One of the most renowned historians of ancient Greece, Victor Davis Hanson superbly relates the story of Greek warfare and how it has shaped world history. Professor Hanson contends that the warfare of the Ancient Greeks was both an expression of Greek values and an enormous influence on every aspect of Greek civilization, from religion and philosophy to democracy. He also argues that, for a time, Greek warfare worked towards “the preservation of an agrarian middle class” (p. 66).

The wars of Greek hoplites—a term probably derived from hopla, the Greek word for battle armor—originated with middling yeoman farmers seeking to defend their farms from neighboring Greeks or to expand the holdings of their own community. War was short. Battles would only take place during summer, before the harvest, and would usually only last for a few hours. Troops were rarely marched more than three days from their homes. Opposing sides, as Hanson describes them, were cordial. In formal pitched battle, each party agreed to fight on the most level terrain and notified of their opponents of their intentions. Pursuit of the losing side was outlawed. With a thick bronze breastplate, bronze-covered wooden shield, and a large spear, a hoplite “was the most cumbersome, slow—and best protected—infantryman in the entire history of western warfare” (p. 61). Causalties were usually fewer than ten percent. Hoplites almost always fought in phalanx formation, usually eight “shields” deep, with each man literally standing shoulder-to-shoulder with his comrades. Unity was emphasized, as were personal bravery and strength. However, the heroism of one man above others was not particularly encouraged, and hoplite generals took their places in the battle lines with the rest of the soldiers.

Despite their simple tactics—usually consisting of a phalanx line charging an enemy line—hoplite armies were virtually invincible when faced with non-hoplite opponents. In 40 BC, a Persian army, purportedly numbering a million men and under the leadership of King Xerxes—whose father Darius I had invaded Greece with a much smaller army and been repelled—invasion Greece and was stopped by a hoplite army numbering only 50,000 men.

However, cracks began to appear in the yeoman hoplite system after the Battle of Salamis, in which the Athenian navy, powered by lower-class oarsmen, proved decisive. The agrarian middle class was then forced to open democracy to the lower class men who had made the victory at Salamis possible, lest the new backbone of Greek naval defense be discontent. The assembly of voting Athenians became increasingly warlike and expansionistic, until eventually the Peloponnesian War erupted between Athens and the militaristic Spartans. Far from the civility of previous hoplite conflicts, in this war, armies pursued the annihilation of their enemy.

Finally, it is with Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great that the Greek hoplite phalanx becomes obsolete. The Macedonian phalanx, a professional army equipped with longer
spears and lighter body armor, and supported by strong cavalry and reserves, obliterated the Greek phalanxes. In a few years, Alexander the Great killed more hoplites than had ever previously been killed in history, and he slaughtered civilian populations by the tens of thousands. Hanson, rather than praise Alexander’s genius and charisma as many historians have done, blisters him as a “megalomaniac” whom he likens not to Napoleon or Caesar, but to Hitler.

The Wars of the Ancient Greeks is highly readable and very well-written. Extensive and well-chosen maps, photographs, and other illustrations of pertinent materials add valuable visual information to Hanson’s appealing prose. Hanson incorporates solid analyses that go to the heart of why the West has, more often than not, dominated in warfare. He also shows how Greek warfare was an expression of Greek society and demonstrates the evolution of Greek warfare beginning with the middling yeoman farmers that he believes represent the ideal and ending with the murderous Asian campaigns of Alexander the Great. This book is a modern classic and a must-read for any student of Ancient Greece or western warfare.

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