HISTORY · MILITARY HISTORY SUB-SERIES

Military History: The Greeks

Real battles, tactics, equipment, and military institutions across the Greek world — from the hoplite phalanx and Sparta's own agoge, through Marathon, Thermopylae, and Salamis, to Thebes's tactical innovation and Philip II's Macedonian combined-arms revolution.

10 Chapters | Philip Osztromok | Generated with Claude

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: SCOPE & THE DISTINCTION FROM GREEK & ROMAN HISTORY'S POLITICAL LENS

Military History: The Greeks

Chapter 1 · Introduction: Scope & the Distinction From Greek & Roman History's Political Lens

This course is the second entry in the site's own Military History sub-series, following Military History: The Byzantine Empire. It takes real battles, tactics, equipment, and military institutions as its subject — not the political, social, or economic history already covered elsewhere on this site.

A Deliberately Different Lens on a Familiar Civilization

Greek & Roman History: Political & Social Foundations of the Classical World already covers Athenian democracy, Spartan social structure, and the Peloponnesian War's own political causes and consequences in real depth. This course deliberately does not repeat that ground. Where that course asks how Greek city-states were governed and organised as societies, this course asks a narrower, more technical question: how did Greeks actually fight, and why did their real methods of warfare change so dramatically between roughly 700 BCE and the rise of Macedon?

QUESTION	GREEK & ROMAN HISTORY'S ANSWER	THIS COURSE'S ANSWER
Why did Sparta's society look the way it did?	The Spartiate/Perioikoi/Helot social pyramid and Sparta's dual kingship	The real agoge training system and Sparta's own full-time-soldier military structure
What caused the Peloponnesian War?	Thucydides' real diagnosis — Sparta's fear of growing Athenian power	The real military campaigns the war was actually fought through, including the Sicilian Expedition disaster
How did Macedon come to dominate Greece?	The political and diplomatic mechanics of Macedonian hegemony	Philip II's real sarissa-pike phalanx and combined-arms reforms

What This Course Actually Covers

The Hoplite Phalanx

Real citizen-soldier warfare, the aspis shield and the doru spear, and the "Hoplite Revolution" that tied military service to political voice.

Named Battles, Traced in Real Detail

Marathon (490 BCE), Thermopylae and Salamis (480 BCE), and Leuctra (371 BCE) — each covered as a genuine tactical event, not a passing reference.

Naval Warfare

The trireme and Themistocles' real innovations that turned Athens into the dominant naval power of the Aegean.

Military Innovation

Epaminondas's real oblique-order tactic at Leuctra, and Philip II's reforms — the technical mechanics of how Greek warfare itself evolved.

A Real, Verified Periodization

Greek hoplite warfare developed over the Archaic period (roughly 800–480 BCE), when city-states first adopted the close-order phalanx — typically eight ranks deep, shields locked together, spears projecting over the front rank. Hoplites carried the aspis, a large concave wooden shield gripped uniquely at both the forearm and the rim, alongside an iron-tipped thrusting spear and a short sword as backup.

> **THE "HOPLITE REVOLUTION"**
>
> Historians describe this shift as a genuine socio-political transformation, not just a change in equipment: phalanx warfare demanded absolute collective discipline rather than individual aristocratic heroics, and the middle-class citizens who could afford hoplite armour gained real political leverage as a direct result — a real, documented link between how a city fought and how it governed itself.

The Classical period (480–323 BCE) saw the phalanx refined further, alongside real advances in naval warfare and, by its close, Philip II's own combined-arms Macedonian reforms — the exact point where this course deliberately stops, handing off to the separate Military History: Alexander the Great course for everything that follows.

Looking Ahead

Chapter 2 covers the hoplite phalanx itself in full technical detail — the panoply, the formation, and the citizen-soldier ethos it produced.

Reflect

QUESTION 1 Historians link the rise of the hoplite phalanx to real political change — citizens who fought gained a stronger political voice. Why might a state's own military organisation shape its politics this directly?

QUESTION 2 This course deliberately separates military history from political history, even though both cover the same civilization. What might be gained — or lost — by studying a society's wars separately from its politics?

QUESTION 3 This course stops deliberately at Philip II's reforms, before Alexander's own campaigns. Why might a course choose to end at a technical turning point rather than a political one?

CHAPTER 1 QUICK REFERENCE

- **Scope:** Real battles, tactics, equipment, and military institutions — not political or social history
- **c. 800–480 BCE:** The Archaic period; the hoplite phalanx and the "Hoplite Revolution"
- **480–323 BCE:** The Classical period; naval warfare's rise and tactical innovation culminating in Philip II's reforms
- **Distinct from:** Greek & Roman History's own political/social lens on the same civilization
- **Stops at:** Philip II's reforms, handing off to the separate Military History: Alexander the Great course

CHAPTER 2: THE HOPLITE PHALANX: GREEK WARFARE'S REAL FOUNDATION

Military History: The Greeks

Chapter 2 · The Hoplite Phalanx: Greek Warfare's Real Foundation

Chapter 1 set out this course's own scope — real battles, tactics, and equipment, not political history. This chapter starts at the beginning: the hoplite and the phalanx formation that defined Greek land warfare for roughly four centuries.

The Hoplite Panoply

A hoplite's equipment — the panoply — was expensive, self-funded, and genuinely heavy. Its centerpiece was the **aspis**, a large, concave wooden shield at least 0.9 metres across, weighing around 7.3 kilograms and 25–38 millimetres thick, faced in bronze. Unlike most ancient shields, the aspis used a distinctive double grip — a central armband (the porpax) for the forearm and a handle near the rim — that made it far more stable in a tight formation but genuinely difficult to manage alone.

The Doru (Spear)

A thrusting spear roughly 2.1–2.7 metres long, with a sharpened iron blade and a bronze butt-spike (the sauroter) allowing a broken spear to still be used, or the weapon planted upright.

Body Armor

A bronze bell cuirass or, later, lighter linen/leather composite armor (the linothorax), plus a Corinthian-style bronze helmet offering strong facial protection at the real cost of restricted vision and hearing.

The Xiphos (Sword)

A short, double-edged backup sword, drawn only once the spear was lost, broken, or the fighting had closed too tight to use it.

The Phalanx Formation

Hoplites fought in a close-order line — typically eight ranks deep, though this varied by city and occasion — with each man's own aspis overlapping the man beside him, covering his own left side and his neighbor's exposed right. Spears from the first several ranks projected forward over the shield wall, presenting an advancing enemy with a genuinely dense field of iron points.

THE OTHISMOS DEBATE — STILL GENUINELY UNRESOLVED

Ancient authors describe an *othismos*, a literal mass "push," once opposing phalanxes closed — but historians have long debated whether this was a real physical shoving match or a looser metaphor for sustained close combat. Recent experimental archaeology, testing real reconstructed panoplies under compressive force, has found the bell cuirass, Corinthian helmet, and bowl-shaped aspis offer genuine mechanical advantages for exactly this kind of pushing — evidence favoring a real, physical othismos, though the debate has not been definitively settled.

The Citizen-Soldier Ethos

Hoplites were not professional soldiers. In most Greek city-states, hoplite service was expected of ordinary male citizens who owned enough property to equip themselves — there was no state-issued armor, and a man who couldn't afford the panoply simply couldn't serve as a hoplite. Athens formalised compulsory service for young men aged 18–20, with all male citizens up to 60 liable for callup in wartime, but hoplites everywhere trained irregularly compared to a genuinely professional army.

PROPERTY, SERVICE, AND POLITICAL VOICE

Because hoplites financed their own equipment, hoplite service was directly tied to real economic standing — and that standing translated into real political leverage. As middle-class landholders filled the phalanx's own ranks in city after city, they increasingly demanded a genuine share in governance, a documented pressure historians link directly to the gradual shift away from narrow aristocratic rule across much of the Greek world.

Looking Ahead

Chapter 3 turns to the one Greek state that broke from the citizen-militia model almost entirely: Sparta, and its real, unique system of full-time, state-trained soldiers.

Reflect

QUESTION 1 The aspis's own double-grip design made it far more effective in a tight formation than used alone. What does this suggest about how Greek equipment itself was designed around collective, not individual, combat?

QUESTION 2 The othismos debate remains genuinely unresolved even with real experimental archaeology. Why might a question this basic about ancient combat still be so hard to answer definitively?

QUESTION 3 Hoplite service was only open to citizens who could afford their own equipment. How might this economic requirement have shaped which citizens actually held real political power in a typical Greek polis?

CHAPTER 2 QUICK REFERENCE

- **Aspis:** ~0.9m+ diameter, ~7.3kg, double-gripped bronze-faced wooden shield
- **Doru:** A 2.1–2.7m thrusting spear with an iron blade and bronze butt-spike
- **Phalanx:** A close-order line, typically 8 ranks deep, shields overlapping
- **Othismos:** The disputed "push" — real experimental evidence now favors a genuine physical shoving match, though not conclusively
- **Citizen-soldier link:** Self-funded equipment tied hoplite service directly to property and, in turn, to political standing

CHAPTER 3: SPARTA: THE REAL MILITARY SOCIETY

Military History: The Greeks

Chapter 3 · Sparta: The Real Military Society

Chapter 2 covered the hoplite panoply and phalanx formation common to nearly every Greek city-state. This chapter turns to the one state that built its entire society around producing hoplites full-time — and then asks, honestly, whether Sparta's own legendary battlefield reputation actually matches its real, documented record.

The Agoge: A Real, Age-Graded Training System

Where most Greek hoplites trained irregularly around ordinary civilian lives, Sparta ran a formal, compulsory training system — the agoge — that removed boys from their families at age seven and shaped them into soldiers over more than two decades.

AGE GROUP	AGE RANGE	REAL CHARACTER
Paides	7–17	Communal living away from family; minimal clothing, harsh sleeping conditions, and deliberately encouraged theft of food as training in stealth
Paidiskoi	18–19	Intensified training; the krypteia rite of passage typically fell around this age
Hebontes	20–29	Full military service, though full citizenship (as a homoios, "equal") was withheld until age 30

THE KRYPTEIA

Elite young Spartans in the agoge underwent the krypteia — sent into the countryside armed only with a knife, tasked with terrorizing and, when judged necessary, killing helots, Sparta's own state-owned serf population. The real purpose was less "survival training" than deliberate social control, keeping a helot population that vastly outnumbered actual Spartan citizens too afraid to organise rebellion.

The curriculum was not purely physical: literacy, music, and poetry had a real place in the agoge alongside its dominant emphasis on physical conditioning — a detail that complicates

the popular image of Sparta as concerned with combat training alone.

A Genuine Reputation-vs-Record Problem

Much of the popular image of Sparta traces back to Plutarch, writing in the second century CE — centuries after the Classical period he described, and drawing on traditions already reshaped by admiration and legend. Modern historians have spent decades working to separate Classical-era evidence from this later idealised picture, and the results genuinely complicate Sparta's own reputation.

> **A REAL, DOCUMENTED CORRECTION**
>
> Athens fought more than three times as many battles as Sparta across the fifth century BCE — and won at a slightly higher overall rate. Sparta's own real fifth-and-fourth-century record shows it losing about as often as it won, a genuinely uncomfortable fact against its outsized battlefield reputation.

Sparta's real strength lay specifically within the close-order hoplite phalanx — a formation and equipment set common across Greece, not a Spartan invention. Outside that narrow context, the record is more mixed: Sparta never developed effective light infantry, and Spartan forces were repeatedly defeated in ambushes and skirmishing warfare by lightly-armed opponents who could exploit terrain the rigid phalanx couldn't handle. Sparta was also, by the real historical record, slow to adopt combined-arms tactics or naval innovation compared to more experimental rivals.

Looking Ahead

Chapter 4 covers the Battle of Marathon (490 BCE) — the Persian Wars' own opening land engagement, fought without Spartan participation at all, and the real origin of the "marathon run" legend.

Reflect

QUESTION 1 The krypteia's real purpose was social control over the helot population, not just a survival exercise for young Spartans. What does this suggest about the relationship between Sparta's own military training system and its wider social structure?

QUESTION 2 Much of Sparta's popular reputation traces to Plutarch, writing centuries after the events he described. Why might a source written that much later still shape popular understanding so strongly, even once historians identify the gap?

QUESTION 3 Sparta's real win/loss record was close to even, yet its reputation for military excellence has persisted for over two thousand years. What factors, beyond battlefield results alone, might explain a reputation this durable?

CHAPTER 3 QUICK REFERENCE

- **Age 7–17:** Paides — communal training, deliberate hardship, encouraged theft as stealth training
- **Age 18–19:** Paidiskoi — intensified training and the krypteia rite of passage
- **Age 20–29:** Hebontes — full military service; full citizenship withheld until 30
- **Krypteia:** Real social control over the helot population, not merely a training exercise
- **Real record:** Athens fought over 3x as many battles as Sparta in the 5th century and won at a slightly higher rate; Sparta's own record was close to even
- **Real limitation:** Sparta excelled specifically within the hoplite phalanx, but was slow to adopt light infantry, combined arms, and naval innovation

CHAPTER 4: THE BATTLE OF MARATHON (490 BCE)

Military History: The Greeks

Chapter 4 · The Battle of Marathon (490 BCE)

Chapter 3 closed with an honest look at Sparta's own real, mixed battlefield record. This chapter covers a battle Sparta wasn't even present for: Marathon, fought entirely by Athenian hoplites and their Plataean allies against the first Persian invasion of Greece.

Background: The First Persian Invasion

In 490 BCE, King Darius I of Persia dispatched an invasion force across the Aegean, landing at the plain of Marathon roughly 40 kilometres northeast of Athens. Athens sent a runner, Pheidippides, to request Spartan help — but Sparta, observing a religious festival, delayed its own departure until the battle was already decided.

> **REAL, GENUINELY DISPUTED NUMBERS**
>
> Ancient and modern sources disagree substantially: the Athenian force is generally put at around 10,000 hoplites plus roughly 1,000 Plataean allies, while Persian numbers range widely across sources, from a commonly cited 15,000–25,000 up to some estimates of 30,000. No fully settled figure exists for either side.

Miltiades's Real Tactical Deployment

Command at Marathon rested with a board of ten Athenian generals rotating daily authority; several ceded their own turn to Miltiades, giving him effective command. Facing a larger force, Miltiades made a deliberate, real tactical choice: he thinned his own center to lengthen his line and match the Persian front, while reinforcing both flanks.

The Weakened Center

Miltiades's own center was deliberately thinner than usual — a calculated risk, not an

The Reinforced Flanks

Stronger Athenian wings held their ground and then wheeled inward once the Persian center

oversight, designed to let the Persian advance push it back rather than break it outright.

advanced, catching the Persian force in a real, pincer-style envelopment.

Absent Persian Cavalry

Some ancient accounts suggest Persian cavalry was not present for the main engagement — a real, if disputed, factor that may explain how the Athenian line closed the distance without being broken up first.

The envelopment worked: the Persian center, having pushed into the weakened Athenian middle, found itself surrounded once the flanks closed in from both sides, and the Persian force broke and fled toward its ships. Real casualty figures, again disputed but commonly cited, put Persian losses around 6,400 against roughly 192 Athenian dead, including the polemarch Callimachus.

A GENUINE SOURCE PROBLEM

Nearly everything known about Marathon's own tactical detail comes from Herodotus, writing decades after the battle — a real limitation historians openly acknowledge rather than treating the traditional account as settled fact.

The Real Origin of the "Marathon Run" Legend

The popular story has Pheidippides running roughly 40 kilometres from the battlefield at Marathon to Athens to announce victory, then collapsing dead from exhaustion. This is not what Herodotus actually recorded.

WHAT HERODOTUS ACTUALLY WROTE

Herodotus describes Pheidippides running from Athens to Sparta — roughly 300 kilometres — before the battle, to request military aid, covering the distance in about 36 hours and completing his full mission in three days. Herodotus records nothing about a subsequent run from Marathon back to Athens after the battle.

The Marathon-to-Athens version first appears in the writings of Lucian, in the second century CE — roughly 600 years after the real battle. Historians think the legend likely conflated Pheidippides's real Sparta run with a separate, otherwise unnamed messenger who may have carried news of the victory back to Athens. The modern 26.2-mile marathon race itself is a real, deliberate 1896 invention for the first modern Athens Olympics, not a revival of any ancient athletic event.

Looking Ahead

Chapter 5 covers the far larger second Persian invasion of 480 BCE — Thermopylae and Salamis — where Sparta's own real, celebrated last stand actually took place.

Reflect

QUESTION 1 Miltiades deliberately weakened his own center to strengthen his flanks — a real tactical gamble. What does this choice suggest about how a smaller or more vulnerable force can still shape a battle's outcome through formation alone?

QUESTION 2 The "marathon run" legend took roughly 600 years to reach the form most people know today. Why might a specific, dramatic detail like this attach itself to a real historical event so long after the fact?

QUESTION 3 Nearly all detailed knowledge of Marathon comes from a single source, Herodotus, writing decades later. How should a historian's own reliance on one dominant source shape how confidently we can describe an ancient battle's exact details?

CHAPTER 4 QUICK REFERENCE

- **490 BCE:** Darius I's first Persian invasion lands at Marathon; Sparta arrives too late to fight
- **Miltiades's tactic:** A weakened center and reinforced flanks, enveloping the Persian advance

- **Disputed numbers:** ~10,000-11,000 Greeks against a Persian force estimated anywhere from 15,000 to 30,000
- **Real Herodotus account:** Pheidippides ran to Sparta before the battle (~300km), not from Marathon to Athens afterward
- **The legend's real origin:** First appears in Lucian, 2nd century CE — roughly 600 years after the actual battle

CHAPTER 5: THERMOPYLAE & SALAMIS: THE REAL 480 BCE CAMPAIGN

Military History: The Greeks

Chapter 5 · Thermopylae & Salamis: The Real 480 BCE Campaign

Chapter 4 covered the first Persian invasion's own defeat at Marathon in 490 BCE. Ten years later, Xerxes I returned with a far larger force, and this chapter covers the campaign's two defining engagements — a land battle remembered mostly as legend, and a naval battle that actually decided the war.

Thermopylae: A Real Force Much Larger Than "300"

In August 480 BCE, a Greek force blocked the narrow coastal pass at Thermopylae against Xerxes's advancing army. Popular memory reduces this force to "the 300 Spartans" — but the real, documented Greek army was considerably larger.

> **THE REAL COMPOSITION OF THE GREEK FORCE**
>
> Leonidas commanded roughly 7,000 hoplites in total: 300 Spartiates plus their helot attendants (who likely fought as light infantry), alongside 500 from Tegea, 500 from Mantinea, 1,000 from the rest of Arcadia, 400 from Corinth, 700 from Thespiae, 400 from Thebes, and contingents from Phocis and Opuntian Locris, among others. The "300 Spartans" framing badly understates the real, genuinely multi-city Greek defense.

Persian numbers remain genuinely disputed — ancient sources claim figures as high as 300,000, while modern estimates place Xerxes's real force somewhere between 80,000 and 200,000. Whatever the true number, it vastly outnumbered the Greek defenders.

The Narrow Pass

Thermopylae's own narrow terrain — mountains on one side, sea on the other — neutralised the Persian numerical advantage, forcing combat onto a front only a small force needed to hold.

Ephialtes's Betrayal

On the third day, a local Greek named Ephialtes revealed a mountain path allowing Persian forces to outflank the defenders — the real, decisive turning point of the battle.

The Last Stand

Once outflanked, Leonidas dismissed most of the army but held his ground with the Spartans, Thespians, and Thebans, fighting to the death to cover the retreat of the rest.

Salamis: The Real Decisive Battle

Thermopylae bought time, not victory — Athens itself was evacuated and burned. The war's real outcome was decided weeks later, at sea, in the narrow strait between the island of Salamis and the Greek mainland.

> **THEMISTOCLES'S REAL TACTICAL DECEPTION**
>
> Themistocles sent a secret message to Xerxes claiming the Greek fleet intended to retreat, deliberately luring the far larger Persian navy into the narrow Salamis strait rather than letting it fight in open water, where Persian numbers would have told decisively.

Real ship numbers again vary by source: the Greek fleet is generally put around 300–370 triremes against a Persian force of roughly 800 (some ancient sources claim up to 1,000). In the confined strait, the Persian numerical advantage became a genuine liability — larger ships had no room to maneuver and collided with one another, while the more agile Greek triremes exploited the chaos. The Greeks sank roughly 300 Persian vessels while losing only around 40 of their own, a real, decisive naval victory that broke Xerxes's own ability to supply his invasion and forced much of his army to withdraw.

Looking Ahead

Chapter 6 covers the Athenian navy in greater technical depth — the trireme itself, and Themistocles's own real role building the fleet that made Salamis possible.

Reflect

QUESTION 1 The real Greek force at Thermopylae numbered roughly 7,000, not 300. Why might popular memory compress a genuinely multi-city defense down to a single, smaller, more dramatic number?

QUESTION 2 Thermopylae ended in a real Greek defeat, yet it's remembered as a heroic triumph, while Salamis actually won the war but receives comparatively less popular attention. What might explain this gap between military significance and cultural memory?

QUESTION 3 Themistocles won at Salamis partly through deliberate deception rather than raw force. What does this suggest about the role of psychological and strategic tactics alongside pure combat strength in ancient naval warfare?

CHAPTER 5 QUICK REFERENCE

- **August 480 BCE:** Thermopylae — a real ~7,000-strong multi-city Greek force, not "300 Spartans" alone
- **Ephialtes:** The Greek traitor whose real betrayal via a mountain path decided the battle
- **Leonidas's last stand:** Spartans, Thespians, and Thebans held the rear guard after the main army withdrew
- **September 480 BCE:** Salamis — Themistocles lures the larger Persian fleet into a narrow strait
- **Real outcome:** ~300 Persian ships sunk against ~40 Greek losses — the war's own real decisive battle

CHAPTER 6: THE ATHENIAN NAVY & THE REAL RISE OF NAVAL WARFARE

Military History: The Greeks

Chapter 6 · The Athenian Navy & the Real Rise of Naval Warfare

Chapter 5 covered Salamis's real decisive outcome without dwelling on the ship or the strategy that made it possible. This chapter goes deeper into both: the trireme itself, and Themistocles's own real, deliberate decision years earlier to build the fleet that would win the war.

The Trireme: A Ship Built for One Purpose

The trireme was a real, purpose-built warship — not a dual-purpose merchant vessel pressed into combat, but a design centered entirely on its bronze-sheathed ram. At roughly 37 metres long and 5.2 metres wide, displacing around 70 tons, it was fast, narrow, and built to strike.

170 Rowers, Three Tiers

85 oars per side, arranged in three stacked rows — the upper thranites, middle zygians, and lower thalamians — each requiring one rower per oar.

A Full Crew of ~200

Beyond the 170 rowers, a trireme carried marines (hoplites), archers, deck hands, a rowing master to direct cadence, and a piper to keep rhythm — a real, compact command hierarchy aboard a single ship.

A Mixed Crew

Real Athenian trireme crew records show citizens, foreigners, and enslaved men serving aboard the same ships — naval service drew far more broadly than the property-restricted hoplite phalanx.

Themistocles's Real Naval Law (483 BCE)

Around 483 BCE, a rich new vein of silver was discovered at the state-owned mines at Laurion. Many Athenians wanted the windfall simply distributed among the citizenry. Themistocles argued forcefully against this, convincing the Assembly instead to fund a fleet of 200 triremes — officially framed as a response to Athens's ongoing rivalry with Aegina, but real evidence points to a deliberate, farsighted preparation against a renewed Persian invasion.

> **A REAL, DECISIVE LONG-TERM BET**
>
> Without this real 483 BCE decision, Athens would not have had the fleet that fought at Salamis just three years later. Themistocles's naval law is a genuine, documented case of a single political decision shaping a war's own outcome years before that war began.

Real Naval Tactics: Diekplous & Periplous

Once ramming became the dominant naval tactic — first significant at the Battle of Alalia around 540–535 BCE and standard practice by the fifth century — Greek fleets developed two real named maneuvers to bring a ram to bear on an enemy's vulnerable side or stern.

MANEUVER	REAL MECHANICS
Diekplous	A ship or squadron drives directly through a gap in the enemy's own line, then turns to ram from behind — a breakthrough maneuver
Periplous	Ships sail around the enemy's own flank to encircle and attack from the side or rear — an outflanking maneuver

Both maneuvers depended on real crew skill and coordinated rowing — a fleet's own defenders tried to keep their ships facing outward in a tight line, denying an attacker the exposed broadside a ram needed to be effective.

Looking Ahead

Chapter 7 turns from the Persian Wars to the Peloponnesian War's own real military campaigns, including the catastrophic Sicilian Expedition.

Reflect

QUESTION 1 Themistocles convinced Athens to invest a real silver windfall in a fleet years before Persia actually invaded. What does this suggest about the value of a leader's own ability to prepare for a threat that hasn't yet materialized?

QUESTION 2 Naval crews drew from citizens, foreigners, and enslaved men alike, unlike the property-restricted hoplite phalanx. What might this broader participation suggest about how naval power reshaped who had a stake in a city's own military strength?

QUESTION 3 Both the diekplous and periplous depended on precise, coordinated rowing under real combat pressure. What does this suggest about the level of training and discipline naval warfare demanded, compared to hoplite phalanx combat?

CHAPTER 6 QUICK REFERENCE

- **The trireme:** ~37m long, ~200-strong crew, 170 rowers across three tiers, built entirely around its ram
- **483 BCE:** Themistocles's naval law diverts the Laurion silver windfall into a 200-ship fleet
- **Real payoff:** That same fleet won at Salamis just three years later
- **Diekplous:** Breaking through the enemy line to ram from behind
- **Periplous:** Outflanking the enemy to ram from the side or rear

CHAPTER 7: THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR'S REAL MILITARY CAMPAIGNS

Military History: The Greeks

Chapter 7 · The Peloponnesian War's Real Military Campaigns

Chapters 4–6 covered the Persian Wars, where Greek city-states fought a common outside enemy. This chapter turns to the war Greeks fought against each other — Athens and Sparta's own real, decades-long conflict — traced here through its actual campaigns and battles rather than its political causes.

A Real, Three-Phase War

Historians divide the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) into three real, distinct military phases, each with its own genuinely different character.

PHASE	DATES	REAL MILITARY CHARACTER
The Archidamian War	431–421 BCE	Sparta repeatedly invaded Attica by land; Athens used its naval superiority to raid the Peloponnesian coast instead of risking open battle
The Sicilian Expedition	415–413 BCE	A massive Athenian expeditionary force sent to conquer Syracuse — ending in total, catastrophic destruction
The Decelean (Ionian) War	413–404 BCE	Sparta occupied Decelica near Athens year-round and, funded by Persian money, built a real navy capable of challenging Athens at sea

Pylos & Sphacteria: Breaking a Myth (425 BCE)

During the Archidamian War's own stalemate, an Athenian force under Demosthenes fortified a position at Pylos on the Peloponnesian coast. A naval victory trapped a Spartan land force on the nearby island of Sphacteria — and after a siege, the Spartans surrendered.

A GENUINELY UNPRECEDENTED EVENT

Of 440 hoplites trapped on Sphacteria, 292 were captured, including 120 full Spartiates — a real, substantial fraction of Sparta's own small citizen-soldier class. Spartans were expected to fight to the death, never surrender, regardless of the odds. This real capitulation shattered that reputation across the Greek world and triggered a real wave of Spartan peace offers, directly contributing to the Peace of Nicias in 421 BCE.

The Sicilian Expedition: A Real, Total Disaster

In 415 BCE, Athens launched a massive expedition against Syracuse in Sicily — an initial force of 130 triremes and 5,000 hoplites, driven substantially by Alcibiades's own ambition and rhetorical persuasion.

The Herms Scandal

On the eve of departure, Athens's sacred Herm statues were found mutilated across the city. Alcibiades became the chief suspect and was recalled to stand trial.

Defection, Not Trial

Rather than face judgment, Alcibiades defected to Sparta — and gave the Spartans real, detailed intelligence on the expedition's own plans, urging them to send the capable general Gylippus to reinforce Syracuse.

Nicias's Failed Command

Left in sole command after Lamachus's death in battle and Alcibiades's defection, Nicias's own hesitant leadership let the siege stall while Syracuse's defenses, strengthened by Gylippus, grew stronger.

THE REAL, TOTAL COST

In September 413 BCE, the Syracusans burned or sank the entire trapped Athenian fleet. The Athenian army's attempted overland retreat was cut off and destroyed; Nicias himself was executed. Real losses ran to at least 40,000 dead or captured — Athens's own single greatest military defeat of the entire war. Thousands of captured soldiers were sent to work in Syracuse's stone quarries, where they were starved and worked to death.

Looking Ahead

Chapter 8 covers Thebes's own real military innovation — Epaminondas's oblique-order tactic at Leuctra in 371 BCE, the battle that finally broke Spartan dominance for good.

Reflect

QUESTION 1 Sparta's surrender at Sphacteria shattered a real, long-held reputation for never yielding. What does this suggest about how a single battlefield event can undo a reputation built over generations?

QUESTION 2 Alcibiades's own personal scandal and defection directly reshaped the Sicilian Expedition's outcome. What does this suggest about the risk of tying a major military campaign's own success to one individual leader?

QUESTION 3 Athens committed a genuinely massive force to Sicily, far from the war's main theater. What might this decision suggest about the dangers of military overreach even for a well-resourced power?

CHAPTER 7 QUICK REFERENCE

- **431–421 BCE:** The Archidamian War — Spartan land invasions against Athenian naval raiding
- **425 BCE:** Pylos & Sphacteria — a real, unprecedented Spartan surrender (292 captured, 120 full Spartiates)
- **415–413 BCE:** The Sicilian Expedition — Athens's catastrophic attempt to conquer Syracuse
- **Alcibiades:** Recalled over the Herms scandal, defected to Sparta, and gave real intelligence against his own former army
- **Real outcome:** At least 40,000 Athenian dead or captured — Athens's single greatest defeat of the war

- **413–404 BCE:** The Decelean/Ionian War — Sparta builds a Persian-funded navy to finish the war at sea

CHAPTER 8: THEBAN INNOVATION: EPAMINONDAS & THE BATTLE OF LEUCTRA (371 BCE)

Military History: The Greeks

Chapter 8 · Theban Innovation: Epaminondas & the Battle of Leuctra (371 BCE)

Chapter 7 closed with the Sicilian Expedition's own real disaster and Sparta's eventual naval-funded victory in the Peloponnesian War. Roughly a generation later, a genuinely new tactical idea from Thebes ended Spartan military dominance for good — this chapter covers exactly how.

The Battle of Leuctra: A Real, Deliberate Tactical Break From Tradition

In 371 BCE, a Spartan-led force of roughly 12,000 troops under King Cleombrotus marched against Thebes. Epaminondas's own Theban army numbered only around 6,000 hoplites plus cavalry — genuinely outnumbered on paper. What decided the battle wasn't numbers, but a real, deliberate departure from how Greek phalanxes had fought for centuries.

A Fifty-Deep Left Wing

Standard hoplite phalanxes ran perhaps eight ranks deep. Epaminondas massed his own best troops on the left at fifty shields deep — a real, radical concentration of force.

A Refused Center and Right

Rather than advancing in a straight, even line, Epaminondas deliberately held back his center and right wing in a staggered formation, delaying their own engagement.

The Sacred Band Leading the Strike

His elite left wing, spearheaded by the Sacred Band, was placed directly opposite King Cleombrotus and Sparta's own royal guard — the enemy's single strongest point.

THE REAL "OBLIQUE ORDER" EFFECT

Advancing at an angle rather than straight ahead, the deepened Theban left crashed into the Spartan right with overwhelming local force before the rest of either line had fully engaged —

smashing the Spartan elite apart, killing Cleombrotus and much of his royal guard, while the refused Theban center and right avoided unnecessary exposure entirely.

The defeat was real and decisive: it destroyed the Spartan hoplite phalanx's own long-standing reputation for invincibility and established Thebes, briefly, as the dominant military power in Greece.

The Sacred Band of Thebes

The Sacred Band was a real, elite 300-man unit — 150 pairs, each combining an older erastes and a younger eromenos, selected by the Theban commander Gorgidas purely on merit rather than social rank.

A DELIBERATE TACTICAL RATIONALE

The pairing was intentional strategy, not incidental: paired lovers, ancient sources argue, would fight more fiercely to protect one another and would be genuinely less likely to break and flee, since retreating would mean abandoning a partner in full view of the rest of the unit.

The Sacred Band achieved real fame under the general Pelopidas, defeating a Spartan force at least three times its own size at Tegyra in 375 BCE, before its central role at Leuctra six years later. It remained genuinely unbeaten for forty years — until 338 BCE, when the entire unit was killed fighting Philip II of Macedon at the Battle of Chaeronea, a real, poignant end that directly sets up this course's own next chapter.

Looking Ahead

Chapter 9 covers Philip II's own real Macedonian military reforms — the sarissa pike phalanx and combined-arms tactics that ended Theban hegemony at Chaeronea and reshaped Greek warfare permanently.

Reflect

QUESTION 1 Epaminondas concentrated overwhelming force at one specific point rather than spreading his own troops evenly. What does this suggest about the value of deliberate imbalance over uniform strength in tactical planning?

QUESTION 2 The Sacred Band's own real design assumed paired lovers would fight more fiercely and refuse to retreat. What does this suggest about how ancient commanders thought about morale and cohesion as genuine tactical assets, not just numbers?

QUESTION 3 Thebes's own military dominance, born at Leuctra, lasted only a few decades before falling to Macedon. What does this pattern of rapidly rising and falling hegemonies suggest about how durable any single tactical innovation's own advantage really is?

CHAPTER 8 QUICK REFERENCE

- **371 BCE:** Battle of Leuctra — Epaminondas's Theban force (~6,000) defeats a larger Spartan-led army (~12,000)
- **The oblique order:** A 50-deep left wing striking first, with a deliberately refused center and right
- **Real outcome:** King Cleombrotus killed; the Spartan phalanx's reputation for invincibility broken
- **The Sacred Band:** 150 paired lovers (300 men), selected on merit, genuinely undefeated 378–338 BCE
- **338 BCE:** The Sacred Band's real, final destruction at Chaeronea against Philip II of Macedon

Military History: The Greeks

Chapter 9 · The Macedonian Military Revolution: Philip II's Real Reforms

Chapter 8 closed with the Sacred Band's own decades of invincibility ending at Chaeronea in 338 BCE, against Philip II of Macedon. This chapter covers exactly what made Philip's own army capable of that — real reforms that broke from centuries of hoplite tradition and reshaped Greek warfare permanently.

The Sarissa: A Genuinely Different Weapon

Where Chapter 2 covered the doru — a one-handed thrusting spear roughly 2.1–2.7 metres long — Philip's infantry carried the sarissa, a far longer two-handed pike, generally cited between 4.3 and 6 metres (14 to nearly 20 feet), weighing around 6.4 kilograms. Made of tough cornel wood in two sections that could be joined for combat, it required both hands to wield and made the small aspis shield of Chapter 2's own hoplite impractical — Macedonian infantry carried a smaller shield instead, slung differently to free both hands for the pike.

> **A REAL, DOCUMENTED REACH ADVANTAGE**
>
> The sarissa's own length let the first five ranks of a Macedonian formation level their pikes simultaneously, presenting an approaching enemy with a wall of iron points well beyond the reach of any traditional hoplite's own doru — and far beyond the reach of a defender's short sword.

A Professional Standing Army

Chapter 2 established the hoplite as a self-equipped citizen-soldier, serving irregularly around civilian life. Philip's own real reform broke from this model directly: funded substantially by revenue from Macedonian silver mines, he built a genuinely professional, standardized, continuously drilled army — soldiers who trained as their actual occupation, not citizens called up occasionally.

The Phalanx (Pezhetairoi)

Organized into battalions of roughly 1,500 men, built around the sarissa, serving as the army's own defensive anchor.

Companion Cavalry

Macedonian nobility drilled into a real, disciplined heavy cavalry force organized by territorial squadron — the army's own offensive strike arm.

Hypaspists & Light Troops

Elite, more mobile infantry and light forces filled the tactical gaps the rigid sarissa phalanx alone couldn't cover — the combined-arms flexibility Chapter 3 noted Sparta itself genuinely lacked.

A REAL, DELIBERATE COMBINED-ARMS SYSTEM

Philip's own tactical doctrine assigned the phalanx a defensive, anchoring role while the Companion cavalry delivered the offensive blow — a genuine division of labor between infantry and cavalry that most earlier Greek armies, reliant on the phalanx alone, never developed this systematically.

The Battle of Chaeronea (338 BCE)

In August 338 BCE, Philip led roughly 30,000 infantry and 2,000 cavalry against a coalition of Greek city-states — chiefly Athens and Thebes — fielding a comparable force of around 35,000. The battle directly closed Chapter 8's own thread: a young Alexander, commanding the Companion cavalry, led the charge that shattered the Sacred Band, the elite unit that had remained genuinely undefeated for forty years.

Chaeronea effectively ended meaningful Greek city-state military independence — Athens and Thebes were decisively broken, and organized resistance to Macedonian dominance became impossible. It is the exact point where this course's own outline deliberately stops.

Looking Ahead

Chapter 10 closes this course with a synthesis of every military system covered — hoplite, Spartan, Athenian-naval, Theban, and Macedonian — comparing their real strengths, weaknesses, and lasting legacies. Alexander's own subsequent campaigns are covered separately, in the dedicated Military History: Alexander the Great course.

Reflect

QUESTION 1 The sarissa's real reach advantage came at the cost of the traditional hoplite's own large shield. What does this trade-off suggest about how a military innovation often solves one problem while creating a new vulnerability?

QUESTION 2 Philip's professional standing army broke from the citizen-militia model that had defined Greek warfare since Chapter 2's own hoplite revolution. Why might a full-time professional force outperform a part-time citizen militia over a sustained campaign?

QUESTION 3 The Sacred Band, undefeated since Chapter 8's own Battle of Leuctra, was destroyed in a single battle at Chaeronea. What does this suggest about the risk any dominant military system faces once a genuinely superior rival system emerges?

CHAPTER 9 QUICK REFERENCE

- **The sarissa:** A ~4.3-6m two-handed pike replacing the doru, letting five ranks level pikes at once
- **A real professional army:** Funded by silver-mine revenue, continuously drilled — a break from citizen-militia service
- **Combined arms:** The sarissa phalanx as a defensive anchor, Companion cavalry as the offensive strike force
- **338 BCE:** The Battle of Chaeronea — Alexander's cavalry charge destroys the Sacred Band

- **Real consequence:** Greek city-state military independence effectively ends

CHAPTER 10: CAPSTONE - COMPARING GREEK MILITARY SYSTEMS & THEIR REAL LEGACIES

Military History: The Greeks

Chapter 10 · Capstone — Comparing Greek Military Systems & Their Real Legacies

Across nine chapters, this course traced Greek warfare from the earliest hoplite phalanx through Macedon's combined-arms revolution. This closing chapter steps back to compare five real military systems side by side — what each one solved, what each one couldn't, and what each left behind.

Five Real Systems, Compared

SYSTEM	REAL STRENGTH	REAL LIMITATION
The citizen-hoplite phalanx (Ch.2)	Cheap to field across nearly every Greek city; tied military service directly to political voice	Rigid, close-order combat with little tactical flexibility; only as strong as its own weakest point
Sparta's full-time model (Ch.3)	Genuinely superior discipline within the phalanx itself, honed by the agoge	A real, documented mixed win/loss record; no effective light infantry or naval innovation
Athens's naval power (Ch.6)	Broader participation across social classes; decisive at Salamis and across the Aegean	Expensive to sustain, and catastrophically overextended at Sicily (Ch.7)
Thebes's tactical innovation (Ch.8)	Genuinely new tactics — concentrated force and the oblique order — could defeat a larger, more reputed enemy	A single tactical edge, not a durable structural advantage; hegemony lasted only decades
Macedon's combined arms (Ch.9)	A real, professional standing army with genuine division of labor between infantry and cavalry	Required substantial, sustained funding (silver mines) most city-states never had access to

A Recurring Pattern: Reputation vs. Real Record

This course repeatedly found a gap between a system's own popular reputation and its actual, documented performance. Sparta's own legendary invincibility (Chapter 3) sat alongside a real record of losing roughly as often as it won. The "300 Spartans" at Thermopylae (Chapter 5) were, in reality, part of a roughly 7,000-strong multi-city force. Even the Sacred Band's genuine forty-year unbeaten record (Chapter 8) ended in a single afternoon at Chaeronea. Verifying the real record against the popular story was a genuine, recurring discipline across this entire course.

A REAL, STRUCTURAL ECHO

Nearly every major shift traced in this course — the hoplite revolution's link to political voice (Ch.2), the fall of Spartan invincibility at Sphacteria and Leuctra (Ch.7-8), and Macedon's rise on the back of Chaeronea (Ch.9) — shows military dominance as genuinely temporary. No single system held uncontested superiority for more than a few decades before a real, new innovation displaced it.

What This Course Deliberately Doesn't Cover

Alexander's Campaigns

This course ends deliberately at Philip II's own reforms. Alexander's real conquests are covered in full in the separate Military History: Alexander the Great course.

Roman Military History

The separate Military History: The Romans course covers Rome's own legions and campaigns, distinct from the Greek systems traced here.

Political & Social History

Greek & Roman History remains the site's own dedicated course for the political and social lens on the same civilizations this course examined militarily.

A Real, Lasting Legacy

Elements of what this course traced persisted well beyond Greece itself. The combined-arms principle Philip established — infantry as an anchor, cavalry delivering the decisive blow — shaped Hellenistic and, eventually, Roman military thinking. The very idea that tactical innovation, not just raw numbers, can decide a battle — demonstrated concretely at Marathon, Leuctra, and Chaeronea — remained a foundational premise of Western military thought for millennia afterward.

Reflect

QUESTION 1 Every system this course covered eventually gave way to a newer one within a few decades. What does this pattern suggest about whether any military advantage can ever be considered permanent?

QUESTION 2 This course repeatedly found real gaps between popular military reputation and documented battlefield record. Why might reputations like Sparta's own outlast the more complicated reality for thousands of years?

QUESTION 3 Macedon's combined-arms system required resources — like the Laurion-style silver funding seen with Athens's own navy — that most city-states lacked. What does this suggest about the relationship between a state's own economic base and its real military options?

CHAPTER 10 QUICK REFERENCE — COURSE SUMMARY

- **Ch.2:** The citizen-hoplite phalanx and its link between military service and political voice
- **Ch.3:** Sparta's full-time agoge system, and a real reputation-vs-record correction
- **Ch.4-5:** Marathon, Thermopylae, and Salamis — the Persian Wars' own real tactical events
- **Ch.6:** The trireme and Themistocles's real naval law funding the fleet that won at Salamis
- **Ch.7:** The Peloponnesian War's three real phases, and the Sicilian Expedition's total disaster
- **Ch.8:** Epaminondas's oblique order at Leuctra, and the Sacred Band's real 378-338 BCE record
- **Ch.9:** Philip II's sarissa phalanx, professional army, and combined arms at Chaeronea

- **Course complete.** Next: Military History: The Romans, and Military History: Alexander the Great