

Ancient Greek Hoplites and their Origins

By

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The ancient Greek hoplites were heavily armed infantry soldiers, known for wearing extensive armor, carrying a large rounded shield, spears, and a sword. By looking at armor, weapons, tactics, and vases recovered from archaeological digs, along with literature of the time, such as Homer's *Iliad* (ca. 700 B.C.)<sup>1</sup> and Hesiod's *Shield of Heracles* (ca. end of the late 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.)<sup>2</sup>, who and what a hoplite was can be defined. The scholarly consensus has been that eighth century B.C. is crucial in exploring the origins of hoplites. The eighth century sees a dramatic increase in population leading to the rise of city-states and hoplites. In this paper I am going to consider the evidence for the existence of hoplites during the eighth century B.C. and whether or not there is any evidence for their existence before this.

When examining evidence for defining when hoplites first appeared, it's important to understand what makes a hoplite unique, specifically his equipment, weapons, and tactics.

In the article "Hoplites and Heresies," A.J. Holladay looks at the overall view of the hoplite on the battlefield and some forms of military tactics the Greeks might have had. Holladay examines what is typically assumed as hoplite customs, fighting in a close pack, with their shields in their left hand protecting themselves and their neighbors as well as carrying a spear in their right hand. He also looks at the main purpose for battle and phalanxes: breaking through the enemy's line from the use of pressure of the mass ranks, which were also known as othismos.<sup>3</sup> When one phalanx would penetrate and break through the line of the opposing phalanx, the result would usually be the collapsed

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<sup>1</sup> Hubert Canick and Helmuth Schneider. *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World: Hat-Jus*. (Boston: Koninklijke Brill Incorporated, 2005), 450.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 279.

<sup>3</sup> A.J. Holladay, "Hoplites and Heresies," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982): 94.

phalanx in flight, handing the fleeing team a loss.<sup>4</sup> An interesting fact Holladay adds is that casualties in battle were fairly light; he believes this supports the traditional view that if there was a breakthrough, it was morally accepted as the outcome without additional fighting.<sup>5</sup> Holladay also briefly mentions that cavalry could have been a part of battle along with light armed troops. Towards the end of Holladay's article, he compares and contrasts the role of the hoplite to the possibilities of what light armed troops could do in battle and what that could mean for the future of fighting. He takes the comparison between the two and looks at the fact that there might have been a different type of army because of class structure and those that fought in battle were required to purchase their own equipment.

G.L. Cawkwell focuses his article, "Orthodoxy and Hoplites," on the effectiveness of the hoplites in battle. He looks at the efficacy of the phalanx as well as the weapons that the hoplite brought into battle. Cawkwell felt that the hoplite was not well trained outside the close protection of his phalanx,<sup>6</sup> perhaps addressing the common thought that two opposing phalanxes would clash shield to shield in battle, resulting in a shove, which wouldn't require much training. Because of this form of battle, Cawkwell proposes two important qualities that a hoplite possessed were weight and solidity.<sup>7</sup> He also suggests that the phalanxes the hoplites fought in were flexible; allowing the front ranks to remain in the front even if the phalanx changed its direction. As Cawkwell

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<sup>4</sup> Holladay, 94.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 97.

<sup>6</sup> G.L. Cawkwell, "Orthodoxy and Hoplites," *The Classical Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1989): 376.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 375.

indicates, this was most likely done by making the phalanx thinner and deeper.<sup>8</sup>

Cawkwell's article gives a good look into the possibilities of what hoplites in battle might have encountered and how they might have dealt with different situations that occurred on the battlefield.

Hoplites: the Classical Greek Battle Experience edited by Victor Davis Hanson is a collection of articles about the hoplite and what his life on the battlefield might have entailed. These articles look at some of the more detailed areas that one might not have thought about when thinking of hoplite battles. Hanson includes articles about hoplite ideology, weapons, the phalanx and pre-battle sacrifices. When looking at the hoplite in battle, it is important to note that Hanson discusses that when fighting in the back ranks, it would have been impossible to throw their spear in risk of hitting their own side.<sup>9</sup> This shows that only during specific times would a hoplite soldier be able to throw their spears instead of using them for thrusting at the enemy. Hanson talks about archaeological finds of hoplite equipment from as late as the eighth century B.C., along with hoplite references found on vases and literature.<sup>10</sup> This suggests that the information is coming from legitimate sources as well as being able to form a time period of when hoplites were taking form and perhaps beginning to enter their height. Hanson's book gives a complete look at what the hoplites life in battle most likely looked like and how this life might have evolved over the years due to new technology.

David Whitehead and J.F. Lazenby talk about the legend of where the name hoplite might have originated from in their article, "The Myth of the Hoplite's Hoplon."

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<sup>8</sup> Cawkwell, 380.

<sup>9</sup> Victor Davis Hanson, ed., *Hoplite: The Classical Greek Battle Experience*: (London: Routledge, 1991), 19-20.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 65.

They address the highly accepted idea that the name the hoplite came from the name of their shield, hoplon. However, throughout Whitehead and Lazenby's article, they look at the fact that the name could have come from the general term for their weapons and armor, hopla.<sup>11</sup> In Lazenby and Whitehead's article, they open up the possibility that the hoplite's shield might have been part of where their name came from, but also their breastplates and their equipment which could add more to the meaning of the hoplite. They take an approach that the meaning of hoplite refers to nothing more than "(heavily-) armed (infantry-) men."<sup>12</sup> This definition allows Whitehead and Lazenby to bring in other forms of equipment that have a reasonable likelihood that they too might have played a contributing factor in the creation of the name hoplite. Lazenby and Whitehead's article gives us an alternative look to the typical mainstream thoughts about the hoplite name, giving a different view and factors to take into consideration.

Snodgrass's Archaeology and the Emergence of Greece is in general focusing on Greek archaeology, ranging from Classical, the Iron Age, the polis and art. The areas that this paper is most concerned with are the areas of hoplite history, the hoplite reform, writers and painters. Snodgrass mentions that it would have been astonishing for the hoplite to appear fully equipped and go right into phalanx formation. He suggests that techniques of battle which, knowledge has been obtained from Homer and other writers as well as from paintings, have been found on Geometric vases.<sup>13</sup> Snodgrass also looks at Greek pottery and the paintings that are found on them. He is also able to provide a list of

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<sup>11</sup> J.F. Lazenby and David Whitehead, "The Myth of the Hoplite's Hoplon." *The Classical Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (1996): 27.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Snodgrass, *Archaeology and the Emergence of Greece*: (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006): 311.

uses that a vase might function as depending on its shape. He is specifically looking at vases that include both paintings and inscriptions, the inscriptions appear in fill in gaps between scenes.<sup>14</sup> Even though Snodgrass is looking at the overall Greek experience through archaeology, he has it broken down into specific areas of focus which make things such as hoplites or vases easy to find and get information on.

Greenhalgh's Early Greek Warfare is primarily focusing on chariots in Homer as well as in art; however this article is important because it is looking at vases that concern hoplites as well as Homer, which has the potential to include hoplites. Greenhalgh does in fact contribute a portion of his book to looking at hoplites, warriors, and cavalry. He uses late Geometric vase paintings, poems from the Homeric time as well as discussions of the "Dipylon" shield to develop his ideas of combat. The most important of his arguments are the battle scenes that are depicted on vases, especially like the early seventh century B.C. vase that shows the use of a "Dipylon" shield which allows that warrior using it to have better control over his protection as well as how the hoplite could hold a spear in the same hand as his shield and use a second spear in the other hand as a javelin.<sup>15</sup> Specific scenes painted on vases that Greenhalgh discusses play a valuable role in piecing together around what time the hoplite and phalanx forms began to take shape as well as what time weapons and their techniques were introduced.

Victor Davis Hanson has another book, The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece. He is addressing the atmosphere in which infantry men experienced in battle. Hanson is looking at situations and ideas that express the Western battle by

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<sup>14</sup> Snodgrass, *Archaeology and the Emergence of Greece*, 408.

<sup>15</sup> P.A.L. Greenhalgh, *Early Greek Warfare*: (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 70.

looking at the infantry before they began fighting. He looks at Greek literature such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, suggesting that from looking at Homer's works a great deal could be obtained about the early attitudes towards the Greek ideals of death and war.<sup>16</sup> From him addressing Homer, he is opening the possibility of looking earlier into the Greek history than just the Classical era for references of war. In one section Hanson focuses on the obstacles that the infantry faced before going into battle, the mental and physical aspects, while another part looks at the side by side fighting and the closeness between the men. Hanson notes that when in a phalanx formation, men were often arranged close to family members or neighbors; this would lead one to believe that the men were fighting for their own land, their community as well as the respect of the men that surrounded them.<sup>17</sup> Hanson doesn't give the most graphically depicted battle scenes, but he breaks down different aspects of the infantry's life and routine, which intern helps in understanding the men and also how their form of battle operated.

The main item a hoplite is known for possessing is a large round shield known as a hoplon. The shields were three feet in diameter and were carried on their left arm. Because of the massive size and weight, over time the shields began to take on more features to make them more practical while in battle. There was an interior strap added to help support the forearm as well as a hand grip.<sup>18</sup> Although historians and archaeologists have discovered such modifications to the hoplite shields, it is still unknown if these changes had an impact on their battle techniques. These large shields were also equipped with a metal platted top coat which gave extra protection from flying spears and arrows.

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<sup>16</sup>Victor Davis Hanson, *the Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*. Berkley: University of California Press (1989), 40.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 27.

An argument among historians is where the hoplite name derives from. Many believe that hoplite comes from their shield, hoplon. However there are others that argue that the name comes from hopla, which is in reference to the overall armor and equipment. Whitehead and Lazenby discuss that “‘shield’ is, clearly, a possible rendering but not the only one. Again ‘breastplate’ would serve equally well, if it were held that the thought requires, of itself, only a general orientation towards defense rather than attack.”<sup>19</sup> Thus suggesting that either a shield or a breastplate were equally important in the hoplite attire, creating the possibility that hoplite could have come from either the shield or breastplate. It is hard to make a decision either way because the two names are so similar. In fact one might be able to argue that either or either the shield or the equipment had an influence in naming the other. Whatever way the name of the hoplite is addressed, it can be asserted that the name came from an item the hoplite used while participating in battle.

Hoplites usually carried at least one long spear with them into battle, averaging about twelve feet in length. Because their spears were so long, they were typically used for thrusting/stabbing action or utilized like a javelin. Anthony Snodgrass explains in “The Hoplite Reform and History,” that when the spear was used as a thrusting object, the aim was usually directed toward the groin or the throat.<sup>20</sup> Along with their spears, hoplites carried a sword or double-bladed axes which could be used for up close battle when a spear was not sufficient or if they no longer had a spear and were making their last efforts. Hanson discusses in *Hoplites* that because of the fighting that occurred in the

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<sup>19</sup> Lazenby and Whitehead, 29.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony Snodgrass, “The Hoplite Reform and History,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 85 (1965): 115.



phalanx there wasn't much room for sword action, but that it would play into the advantage of the hoplite because it gave them more movement within their formation,<sup>21</sup> which could also be way Hanson refer to the sword as a secondary weapon.<sup>22</sup>

With use of the hoplites large, metal covered shield, their sword, spear, helmet, greaves, corsets, etc, all were metal or had metal material fastened to this. All this metal material would have created a lot of extra weight, probably fifty to seventy pounds, which posed problems of being heavy when an average hoplite weighed around hundred and fifty pounds or when the weather was warm, causing hoplites to sweat, taking away their energy. Having enclosed metal helmets with so many people, it also made hearing a challenge.

In the early days of battle soldiers fighting needed protective gear and shields which were rather expensive, so more often than not these men came from the aristocracy or a family with money. This is due to the fact that there was no standing army and soldiers had to purchase their own protective gear and weapons. As time progressed, by the early seventh century B.C. there were a growing number of farmers that were beginning to become hoplites. A typical hoplite farmer usually owned between 5 to 10 acres of land outside of the city walls.<sup>23</sup> With farmers increase in property and money they were most likely taking up arms to look out for their interests. The addition of the hoplite farmer was able to create a different type of solidarity within the army.<sup>24</sup> These farmers were able to relate to each other because many of them most likely lived close to

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<sup>21</sup> Hanson, *Hoplite*, 76.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Hanson, *the Western Way of War*, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 29.

one another, but they were also fighting to protect their economic interest, protect their family, neighbors, and city-state.

When fighting in the phalanx formation Hanson notes it required hoplites to be in extraordinary physical condition, lots of valor, and stamina but on the other hand they didn't need much focused training with the formation or weapons.<sup>25</sup> Endurance and strength were both big factors in hoplite battle because the hoplite had to carry his large shield and spear; he was also wearing heavy armor. While engaged in battle both characteristics were needed to engage in the *othismos*, which is when the collisions of the two armies and the front ranks of both armies are pushing against each other shield to shield.

The only items that are known to exist from the time of hoplites that prove their existence and help in understanding them are weapons, armor, painted vases, and some literature. The armor and weapons show the actual items the hoplites wore and used in battle. The painted vases show different battles, perhaps military tactics or outcomes of a battle and literature gives descriptions of armor, weapons, battle tactics, and war heroes. To understand what a hoplite wore and what he used in battle one can look at the actual equipment used by the hoplite that has been obtained from archaeological digs. Vases such as the Chigi Vase give depictions of warriors and sometimes battles, and literature such as Homer's *Iliad* or Hesiod's *Shield of Heracles* give the description of what people might have observed from watching hoplites in action.

The Chigi Vase is an important component for receiving depicts of a hoplite as well as setting a timeframe for their appearance. The following examines when the Chigi

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<sup>25</sup> Hanson, *the Western Way of War*, 30.

Vase was created, how to interpret depiction, and what the vases mean to the importance of understanding hoplites.

A specific article in Ancient Etruscan and Greek Vases in the Elvehjem Museum of Art by Jeffery Hurwit is important because it takes time to look at and explain the Chigi Vase, which he describes it as being “the masterpiece of the Protocorinthian style.”<sup>26</sup> There are several different years that the Chigi Vase was thought to have been made, Hurwit believes it to be around 640 B.C. and had been placed in the Etruscan tomb before the seventh century ended.<sup>27</sup> The Chigi Vase depicts a parade, a rabbit-hunt, figures, as well as infantry battle. Hurwit also looks at other vase styles that were being created during the seventh century B.C. and how that during this time is when the first vast exportation of Greek vases to Etruria began to take place, this meant that by the sixth and fifth centuries Greek vases would be arriving in Italy.<sup>28</sup> Hurwit’s insight help in forming the time period for the creation of the Chigi Vase, which can help date hoplites.

Jeffery Hurwit also wrote “Reading the Chigi Vase,” which takes depictions from the Chigi Vase and breaks them down so they become easier to understand and can show a more cohesive and connecting piece of work. When addressing issues about the Chigi Vase, Hurwit looks at things such as the origins of the painter. He describes the possibilities that the person who had signed or labeled the backside of the vase didn’t sign in Greek, possibly being Aiginetan, which tells him that either the man who was the painter didn’t do the writing or that the person who painted the vase was not indigenous to Corinth, however the types of colors used on the vase make it hard to discredit it as

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<sup>26</sup> Jeffery Hurwit. *Ancient Etruscan and Greek Vases in the Elvehjem Museum of Art* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2000), 12.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 12.

being Corinthian.<sup>29</sup> Knowing where the painter is from could be helpful in narrowing down a location to the type of hoplite being depicted. Hearing explanations of the vase help in giving a fairly good time period of when the vase was created, who might have created it, and what it was created for, giving an enlightened outlook on one of the most important pieces of artwork from the seventh century B.C.

One of the most well known vases that depict hoplites is the Chigi Vase. The vase dates back around 650 to 640 B.C., it was found in the main chamber of a tomb in Monte Aguzzo, located in Italy near La Villa, which is thought to have been constructed before the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. ended.<sup>30</sup> Near the handle of the vase is where one of the earliest illustrations of hoplites in action is depicted.<sup>31</sup> In this scene the hoplites are scene carrying two spears, one most likely used for throwing, like a javelin, and the other for actual hand to hand combat. Also the hoplites that are in this scene don't have swords which were common, at least in the later hoplites.<sup>32</sup> However the vase still shows the hoplite as being a heavily armed man that fought on foot and did so right next to his fellow neighbor shield to shield. The type of formation that is seen on the Chigi is definitely from an earlier time period because it isn't shown as reaching its advanced tactics.<sup>33</sup> The illustrations on the vase could be important in the study of hoplites because of the tactics it shows. It shows the warriors overlapping their shields and progress from the right and the insignia on the shields show "power, prowess, and ferocity; birds of

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<sup>29</sup> Jeffery M. Hurwit, "Reading the Chigi Vase," *Hesperia* 71, no. 1 (Jan- Mar, 2002): 7.

<sup>30</sup> Hurwit, "Reading the Chigi Vase," 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

prey, bull's head, growling lion's head, and a boar."<sup>34</sup> The Chigi Vase is one of the best pieces for looking at early hoplites weapons and tactics. It is also extremely important when examining hoplites because the depictions are most likely of hoplites and because the date of vase is fairly specific, it helps in giving a rather precise time of when hoplites are known to have been fighting and using a formation similar to the phalanx.

This segment focuses on different literature that ranges from the eighth to sixth century B.C. These works include Homer, Hesiod, and several other poets of this era that make references to battle, equipment or tactics that could be associated with hoplites.

Homer's *Iliad* is an epic poem that is comprised of twenty four books. The primary focus of the *Iliad* is Troy, a theoretical Greek city that to this date the actual location as yet to be found. The start of the epic poem begins nine years after the end of the Trojan War; the first book is calling upon a muse to help tell the story of Achilles and discusses a dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon. In the second book Agamemnon tells other leaders about the dream he has about going to war and victory for him and his people. By book five the major characters are at war and in book seven there is a contest between Hektor and Aias, which ends in a duel, thus ending the battle for the day. Books twelve through fifteen elaborate on the Trojans attacking the camp of the Greeks. Then in book nineteen Achilles decides to move on from the fight that had been on going with Agamemnon and goes back to battle. By the end of the last book the body of Hektor is returned to the Trojan people along with Helen and the people of Trojan mourn the lost of their best warrior and leader. Because the majority of the *Iliad* is taking place during battle, there are many references to battle, equipment, and tactics. These references help

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<sup>34</sup> Hurwit, "Reading the Chigi Vase," 16.

create links to armor and formations that could have possibly been used by hoplites. “The men were forced to their seats, marshaled into ranks...”<sup>35</sup> From looking at this passage, the description makes it sound rather similar to the hoplite phalanx formation. Another potential phalanx reference is, “At last the armies clashed at one strategic point, they slammed their shields together, pike scraped pike with the grappling strength of fighters armed in bronze and their round shields pounded, boss on welded boss...”<sup>36</sup> Not only is this passage making reference to the othismos, but also to rounded bronze shields and spears. These segments taken from the *Iliad* help create a detailed picture that can relate to specific characteristics of hoplites, helping give a more defined description of a hoplite as well as setting a date for when equipment or tactics of hoplites were being to be used.

The translated work of Hugh Evelyn-White on Hesiod: the Homeric Hymns and Homerica looks epic poetry from early Greece. The book includes works from Hesiod as well as other Homeric Hymns from a number of other authors. The majority of the works in this book that are relevant are mainly from Hesiod’s collection. Hesiod’s *Shield of Heracles*, which is thought to be written in the eighth century B.C, gives the most references to battle and equipment out of the epics mentioned in the book. “Their armour shone like a flame of blazing fire as they two stood in their car.”<sup>37</sup> References such as this help lay a foundation of equipment used, how it might have been used, and the type of material used for creating the equipment. It also helps establish Hesiod and that he has credibility in his works, setting a slightly earlier time period for the possible use of hoplites. It also gives additional references to items mentioned in the *Iliad*.

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<sup>35</sup> Homer, *the Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Group, 1990), 102.

<sup>36</sup> Homer, 160.

<sup>37</sup> Hugh Evelyn-White. *Hesiod: The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*: (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), 225.

Archilochos, Sappho, and Alkman: Three Lyric Poets of the Seventh Century

B.C. translated by Davenport is a collection of fragmented translations of literature that has lasted from the seventh and six centuries B.C. The majority of the literature is poems, hymns, and song lyrics. The two poets that make reference to battle and/or equipment are fragments from the works of Archilochus and Sappho. Archilochus is said to have been from the seventh century B.C. from Paros where he was a soldier.<sup>38</sup> Snodgrass suggests in “The Hoplite Reform and History,” that there are “fragments that Archilochos fought with the hoplite shield and spear.”<sup>39</sup> The date of Sappho, one of few female poets, is rather uncertain, but is commonly thought to have lived sometime in the late seventh century B.C. in Lesbos. Because both of these sources are from the seventh century, their works are fragmented, as well as Archilochus having been noted as the “second poet of the West,”<sup>40</sup> leaves one to believe that the reliability of these sources are questionable. However due to the fact that Archilochos was said to be a soldier and used hoplite equipment, his perspective might be more believable than a woman who had not partaken in battle. Neither gives specific insights into hoplites or war; however they both make references to battle, different actions within it as well as weapons that were used.

Archilochos-

*There are other shields to be had,*

*But not under the spear-hail*

*Of an artillery attack,*

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<sup>38</sup> Guy Davenport. *Seven Greeks: Archilochos, Sappho, Alkman, Anakreon, Herakleitos, Diogenes, Herondas*. (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1995), 1.

<sup>39</sup> Anthony Snodgrass, “The Hoplite Reform and History,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 85, (1965): 111.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

*In the hot work of slaughtering,  
Among the dry racket of the javelins,  
Neither seeing nor hearing.<sup>41</sup>*

Sappho-

*Hear the melody of your walking  
And see the torch-flare of your smile  
Than the long battleline of Lydia's charioteers,  
Round shields and helmets.<sup>42</sup>*

These are other sources that can be looked at to establish a general time period as well as equipment that was used while in battle. These works are from other poets during early Greece that can help in backing up items talked about in the works of Homer and Hesiod.

Hans Van Wees wrote a two part article, "The Homeric Way of War: The *Iliad* and the Hoplite Phalanx (I) and (II)." These two articles are part of the essentials for this paper because they are creating or disproving connections between things mentioned in the *Iliad* and hoplite phalanxes. In Wees' part I, he discusses issues like the clashing of the front lines of the two armies. He quotes Homer as saying, "dense, dark, bristling with shields and spears," (4.274-82).<sup>43</sup> This line makes references to the closeness of the warriors, but not an exact depiction of the phalanx formation. In Wees' part II, he addresses such topics as the shields, focusing on their appearance. He discusses how the *Iliad* makes numerous portrayals of shields being of various sizes, but remaining

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<sup>41</sup> Guy Davenport. *Archilochos, Sappho, Alkman: Three Lyrical Poets of the Seventh Century B.C.*: (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 29.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>43</sup> Hans Van Wees, "The Homeric Way of War: The 'Iliad' and the Hoplite Phalanx (I)," *Greece & Rome, Second Series* 41, no. 1 (April 1994): 3.



consistently round and bronze.<sup>44</sup> He is able to make these types of connections from passages in the *Iliad* such as, “it blinded eyes, the glare of bronze from shining helmets, newly polished corslets and bright shields, as they advanced in their masses,” (14.340-3).<sup>45</sup> Information such as this that Wees has compiled from the *Iliad* it helps in building a foundation that there are some connections and some possibility that Homer had depicted hoplites or at least an early form of them in his works.

A form of hoplite can be seen in some early Greek literature more specifically that of Homer’s *Iliad* as well as some of Hesiod’s works. Homer describes the hoplite as well as his battle tactics and his war formation, the phalanx. The accuracy of Homer’s interpretations is debated, but the fact of the matter is that there are references to not only hoplites, but also to their protective gear and weaponry. Looking at the *Iliad*, Homer describes the shield the soldiers used to protect themselves, he portrays them as having a bronze front, round, but size seems to vary.<sup>46</sup> Also in the *Iliad* he places a lot of emphasis on body-armor. He makes it known that the armor the warriors are wearing is made of bronze.<sup>47</sup> Another important item that Homer discusses in his writing is that of the spear. In the *Iliad* the hoplite only carries one spear with him. According to Van Wees this is something to note because early depictions of hoplites, on things such as Late Geometric vase-paintings that date back to 750 to 700 B.C., show men with two spears.<sup>48</sup> This creates closer connections between the work of Homer and actual archeological finds. Even though some of what is written in Homer’s *Iliad* may have made humans seem god

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<sup>44</sup> Hans Van Wees, “The Homeric Way of War: The ‘Iliad’ and the Hoplite Phalanx (II),” *Greece & Rome, Second Series* 41, no. 2 (Oct., 1994): 133.

<sup>45</sup> Van Wees, (II), 131.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 133.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 135.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 138.

like, creating a 'superhero,' the fact that Homer mentions hoplites, their gear, and formations helps in building a foundation to expand ideas and information that has been gathered from archeological finds.

It has been speculated that the *Iliad* might have been compiled in the later half of the eighth century B.C. which is significant when looking at some of the finds archaeologists had made. Archaeologists found hoplite armor that was appearing on the mainland of Greece for the first time; however it doesn't show what their military tactics were.<sup>49</sup> Because of these facts as well as how Homer depicts warriors fighting isn't constant with later hoplite techniques, many feel that this is evidence to not rely on Homer. Hanson says that the Linear B tablets are references to Mycenaean, with some cultural aspects of the Dark Ages along with references to Homer's time, which gives us a combination of time that extends over five hundred years, leaving some to believe that Homer's story doesn't reflect any actual period of history.<sup>50</sup> Homer's depictions in some of the literature might not be one hundred percent accurate because he might have been embellishing in certain areas to create a heroic effect, however there are still other things that can be obtained from his writings. Or the fact that stories like the *Iliad* were once oral stories and were then later written down. But there are other poets from this time that have references or similar comparisons in their writings.

Hesiod, a Greek poet, was thought to have lived in the seventh century B.C., perhaps close to the time of Homer due to the fact that their literature is often compared. Little is known about Hesiod however it has been thought that he was either a farmer or shepherd most likely in Boeotia. His best known works are *Work and Days*, *Shield of*

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<sup>49</sup> Hanson, *the Western Way of War*, 41.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

*Heracles*, and *the Theology*. This paper is specifically addressing *Shield of Heracles*. This particular work is relevant because Hesiod is making references to equipment and battle throughout the story. “And on the shield was a harbour with a safe haven from the irresistible sea, made of refined tin wrought in a circle, and it seemed to heave with waves.”<sup>51</sup> A reference such as this is referring to the shield, what its purpose served, its shape, and what it was made out of. Finding passages such as this in other forms of literature beside the *Iliad* help in giving more supporting evidence of hoplites or a form of them existing during or possibly before the eighth century B.C.

The Development of the Polis in Archaic Greece, edited by Lynette Mitchell and P.J. Rhodes is a collection of articles from a conference in 1995. The focus of these articles is to look at the development of the polis, population, and what sort of information those developments can help explain about the Archaic Greece time period. The article that is most beneficial for this paper is the article by Kurt Raaflaub, “Soldiers, Citizens, and the Evolution of the Early Greek Polis.” Raaflaub is primarily focusing on looking at the citizen who played a double role in the military and society and that both roles were equally important for the polis. He suggests in Homeric era, the ‘heroic’ form of battle that was dominated was comprised of leaders who made decisions about battle, and the masses followed suit. Due to what is being obtained from that time period’s literature, when the phalanx came about, it required masses, but on an equal scale.<sup>52</sup> Raaflaub helps give insight into the polis, but also helps in building a background from where the direction of battle first started out and where it eventually moved to.

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<sup>51</sup> Evelyn-White, 235.

<sup>52</sup> Kurt A. Raaflaub, edited by Lynette Mitchell and P.J. Rhodes. *The Development of the Polis in Archaic Greece*: (London: Routledge, 1997), 49.

As one might have noticed the majority of the evidence that has been presented doesn't date back further than the ninth or eighth centuries B.C., which possess a problem when trying to look further back to find dates and hoplite evidence. However an important part of Greek history should be looked at when addressing the problem of having little knowledge of the existence of hoplites prior to the eighth century. In the eighth and seventh century B.C. there is said to have been a population growth in Greece. This idea had been addressed by several historians, but it is hard to prove such a thing happened, because the source of information it derives from; it is difficult to know whether or not it is a creditable source or not, if there are specific sources. Even so, any of the historians agree on some level that there was growth in population.

Chester Starr's The Economic and Social Growth of Early Greece gives a general overview of issues that played economic and/or social roles in forming Greece from 800 – 500 B.C. The area of his book that is of most concern is the “Demographic Factors” section. Starr talks about how “characteristics of a population and especially any marked shifts are among the most influential forces in its economic progress or decline.”<sup>53</sup> He continues in discussing how during early Greece the majority of the population was an agriculture producing demographic, which was made slightly easier due to the weather Greece has.<sup>54</sup> However a downfall to a society being heavily dependent on crops and small livestock is that if there is a bad season, not enough rain, too much rain, etc., it could potentially affect the crops, which affects the food going to animal, which in turn affects the food supply that humans receive. Starr also mentions the possibility of plague

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<sup>53</sup> Chester Starr. *The Economic and Social Growth of Early Greece 800 – 500 BC*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 40.

<sup>54</sup> Starr, 41.

or massive illness occurring, he makes note that literary references of archaic Greece don't mention anything about an epidemic of any sort, although there is a tombstone that speaks of a plague "loismos."<sup>55</sup> Starr then looks to the eighth century B.C., specifically the works of Hesiod and the *Iliad*, which at the beginning of the *Iliad* describes that "an epidemic strikes the Achaean host, and Hesiod promises plague and famine to states where injustice prevails."<sup>56</sup> He shows that in archaic literature there might not have been references to epidemics, but slightly earlier, some forms of literacy provide indications of plagues occurring. Starr produces different factors that played an important part in the economic and social aspect of Greek life, but many of these factors are also reflected in the fluctuation in the population that once took place in early Greece.

Walter Scheidel's article, "The Greek Demographic Expansion: Models and Comparisons," is addressing the populations growth in the eighth and seventh century B.C., despite the lack of quantitative evidence. Throughout the article he discusses how population growth had an effect on the culture and expansion of Greece as well as suggesting other factors that would hinder or aid in the population growth. Decreases might occur due to fluctuating climate (having an effect on the food source), disease, war, or an epidemic.<sup>57</sup> Scheild also talks about ways it is possible to know that there was a population increase during the eighth century B.C. There was expansion in the central Greece area,<sup>58</sup> as well as possibly looking at the number of burials.<sup>59</sup> If there are a significant jump in burials that could be associated with a major population burst.

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<sup>55</sup> Starr, 42.

<sup>56</sup> Starr, 43.

<sup>57</sup> Walter Scheidel. "The Greek Demographic Expansion: Models and Comparisons." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 123, (2003): 121.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 124.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 127.

Because Scheild doesn't have statistics, the exact numbers are unknown and the different scenarios he presents are the best forms to create an educated assumption about what triggered the population growth and how to see this growth.

Greece in the Making, by Robin Osborne is addressing the early years of Greece and major events and problems that occurred. His chapter "The Problem of the Beginning," provides information on the population decrease in the twelfth to eighth century B.C., migration, invasions, as well as the same sort of information on surrounding areas. Osborne as well as many other historians looking at this early time period had a problem with finding literary or quantitative evidence. He discusses two migrations that occurred from Athens to Asia Minor, as well as that by the end of the archaic period or even the end of the seventh century, there were many signs that would point to Athens, Attic, and Ionia being closely connected, due to features such as customs and the linguistic patterns.<sup>60</sup> Osborne covers a wide range of areas to explore migration and population giving different possibilities for items that might have had an effect on the Greek demographic.

In Osborne's book, he discusses a possible Ionian migration that also took place between the twelfth through eighth centuries. During that time, it is known that there was Dorian invasions. This wasn't something that happened once, but rather several times throughout the twelfth to eighth centuries B.C. The Dorian invasion brings different cultures, lifestyles and backgrounds to the Greek world. A possibility that should be thought about is that the Dorians' might have conquered other peoples prior to this invasion, possibly absorbing those other conquered people, bring along addition cultures

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<sup>60</sup> Robin Osborne, *Greece in the Making, 1200-749 BC*, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 35.

and lifestyles. Osborne notes that due to the collapse of Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt near the end of the thirteenth century B.C, there was depletion in the exchanges that went on from the eastern Mediterranean. Also with the collapse of major middle-eastern empires it meant that Greece had no major powers to compete with and no worries about outsiders trying to take over and acquire their lands.<sup>61</sup> However at the beginning of this time there was a large decrease in population, because of this decline, there really weren't any city – states of any substantial size in Greece. Because Greece itself didn't have a large population they didn't have the man power or the need to fight. Raaflaub discusses that due to the population drop that occurred during the Dark Ages, the tenth to eighth centuries B.C., groups of people were organized into “simple” chiefdoms.<sup>62</sup> With a large decrease in population, many people lived in strewn villages, usually located around farmland, typically consisting of small groups of families.<sup>63</sup> Raaflaub also mentions that raids were the typical form of warfare in this time; they were usually led by someone local from their community, however they were limited to neighboring areas.<sup>64</sup> So perhaps during the twelfth to eighth centuries the small population was able to function with little to no fighting.

Looking at the eighth and seventh century B.C. prior to the population increase is important because the population most likely had an affect on the economy, allowing people like farmers to gain more money. By acquiring more money, they were able to then obtain more land, and usually more land could potentially equate to gaining more money. Along with gaining additional money they would have been able to obtain the

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<sup>61</sup> Osborne, 40.

<sup>62</sup> Raaflaub, 39.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 52.

equipment needed to become a hoplite. This might explain the raise of the hoplite around this time period. The rise of the hoplite seems to correspond with more people gaining more wealth, thus being able to afford armor and weapons. This might be why there is more information about warriors of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. because there were more of them as well as there might have been more of a need for hoplites due to expansions into the countryside and establishment of colonies.

After examining all the evidence it seems to express that the origin of hoplites began in the eighth century B.C. The earliest form of armor that has been found to date goes back not further than the eighth century B.C. The Chigi Vase, depicting hoplites, is thought to have been created in 650 – 640 B.C. Also all of the literary references, Archilochos, and Sappho date the seventh century B.C. while the works of Hesiod and Homer date back to the eighth century B.C., Homer might possibly be the earliest, potentially dating near the end of the ninth century B.C. One also needs to take into consideration the substantial population drop that occurred during the Dark Age. There were not threats to Greece except by the Dorians', and the Greek population was so small that there weren't even city-states, but rather chiefdoms. The population expansion that began to take effect in the eighth century B.C. allowed development in the countryside, and people such as farmers were gaining more wealth. With this wealth farmers were now able to afford to buy the expensive equipment that is required of a hoplite. Also with this increase in farmers there was an increase in occupied land which created a need for a mass group to be able to fight to protect themselves, their neighbors, their increasing community, and secure their property. With the understanding of these facts, there is no physical evidence that remains of hoplites from earlier than the eighth century B.C.



and with the information provided about the increase and decrease of population, it shows that prior to the eighth century there was no need for a mass fighting group. The rise of the hoplite and all aspects hoplite related seems to coincide with rise of the Greek population of the eighth century B.C.

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