his peers? Hope of a Greek-style battle was for this very reason always in the mind of the Crusader, a figure who more than any other in European history was enamored with classical armament and a desire to kill at close range. At the battle of Arsouf (A.D. 1191),

> The Turks did not endure for a moment the onset of the dreaded knights of the West. The sudden change of the crusading army from a passive defense to a vigorous offensive came so unexpectedly upon them, that they broke and fled with disgraceful promptness . . . a dreadful slaughter of the Infidel took place. The rush of the Crusaders dashed horse and foot together into a solid mass, which could not easily escape, and the knights were there to take a bloody revenge for the long trial of endurance to which they had been exposed since daybreak. Before the Moslems could scatter and disperse to the rear, they had been mowed down by the thousands. *(Oman 2. 315)*

And how else can we explain the carnage caused by those who adopted this absurd manner of battle at the Somme, or Verdun, or Omaha Beach? To the Greeks who long ago formulated these ideas about battle, anything less than a "fair" fight—that is, a daylight clash of two massed phalanxes—was no fight at all, however decisive. "The policy which you are suggesting is one of bandits and thieves," snapped Alexander the Great when he was urged to attack the Persians by night, "the only purpose of which is deception. I cannot allow my glory always to be diminished by Darius' absence, or by narrow terrain, or by tricks of night. I am resolved to attack openly and by daylight. I choose to regret my good fortune rather than be *ashamed* of my victory." (Curtius *Alexander* 4.13) The Greeks of the past, wrote the Hellenistic Greek historian Polybius, had no interest in victory through tricks and deceit since it was only "hand-to-hand battle at close range that brought clear results." (13.3.2–3) Therefore, it was "madness" that the Hellenistic ruler of Macedon Philip V avoided pitched battle, "left war untouched," in Polybius' words, opting instead to attack the cities of Thessaly. Up to that time all others "had done everything they could to beat each other on the field of battle, but had spared cities." (18.3.7) Part of the romanticism and glory that we see here lies too in the struggle against vastly superior numbers. From the Three Hundred at the pass at Thermopylai, to Xenophon's Ten Thousand in Asia Minor, to the frontier Roman garrison, the Crusaders, and European colonial troops, outnumbered Western commanders have never been dismayed by the opportunity to achieve an incredible victory through the use of superior weapons, tactics, and cohesion among men.



This deliberate dependence on face-to-face killing at close range explains another universal object of disdain in Greek literature: those who fight from afar, the lightly equipped skirmisher or peltast, the javelin thrower, the slinger, and above all, the archer. (Eur. *HF* 157–63; Aesch. *Pers.* 226–80, 725, 813, 1601–3) These were all men who could kill "good" infantry with a frightening randomness and little risk to themselves. Worse yet, in the eyes of the Greeks, they were often men from the lower orders of society who could not afford their own body armor, or semi-Hellenized recruits from outlands like Crete or Thrace who had no stomach for the clash of spears, no desire "to play by the rules." When the Spartan infantry survivors at Pylos were asked how and why they inexplicably surrendered during that disastrous battle of the Peloponnesian War, and so handed themselves over alive to the despised light-armed and missile-equipped troops of the Athenian general Demosthenes, one prisoner dryly replied in his defense that arrows would be worth a great deal if they could pick out the brave men from the cowards. (Thuc. 4.40.2) Clearly, the indiscriminate and unexpected manner of death from distant warriors did not go down well; it dated from the very dawn of the hoplite age as we see in Homer's *Iliad:* "If you were to make trial of me in strong combat with weapons," challenged Diomedes to Paris, "your bow would do you no good at all nor your close-showered arrows." (11.385–87) No doubt we can believe the first-century A.D. geographer Strabo when he

claims that he saw an ancient inscribed pillar of great antiquity which forbade the use of missiles altogether in the war on the Lelantine Plain during the eighth century B.C. (10.448) Plutarch, too, in an anecdote of uncertain date, reminds us that for a Spartan dying from a fatal arrow wound "death was of no concern, except that it was caused by a cowardly bow." (*Mor.* 234 E 46; cf. Hdt. 9.72.2) There is a note of pathos in the usually somber Thucydides when he describes the fate of a phalanx of five hundred of the best Athenian infantry who during the early years of the Peloponnesian War stumbled clumsily into the mountainous wilds of Aitolia only to be bled white by the javelins and arrows of lightly armed native irregulars. Nowhere was there an enemy phalanx visible to test the Athenians' spears and unbroken ranks. "They were," Thucydides sadly concludes, "many and all in the prime of life, the *best* men that the city of Athens lost in the war." (3.98.4) Another fifth-century Athenian, Aeschylus, wrote of Greek infantry who die far off in Eastern battle: "in the place of men, urns and ashes return to the house of each." (*Ag.* 434–36)

Like so much of their art and literature, the Greek manner of battle was a paradox of the highest order, a deliberate attempt to harness, to modulate, and hence to amplify if not sanctify the wild human desire for violence through the stark order and discipline of the phalanx. To the Persians, who reversed these concepts—their disordered, moblike frightening hordes had no fondness for methodical killing—the approach of a Greek column was especially unsettling. At Marathon they thought a "destructive madness" had infected the Greek ranks as they saw them approach on the run in their heavy armor. Surely, as those outnumbered Greek hoplites crashed into their lines, the Persians must have at last understood that these men worshiped not only the god Apollo but the wild, irrational Dionysus as well.

This Western desire for an awesome clash of arms was first expressed in Greece at the beginning of the seventh century B.C. There, for the first time in European history, heavily armed and slow-moving infantry, massed together in formation, by mutual agreement sought battle to find in a few short hours a decisive



victory or utter defeat, where men's "knees settled in the dust and the spears shattered at the very outset." (Aesch. *Ag.* 64–65) This explains what went on in the mind of the fourth-century B.C. Spartan general Agesilaos when he purposely allowed his various enemies to combine so that he might fight them all together, in a single pitched battle, whatever their numbers: "he thought it the wisest course of action to allow the two enemy forces to combine, and, in case they wished to fight, to engage them in battle in the traditional manner and out in the open." (Xen. *Hell.* 6.5.16; *Ages.* 2.6) No wonder that after Antiochos returned from Persia he concluded that although he had sought out many men for his phalanxes he "was not able to find any who could stand up to Greeks in battle." (Xen. *Hell.* 7.1.38) Contrarily, nearly two centuries later, to Philip V's everlasting discredit among the Greeks, he chose to fight in rough terrain and thereby avoid pitched battle. (Polyb. 18.3.3)

The stark simplicity of Greek combat, bereft of heroics and romanticism, has not been appreciated by us, their Western heirs: for too long we have failed to include this austere legacy of Greek battle among the gifts—or burdens—of our classical heritage. This is a surprising omission when we consider that our general ideas about the conduct of battle even under the frightening conditions of contemporary warfare have not changed much in other respects from those practiced by our Greek ancestors. These men were the first we know of to relegate cavalry to a secondary role and thus to suppress for a thousand years to come the notion that the battlefield was the private domain of aristocratic horsemen. Nor did they have any liking for the landless poor, who were skilled only in missile attacks; they, too, were to be kept clear of the hard fighting. Instead, the hoplite class of the Greek classical age chose to ignore the bow or javelin in preference for the spear and massive bronze armor in a desire to eliminate entirely the critical "distance" that elsewhere traditionally separated men in battle. They alone introduced to us a novel type of frontal attack, where warriors of like class sought to eye each other at close range as they killed and died. Yet they dis-

played a minimum of heroics and gallantry in battle. The plumed general, the armchair tactician, and the bemedaled retiree were virtually unknown—left to the imagination of their Hellenistic and Roman successors. Battle was seen only as the domain of those men who actually experienced the carnage of spear and sword thrust, and these had no desire to make anything else out of it than the acknowledgment of unavoidable and necessary killing. No wonder theirs was a type of warfare which the poet Pindar called "a sweet thing to him who does not know it, but to him who has made trial of it, it is a thing of fear." (Fr. 120.5)

# 3 *Not Strategy, Not Tactics*

> I do not intend to say anything of logistics or strategy and very little of tactics in the formal sense . . . My purpose [is] to demonstrate, as exactly as possible, what the warfare, respectively, of hand, single-missile and multiple-missile weapons was (and is) like, and to suggest how and why the men who have had (and do have) to face these weapons control their fears, staunch their wounds, go to their deaths.
>
> —*John Keegan,* The Face of Battle

> Tactics are only a very small part of warfare.
>
> —*Xenophon,* Memorabilia

The origins of the Western infantry experience lie in classical Greece, back past 2,500 years of military tradition to the battlefields of Marathon and Delion, or to that strange, terrible head-on collision of Thebans and Spartans in 394 at Koroneia—"like no other in our time," wrote the contemporary witness Xenophon—where men in the West first drew themselves up in dense formation, charged, killed, and then died. To the few students now who sometimes ask about war in ancient Greece, about hoplites, phalanxes, Thermopylai and Leuktra, Agesilaos and Epameinondas, I usually insist that they read first the ancient accounts of these battles, however brief, however inadequate by our modern standards of accuracy and fairness. To those who return and wish more, the advice to learn the classical languages, to reread these passages in Latin or Greek is unwelcome. But this is not perverse advice on my part to bolster enrollments in classics at our state university (I can think of only two students who eventually pursued that interest and signed up for Introductory Greek or Latin the next term). Nor is it because I think nothing is to be learned from the research of the last two hundred years of classical scholarship; *res militares,* after all, were among the fa-

vorite topics of inquiry of a most gifted group of nineteenth-century Europeans. Rather, it derives from a quirk of my own personal experience, a belief that what little I have learned about warfare has come out of an interest in battle and combat at the expense of strategy and tactics. During my childhood, for example, I read every word of my father's popular paperback accounts of the "Air War over Japan," and memorized the specifications of the B-29 bomber in his strange collection of histories of the aircraft. Yet now I remember very little of these books, and of what I do recall, nearly all seems unimportant or detached from any plausible frame of reference, so that I really have no idea at all what went on in those last months of 1945 in the air above Japan. But what I *do* remember are the stories of combat—never of strategic bombing planning or an analysis of the damage inflicted—that my father told to my brothers and me, usually late at night after he had opened a bottle of good bourbon or scotch. War to us, then, was never an antiseptic description of strategy and tactics, but rather a lesson about what battle was, about which men looked to maps, charts, and reports, and which bombed, strafed, and were blown apart. To discuss anything other than the latter class of soldiers called into question our very morality. These sessions were "stories" only in the sense that they were narratives about human conduct, but they were far more than stories. Men, we were told, do unexpected things when they are trying to kill each other, and so my father went on about those who defecated in their flak suits, who wrapped their groins in armor only to suffer wounds to the head —if the loss of both the face and jaw can be called a mere wound. And he told of the smell of burned flesh from those set afire ten thousand feet below, of doomed bombers that did not "crash" on lift-off or even crumble to pieces, but rather simply vanished, overloaded as they were with fuel and incendiaries.

In his defense, it must be said that my father was only following a family tradition, for his father had taught him about the nature of battle by describing his own wartime experience, lost in the Ardennes in 1918: about the Lewis machine gun which finally



melted in his hands from the monotony of shooting German teenagers, about the gassed food that slowly ate away at his insides, transforming him not only bodily but also in outlook, so much so that on his return his forty acres no longer were a mere farm but had become a refuge from those around him. My own memory of my grandfather is of a man in his late seventies riding a donkey about his farm, quite an anomaly to his young neighbors, professional farmers riding the boom of the late 1960s who considered him, rather than themselves, so odd. Much of the same could be said of so many cousins, uncles, and friends, those lucky enough to come back from war, although damaged and unable to do more than prune a few vines in the winter—like my cousin Beldon, brain damaged from tropical fever, yet far luckier than his brother Holt, who died of a head wound on Omaha Beach.

From the haphazard descriptions told by these Americans (and despite what many Europeans may think, there is a tradition of battle in many families in this country), a coherent picture of war overseas was created in my mind at a very young age. After learning the classical languages, I looked for similar descriptions in the ancient authors who wrote about Greek warfare, such as Thucydides and Xenophon, veterans themselves of land battle, expecting the same detail, comparable stories of soldiers under fire.

Yet within their histories of war there is a scarcity of detail about most of the action on the field once the two sides joined in battle; the overall campaign, the city-states that formed the battle alliance, the number of respective combatants, the speech of the general before the battle—all these warrant their attention instead. Modern scholars have chosen likewise to concentrate either on tactics, provisioning, deployment, drill, or on the structure of command. Of course, ancient Greek writers composed their narrative for an audience of veterans, hoplites like themselves who knew all too well the slaughter that took place once men in armor met, but it is not entirely accurate to state that therefore they omitted in-depth accounts of the subsequent

wounding and killing because this would bore their experienced readers: in fact, Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon do tell us much about men in battle, if little detail about any *one* battle. Their many offhand remarks, such as the one by Xenophon concerning the Spartans drinking before the battle of Leuktra, or Thucydides' strange interest at the fight at Mantineia in the universal tendency of hoplites to drift toward the right side, have a cumulative effect. These anecdotes give us a good idea of what the fighting, killing, and dying were like. Equivalent information can be found throughout Greek literature (and on Greek vases). Battle, then, was known by the Greeks to be the essence of human conflict.

We must ask ourselves what the hoplites in the phalanx were faced with, for they are the key to our understanding ancient Greek warfare. Because of the peculiar nature of classical Greek society "battle" rather than "war" may be the only apt description of conflict between city-states. Classical scholars, with their long university training in philology and limited exposure to, or affinity with, veterans of infantry combat, have neglected this view and have misinterpreted the spirit and, most importantly, the lesson of classical Greek military history—the nature of which we have always felt we have understood so well.

From the research of the past two centuries we have learned a great deal about how the classical Greek hoplite was armed, drilled, and deployed and the strategic limitations which confronted his general. For example, the nineteenth-century Germans Köchly and Rüstow (1852), Droysen (1888), Delbrück (1920), and, later and most importantly, Kromayer and Veith (1928), drawing on their practical experience in the German army—their *Kriegskunst*—as well as their knowledge of the classics, conceived the modern study of ancient military theory and practice as the natural complement to a wider, contemporary interest in the diplomatic and political history of the Greek city-state. Yet, their *Handbücher*, exemplars of nineteenth-century scholarship at both its best and its worst, view conflict strategically, topographically, logistically, tactically—in the end, nonsensically and



amorally. There is a marked *distance* in their viewpoint, as if they were suspended above the killing on the battlefield in an observation balloon looking downward, detached from if not uninterested in the desperate individuals below.

Hans Delbrück, for example, felt it necessary to begin his massive work on the history of the art of war with the problem of the relative number of men present at each battle:

> Whatever the sources permit, a military-historical study does best to start with the army strengths. They are of decisive importance, not simply because of the relative strengths, whereby the greater mass wins or is counter-balanced by bravery or leadership on the part of the weaker force, but also on an absolute basis.

Delbrück was not merely wrong, but also misleading: wrong, because in the world of the classical phalanx, the army was without any reserves, coordination of specialized troops, or integration of cavalry, and at the mercy of rumor, superstition, misinformation, and panic to a degree unknown on the modern battlefield, so that the relative strengths were *not* so important, and the historical accounts of Greek battle make this clear. He was wrong again because the numbers of combatants usually cannot be known to the level of accuracy which his argument requires; given the nature of our source material, they can only be guessed at, often through faulty modern analogy and comparison. Finally, that Delbrück presents this issue within the first paragraph of his massive encyclopedia is misleading because it suggests that the actual behavior of Greek hoplites and the unique atmosphere in the phalanx are of secondary importance. In fact, he never discussed them. "To these late nineteenth-century specialists who had experienced the limited confrontations of their own day and who remembered the 'piecemeal' wars of the last century," Yvon Garlan has written, "war was insubstantial and unreal, as gratuitous as a game of chance, an outlet for the energy of a social group which it did not affect deeply, or else a luxury activity." (19)

Later English scholars—for example, Tarn (1930), Griffith

(1935), or Greenhalgh (1973)—sought to understand Greek warfare either topically or chronologically, to trace the origins and evolution of battle through one specific type or era of warfare. Yet they too did not wholly abandon the previous obsession with deployment, drill, weapons, and tactics. But a shift in focus was dramatically accomplished by the three volumes of Kendrick Pritchett's *The Greek State at War* (1971–79), where for the first time Greek warfare was really seen in its proper function as a social institution, as commonplace and integral an activity to the Greeks as agriculture or religion: in Garlan's words, "ancient war has a reality, a manner of being, a practice and a mode of behavior that are as wide as society itself." (21) While Pritchett made no claim to comprehensiveness in the presentation of his material, the range of interests is nevertheless quite remarkable.

In all these recent studies of ancient Greek warfare, however, there was no substantial change in the manner of inquiry, what John Keegan has termed our "angle of vision." Battle between hoplites was seen from the vantage point either of the general, or of the state, or, more fashionably now, of the community as a whole. With the publication of Keegan's *The Face of Battle* (1976), however, combat as experienced on the battlefield became a legitimate subject of study by classical historians. Usually works in medieval or modern European history have little influence on current research in the ancient world; classical scholarship, after all, can pride itself on its near isolation from "trends" in the historiography of other disciplines. That a popular account of medieval and modern battles such as Keegan's would turn attention toward the neglected figure of the ancient Greek infantryman and his experience within his phalanx attests to the singular originality of Keegan's approach—an approach which, ironically, perhaps might have been even better suited for studying the Greeks' unique concentration on their one decisive clash, on the "battle" rather than episodes of "war." As some scholars sought to apply Keegan's approach and principles to ancient Greek military affairs, what had been for more than a century a laborious and often dry examination of Greek warfare finally became a



more exciting exercise, to learn what battle was actually like for the men who did the fighting and dying. In the last ten years a number of articles and books have ignored strategy and even tactical considerations in an effort to learn the very nature of the individual's experience in battle, as if this was at last understood as the very key to unlocking the strange enigma of war and society in Greece.

Not surprisingly, it was Pritchett again who first collected the evidence, in a fourth volume on *The Greek State at War* (*The Pitched Battle,* 1985). There, he presented an in-depth account, based on close attention to the vocabulary of early Greek poets and historical writers, of the action when hoplites finally crashed together. Given the existence of this excellent, scholarly treatment, I make no attempt here to follow in similar fashion all the action on the Greek battlefield from the initial impact of the phalanxes to the final collapse and subsequent rout. Instead, I try to suggest what the *environment* of ancient Greek battle was, the atmosphere in which the individual struggled to kill and to avoid death, the sequence of events seen from within the phalanx. I ask the question, What was it like? at any given stage of the fighting.

If there is a theme to this brief essay, it is, I confess, the *misery* of hoplite battle. Few types of infantry battle in the West have required quite the same degree of courage, of nerve in the face of mental and physical anguish, as this, its original form, in which armed and armored hoplites advanced in massed formation with no chance of escape. The Greek battlefield was the scene of abject terror and utter carnage, but it was a *brief* nightmare that the hoplite might face only once a summer, unlike the unending monotony of warfare in the trenches of the First World War or in the jungles of Vietnam. A man could focus all his courage upon one pure burst of frenzied activity; for an hour or two he overcame the limits of physical and psychological endurance.

We must always remember that the Greeks' desire for this brutal confrontation was designed to *limit* war and martial gallantry, not to romanticize the warriors' inherent nobility. Yet, finally, is it enough for us to understand the noise, the dust, the wounds,

the manner of death, the confusion and panic of ancient battle, if we cannot understand *why* these men marched forward? I do not believe that the Greeks in the hoplite age fought under coercion or fear of punishment. Their willingness to go into battle is not to be found in either their superior drill or their equipment. Nor were they drunk to the point of senselessness, or bent on plunder and booty, or in awe of God and country. Rather, they went into battle for the man on the left and right, front and back, brother, cousin, father, and son: out of respect for, or in fear before, men of like circumstance, they forged some code of honor and salvaged a certain dignity (if not pleasure) from the killing. When once a man had taken his place in the phalanx of his city, Socrates, the old veteran of hoplite battle, reminded his audience in the last speech of his life, "he must stay put there and face the danger without any regard for death or anything else rather than disgrace." (Pl. *Ap.* 28 D)

# 4 *The Hoplite and His Phalanx: War in an Agricultural Society*

> Indeed, for a long time peace was understood in negative fashion, simply as the absence of war.
>
> —*Yvon Garlan*

Sometime in the late eighth or early seventh century B.C. infantrymen in Greece gradually began to arm themselves with body armor, round shield, and thrusting spear, and so chose to get close and jab the opponent head-on rather than fling javelins from afar, advancing and retreating like the ebb and flow of native warriors whom Europeans encountered in nineteenth-century Africa and South America. The era of mounted fighters of the Greek Dark Ages (1200–800) who dismounted to throw the spear was also now over, for warfare no longer was the private duels of wealthy knights. On the left arm of this new warrior rested a round wooden shield some three feet in diameter, the *hoplon,* so radically different in concept from its cowhide predecessor that it was from this piece of equipment that the infantryman eventually derived his name, "hoplite." By the aid of an interior forearm strap and an accompanying handgrip, the hoplite could manage the unusually great weight of this strange shield, warding off spear blows solely with the left arm, or at times resting its upper lip on his left shoulder to save strength. In this way he could both protect his own left flank and, if formation was well maintained, offer some aid to the unprotected right side of the man to his left in the ranks. Yet, despite the shield's great weight and size, well over half a man's height, its round shape offered poor protection for the entire body, unlike the

rectangular model of the later Roman legionary or the body shield of the earlier Dark Age warrior; there was little chance that a hoplite could save himself from most of the traditional sources of attack on the front and rear. The hoplite's shield offered no material advantage over earlier models in isolated skirmishes or individual duels. Even more importantly, the shield could not be easily slung over the back, as previous shields had been, to protect those who turned and ran—although this was a small drawback, since these fighting men now had no other intention but to stand firm together and push constantly forward.

We do not really know whether the use of this new equipment spawned a radical change in battle tactics, or vice versa. Yet it is at least clear that better success at warding off blows and striking home with the spear was accomplished by having the men mass in column, usually eight ranks in depth. There they could find mutual protection from an accumulation of their shields to the front, rear, and side—if care was taken to moderate and account for the natural tendency to drift rightward as each man sought cover for his own exposed, unshielded right flank in the shield of his neighbor. Although there was an accompanying loss of firepower overall, as every rank to the rear of the first three primary rows was effectively out of the initial action (the spears of these men in the middle and rear not immediately reaching the enemy), the added weight and density of the formation were believed to offer a crucial stabilizing force, in both physical and psychological terms, for the few men who first met the terrible onslaught of the enemy.

What followed this initial collision was the push, or *othismos*, as ranks to the rear put their bodies into the hollows of their shields and forced those ahead constantly onward. Some recent scholars have branded this image of a mass thrusting contest as ridiculous and absurd. Yet careful compilation of ancient descriptions of Greek warfare make it certain beyond a doubt that this was precisely what happened in hoplite battle; it soon degenerated into an enormous contest of pressure, as men used their shields, hands, and bodies in a desperate, frantic effort to force a path



forward. Xenophon, an eyewitness of the last age of purely hoplite battle, remarked that any troops who were suspect belonged in the middle of the phalanx, so that they would be surrounded by good fighters at the front and rear "in order that they might be led by the former and *pushed* by the latter." (Xen. *Mem.* 3.1.9) The key, as the successful Spartan general Brasidas reminded his men, was to maintain formation always, to stay in rank, and to preserve the cohesive protection offered by the accumulation of shields. Likewise, Thucydides notes that during the awful retreat after the Peloponnesian catastrophe at Olpai in 426, only the Mantineians survived, never once breaking rank, but rather tightening up their formation to prevent any inroad between their shields. (Thuc. 3.108.3; Diod. 15.85.6)

The actual social and political sequence of events at the end of the Greek Dark Ages that led to this movement toward the armament and subsequent tactics of hoplite battle cannot and will not be known, given the nature of our sources. But surely by the early seventh century B.C. the so-called hoplite reform—if we may use such a dramatic term—must have attracted a growing number of farmers, who now became restless at the idea that anyone might traverse their own small parcels of land. (Hoplite farmers usually owned properties outside the city walls of between five and ten acres.) It makes sense that the solidarity and, more importantly, the success of their wartime experience in the phalanx—a formation which, like Napoleon's columns, encouraged ties of camaraderie, if not revolutionary fervor—reflected a growing confidence in their new, emerging function in the government of the Greek city-state as owners and producers of food. By the late seventh century B.C. the security of most of Greek society depended on the arms and armor that each such landholder possessed, hung up above his fireplace, and the courage which he brought into battle when confronted with an army of invasion encamped on his or his neighbors' farms.

As long as these unlikely fighters, heavily armed men in bronze armor, held their assigned places in the ranks of the phalanx, they were virtually impregnable from attack by any lighter-

armed, mobile infantry or by charges of heavy cavalry—provided that the ground was flat and free of obstruction. Because the great plain of Boiotia met these criteria, the legendary fourth-century Theban general Epameinondas once called it "the dancing floor of War." (Plut. *Mor.* 193 E. 18) The phalanx (which Aristotle reminds us must break its ranks when "crossing even the narrowest ditch" [*Pol.* 1304]) then must first find such a battlefield, and only thereafter seek out its enemy. Polybius was correct in his famous comparison between the Roman legion and the Greek phalanx, when he remarked of the advantages of the Greeks that "nothing can stand in the way of the advance of a phalanx, as long as it maintains its customary cohesion and power." (18.30.11) Success, especially when depth increased and width diminished accordingly, required that the vulnerable flanks be protected by cavalry, skirmishers, and above all, rough terrain. Even well-trained enemy archers and slingers were seldom a threat if the hoplites stayed on level ground and could be brought to close quarters quickly. When infantrymen lumbered across the last 150 yards of no-man's-land and came into the range of the ancient arrows and other hand-propelled missiles, which could wound their arms, legs, faces, and necks, and at closer ranges penetrate their body armor, the "window of vulnerability" lasted not more than a minute. These airborne attacks, far from turning aside the onset of heavily armored men, most likely served to incite their anger and to guarantee a furious collision of leveled spears. In short, for nearly three hundred years (650–350) no foreign army, despite any numerical superiority, withstood the charge of a Greek phalanx. The battles at Marathon (490) and Plataia (479) demonstrate this clearly: relatively small numbers of well-led, heavily armed Greeks had little difficulty in breaking right through the hordes of their more lightly equipped and less cohesively ranked adversaries from the East.

The extraordinary integration of civilian and military service within the city-state also explains much of the Greek success. In most cases, men were arranged within the phalanx right next to lifelong friends or family members, and fought not only for the



safety of their community and farmland but also for the respect of the men at their front, rear, and side. Small landholders and craftsmen with their own armor on their backs were liable to be called up from the city's muster rolls for military service any summer after their eighteenth birthday until they turned sixty. In the fifth and fourth centuries, battle broke out in the Greek world nearly two out of every three years, so the chances were good that a man would have to leave his farm, take up his arms, fight in repeated engagements, and fall wounded or die one summer's day in battle. Military service rarely was confined to peacetime patrols or to drill, and consequently hardly any figure in fifth-century Greek literature refers to his past tenure as a hoplite but rather only to the specific battles at which he fought. A service organization other than the Veterans of Foreign Wars (such as the American Legion) would be incomprehensible to the classical Greek mind.

In this world of perennial battle, fighting in the ranks of the phalanx required utmost courage, excellent physical condition, and endurance, but little specialized training or skill with weapons. The spear and shield, even when used in unison with other men in the crowded conditions of the column, were still much simpler to handle than either the bow or the sling or even the javelin. Besides, "there was little chance," Xenophon remarked quite rightly, "of missing a blow" through any lack of skill in massed combat. (*Cyr.* 2.1.16; 2.3.9–11) About the same time, Plato agreed that specialized weapon training was of little value except during retreat and pursuit, where for the first and only moment men had room to maneuver and to use their prowess in arms in duels or individual skirmishing. (*Lach.* 181E–83D) Pericles, in his famous funeral oration after the second year of the Peloponnesian War, castigated the Spartan system for its excessive (and unnecessary) attention to hoplite drill (Thuc. 2.39.1), and Aristotle likewise seems to imply that the Spartans were just about the only soldiers in Greece who felt it necessary to train at all for battle. (*Pol.* 1338 b27) In the utopia of the *Republic* Plato must have been reacting to this general Panhellenic amateurism

when he complained that a man who grabbed up a shield could hardly become a skilled warrior on that very day. (374ff) Yet, in a sense, that was very nearly the truth. All this would explain why on occasion we read of extreme cases in Greek history where men fought in the phalanx with virtually no training. These soldiers were not exactly "hoplites"; nevertheless, they were provided with heavy armor and ordered to fight as infantrymen with no experience or idea of hoplite combat. (E.g., Thuc. 6.72.4; Xen. *Hell.* 4.4.10; Diod. 12.68.5; 15.13.2; 14.43.2–3; Polyaen. *Strat.* 3.8) For example, during the Athenians' invasion of the Ionian city of Miletos in 413, they brought along five hundred light-armed irregulars from Argos who were given armor and expected to fight as hoplites. (Thuc. 8.25.6) And the hoplite class of independent small farmers, as they have for centuries since, had little free time or desire for constant drilling. Yet they came to battle with an abundance of courage, if not controlled recklessness, and possessed a spirit of camaraderie with those of the same class and background: "I do not think," wrote the fourth century A.D. tactician Vegetius, "that there has ever been any question that the rural peasantry are the best equipped for military service." (1.3) These men were natural hoplites, in short, awesome soldiers turned loose to battle on their own turf, the farmlands of Greece, men to whom Pericles in his famous funeral oration was no doubt referring when he said they "would rather perish in resistance than find salvation through submission." (Thuc. 2.42.4)

Throughout the seventh, sixth, and on into the fifth century in Greece, a hoplite army of invasion quickly offered a challenge to pitched battle once it had made its way into the flatland of the enemy; indeed, its very occupation of precious farmland was an invitation to battle. Attacks against the walls of an enemy community were rarely successful, perhaps because siegecraft was both expensive and its techniques—the battering ram, artillery, and movable armor—were either unknown or not well understood. Only late in the fifth century and, more frequently, in Hellenistic times does one find the occasional successful siege.



Nor were night engagements an option. At times the sheer daring of an attack after darkness could bring results, but more commonly it ended in chaos, misdirection, and disorder in the ranks. (Hom. *Il.* 2.387) The confusion of men trapped in tight formation without any visibility made such battle risky, as well as less honorable if successful, in the eyes of most hoplite generals. (Thuc. 7.43–44; 7.80.3) Instead, once an invading army had crossed the border, either the defenders usually marched out from their walled cities promptly to contest this occupation of their farmland, or they simply submitted to the terms dictated in order to clear the intruder from their property as quickly as possible.

Strangely, in the typically brief invasion and occupation, there was little discussion on the part of the invaded whether any enemy army actually posed a credible threat to their livelihood by causing *lasting* damage to their orchards, vineyards, and grainfields when they set to work with fire and ax. After all, the methodical destruction of trees and vines with hand tools is a time-consuming process, made more difficult by enemy sorties and the need to gather food. The trunks of olive trees can achieve enormous proportions of some ten to twenty feet or more. Because the wood is especially hard, systematic cutting of olive groves with hand tools then was nearly impossible. Uprooting olives was of course an absurd undertaking; it is a formidable task even for the modern bulldozer. Vines could fall to the ax, but under ancient methods of cultivation there might be upward of two thousand plants to the acre; the image of light-armed troops chopping away for hours on end in an alien vineyard belongs more to the world of stoop agricultural labor than to the battlefield.

Wheat and barley can be burned but only during a brief period right before harvest, which would require the ravagers to arrive in enemy territory at precisely the right time. And numerous difficulties limited that scenario: if they had delays in mustering troops, their arrival on the enemy flatland would be amid grain still green—cereals impossible to use as a supplement to

their own rations and not at all combustible; while later invasions, in late June or July, might find fields harvested and a populace willing to ride out occupation, secure in the belief their produce was safe behind strong walls. The key, then, was to invade right at the beginning of harvest, to burn the barley and wheat, to deny the enemy the dividends of an entire year's work and investment, to use the produce to feed the very agents of its destruction. Yet, there remains one final irony; the invading hoplite army of small farmers had their own responsibilities back home; and the time they spent torching the grain of the enemy might mean that their own fields were left without adequate help just when harvest labor was most precious. In short, agricultural devastation was far from a simple process; even when accomplished it usually had few long-term effects.

The psychological turmoil among the influential, landed class of hoplites within the city walls, peering out at an enemy running among their ancestral fields, was generally felt to be enough either to draw the citizen body out to fight or, better yet, to make them simply give up. In this strange ritual of agricultural poker, a few cities, usually closely tied to the sea, occasionally persuaded their citizens to "ride out" an enemy invasion and not hazard battle, but only when they had men of vision and daring—men like Pericles of Athens who could at least convince all but the hoplite class to stomach foreigners on Attic soil. When this was the case, they suffered little agricultural damage of any lasting consequence from enemy ravagers and kept their city free and their infantry—though perhaps not their pride—unhurt. Oddly, few of the city-states understood, or rather wished to understand, the advantages that this unaccustomed inactivity within the walls could achieve. Such self-control was very rare during the age of the classical hoplite, as most Greeks felt that revenge in the old form of pitched combat was the most honorable and expedient way of resolving an insult to their sovereignty. Their tradition, their duty, indeed their desire, was for a ritualistic collision, head-on, with the spears of their enemy to end the whole business quickly and efficiently.



This paradox of Greek warfare—the threat of such a relatively ineffective tactic as crop destruction being successful in drawing men out to fight—helps to explain the frequency of pitched battle between mutually consenting hoplites throughout the Greek world. Yet, if battle was so incessant among the small city-states of classical Greece, how did the social fabric endure the frequent death and destruction year after year and such a vast amount of collective time and labor seemingly wasted on defense? The answer must lie again in the sheer simplicity of phalanx tactics and strategy, a mode of battle that did not require extensive peacetime drill and training or public expenditure on arms and provisioning. More importantly, until the late fifth century, there was no need for the expense of extended campaigns, with men marching for months on end, fighting in battle after battle. The enemy was usually nearby, on the other side of a range of mountains, no farther than a few hundred miles at most. Once the invader arrived in the spring, the entire "war," if that is the proper word, usually consisted of an hour's worth of hard fighting between consenting, courageous hoplite amateurs, rather than repeated clashes of hired or trained killers. The harvest demands of the triad of Greek agriculture—the olive, the vine, and grain—left only a brief month or two in which these small farmers could find time to fight.

Nor was combat fatal to most combatants; annihilation of entire armies was rare in the classical age, as the nearly uniform adoption of the panoply—the Greeks' bronze breastplate, shield, helmet, greaves, spear, and sword—ensured protection from repeated attacks. (It was left to the Hellenistic Greeks to record staggering deaths in battles between huge phalanxes of poorly protected infantry.) After the clash between the front ranks of armored infantry determined the direction of momentum and one side made an inroad into the ranks of the other, battle degenerated into a massive, pushing contest as rank after rank struggled to solidify and increase local advantages until the entire enemy's formation was destroyed. Yet, if the defeated could somehow maintain enough cohesion, a fighting withdrawal of

sorts was possible. A great number died only when there was a sudden collapse, a collective loss of nerve, when the abrupt disruption of the phalanx sent men trampling each other in mad panic to the rear, either in small groups or, worse, individually to save themselves from spear thrusts in the back. Even when one side was swept suddenly off the battlefield, casualties in such a disaster remained low by modern standards, well below 20 percent of the original force—a "tolerable" percentage as long as such a decisive engagement entailed both the beginning and end of the "war." However, several such repeated clashes, such as the missions which caused the notorious casualty ratios among American bomber crews in the Second World War over Europe, would have bled a small city-state white in short order.

Long-drawn-out pursuit was also rare; unlike Napoleon, the victors were not aiming for the complete destruction of an enemy army. Indeed, pursuit of fleeing hoplites was not even crucial: most victorious Greek armies saw no reason why they could not repeat their simple formula for success and gain further victory should the enemy regroup in a few days and mistakenly press their luck again. Besides, it was always good propaganda for a Greek general to profess no taste for slaughtering fellow Hellenes from the rear after the issue of battle had already been decided face-to-face. (E.g., Polyaen. *Strat.* 1.16.3; 1.45.5; 2.3.5; Thuc. 5.73.3.; Plut. *Mor.* 228 F 30) When told of the slaughter of Corinthians by his Spartans, the legendary old battle veteran and king of fourth-century Sparta, Agesilaos, was supposed to have remarked, "Woe to you, Greece, those who now have died were enough to have beaten all the barbarians in battle had they lived." (Xen. *Ages.* 7.6) Both sides were usually content to exchange their dead under truce. The victors, after erecting a battlefield trophy or simple monument to their success, marched home triumphantly, eager for the praise of their families and friends on their return.

For more than three hundred years Greece thrived under such a structured system of conflict between amateurs, where the waste of defense expenditure in lives and lost work and agricultural produce was kept within "limits." Unfortunately, nearly all of the conflicts of the seventh and sixth centuries remain unrecorded. At this time hoplite battle remained a "pure," static, unchanging match between men in the heaviest of armor, void of support from auxiliary cavalry, missile throwers, or archers, and they were proud of their close bonds to their farms. In the later fifth century, when we learn a great deal more from our sources about hoplites, two events occurred that upset this fragile equilibrium inherent in Greek battles between city-states; these led not merely to fundamental changes in the manner of fighting, but also to uncharacteristically catastrophic losses throughout the Greek city-states, as their most logical and in one sense unheroic system of resolving disputes was transformed into an unending nightmare.



First, the two great Persian invasions of the early fifth century pitted Greek hoplites not against each other in the accustomed ritual of battle, but rather against a huge army of Eastern troops with unfamiliar equipment and tactics, specialized contingents, and, most importantly, different aims and responsibilities. Battles such as Marathon and, especially, Plataia were longer, involved greater numbers of combatants, and were certainly more violent than the domestic clashes of the prior two centuries. The outcome of infantry battle was now more decisive. The issue that induced pitched battle no longer concerned the temporary swing of influence over a nearby rival, the occupation of a few acres of disputed borderlands, or the threat to chop down a few trees, but, rather, the final status of the Greek-speaking world. Battle was now with an enemy that had at his disposal cavalry brigades, missile troops, and an array of variously armed infantry: the Persian Wars became the training ground for the murderous years of the Peloponnesian War, as—reversing the contexts—the Spanish Civil War was for the Second World War. The Greeks were to learn that battle could be more than a simple pushing contest between armored men, and that war was more than a onetime collision of phalanxes.

Sparta and Athens, the two great Hellenic powers that

emerged dominant from the Persian conflict (only to divide the Greek world fifty years later into two armed camps), were—unfortunately, perhaps—unrepresentative of what might be termed "normal" Greek city-states, and thus immune from those accompanying "normal" restrictions that had traditionally prevented Greek battle from evolving into a deadly struggle of annihilation. Supported by an entire class of rural, disenfranchised servants known as *helots* who worked their farms, Spartan hoplites were free to drill and campaign without any obligation to work their farms or to return from battle to harvest their crops. "Not by caring for the fields," the Spartans could brag, "but rather by caring for ourselves did we acquire those fields." (Plut. *Mor.* 214 A 72) In other words, Sparta's closed, militaristic society produced an army of professionals, immune from pressing economic or other peacetime obligations; they were free to threaten the farms of others, to fight year round if need be, secure in the knowledge that in their nightmarish system of apartheid, servants were busy with their own harvests. In answer to the complaints of his allies that they had contributed too many men for too long, the Spartan king and general Agesilaos asked the assembled army of the alliance to stand up by profession—potters, smiths, carpenters, builders, and others. At last only the small minority of Spartiates remained seated, the few who had no jobs other than war. "You see, men," Agesilaos laughed, "how many soldiers more we send out to fight than you do." (Plut. *Mor.* 214 A 72)

Yet, neither were their Athenian adversaries obliged to go home to their countryside to resume work on their farms, nor was their government overly worried about a rapid depletion of capital from the constant drain of wartime expenditure. Already by the fifth century Athens had a majority of craftsmen, traders, and small businessmen who felt it was not in their own interest to march out and risk their lives in the old way to defend the cropland of the minority of small farmers who tilled the surrounding countryside. Whatever their shrill appeals to the glorious tradition of pitched battle, these "Marathon men" of Aristophanes' comedies may have had as much influence in the foreign policy of their government as their rural American counterparts do today. So it was from the sea that Athens found her "*helots*," for it was from the maritime empire in the Aegean that the men came who provided the lifeblood of imported goods, foods, and tribute which kept Athens strong. Massive long walls running down to the port of Piraieus ensured that Spartan infantry were kept out, while vital maritime trade could reach Athens uninterrupted, protected as it was from the Peloponnesian fleet by Athenian naval superiority. By the late fifth century, the Athenians, in hopes of spreading their untraditional ideas about the avoidance of hoplite battle on the plains, sent out corps of "long-wall builders" to other cities, such as Argos or Patras, to advocate the construction of similar systems of defense. (Plut. *Alc.* 15.2–3) Consequently, there was less chance now that a single, simple clash of Spartan and Athenian infantry would be the decisive factor in determining the outcome of a war between the two states; throughout Greece the old way of massing in formation to decide a conflict on a battlefield was nearly forgotten. War was now to drag on for countless years in a variety of land and sea encounters over a vast theater of operations, involving soldier and civilian alike, until both sides were finally exhausted, having suffered the steady misery of battle so well known to modern civilization.