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The Hoplite Reform and its Political Consequences

In the mid 7th century, the Greek world was rocked by the emergence of a new form of military organization known as the Phalanx, using a tightly-packed line of heavy infantry. These heavy infantry with their distinctive equipment were known as Hoplites, called so after their distinctive hoplon shields. As the number of armed peasants increased, the Hoplites formed into a distinct political unit, which drastically altered the Political and Societal state of Greece. Exactly when the Hoplites emerged as a distinct political class remains somewhat vague, and it is clear that the advent of Hoplite was not deliberate, but was rather the consequence of a number of changes in Greek society. These changes are the dwindling of aristocratic power, a greater focus on the concept on the polis, an increase in the wealth of the middle class, and the affordability and accessibility of arms and armor. These changes allowed the middle class to afford Hoplite equipment and to enter military service. These men, formerly without political power, could no longer be ignored, as they came to make up the bulk of military force within the *polis*. The Hoplite reform shook Greek society, and city-states such as Athens and Sparta had to radically alter their political structures to accommodate the newfound military power of the average citizen.

There is no clear answer to how the Hoplite and Phalanx came to be. In fact, the very existence of this form of warfare in Greece seems counterintuitive. Greece, as a mountainous region, is best suited for lightly-armed and mobile skirmishers, supported by missile weapons.

Phalanx tactics, however are best suited to wide, open plains where battle lines can be set up. Prior to the 7th century, Hellenic warfare was primarily ranged, mostly utilizing archers and light infantry armed with javelins. Historian John Salmon notes that early Hoplite equipment emerged in the early 7th century, mostly in the form of the hoplon shield and the bell cuirass. This early Hoplite armor was expensive, and could only be afforded by nobility. The initial introduction of Hoplite equipment allowed aristocrats to fight at closer quarters. This was considered a more “heroic” fighting style and enabled better survivability for aristocrats in solo combat and duels (Salmon 85). However, around 675 BCE, masses of heavily-armed men begin to appear in art and pottery. These early depictions seem to depict a group of hoplite-equipped men in close combat, but do not appear to show a tightly-grouped phalanx, suggesting that these early Hoplites were still interested in single combat and personal glory (Salmon 87). In addition, A.M. Snodgrass suggests that this increase in Hoplite equipment was not restricted to infantry, but was also used by cavalry and marines, especially the hoplon shield, which had been modified with a central arm-band, making it easier to wield and more accessible to a broader set of the population (Snodgrass 111). With this in mind, it seems fairly certain that Hoplite equipment was becoming more popular and accessible among the aristocracy, allowing for a greater focus on survivability and a more “heroic” style of combat, but that cavalry and ranged warfare was still a major focus, and that heavy infantry had not yet become the norm in Greece.

The emergence of a “true” phalanx has proved difficult to place, with some arguing that Pheidon of Argos was first to make effective use of the Phalanx, at the latest in 669. Pheidon successfully strengthened the power of the Argive monarchy with the support of the military, effectively converting his rule into an early form of tyranny (Salmon 93). If this is the case, then Pheidon must have gained either the popular support of the Aristocrats, or have drawn his

military power from elsewhere. If Pheidon's army was not comprised of Aristocrats, he must have had enough influence to form a Phalanx from the lower classes. P. Cartledge provides an explanation of how this came to be. During this time, a growing population had resulted in a scarcity of land. Warfare over land had become more common, leading to the strengthening of the concept of the *polis* as a common community. These *poleis* came to be lead by the wealthy aristocracy, with kings losing political power during this time. The emergence of the concept of the *Polis* and the dwindling monarchy lead to a rise in more substantial farmers, who had wealth but not political power, and could afford to buy arms and armor in order to defend their property (Cartledge 22). The growing middle class found that the aristocracy could no longer be trusted with their property. Hesiod speaks to this corruption in his *Works and Days*, describing the ruling aristocracy as easily bribed and not overly interested in justice or rightful property (Hes, *Works* 35-40). It stands to reason that if given the opportunity, these Farmer-Hoplites had the numbers to support a powerful leader. Returning to Pheidon, it seems that these newly-armed middle class soldier supported him in his bid for power, allowing him to bypass the traditionally Aristocratic military. As such, it seems that Pheidon's military force did not comprise of Aristocratic soloists, but of an early form of the Phalanx, comprised of Hoplite-equipped farmers.

If Pheidon did indeed use a Phalanx in establishing the Argive tyranny, then a precedent was set for the establishment of later tyrannies. In addition to this, with the emergence of middle-class soldiers, the Aristocratic hold on power was beginning to deteriorate. With the commoners empowered to defend their *polis* and possessions, military organization began to emerge within Greek *poleis*. The Aristocracy were able to organize their own private hoplite forces based on a gentilical basis, but found it easier to enlist these newly-equipped farmers for their military campaigns (Cartledge 23). However, Aristocratic warfare over wealth and territory was not of interest to the new Hoplites, as they had armed themselves for primarily defensive

reasons, not to fight in Aristocratic wars. Especially wars commanded by Aristocrats who were often poor military commanders. Around 650, the Phalanx as it is commonly known had emerged, as heroic solo battles were replaced by a protective formation of men, with Aristocrats grudgingly taking their places beside men of lesser stature. As a compromise, the Aristocrats were allowed to arrive to the battle on horseback, accompanied by servants (Snodgrass 114).

While Phalanx tactics at first glance were not suited to the geography of Greece, it makes more sense when looked at as a political issue. To the emerging *polis*, defending its borders was a constant concern. Maintaining a navy and blocking key border passes were prohibitively expensive for the emerging political system. In addition, assembling and equipping a light infantry force would have had to include the lower classes, providing the poor with military training and a certain amount of political power. With this in mind, it made economic and political sense to have a self-equipped, self-sufficient heavy infantry force such as the hoplites make up the bulk of the military (Cartledge 24). This made the military exclusive to those who could afford Hoplite equipment, effectively restricting the military to the Aristocracy and wealthy landowners. Here, a break from Aristocratic ideology can be seen, shifting towards the oligarchic model by giving power to those who hold military force. Instead of a state-funded military, a citizen-funded military was established. However, this new system created a problem for the Aristocratic state, as the expanded military was not strictly under their control. A sufficiently ambitious, charismatic, or wealthy man could gain control of the military, allowing him to control the military force and thereby control the state.

One of the first expressions of Hoplite political power was the establishment of tyrannies. The seizure of the Argive tyranny by Pheidon had set a notable precedent for a ambitious man gaining power of a state's military and establishing a tyranny. A similar state of affairs occurred in Corinth, with the tyrant Cypselus. Cypselus is depicted by Herodotus as an ostracized member

of the ruling Bacchiad family, who is prophesied to destroy the monarchy, and after the Bacchiads fail to assassinate him, he manages to gain power and "...exiled many of the Corinthians, deprived many of their possessions, and many more of their lives" (Hdt. 5.92). While this narrative does follow Herodotus' pattern of emphasizing prophecies and oracles, it seems that Cypselus managed to gain enough military force in order to overthrow the Bacchaid aristocracy, and that he was highly aggressive in doing so. Cypselus held some previous position within the Bacchiad regime, although his exact reputation or role remains unclear. It is possible that Cypselus gained control over the middle-class Hoplites with promises of increased political prominence under his regime. However, even if the Hoplites as a whole did not support Cypselus, they certainly did not take action to defend the Aristocratic Bacchiads. Either way, it suggests that the Hoplite class was either actively against the aristocracy, or reticent to their continued rule (Salmon 97). A core tenet of an Aristocracy is the belief that the Aristocrats had an inborn right to rule, and that they were owed loyalty through right of wealth and birth. However, the advent of tyrannies throughout Greece demonstrates that the power of the aristocracy had been broken down, as a more oligarchic mentality replaced it, with a powerful individual or group claiming the right to rule through the control of force. With the Hoplites now acting as their own distinct class, it became necessary for those in power to maintain control over the Hoplite class, lest they lose control to a competitor.

However, the age of Tyrants was not to last. The continued political and philosophical development of the *Polis* lead the citizens at large to wish for greater say within their state. Political systems greatly evolved, and by the 6th century, the role of the Hoplites had taken on a unique context within each city-state. The two premier city-states of the time were Athens and Sparta, with both developing entirely different methods of government. Athens established a democracy, while Sparta maintained certain elements of monarchy, heavily supervised by an

Oligarchic assembly. Both states took radically different approaches to integrating their Hoplitēs within their political system. However, there are some commonalities between the two systems. Firstly, the Hoplitēs remained restricted to the middle and upper class, with the lower classes taking a much lesser role in the military. Eligible citizens would undergo mandatory military training, meaning that both states had a consistent military to draw on. Secondly, both Athens and Sparta, in addition to other states took pains to integrate their military into public life. Mandatory military training and an emphasis on state doctrine helped to ensure that the military was loyal to the state, which acted as a safeguard against the establishment of tyranny. Finally, restrictions were placed on the decision-making power of the upper class, helping to ensure that poor or self-serving military decisions could not be made without the consent of the state as a whole. While this may not be uniform across all Greek city-states, it seems clear that Athens and Sparta had recognized the power of the Hoplitēs as a group, and wished to prevent the advent of other tyrannies by tying the hoplitēs to the state in order to prevent hostile takeovers.

Sparta is notably unique amongst the Greek city-states, and had a remarkable system for managing its political situation and military. Unlike states like Athens, Sparta had a standing army comprised of citizen-soldiers. Initially, it seems that Spartan kings may have attempted to maintain their political power through influencing the Hoplitēs under their command, following a similar model to the tyrants. However, being forced to serve under a king instead of the state did not prove popular among the Spartan hoplitēs, leading to them restricting many of the king's power, including placing the decision to go to war in the hands of the citizen-controlled *damos* (Salmon 100). Cartledge further describes the Spartan system as a "*rentier* state living almost entirely off the surplus labour of subject populations" (Cartledge 24). It is notable that prior to the introduction of the Hoplite, Spartan battle traditions were far more individualistic, focused heavily on the "old" ways, with Aristocratic soloists remaining the norm even as other states "went

hoplite". However, following a series of defeats, the Spartans adopted the Hoplite methods around 650 BCE, but having witnessed the rise of tyranny in other states, set about creating a state-sanctioned, professional military of full-time citizen soldiers.

Firstly, it should be recognized that the Spartan definition of a citizen was extremely limited. Unlike in Athens, where being a soldier was expected of a citizen, in Sparta only soldiers could be truly considered citizens. This elite class of citizen-soldiers were known as the Spartiates, who had been trained from a young age to be absolutely obedient to the state and to uphold Spartan principles. The poet Tyrtaeus reflects this change in Spartan attitudes by extolling the virtues of dying for the state: "To fall and die among the fore-fighters is a beautiful thing for a brave man who is doing battle on behalf of his country..." (Tyr. 5.10). This reflects the Spartan outlook on warfare, that fighting at the front is heroic, and that loyalty to one's comrades, elders, and state should be placed before all else. To accomplish this mindset, the Spartan state instituted Hoplite training for all Spartiate boys. All Spartiate babies were subjected to inspection, with those who did not pass being disposed of. At the age of 7, boys were removed from their families and placed in a *paideia*, where comprehensive state education would begin. Until the age of thirty, a Spartan man would sleep, eat, and go to war with his peers, fostering a close bond between the Spartiate men and a fierce loyalty to each other and the state (Cartledge 17). Sparta became a state for Hoplites, by Hoplites. Unlike other cities, whose citizens could be called upon to become soldiers, Sparta's only citizens were soldiers. Instead of working around the threat of Hoplite rebellion, Sparta integrated the military into every level of their state.

Athens found a different way to integrate Hoplites into their political system. Unlike Sparta, who developed a small, elite group of citizen-soldiers, Athens drew from its larger population of citizens to build a citizen militia. Athens followed a more typical system, which

was also used by other states to create armies of part-time Hopliters. R.T. Ridley provides an overview of the Athenian mechanisms for creating a Hoplite force. First of all, the property qualification for Hopliters were still in place. An Athenian citizen of sufficient wealth was eligible for military service between the ages of 18 to 60, and had to provide their own armor. In the Solonian constitution, all but the lower classes of Thetes were eligible for military service. Following the reforms of Cleisthenes in 508 BCE, all Athenian citizens were all eligible for the draft, with the draft based on the Cleisthenic tribes, including the lower classes who served as light infantry and ranged troops. The capacity to serve constituted the fully qualified citizen, and military service was expected of all young men (Ridley 510). Young men were trained by their tribe by an elected epimeletes and kosmetes, as well as other experienced military men. All eligible young men were taught drills and weapons use, as well as being paid a small amount while they were being trained. Following their training, the state provided spears and shield, with the young men expected to acquire their own armor (Ridley 531). These state-provided arms were considered sacred, with part of the oath taken by young men reading: "I will not dishonour the sacred arms I carry ; I will not abandon my comrades in battle ; I will fight to defend the state sanctuaries, and will hand on to posterity a country not diminished but greater and more powerful, to the best of my ability and with everyone's help" (Ridley 532). It seems clear that state-sponsored military training was intended to create a sense of unity amongst the young men of Athens, to forge them into true citizens. In addition, by ascribing a religious aspect to the state-provided arms and armor, it further bound the military power to the state.

This idea is further supported by historian Christopher Vasilopoulos, who suggests that Athenian lawmakers such as Solon and Cleisthenes had recognized the political power of the Hopliters, and had sought to prevent political *stasis* by tying citizenship and loyalty to the state to the hoplite class. Cleisthenes especially sought to break down Aristocratic power by breaking up

the traditional unity of Aristocratic families and parties. However, he repurposes this unity by applying it to his new tribes and military organization. By focusing on military training, unity, and loyalty to tribe and state, Cleisthenes brought Athens closer to the Spartan method of training Hoplites. In doing so, Cleisthenes made the Hoplite class an essential part of the Democracy, breaking down the traditional power of the Aristocracy and bringing the Aristocrats and Middle class together as citizens and fellow Hoplites, who in wartime fought side by side using the same training and equipment, and in peacetime were equals in politics (Vasillopoulos 59).

The other major restriction on the political threat of the Hoplites was the treatment of *Stratego*i within the political system. During the 7th century, it became clear that a giving a charismatic and ambitious individual power of the military created a dangerous state of affairs, and that the power of Athenian generals had to be restricted. However, placing randomly-elected generals in command of Hoplites could result in poor tactical decisions. With this in mind, the position of *strategos* was established as the only elected office within the Athenian democracy. As already established, much of the Athenian *ekklesia* were made up of men with military training, as instituted by Cleisthenes. This ensured that hoplites, as a class, were allowed to select who lead them in war. A balance was placed on the power of the *Strategos* by randomly assigned troops, ensuring that a general would be unable to gather a great deal of military support (Ridley 514). This is similar to the treatment of the Spartan kings. By putting the bulk of their authority under the assembly of citizens, the general is unable to seize military power and support in an attempt to overthrow the government. At the same time, however, the *strategos* was unique as the only elected position within the Athenian democracy. It is clear that the Athenians recognized that competent military commanders were also necessary to please the Hoplites, as incompetent military command was one of the major

reasons the Hoplites either sided against or were unwilling to protect the previous Aristocratic rules.

In conclusion, the establishment of the Hoplite and Phalanx as the primary Greek fighting force had wide-reaching political and social consequences. These changes did not happen overnight, however, with numerous changes occurring over a period of decades, including a shift from Aristocracy, to tyranny, to the Athenian democracy and Spartan oligarchy of classical Greece. It is not an understatement to say that these systems would not have come to be without the advent of the Hoplite. With the middle class having gained arms and armor in order to defend themselves, they could no longer be ignored by the Aristocracy. The fate of the aristocracy was ultimately decided when the middle class were able to fight for themselves, putting an end to Aristocratic military dominance. Although not initially a unified political force, the Hoplites proved vital in establishing the tyrannies of Pheidon and Cypselus, proving that a ambitious, wealthy, or charismatic man could use the Hoplites to their advantage. Following the age of the Tyrants, city-states, notably Athens and Sparta, recognized the need for state-controlled Hoplites. Both states radically altered their political systems to do this, with both establishing a focus on citizen-soldiers through very different means. Sweeping political reform ensured that the Hoplites remained loyal to the state, and that powerful men such as the spartan kings and remaining aristocrats could no longer use the hoplites to their political advantage. In short, the Hoplite reform of the 7th century helped to create the political landscape of classical Greece, radically altering the systems and ideology of Athens, Sparta, and other Greek states.

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