

# GOING ALL KOUROS: RE-ENACTING THE LIFE OF THE ANCIENT HOPLITE

April 2012

Hoplite  
Warriors,  
Wikimedia  
Commons



**“Military training has three purposes: 1) to save ourselves from becoming subject to others, 2) to win for our own city a position of leadership, exercised for the benefit of others...3) to exercise the rule of a master over those who deserve to be treated as slaves.”Aristotle, *The Politics*, Book VII**

**By Victoria M. Lord**

In September of 2011, cars, buses, and trucks driving just outside of Marathon, Greece, found themselves forced to dodge a group of ancient Greek warriors parading down the road. This strange scene was part of the celebration of the 2500th anniversary of the Battle of Marathon, the first major battle of the Greco-Persian wars. Trailed by reporters and tourists, the ancient Greek hoplites were, in fact, British, Australian, and yes, even Greek, re-enactors. Gathered together from across

the world, these re-enactors were engaged in living history, a pursuit that is both fun and serious for its participants.

Re-enactors use historical texts and archaeological resources to study the time period of their choice. Once they have gathered sufficient information, they set out to recreate the tools, weapons, and clothing of that era. In doing so, they often discover details of everyday life that were so ordinary, no one recorded them at the time.

Military re-enactment is probably the most visible of all the types of living history.

Increasingly, military re-enactors are choosing ancient Greece as their focus.

Fragmented into city-states, the Greeks were usually at war either with each other, or with outside forces such as the Persian Empire. As a result, every city required its citizens to perform some type of military service.

The type of warfare changed slowly over the centuries from the individual combat Homer depicted in the Iliad to the phalanx formations of the Greco-Persian (429-449BCE), and later Peloponnesian wars (431-404 BCE).

Most contemporary re-enactors base their equipment on that used during the Greco-Persian wars.

Greek re-enactment, unlike most other historical re-enactment, is a world-wide phenomenon. Australia, Canada, France, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Greece, the U.K., and the United States, are all home to bands of hoplites dedicated to the accurate portrayal of these ancient warriors.

These communities are often in contact with each other through the internet where they share information and research. This outreach led to the gathering at Marathon in 2011.

The life of the hoplite attracts a variety of enthusiasts: history buffs, archaeology students, people of Greek descent, lovers of ancient Greek history, and above all, military enthusiasts.

John Trikeriotis, of the U.S. based group, **300 Spartan Warriors**, points out that while re-enactment is generally considered to appeal to

men, women are often intrigued by the same things that draw the men: the armor, the history, and the battles. In fact, a woman in his group built her own panoply, which is a full set of armor. She participates in all their re-enactments and is (contrary to the ancient way of thinking) an equal member of the group.

The only bar to entry into a band of hoplites is now, as it might have been for the Greeks, cost. A complete panoply can cost anywhere from \$1,000 to \$3,000 or even more. The components can be purchased from vendors already experienced in crafting armor or the re-enactor can construct them himself. Trikeriotis points out that since re-enactment is an ongoing learning experience, a warrior may have to make changes to the panoply.

“In the long run, it will definitely end up costing more if you don’t do your homework and wish to pursue this further,” says Trikeriotis. “We try to emulate the armor as it appears on the pottery and steles of ancient Greece and the extant archaeological artifacts.”

## Equipment

The hoplite needs a shield, spear, sword, helmet, and greaves. Each item can be customized: a



Greaves which protected the legs, c. 500 BCE, Wikimedia Commons



**Hoplite and Persian Warrior,  
5th Century BCE, Wikimedia  
Commons**

helmet might have a vertical crest or a horizontal crest; a shield can display an individual emblem or the emblem of a particular city-state. The two most famous decorative emblems are the lambda of Sparta (which was known as Lacedaemon in Ancient Greek) and the owl of Athens. Some re-enactors choose their own emblems from historically accurate symbols.

The shield is both an expensive and a symbolically important element of the costume. A warrior depended on his shield for his life and to lose or abandon it in battle brought disgrace.

Spartan mothers traditionally sent their sons off to war saying, “With your shield or on it,” meaning either return carrying your shield as an honorable soldier or dead, carried home on top of the shield by your comrades.

The poet Archilochus is noted for his infamous lyric about this,

Some Saian rejoices over the shield,  
blameless gear, which I left by a bush

wanting it no longer  
and saved myself.

What does that shield matter to me?  
The hell with it.  
I’ll get myself another one, no worse.  
Fragment, Lyric poem 6  
Tr. M. Eckenwiler

Once a re-enactor hefts a real shield, the temptation to abandon it while fleeing from attackers becomes clear. This kind of understanding is the key to living history.

### **Education Through Re-enactment**

Most re-enactment groups are heavily involved in education: they appear at public events and schools as a way to interest and enlighten students.

“To read about how heavy a shield is, is one thing,” John Trikeriotis explains, “However, to hold it and then imagine carrying it for an extended period of time while fighting an adversary gives the class a different perspective.

April 2012

We are essentially bringing representations of artifacts, which can only be seen behind a museum glass, and allowing the students to try them on. When you see their faces light up, or their hands raised for questions, you know that your efforts are validated.”

By speaking to students and sharing their experiences, groups like 300 Spartan Warriors help a new generation of students understand ancient Greece in a way that goes beyond a textbook. Living history and the world of re-enactment is the laboratory in which students test theories and discover truths about the past.

John Trikeriotis’ group 300 Spartan Warriors will be appearing at the Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA in May, 2012.

For Further Reading:

Victor Davis Hanson, *Hoplites: The Classical Greek Battle Experience*

Hans van Wees, *Greek Warfare: Myths and Realities*



**Greek Armor, Corfu Museum,  
Wikimedia Commons**