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Thomas Nelson Winter

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, c150gpilot@yahoo.com

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The Place of Archery in Greek Warfare

The Ancient Greek Archer: . . . at work & war

by Tom Winter

Summary: Despite the ancient Greek equivalent of an Agincourt, the Greek military mind firmly retained the heavy infantry, rather than the archers, as the main force. Recognized uses of the archer in Greek warfare were to fend off heights of city walls, to perform commando raids, and to provide covering fire for commando-style operations. This essay, written after a fresh reading of the principle Greek historians, puts together all passages where one can see the ancient Greek archer at work and in his military setting.

When Pericles proclaims the catalog of Athenian forces at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War (431–404), the array looked like this:

- 15,000 first-line hoplites
- 1,600 reserve hoplites
- 1,600 cavalry (including mounted archers)
- 1,200 archers
- 300 warships

Archers comprised, then, roughly 10 percent of an ancient Greek city's military force. We want to ask, of course, what they did with these archers. This in turn requires seeing the system of Greek land warfare.

Pericles' list of forces lets us see the relative numbers, but is somewhat misleading, as it omits a major category, the light-armed soldier; a man armed with shield and spear, but, unlike the hoplite, not protected by body armor.



Fully armed hoplite.
The cutout becomes a view-port
when the shield is up.

The system of the use of all these will become clearest fastest if divided into two categories, those who stand and fight, and those who can range over a distance or who have range and distance.

The hoplites are the Sherman Tanks of antiquity. Their armor is cast and hammered bronze. Bronze, please remember, is heavier than iron. Typically, if a hoplite is to run, he must jettison armor. He is not mobile, and is no ranger. The light armed trooper is naked but for his shield and helmet. He is called variously *psilos* “light”, *gymnetes* “bareman” or *akontistes*, “spearman.” Slingers and archers fall into the same category, except neither can, of course, both do his job and manage a shield. Generally, the *psilos* is, in fact, a ranger on foot. He can be seen in several Greek engagements running on a corps of hoplites slinging his spear (it had a long thong on its balance point, spiraled around it) and then getting out of counter-throw range, fast. Though the Assyrian archers had a shield-holding teammate, the Greek archer seems to have been completely unarmored, defended utterly by the range of his weapon. The cavalryman, *hippeus*, is variously armed with spears, sabers, and/or the bow.

None of these can stand toe-to-toe with a corps of hoplites. For



The attendant solves the
Assyrian archer's shield problem.

that, another corps of hoplites is needed. This is not to say, however, that only hoplites can defeat hoplites. Far from it. We see most clearly what each “branch of service” has for its proper use by watching what happens when a particular branch is missing.

Let's begin with cavalry. Ten thousand Greek mercenary hoplites had marched into the Persian empire with Cyrus to help him wrest the empire from his brother (401–400 B.C.). They defeated the Persians at the end of their battle line, but as their employer Cyrus was killed in the battle, they were faced with having to get out of 1,500 miles of unfriendly territory. Although they had smashed all opposing Persians, they were very dubious about their chances. They had NO cavalry.

What did it mean to them? The Ten Thousand all knew what it meant, and Xenophon expressed it this way:

“But since we have no cavalry, if we win we can't kill anybody, and if we lose we all die.”

Expanding upon this, we can also see the advantage of the *gymnetes*: victorious hoplites keep their armor, and cannot catch retreating hoplites who jettison theirs.

An interesting implication, which we will see happen in history, is that hoplites alone cannot defeat the gymnetes, who can always simply run away from them. To put the cap on a victory, the ancients needed the cavalry to run down and beat them. If defeated, the Ten Thousand would be unable to escape the enemy cavalry. One needs cavalry, then, to fend off the enemy cavalry to cover the escape of over-matched hoplites. The Syracusan Expedition, as related in Book Six of Thucydides, is a beautiful illustration. The Athenian Expedition against Syracuse shipped no cavalry. The people of Syracuse were strong in cavalry. In the first big battle before Syracuse, the Athenians won, driving the inexperienced and diffident Syracusan heavy infantry before them.

But no. The battle was indecisive, for the Syracusan horsemen kept cutting off the pursuit. Whichever part of the Athenian front came ahead too far in pursuit suddenly had mounted rangers spearing them and running. The Athenians “won,” but they couldn’t kill anybody: without cavalry, their victory was reduced to a stand-off, a draw! This is the extreme of the no-cavalry handicap.

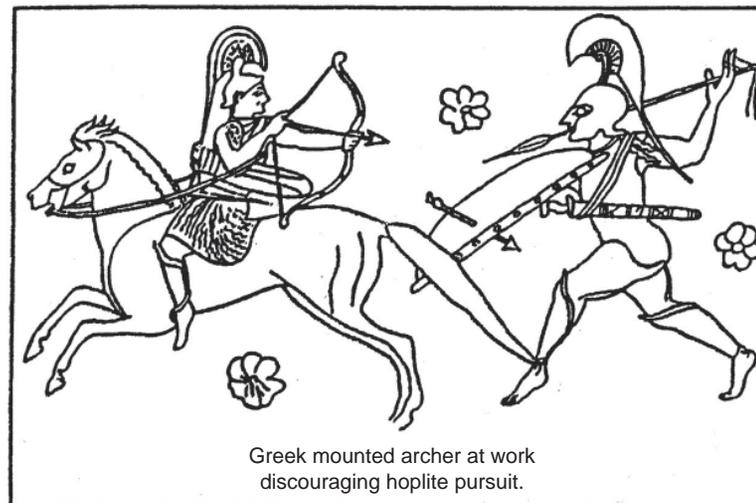
On the Syracusan side, they “lost” but nobody died. Their cause was still safe: it was as if the battle had not taken place! They had the ancient equivalent of “command of the air.”

We observe: Hoplites can defeat hoplites, but hoplites cannot defeat a combined force of hoplites and cavalry.

The next thing the Athenian expeditionary force does, of course, is to send home for cavalry. They do this, plus one other thing: they send home for archers for the express purpose of fending off the enemy cavalry. To deal with soldiers with range, a weapon with range. This lets us see that the archer was a relatively cheap and easily transportable means of dealing with a superior cavalry force.

A beautifully clear interplay of hoplites, archers, and akontistai is seen in the career of Demosthenes in the Peloponnesian War. Demosthenes was an independent thinker. Settled with an expeditionary naval force off shore of what is now Albania, he let the local islanders talk him into an expedition inland against their enemy, the Aitolians.

Demosthenes acceded to this adventure thinking of nothing less than conquering his way clear across the mainland to the northern



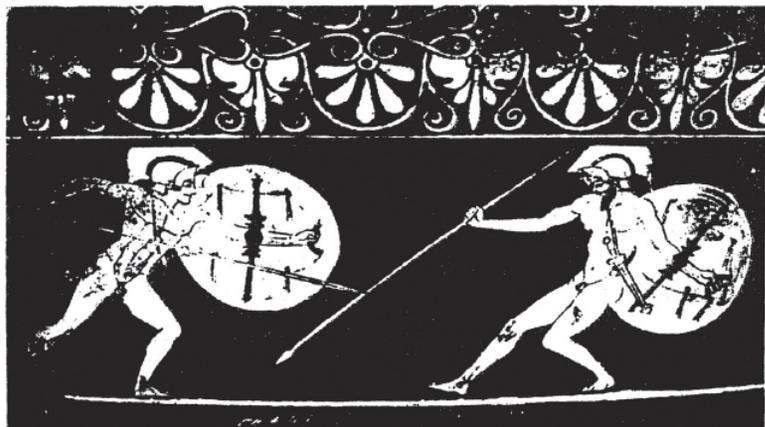
shores of the Aegean Sea. The islanders told him that the Aitolians were just light armed, and he should take them quickly.

He did—at first. The three towns were march-overs. Unfortunately for Demosthenes’ career, the Aitolians were retreating and gathering until they had enough spear power to stop the hoplites. At the town called Aigion we first see gymnetes defeat heavy infantry. Thucydides’ description of the battle is called “a series of pursuits and returns, with the Athenians at a disadvantage going in each direction.” The Aitolians’ single weapon, the spear, could eventually prevail. The Athenian force, decisively better, had to break up, jettison, and straggle to the shore through the forests.

Archers? Yes, Demosthenes did have some archers. Studying the battle, one sees the passage, “The Athenians were all right so long as their archers had arrows.”

Adding the battle of Aigion to what we have already seen, we have as follows: Hoplites cannot defeat gymnetes. Gymnetes can defeat hoplites. Therefore, hoplites need archers to keep the gymnetes at a distance.

Interestingly, Demosthenes learned and applied this lesson of Aigion in his next adventure, at Pylos and its near offshore island,



The light armed trooper to naked but for his shield and helmet.

Sphacteria. Sphacteria was a small island, long and narrow, on the west coast of Peloponnese. Its length sheltered, and all but shut off, the bays of Pylos from the sea. The bayshore included a rising bit of cliff, in which Demosthenes recognized a strategic opportunity. His expedition force fortified the place. This put a spear at the Spartan throat, as the place was but 40 miles from Sparta.

The Spartans, to counter, put a force of three hundred hoplites on the island. This would help them control the bay, and, they intended, to help shut off the fort from seaborne support. Cleon, boasting in Athens that he could bring the Spartans off Sphacteria dead or alive in 20 days, was given an expeditionary command to fulfill his boast. What force did he take? He, too, had learned Demosthenes' lesson of Aigition. He took no hoplites at all, just spearmen and archers!

Sharing the command with Demosthenes, who was afraid to come home after Aigition, Cleon succeeded.

Cleon and Demosthenes put a small force of heavy infantry on one end of the island, but never moved them. They were bait. The Spartan heavies, seeing their enemy, boldly marched to battle. The Athenians didn't move. The Spartan heavies had to cover all the distance themselves.

They never got there. The archers were stationed in clusters at the flanks, with light-armed akontistai, and slingers. Secure in the doc-

trine that the real battle happened when hoplite lines met, the Spartans marched through a gauntlet of arrows and slung spears. Thucydides relates "The Spartan helmet was not proof against penetration by arrows!"

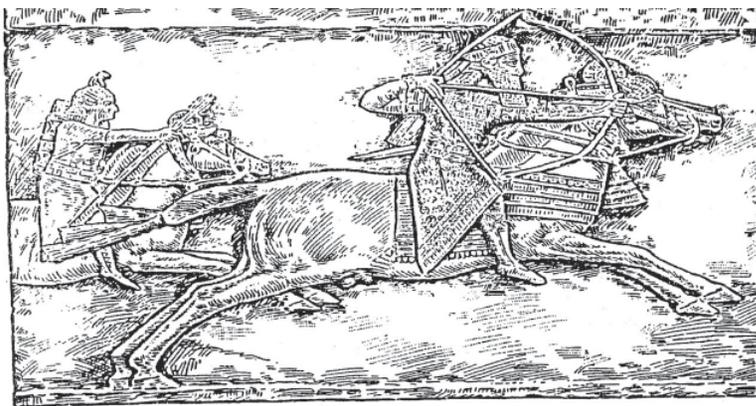
The surviving Spartans retreated, taking refuge in an old abandoned fort on some high ground. This gave them a breather until a body of archers found a way around to the other side. Their fire quickly made the Spartan position hopeless. At this point, Demosthenes and Cleon, seeing that the Spartans would all die, gave the remaining Spartans a chance to surrender.

Much to everyone's surprise, they did. It was the first time a Spartan force had ever done it. It created quite a stir throughout the Greek-speaking world. People could not believe that the live Spartans were as brave as the dead ones. And Athenian, expressing such a thought to the prisoners, got this response: "The arrow would be quite a weapon if it just killed the brave."

Archers can defeat hoplites.

Strange to relate, this seems to be the only fighting in classical Greek history of hoplites against archers. Further, it was the greatest victory on land that the Athenians ever won in the entire war (431–405 B.C.). Sphacteria demonstrated the decisiveness of the archers' advantage over heavy infantry. Yet this seems never to have been followed up until the age of the English longbow.

Demosthenes and Cleon learned from Aigition and produced Sphacteria, but Sphacteria produced, among the Greeks, no strategic offspring. It was too difficult to break out of the idea that the real battle was always when the heavies met the heavies. The least intelligent use of archers seems, when it appears, to be the typical way: relating one major Syracusan battle, Thucydides states the light-armed (spearmen, archers, cavalry) fought first and it went this way and that, "as light-armed battles do," and then the battle took place when the hoplite forces met. This is just a matter of letting the shrinking range between two oncoming forces dictate the type of soldier and the type of weapon used: first, the long range soldiers and long range weapons; then the toe-to-toe soldiers and their toe-to-toe weapons.



An attendant keeps an Assyrian mounted archer supplied with arrows.

If the archer can defeat the hoplite, why was this lesson lost upon the Greeks? Probably because they had so decisively defeated the Persians, whose main weapon was the bow. We must ask how.

We get the clearest view of the fighting of Greek hoplites with Persians in Herodotus' description of the battle of Plataea in 480.

This was the final battle of the Persian Wars, and first it looked like it was going pretty well for the Persians. Their mounted archers kept milling around the encamped Greek army. Herodotus and the Greeks at the time looked upon these losses as wasted, lost "before the battle even started!" Pausanias, the commander of the Greek forces, kept sacrificing as the arrows were coming in, waiting until the omens were auspicious. Finally, the lobes of the livers looked right, and the Greek heavies advanced.

They faced an army that tried to combine the archer and the toe-to-toe warrior. The Persians kept shooting at the advancing hoplites until they were too close; they then had to prepare to welcome the Greeks hand-to-hand. But as archers, they had put their shield down. You can't hold a huge heavy shield on your left hand and still shoot a bow; so the Persian style was to set their shield down together, making a barricade of them. The Greeks marched through the shield barricade. The Persians fought Greek heavies while shieldless themselves. It was a slaughter. Greek sources glory in the valor of the Greek hop-



An akontistes spearman (as edited for appearance in a 1912 school text of Xenophon) from a Greek wine bowl.

lites. Yes, they did have the machismo to march through arrows, but if archers let heavies close with them, the result is foregone.

From their glorious victory over the land forces of the Persian army, the Greeks, I believe, learned some of the wrong lessons. Permit me a what-if: what if Mardonius, the Persian general, had realized his mounted archers were on to a good thing, and just left the Greeks to them, keeping the host out of range, except to keep the mounted archers supplied with arrows? This, of course, is precisely how the Parthians under Surena defeated Crassus, the Roman Proconsul of Syria and his Roman Legions at Carrhae in 53 B.C. It would also have worked in 480.

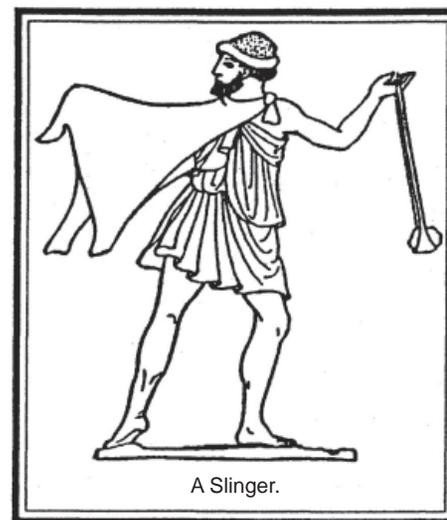
For an army on the march, the archer, and then the spear slinger, were the first line of defense against ambush. Throughout the Greek historians, one sees a force marching through suspicious territory and the commanding officer giving the order that the "spearmen march with the spear on the throng, and the archers with the arrow on the string."



Persian foot soldier

Where the ancient Greeks best perceived the need for archers was when an expeditionary force came to them: if an ancient city knew a siege was facing them, what preparations would they make? As Mitylene prepares to secede from the Athenian Empire (428) we see the city taking three preparations to undergo a siege: one was to buy grain, second was to raise the height of the walls, and the third was to bring in archers from Thrace.

In a siege, the defenders always have the height advantage. They are throwing or shooting from the city walls, the offense is shooting from the ground. Mathematically, the height advantage goes with the square root of two. If, for instance, you are shooting from twice as high, your arrow goes 1.414 times as far. If you are on a battlement 50 feet high, and your opponent is shooting from five feet high, your



A Slinger.

arrow goes seven times farther than his. (This is purely mechanical, ignoring aerodynamics.)

The bow, among the Greeks, was the principal weapon for the city besieged. The bow being so effective in this situation explains why the first advance in ancient siege machinery was the movable tower. This is the invention of Dionysius of Syracuse. You build it out of range, as high as the city walls, or even higher, armor the front with hides, move it up and give your archers a fair chance to clear the city walls. Here, for once, is a situation where archers are fighting archers as the main event in ancient Greece. Though siege-towers were constructed out of range, they could always be over-achievers: Philip II, king of Macedon (359-336) and father of Alexander the Great, was inspecting siege-works when he got his most famous wound: an arrow from the city walls knocked his eye out.

Archers on city walls turned many a tide, as victorious besiegers routed a city's land forces, and, in the excitement of pursuit, got too close to the city walls! Xenophon presents one such instance, as but the most recent of many such cases, relating the death of Teleutias. Teleutias was an enterprising Spartan general. The Ephors of Sparta, having complete faith in him, sent him to take charge of the war

against Olynthus, on the northern shores of the Aegean Sea. Part of his forces were engaged in destroying the Olynthian gardens, farms, and orchards, as the other warded off Olynthian cavalry and light-armed troops who would try to prevent them. Angered by the success of some Olynthian rangers against his own, he commanded his more mobile forces to pursue the Olynthians and keep pursuing them, backing them up with an advance of hoplites marching in their line.

Their hot pursuit took them within shooting distance of the city walls. The defending archers, seeing their chance, waited for a bit of committing space, and then decimated the Spartan forces. As the Spartans withdrew, the Olynthians then sent out a counter-attack, and turned the withdrawal of the Spartan forces into a route. Xenophon, introducing the episode, observes that a "Force pursuing up to a city often has difficulty getting away." His epilogue is that "A commander must never issue an order in the heat of anger."

Archers are absolutely necessary for the besieged to cover any sneak attacks upon the besieging lines. There are three such events in Thucydides' coverage of the Peloponnesian War. The island of Melos (where the Venus de Milo was found) was outside the Athenians' empire of islands, and they wanted it in. They, therefore, besieged its city. Their technique, since the city of Melos was well upland from its harbor, was to build a wall completely around it. Twice the Melians successfully raided the magazine of the Athenian line, escaping back into the town with supplies stolen from the Athenians. The how of this is visible in Thucydides' narration of the break-out of the Plataeans. The Spartans besieged Plataea, most of whose citizens were living in Athens, having retreated there because of the war. At the time of the siege (428), the town was a garrison of 400 soldiers, and 120 women to bake their bread. Sparta put a double wall around it; one against the Plataeans, one outside against any relieving force from Athens. On each side of the double wall was a ditch. There were ten towers interrupting both sides of the double wall and flush with the outside of the double wall, which served as observation and strong points. The Plataeans decided on a breakout.

They prepared ladders and awaited a moonless and stormy night. That winter, a hard freezing storm came up that filled the bill. The

Spartans took shelter in the towers, leaving the walls unmanned. Armed for traveling, 200 Plataeans made the attempt. As they went up and either went over or took watch positions on the wall, the storm covered any noise they made until a lookout on a tower roof knocked down a rooftile. As the Spartans came out to investigate, archers from rooftops and from the ditches shot down the oncoming Spartans, aiming at the parts not covered by armor.

The Plataeans remaining in the town raised a racket at the opposite side of the ring to confuse the Spartan besiegers. The Spartan force in first line of readiness then came up; incredibly, they were holding torches to light the way.

The Plataeans, by going at first into enemy territory before cutting around to get to Athens, eluded pursuit. The breakout was one of the great successes of the war. "There was only one loss," Thucydides records, "an archer at the last ditch." It is left to us to figure that this is the last of the rear guard, an unnamed hero who stayed back to keep cutting off the Spartan pursuit until he himself was taken.

We must presume that the two successful commando raids of the Melians were similarly a matter of time-consuming action taken under archery cover, and that there, too, were also anonymous archer heroes.