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Index: History: Ancient Greece

Spartan Warfare

Written by: Unregistered

In the 7th Century BC a new era of warfare strategy evolved. Before this new strategy, foot soldiers (known as hoplites) engaged in battle in the form of one mob for each army which on the command of their generals runs at each other and proceeds to hack blindly at the enemy with little to no direction other than to kill the enemy in front of them. This proved to be very messy

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and the tide of battle depended mostly on emotion and size of an army. In the name of strategy and organization, the phalanx was developed. A phalanx is simply defined as a line formation with its width significantly larger than its depth. The depth of the phalanx is a variable which some suggest was decided by the army itself rather than by the leaders of the army. The smallest depth appears to have been that of one man deep. However this was a unique occurrence which is widely believed to be fictitious. The largest depth is that of 120 men deep which was fielded at one time by the Macedonians. On average, the depth of the phalanx appears to be about eight men deep. During the time of Alexander the Great, the phalanx was believed to be eight men deep, but some argue that it evolved into a sixteen man deep phalanx. The Spartans purposely varied the depth of their phalanx so to confuse the enemy about the number of soldiers fielded. The phalanx proved to be a very valuable weapon for the military at that time. Armies which did not adapt to the phalanx formation were quickly slaughtered. The use of the phalanx allowed the Greeks to win the Persian Wars.

Many historians believe that the development of the phalanx led directly to social changes occurring throughout Greece during the time of the phalanx's implementation. The phalanx formation allowed men to participate in the military who otherwise could not have because a much smaller investment in weapons and armor was needed to participate in the phalanx. The combined increase in the number of those participating in the army and the increase in

importance of the common foot soldier lead to the common man being increasingly treated better by the ruling classes.

Eventually this may have led to the invention of democracy.

The most noticeable difference between ancient Greek and modern warfare is the amount of "intelligence" information. Today our military maneuvers are almost exclusively reliant on information we get from satellites, scouts, or spies in the opposition. The ancient Greeks totally ignored this area of military strategy. Countless tales of armies meeting each other by chance or armies passing within miles of each other without knowledge of the other. Intelligence information seemed to have come by chance for the ancient Greeks rather than by conscious effort.

Surprise is also an element of war which in modern times is taken very seriously and which was taken very lightly in ancient Greece. In fact there is evidence that ancient Greek soldiers raised their voices in the form of a marching song when they were told that an enemy was near and may be caught unprepared. This war song, called a paian, was also used to promote organization in the marching army so that all soldiers would march with an even step. In addition, the paian was used to promote courage and bravery. A paian was also used on ships to announce the nearness of the enemy. When the actual battle was joined the paian turned into a war cry. The Spartans often accompanied the paian with a flute or several flutes. The Spartan King would lead the paian as well. The use of the paian for attack appears to have Dorian roots. The Spartans are usually the ones associated

with the use of a paian. Thucydides mentions that when the Dorians, from other city-states, started a paian when they were serving in an Athenian army, fear was struck into the hearts of the Athenians.

Finally the sizes of the armies were very different from what we are accustomed to today. We are familiar with armies of tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions. The entire Spartan army was estimated to be under five thousand men.

In the beginning, Greek armies showed almost no pay structure. This was due to the fact that military participation was seen as a man's duty to his city-state or as a form of taxation. Each man was required to provide his own armor for battle. There for only those who could afford armor and weapons could be in the army. Since most men could not afford armor, most could not participate. Those who could afford to participate had other forms of income. However there was a pay system in place by 445 or 444 BC in Athens. The pay system was enacted during a time of peace for Greece, just after the signing of the thirty year peace between the Delian League and the Peloponnesian League. The standard rate of pay seems to have been a drachma a day until it was cut in half in 413 BC. However the standard rate over time was between three obols (half a drachma) to a full drachma a day for a hoplite soldier.

In Sparta, the military was a way of life. From an early age, children were trained to be strong and to have good fighting skills. With most of their population being helots, or serfs, it was necessary to have a well-organized

and highly trained fighting force to put down any revolts. Therefore, even though the Spartan military was comparatively small, it was very strong.

Athens derived her military strength from a strong navy. In 481 BC the city of Athens discovered a large silver mine on publicly owned land. Athens used this silver to build a fleet of 200 ships of a type called triremes. This naval force not only gave Athens an advantage against the Persians in the Persian wars, it also gave Athens the power to force the membership of almost all the Aegean islands and many other city-states into the Delian League.

The Greek hoplite wore a helmet, breastplate and greaves of bronze. The hoplite is typically armed with a wooden lance for the phalanx formation and a short sword for in close fighting. The round shield was strapped to the left forearm and gripped by a leather strap with the left hand at the opposite end. In the third century B. C. (the 200's) the round shield evolved into a more door-like shield. The shields were easily carried on the back when travelling and were commonly used as a stretcher for carrying the dead off the field of battle. The soldiers were traditionally required to provide for their own weapons and armor, but eventually the responsibility fell to the government and the costs were deducted from the soldiers' pay. There were a variety of reasons for this transfer of responsibility including the state's ability to buy quality armor for all and the benefits of soldiers fighting in armor to which they are accustomed. There is also an aesthetic benefit to having all soldiers, weapons, and banners of the same appearance, not to

mention the economic benefit for the city-state when all weapons and armor for the army must be bought within the city-state.

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