

The ancient Greek heavy-armed infantryman is representative of a warfare in which defensive capability is stressed over offensive power. In some ways the hoplite was similar to the ponderous knight of the middle ages, the major difference being the lack of a horse in the hoplite's case. Both these warrior types attempted to protect themselves from injury with an all-enveloping screen of metal while making use of their increased weight to bowl over the opposition using shield and spear (properly a lance in the knight's case).

The hoplite of the Fifth Century B.C. carried about 57 pounds of defensive armour, plus a spear and sword weighing about 15 pounds, to make up a perspiration-evoking load of approximately 72 pounds. Naturally this crushing burden was only worn in battle, and, if possible, servants and donkeys were used to carry the equipment to the battlefield. In the event of a defeat, however, the hoplite might be in a rather perilous situation as he attempted to make his escape lugging such a weight, the major threat coming not from enemy hoplites equally burdened, but from back-stabbing, fast cavalry. In such an event an expensive bronze shield or a crested helmet or an engraved iron breast-plate might be jettisoned to speed the demoralized soldier on his way. The removal of the iron shin protectors, called greaves, might just invite a spear in rear as one bent over to unfasten them, and so they were probably left on in a hurried retreat.

Hoplites fought in dense serried ranks of rectangular shape. Fighting shoulder to shoulder in these phalanx formations, with one man's shield overlapping the exposed right side of his neighbour's body, certainly heightened morale. In the Fifth Century the average depth of the phalanx was about eight men, and it was as wide as one could make it. The Athenian field army of 13,000 would be about 1,625 men wide.

Hoplites attacked in line, on the run, to the shrill tune of the war flutes, and singing the battle hymn, called the paean. Their spears, as evidenced by many vase paintings, were not held low as a pike; instead the six-foot-long ash shafts were raised high for a possible neck wound while the shield was thrust forward to bear down the enemy. The screams, curses, clanging of metal on metal would have made an incredible roar in the opening moments of battle and would have continued until one side gradually gave way.

For most of the Fifth Century these knights on foot (recruited, however, largely from the upper middle class) dominated the battlefields of Greece. In the Fourth Century the increased use of more complicated military tactics, the growing numbers of cavalry and archers, and the appearance of a medium-armed infantryman called the peltast put the hoplite into a decline from which he never recovered, until later men thought to place this type of soldier on a horse and call him a knight.