

ANCIENT HISTORY: *SPARTA*

With reference to the following sources and other evidence, explain the main features of the army in Sparta.

“Let us fight with courage for our country, and for our children
Let us die and never spare our lives.
Young men, remain beside each other and fight,
And do not begin shameful flight or fear,
But make your spirit great and brave in your heart,
And do not be faint-hearted when you fight with men...” (Tyrtaeus)

+ picture of Spartan ritual warrior dance.

The army was an integral component of Sparta. Its role changes as it grew stronger, but it was mainly to fulfil their position as leaders of the Peloponnesian League, and to prevent a helot uprising by the ephors declaring war on them each year.

Although the percentage of them in the army decreased by the 4th century BC, hoplites were the most important feature of the army. Having been trained in the agoge from age 7, being a soldier was their only job, and as shown in the Tyrtaeus source, they took it very seriously. Tyrtaeus said that it was a “beautiful thing” to die for one’s state, and that “shameful flight or fear”, as shown in the source, had no place in the ranks. The hoplites fought in the phalanx formation, 8-12 rows of soldiers who stood “toe to toe, shield to shield” (Tyrtaeus) to create a ‘steam roller’ effect. They protected the man on their left with their 1m diameter hoplon shield, as evidenced in the archaeological source, encouraging comradeship and trust. By utilising this tactic, they were able to break opposing ranks in battles such as Plataea and cause their enemy to flee. Before going into battle they would chant poems, songs and perform a ritual kyllic dance, as illustrated by the pottery source, to the sound of the oboe. This instilled courage and comradeship in the ranks, which was very important for the phalanx to maintain its structure.

There were also additional soldiers who fought with the hoplites: peltasts (rock throwers), light-armed skirmishers and hippeis, who fought on horseback with the king. The former two would likely be composed of helots and perioikoi, who were forced into service as one of their roles. They protected the vulnerable flanks and rear of the phalanx formation.

The Spartan army gained a formidable reputation as a force to be reckoned with, especially after the Battle of Plataea in 479 BC. However, they did have their weaknesses – the conservative kings were unwilling to adopt their tactics, and thus in the Battle of Leuktra in 371 BC, the Theban leader Epaminondas was able to outsmart them and cause Sparta’s downfall.