

History shows that war-winning defense doctrine is necessary

by Dean Andromidas

The Western Way of War Infantry Battle in Classical Greece

by Victor Davis Hanson

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Victor Davis Hanson states that his purpose was to rigorously examine the experience of the individual Greek soldier from the moment he entered the field of battle until the point he left that field, victorious or defeated, dead or alive. He has studied all the principal texts to draw out the physical conditions confronting the Greek infantryman, including his weapons and armor, their great weight, tremendous discomfort, ability to protect, and vulnerabilities. He speaks of his condition within the phalanx, including closeness to his comrades, discomforts, and the smell of sweat. He speaks of the infantryman's potential wounds, blood, gore, and death. All this is very useful information and once again confirms that "war is hell."

Hanson asserts that his study has shown that the fundamental nature of Greek warfare of this period was the "pitched battle," the desire to simply get the dirty business over with in one episodic battle so that the soldier may go back to work his farm. He concludes that this concept has left a dangerous legacy today: the idea that war is winnable, or that a nation should have a war-winning defense doctrine. We again hear the refrain that nuclear weapons have made a total warfare doctrine impossible. The conclusion is seconded in an introduction by John Keegan, British writer of popular war history and defense correspondent for the London *Daily Telegraph*.

Hanson fails to present any historical evidence to make such an assertion, but his principal failure is the central premise of his work, that is, taking the immediate experience of the individual soldier in its narrowest terms. This demonstrates a failure to appreciate one of the decisive contributions which Greece made to the art of war—the ability of individual soldiers of Greek armies to fight as one coordinated and coherent battle formation, a cooperative effort, not born of coercive discipline, but an almost totally voluntary effort.

What was Greek warfare?

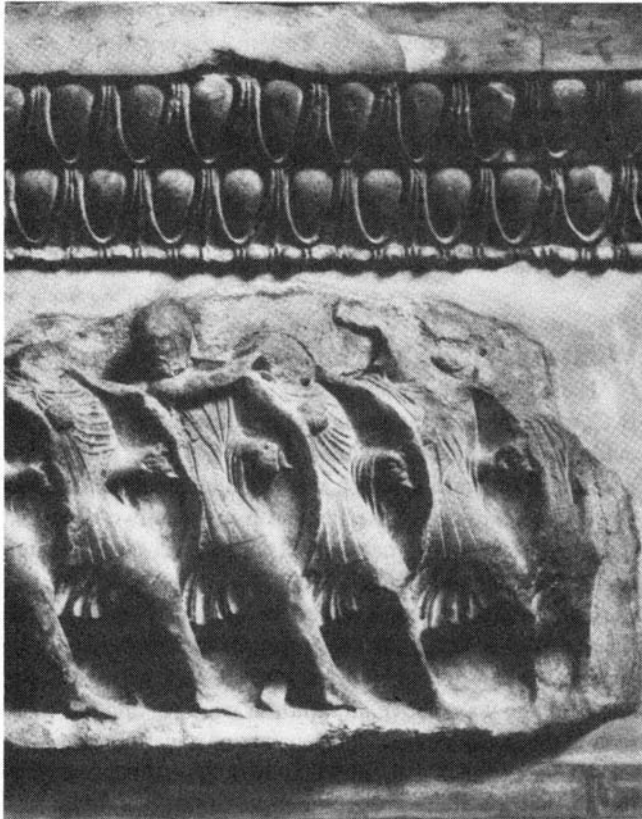
Hanson states that his sources cover the period of 650-380 B.C. which he treats as one homogeneous period. Despite his evident reading of Thucydides, he fails to note how Greek warfare degenerated from a war-winning doctrine that enabled Greece to defeat the Persian Empire in two wars and three great battles, to, for the most part, the set-piece warfare of the Peloponnesian Wars.

The significant contribution of ancient Greece to the science of war does not lie simply in the development of tactics, strategy, or its *ethos*, as such. Greek warfare of the classical age was, above all, cultural warfare, and has to be seen in the context of the development of a war-winning strategy and doctrine of a superior culture opposed to the predominantly inferior, if not evil, cultures prevailing in the Mediterranean and West Asian world as well as within Greece itself. These inferior cultures were typified by that of the Persian Empire and its spiritual foundations as represented by the cult of Isis, known from its Biblical reference as the Whore of Babylon, and similar currents. In Greece itself, these currents were identified with the deities of Apollo and Diana.

Military commanders were poets

A study of Greek literature and history beginning with Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, through the conquest of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great, is the only way to understand the development of Greek warfare. Homer, set in song, is Greece's first constitution. In ancient Greek society, as the great German educator Wilhelm von Humboldt wrote, the poets were the arbiters of society. They were the military commanders as well.

The ancient Greeks submitted warfare to the laws of nature and beauty which governed their development of other arts such as literature, music, architecture, and the plastic arts. This is not to be confused with the "artful" commander, nor is it to say that the acts of violence that accompany war can be described as a thing of beauty. But art, as it was defined in classical Greece, was a celebration of man in the image of God, or the "great composer," as God is referred to in Plato's dialogue the *Timaeus*. Hanson indirectly attacks this conception when he points to what he sees as the dangerous legacy left by the ancient Greeks in their desire for decisive engagements and early decisions in war. But Greek



This fourth century B.C. frieze of a phalanx from the British Museum is part of the Nereid Monument from Xanthus.

warfare was at its height when commanders and states developed doctrines that led to the most rapid conclusions with the least loss in human life.

Homer's *Iliad* is one of the first such examples. Set in heroic hexameter verse and sung by minstrels throughout the Hellenic world, the *Iliad* yet bears comparison to Clausewitz's *On War* as an examination of the nature of war and the state. One cannot be unmoved by the statement of King Alcinoos at the feast in honor of Odysseus, who, when he discovers Odysseus weeping upon hearing a verse from the *Iliad*, says, "All this the gods have fashioned and have woven the skein of death for men, that there might be a song in the ears even of the folk of after time." The primary god who is the patron of the Achaeans or Greeks is Athena, goddess of wisdom, who, unlike many of the other gods and goddesses born from the sordid adventures of the Olympian gods, sprang from the head of Zeus. Depicted as a warrior and goddess of knowledge and wisdom, Athena is the image of liberty for whose defense the ancient heroes would lay down their lives. By contrast, the Trojans were shielded by Apollo and Aphrodite, equivalents of the evil Isis and Osiris of the Eastern cults. (For example, in Virgil's *Aeneid*, the *Iliad* of the Roman Empire, Aeneas is a refugee from Troy whose personal patrons are Apollo and Aphrodite.)

This great poem had profound impact on the art of war which, between the 8th and 6th century B.C., led to the development of the Greek phalanx, where men fought shoulder to shoulder with technically superior weapons and tactics. The phalanx first introduced the concepts we call firepower, mobility, and capabilities in depth. The phalanx took the "firepower" of the Greek sword, spear, and armor—which were superior to the bowman, peltast, and cavalry of the Asiatic horde—and enhanced it with superior mobility. The metal-working industries of Greece produced better weaponry and at a lower per capita cost than in Persia. A larger number of citizens could become fully armed infantrymen.

Military organized to music

Tyrtaeus was a crippled Athenian poet and teacher whom the Athenians sent as a general to aid the Spartans in their war with the Messenians for supremacy over the Peloponnese in the 7th century B.C. In a series of poems on war and citizenship, he "composed" a battle plan for victory. These poems, sung in the hours prior to battle, made Greek warfare an exercise of poetry, music, and dance. At the hour of attack, they would march in battle formation to the sound of flutes. The music had the practical purpose of aiding this mass of men to advance—in lines six-ranks deep whose fronts stretched for 1-3 kilometers—in perfect unison in a demonstration that was awe-inspiring.

Although Hanson enumerates all the conditions of battle found in Tyrtaeus, he overlooks the significance of poetry. Concerned with the fact that, in the terrifying moment of engagement, the soldiers did not break and run for their lives, Hanson attempts to answer by pointing out that the Greek of the classical age was the citizen-soldier and free landholder and farmer. Although an extremely relevant fact, in itself it does not explain the Greek armies' efficacy.

The second striking failing in Hanson's book is that he looks at the Greek phalanx as static and divorced from historical reality. Not only did the phalanx differ widely in form and execution throughout the Hellenic world (although the most effective doctrines were developed in Sparta and Athens, the two primary powers), but Hanson drew his conclusions about it by looking at the Peloponnesian Wars, which marked a disaster for Greece. To base such far-reaching conclusions on a study of the art of Greek warfare in this period is like basing a study of "the American way of war," on the Vietnam War.

In an earlier and better era, the defeat of the Persians at Marathon and Solimnus proved the superiority of not only a war-winning strategy but the cultural direction initiated by Homer and advanced by such philosophers as Parmenides and Zeno. Then the poet Aeschylus, a veteran of Marathon, sharpened the issues of justice, scientific thought, and national mission in his great dramas, particularly *Prometheus Bound* and the *Agamemnon Trilogy*. His political defeat and departure from Athens led to a kind of "Yalta agreement"

with the evil Persian Empire, and the rise of what had been called the Athenian empire and Sparta's hegemony over the Peloponnese. This in turn led to a stagnation in the military art, and the hideous Peloponnesian Wars.

Socrates and war-winning doctrine

It fell to an Athenian stone-cutter, Socrates, to rescue Greece from this evil. Plato's dialogues between Socrates and many of the key players in the Peloponnesian Wars, which were raging at that time, offer insight into what was going awry with Greek military art. Socrates himself had fought in the battle of Delium, but the key military theorist of his circle was Xenophon, the first to develop a war-winning doctrine and operational plan that would be later taken up by Alexander the Great and lead to the defeat of the Persian Empire.

Xenophon's plans for conquest of the Persian Empire are embodied in his *Anabasis*, or the *Persian Expedition*, and in his *Cyropaedia*, or *Education of Cyrus*. *Anabasis* is a personal account of his role in leading 10,000 Greek mercenaries in the employ of Cyrus II, pretender to the Persian throne, through nearly the entirety of the Persian Empire. In defeating several Persian armies, the mercenaries proved how weak the empire was. The latter book, perhaps even more important, is written as a fanciful biography of Cyrus, the builder of the Persian Empire. B.H. Liddell Hart, the well-known British military writer, called it the most important military work of ancient times.

Xenophon develops the concepts of firepower, mobility, and depth of capabilities by demonstrating how Cyrus transforms the despotic Asiatic army into a war-winning, republican-like military formation. Here we see Cyrus taking his mercenaries and common soldiers such as archers, peltasts, and slingers, and arming them with swords, spears, and armor, the same as his own peers, who were from the nobility. These commoners also received the same rights and privileges as the nobles. The phalanx is discussed as a more efficient delivery of the firepower of the times. Cyrus, of course, did not stop with simply forming the phalanx but brought in other types of arms, most particularly cavalry. But most remarkable of all, is that the ordering principle of Cyrus's army is the quest for virtue and perfection. The reader finds many Socratic-like dialogues held in Cyrus's dining tent between himself and his soldiers regarding the training and development of his army. Xenophon then has Cyrus creating his "empire," not on the concept of universal empire, but on the concept of a community of principle.

Although Xenophon was an Athenian, he put his trust in the Spartan King Agesilaus and his attempt to mobilize Greece to free the captured nations of the Persian Empire. Although he had liberated many of the Ionian states from the Persian yoke, he did not succeed in uniting Greece or even Sparta fully behind this task. Greek city-states continued to fight among themselves, manipulated by Persian gold.

Alexander the Great

The liberation of Ionia and the captured nations of the Persian Empire was left to Alexander the Great. The British school of history would quickly protest Alexander was not Greek but "Macedonian." Nonsense! Macedonian claims to being part of "Greater Greece" are just as strong as any other city-state, much stronger than those of Thebes, which was, in fact, founded by Phoenicians. The establishment of the Macedonian state was a project of Socrates and, later, of Plato's circle, to found not simply a city-state, but a territorially unified state which could be militarily defended and independent. While the Athenian army could put in the field no more than 10-15,000 men, the norm was closer to 5,000. The Macedonian army stood at no fewer than 50,000 men. These were free men, citizens of the kingdom of Macedonia.

Another typical assertion by modern historians was that Macedonia was a "younger, more vibrant" society than the rest of Greece. This is also nonsense. Macedonia maintained a very long relationship with Athens. It was the timber of the Macedonian forests from which the ships of the Athenian navy were built. Too much emphasis has been put on the role of Aristotle as one of Alexander's teachers, while little is said of the impact of other great Athenian cultural figures, such as the tragic poet Euripides and Agathon, the host in Plato's *Symposium*, who spent their last days in the Macedonian court at a time when the kingdom was becoming consolidated. The archaeological evidence of sculptured figures of Socrates, Plato, and the famous Greek poets found throughout Macedonia at the time of Alexander, has shown the popularity of their works. Alexander himself was first to admit that his military capabilities were developed through reading the *Iliad* and Xenophon's works, all of which he took with him on his campaigns.

Alexander's army was formed directly on the model developed by Xenophon. Alexander's army is the model for great generals, such as the 17th-century's Gustavus Adolphus, and for today's modern military structure. Comprised of light and heavy cavalry, light and heavy infantry, artillery, an engineering corps, and an extensive supply service, these diversified arms acted in a coordinated fashion to create a devastating capability. In fundamental conception, it is the foundation of modern combined teams of armor-infantry, artillery, and air power. Most important, Alexander took this army and marched through the Persian Empire as a liberator, not as a conqueror in quest of empire.

Hanson's book serves the somewhat useful purpose of describing the conditions of the individual Greek infantryman. But any conclusions or commentary by Hanson on the nature of Greek warfare and war in general, this reviewer finds highly dubious. The crucial sources of information utilized by Hanson do not number more than a dozen ancient texts. If one is interested in Greek warfare, I would recommend reading these texts as a better investment of one's time and effort.