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All dates are BC unless otherwise noted; I have retained those Latinized forms of Greek nouns that are more familiar to a general audience.

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude, as do all students of Ancient Greek history, to W.K. Pritchett, whose five volumes on the Greek state at war, and eight companion books on Greek topography, have prompted a renaissance in the study of Classical warfare.

Victor Davis Hanson
Selma, California
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## Contents

Map list 9  
A millennium of Greek wars 10  

**INTRODUCTION: THE GREEK MILITARY LEGACY** 12  

1 **EARLY GREEK FIGHTING (1400–750)** 24  

2 **THE RISE OF THE CITY STATE AND THE INVENTION OF WESTERN WARFARE (750–490)** 42  

3 **THE GREAT WARS (490–362)** 84  

4 **THE SECOND MILITARY REVOLUTION (362–336)** 142  

5 **ALEXANDER THE GREAT AND THE CREATION OF HELLENISTIC WARFARE (335–146)** 172  

**CONCLUSION: THE HELLENIC LEGACY** 208  

Glossary 214  
Notable Greeks at war 218  
Further reading 222  
Statistics 226  
Index 229  
Picture credits 240
KEY TO MAPS

General symbols

\(\times\) site of battle
\(\text{fort or fortified settlement}\)

\(\rightarrow\) movement

Geographical symbols

\(\text{urban area}\)
\(\text{urban area (3D maps)}\)
\(\text{river}\)
\(\text{seasonal river}\)
\(\text{canal}\)
\(\text{town/city}\)
\(\text{internal border}\)
\(\text{international border}\)

Map list

1. The colonization of the Mediterranean by the Greeks 9th – 6th century BC 30
2. Greek battles, 700 – 168 BC 71
3. The Greek states and the Persian empire, c. 486 BC 88
4. Marathon, phase I and II 92
5. Xerxes’ invasion, 480 BC 98
6. Plataea, phase I and II 104
7. The rise of Macedonia 146
8. The fortified city of Messene 156
9. Alexander’s empire 176
10. Gaugamela, phase I 182
11. Gaugamela, phase II 184
12. Gaugamela, phase III 186
# A Millennium of Greek Wars

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year(s)</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1250</td>
<td>Traditional date of the Trojan war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200</td>
<td>End of Mycenaean civilization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1100–800</td>
<td>‘Dark Ages’ in Greece</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>750–650</td>
<td>Rise of the Greek city state; appearance of hoplites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>700</td>
<td>Lelantine war between Chalcis and Eretria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>669</td>
<td>Spartan defeat by Argos at Hysiae</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>560</td>
<td>Battle of the Fetters; Tegea defeats Sparta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>550</td>
<td>Battle of the Champions; Sparta defeats Argos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>499–494</td>
<td>Revolts of Ionians against Persia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>494</td>
<td>Sparta obliterates the Argives at Sepeia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>490</td>
<td>First Persian war, battle of Marathon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>480</td>
<td>Invasion of Xerxes, battles of Thermopylae and Salamis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>479</td>
<td>Conclusion of Persian wars, battles of Plataea and Mycale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>479–431</td>
<td>Great fifty years of Athenian maritime supremacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>471</td>
<td>Sparta defeats Arcadians at Dipaea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>437</td>
<td>Athenian defeat at Tanagra, but subsequent victory the same year over the Boeotians at Oenophyta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>447</td>
<td>Boeotians defeat Athenians at first battle of Coronea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>440</td>
<td>Successful Athenian siege of island of Samos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>431</td>
<td>Outbreak of Peloponnesian war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>431–425</td>
<td>Peloponnesian invasions of Attica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>429</td>
<td>Death of Pericles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>425</td>
<td>Spartan débâcle at Pylos and Sphacteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>424</td>
<td>Battle between Thebans and Athenians at Delium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>418</td>
<td>Spartan victory at first Mantinea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>415–413</td>
<td>Athenian expedition to Sicily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>415–404</td>
<td>Spartan garrison at Decelea</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- 405: Athenian naval defeat at Aegospotami
- 404: End of Peloponnesian war and defeat of Athens
- 401–400: March of Xenophon and the Ten Thousand
- 399: Artillery first used on Sicily
- 396–395: Spartan king Agesilaus in Asia Minor
- 395: Death of Lysander at Haliartus
- 394: Spartan victories at Nemea and Coronea
- 390: Destruction of Spartan regiment near Corinth
- 375: Theban defeat of Sparta at Tegyra
- 371: Spartan defeat by Epaminondas at Leuctra
- 370: Epaminondas’ first invasion of Sparta, founding of Messene
- 362: Theban–Spartan standoff at second battle of Mantinea
- 339: Victory of Timoleon over the Carthaginians in Sicily
- 338: Defeat of allied Greeks at Chaeronea by Philip II
- 336: Death of Philip; ascension of Alexander
- 335: Thebes destroyed by Alexander
- 334–323: Campaigns of Alexander the Great in Asia
- 334: Battle at the Granicus
- 333: Battle of Issus
- 331: Battle of Gaugamela
- 326: Battle at the Hydaspes
- 323: Death of Alexander the Great
- 323–281: Wars of the Diadochi (Alexander’s Successors)
- 301: Defeat of Antigonus at Ipsus
- 280–279: Pyrrhus’ invasion of Italy
- 217: Pyrrhus defeats Antiochus III at Raphia
- 197: Roman victory over Macedonians at Cynoscephalae
- 189: Roman final defeat over Antiochus III at Magnesia
- 168: Defeat of Macedonians by Romans at Pydna
- 146: Sack of Corinth, final Roman conquest of Greece
INTRODUCTION

The Greek Military Legacy

To the Greeks war and peace, spear and staff, and soldier and sage were complementary, never antithetical. Here, a hoplite with fearsome designs on his shield and shield apron receives advice from an aged learned man in robes. Aeschylus, Demosthenes and Socrates at various times were dressed similarly to both figures on this Attic red-figure pot.
The Greek military legacy

'Always existing by nature between every Greek city state', so Plato said of war. Most Greeks agreed: war was about the most important thing we humans do. It was fighting – not philosophy, not literature, not architecture, not vase-painting – that best revealed virtue, cowardice, skill or ineptitude, civilization or barbarism. For his own epitaph the dramatist Aeschylus wrote of his one-day experience at Marathon – with not a mention of his authorship of the monumental trilogy, the Oresteia.

War and the use of land are the building blocks of Aristotle's Politics and Plato's Republic. Both utopias assume that before man can speculate, contemplate, educate and argue, he must first figure out how to eat and how to fight. The soldier and the farmer may be forgotten or even despised in our own culture, but in the Greek mind agriculture and warfare were central to a workable society, in which both professions were to be controlled by a rational and egalitarian citizenry. There is not a major Greek figure of the fifth century – intellectual, literary, political – who did not either own a farm or fight. Very often he did both.

War – 'the father of all, the king of all', the philosopher Heraclitus says – for good or evil is innate to human kind and thus nearly the central topic of all Greek literature. The Trojan war was not Homer's alone; murderous Achilles, stubborn Ajax and sneaky Odysseus, warriors all, form the backdrop of the very best of Classical Greek tragedy. Aristophanes' comedies, from the Acharnians to the Lysistrata, make burlesque nonsense out of the senselessness of the Peloponnesian war. The lyrics and elegies of the poets Archilochus, Callinus, Alcaeus, even Sappho would be lost without hoplite shields, bronze armour, an armada of ships, and Lydian chariots. Most Greek gods – Zeus, Athena, Poseidon, Artemis, Ares – were portrayed in either song or art as warriors, who as outsized hoplites killed or shielded mortals on the battlefield. Few, if any, cultures have been so steeped in war as the Classical city states without becoming as little militarized.

Plato's stepfather, Pericles' son and Aeschylus' brother were wounded or killed as a result of battle. Melissus, the Samian philosopher and student of Parmenides, led his fleet into battle against Pericles himself, both intellectuals knowing something of oarsmanship and ramming. Sophocles was somewhere at sea nearby, as part of the elected high command of Athenians who came to enslave the island of Samos. Greek generals were often noted historians and poets – Thucydides, Xenophon and Tyrtaeus come quickly to mind. The great mathematician Archimedes died in the siege of Syracuse, in his last days crafting military machines against the Romans.

Nearly every Greek temple has its friezes and pediments full of gods sculpted in the hoplite battledress of the polis; vase-painting glorifies the ranks of the phalanx; grave steles portray the deceased in infantry armour. Plato often uses the paradigm of war to illustrate his theories of virtue and knowledge, his examples often drawn from the personal
experience of the middle-aged Socrates fighting at the battles of Amphipolis, Delium and Potidaea. There is not a single Greek historian whose main theme is not war. For Herodotus, Thucydides or Xenophon to write historical narratives of anything else was apparently inconceivable. Heraclitus said, ‘Souls killed in war are purer than those who die of diseases.’ The poets Mimnermus, Callinus and Simonides agreed. For Socrates, founder of western philosophy, killing men in battle for Athens was not in conflict with the practice of abstract inquiry and dialectics, and Kant’s idea of a perpetual peace was neither envisioned nor sought after by the Greeks.

The Greek legacy, then, is more than rationalism, empiricism, capitalism or consensual government. The Greeks created a unique approach to organized fighting that within a century proved to be the most lethal brand of warfare in the Mediterranean, the chief tenets of which have characterized western military tradition ever since. As our century ends the world is moving toward western political ideals with ever increasing speed: market capitalism, democratization, individualism, private property, free trade and fluid foreign investment are now acknowledged as the global culture, as the only systems of economic organization and political culture that seem more or less to work.

Ultimately the protection of that political and economic agenda depends on a unique practice of arms. After the Second World War and the end of the Cold War there now seems only one way to fight – but this legacy goes back to the polis Greeks and no further. At the millennium almost all military technology is either purchased from western powers – America, Europe, the UK, or the westernized East such as Japan and Korea – or engineered and fabricated on western designs. Military education and doctrine – everything from the organization of divisions, brigades and companies, to the ranking of generals, colonels and majors – is western inspired.

Western armies are free of religious fanaticism and subject to civilian control and audit. Their soldiers, like Greek hoplites of old, are not shanghaied into service, but enter the armed forces with understood rights and responsibilities, the violation of which is subject to trial and appeal, not a firing squad. In short, western military forces are composed of better trained and disciplined troops, which are better equipped and led by better generals than any others in the world today.

Even the most virulently anti-western nations concede this. Only through the emulation of western arms can they ensure a chance of survival in an increasingly unsafe and unpredictable world of guided missiles and laser-directed shells. If, at the end of this millennium, we still see military cabals, warrior clans, ambush, skirmish, primitive weaponry and hit-and-run liberation fighters on our universal television screens, it is by default, not choice. Those belligerents lack the technology, the organization, the education and the capital to meet their opponents face-to-face in a cruel and near-instantaneous decision with sophisticated arms, logistics and transportation. Indeed, even the occasional success of irregulars depends entirely on their access to western-designed arms – grenade-launchers, hand-held missiles and land-mines.

In sum, western warfare is terrifying – both relatively and absolutely. The march of European armies has been both reckless and murderous, ultimately smashing anything that has raised its head in over two millennia of organized military opposition. Other belligerent traditions in China, the Americas, India and the Pacific islands also boast a continuous military culture of great duration. But they cannot claim a practice of similar effectiveness and flexibility, or a warring capability so accomplished in its devastation, as Alexander’s decade-long swath to the Ganges, Caesar’s ‘pacification’ of Gaul, the six-year spoliation of
Europe in the Second World War, or the single-day atomization of Hiroshima and Nagasaki attest.

So utterly deadly has this Greek-inspired western warfare become that in the last decade of the twentieth century it has nearly put itself out of business: the collision of national armies in Europe, the decisive exchange between nuclear powers (the ultimate spectre of western military technology) will lead now not to political resolution and peace but only to barbarism and extinction. If today mere embargo, sanction and counter-insurgency suffice to combat the terrorist and the thug, it is also because the age-old western solution to such challenges – a brutal and quick resolution through massive firepower – is worse medicine than the disease, raising the ante for its squabbling players to abject annihilation.

This admission of the clear fighting superiority of the West must not be interpreted as mere Eurocentrism. Great evil has also been wrought by the efficacy of occidental military doctrine. Indigenous gallant peoples in the Americas and Africa have been slaughtered for no good purpose by the callous skill of Europeanized forces. Alexander sought no 'Brotherhood of Man' in Asia. His ten-year legacy is more accurately seen as a decade of carnage, rape, pillage and arson that left feuding and megalomaniac brawlers, not nation-builders, in its immediate wake.

The tens of millions that were slain in the First and Second World Wars must also in some sense be seen as a logical culmination of the ferocious military tradition of the Greeks that in the last two centuries has once again turned its penultimate destructiveness on its own, at the Somme, at Verdun, at Normandy and at Dresden. Indeed, the organization, efficiency, and systematic carnage of the death camps in Germany and eastern Europe of half a century ago are perhaps best understandable as vile and aberrant appendages of western militarism itself. With Hitler, Mussolini and Treblinka in mind, it is better to see the martial efficacy of the West as relentless and driving, rather than predictably good or evil.

What makes western arms so accomplished – and so horrific on the battlefield – is a series of practices created at the beginning of western culture by the Greeks. Yet this military legacy, so fundamental to the expansion and survival of the later West, is today often forgotten at its moment of greatest triumph. Books on 'the legacy of the Greeks' and 'the western tradition' cover everything from science to architecture, but rarely, if ever, mention warfare, despite this being the central experience of Classical Greece.

To respond to that neglect, the following chapters discuss recurring themes – social, economic, political, religious, moral – that form the substructure of Greek military practice. These larger issues explain why Greek warfare was so relentless and so virulent, and reveal its role – both positive and pernicious – in Classical culture. The obvious aim is to see in ancient warfare ancient culture itself; to inquire why, at the end of the present millennium, the military traditions of Greece alone seem to predominate, offering both comfort and peril for all who would claim their heritage.

But what is this abstraction, 'the Greek way of war', which has provided the core of our later western military tradition? It is not superior courage. All cultures produce gallant men. King Xerxes' Immortals who charged King Leonidas and his Spartans at Thermopylae were brave fighters. So were the fierce Thracians who so perplexed Philip's Macedonian phalangites. Herodotus' history is often a paean to the battle gallantry of non-Greeks. Nor did the Greeks invent the military ethos. Long before the creation of Classical Sparta, Near Eastern and Egyptian societies boasted of elite bodies of chariot warriors, whose profession was to fight, kill, and die bravely for their theocratic dynasts. Indeed, other than in Sparta, the Greeks were never much of a militarized society, despite Max Weber's portrait of a supposed kriegerisches Volk.
This modern bronze statue of the Spartan king and general Leonidas stands not far from the spot where Leonidas and his 299 followers were killed to the last man by the Persians at Thermopylae. Leonidas vowed to hold the pass or die, and delayed the Persian advance for enough time to give his coalition army of more than 7,000 a chance to retreat in safety and warn the other Greeks.

The idea of large armies owes nothing to the Greeks either. During the entire history of the city state, the Greeks were usually outnumbered by Persians, Egyptians, Medes, Gauls, and just about every other culture with which they collided. Both western European tribes and eastern centralized palatial cultures were far more successful than the Greeks at rallying enormous hordes of fighting men.

How, then, did the city states create a military paradigm so adroit at conquering such enemies, when the Greeks had no premium either on battle courage, or militarism — or even the ability to bring superior numbers of combatants to the battlefield? Are not battles mostly won by fielding the greatest number of brave men?

Rarely, if at all. Rather, the Greek way of war encompasses a few core values distilled from the larger cultural, political and economic practices of the city state at large. Greek warfare is only an extension of Greek society, and thus, just as philosophy, democracy, personal freedom, citizenship and free expression are ideas found nowhere else in the Mediterranean, so too the military corollaries of such values are equally singular — and nearly as matchless in achieving the goals for which they are designed.

The military mastery of the Greeks can be summarized broadly by eight general military customs and beliefs which are unique to the Hellenic and indeed later European tradition, and which remain thematic throughout the four-century life of the city state (700–300):

1. Advanced technology: the unsurpassed excellence of both weapons and armour, a superiority in design and craftsmanship over non-Greek equipment that was wide-ranging and well-established, from the hoplite breastplate and shield to the Macedonian sarissa, from catapults to wheeled siege engines — all novel designs and fabrications that brought their creators money and fame, rarely exile, execution or loss of freedom.

2. Superior discipline: the effective training and ready acceptance of command by soldiers themselves, whether in the close-knit ranks of the Classical phalanx or the ad hoc democratic councils of the mercenary Ten Thousand stuck in Persia. The laws of good battle order flowed from the consensus of the Assembly; thus adherence to such discipline was simply a ratification of prior individual expression and group concord.

3. Ingenuity in response: an intellectual tradition, unfettered and uncensored by either government or religion, that sought constant improvement in the face of challenge. That marketplace of ideas explains why under duress Greeks figured out first how to counter elephants and then how to incorporate them into their own armies; why the Near Eastern practice of siegecraft in Greek hands became the science of obliterating, not of merely taking cities; why within a decade Athens had not only created a fleet from nothing, but had essentially destroyed the Persian armada at Salamis. No Greek felt ashamed or
unsure about adopting, modifying, rejecting – or improving – military practices that were originally not his own.

4. The creation of a broad, shared military observance among the majority of the population: the preference for citizen militias and civilian participation in military decision-making, that led, as Aristotle saw it, to a clear battlefield edge over mercenaries. A quarter of a million Persian subjects and mercenaries were assembled at the battle of Plataea under duress; about half that number of Greeks mustered willingly, subservient only to the majority will of their assemblies. At Plataea, the former fought well, the latter fought possessed. The idea of an entire free citizenry in arms is entirely Hellenic.

5. Choice of decisive engagement: the preference to meet the enemy head-on, hand-to-hand in shock battle, and to resolve the fighting as quickly and decisively as possible, battle being simply the final military expression of the majority will of the citizenry. The Persians felt a destructive madness had come upon the Greeks at Marathon, and so it had, as they ran head-on into the Persian ranks, a practice frightening to behold for the easterner, as the battles at Plataea, Cunaxa, Granicus, Issus and Gaugamela attest.

6. Dominance of infantry: the notion that property-owners on foot with muscular strength, not horsemen or even missile-men, alone win wars. Ultimately, what destroyed non-Greek armies – and what shredded the ranks of other Hellenic armies – were hoplites and phalangites, who alone could march forward, clear the way ahead, and then possess the ground they stood upon. Citizens who have title to their own farms, live on that ground, and can pass on that investment to their children, inevitably wish to obtain and hold land – and will not easily give it up.

7. A systematic application of capital to warmaking: the ability to collect assessments, impose tribute and borrow monies to field men and matériel for extensive periods of time. Athens fought well and long because it knew how to raise the necessary money to hire, purchase, rent and borrow men and matériel long after it should have been defeated by a host of more numerous enemies. Alexander could go east because an entire cadre of astute treasurers knew how to tax and steal, and then mint that largess to pay for a sophisticated quartermaster corps – over 1,000 tons of food, water and forage were supplied to Alexander’s army for every day it marched.

8. A moral opposition to militarism: the ubiquity of literary, religious, political and artistic groups who freely demanded justification and explication of war, and thus often questioned and occasionally arrested the unwise application of military force. The Trojan war, the conflict between Sparta and Athens, and Alexander’s murderous rampage through Asia are all the subject of a hostile literature. That Greek warmakers were to be the stuff of artistic, literary and religious criticism resulted in a questioning of aims and procedures – an ongoing debate that ironically often refined and ratified rather than simply hindered Hellenic attack.

The Greek way of war should not be an encomium to the contemporary western efficacy of killing large numbers of people. Western warfare starts out with the Classical Greeks as an ethical practice to preserve society; but its very allegiance to the free economic and political expression of the individual creates a dynamism that without care can lead to the destruction of western culture itself. If anything, these chapters should reveal this dual legacy of the Greeks. The story of Hellenic arms is but a constant see-saw struggle between the Greek genius for applying economic and political prowess to the battlefield, and the effort to harness the lethal result within a framework of largely ethical, legal and moral considerations – a dilemma that began with the Greeks, but whose solution we in the West have yet to solve.