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Ethnicity, courage and class in Greek warfare

In the *Memorabilia* (3.9.2), Xenophon described the Spartans as quintessential hoplites, the Scythians as archers, and the Thracians as peltasts. They each fought according to the style invented by their ancestors and would not want to take up the armor and tactics of other peoples. Elsewhere (*Ana.* 5.6.2), the historian reported that the Paphlagonians were particularly good at cavalry fighting. Both horsemanship and archery were firmly associated in Greek imagination with the Persians: already Aeschylus in the *Persae* (240) represented the struggle between Greeks and Persians as that of spears and shields against bows and arrows. The non-hoplitic methods of fighting were also synonymous with an inferior kind of courage. Tactics that took full advantage of the possibilities afforded by the use of light troops and cavalry involved skirmishing or fighting at a distance and were therefore directly opposed to those of the traditional pitched battle. Greek writers explained these differences in tactics by the distinct political, cultural, and physical qualities of Greek and non-Greek soldiers. Lack of personal freedom was a cause of Persian military weakness according to Jason of Pherai in a speech recorded by Xenophon (*Hell.* 6.1.11). A culture of luxury, which encouraged riding in carriages and wearing fancy clothes, combined with the lack of physical exercise, supposedly made the Persians effeminate, weak, and simply "incapable of bravery" (Isoc. *Paneg.* 149).

This ideological distancing of non-hoplitic warfare as belonging strictly to the realm of the non-Greeks, both because of the tactics it involved and the little physical and moral strength it required, is, however, inconsistent with descriptions of Greek armies that can be found in Classical historians. Beginning with the time of the Peloponnesian War, light troops and cavalry were playing an increasingly prominent role in Greek armies. While most scholars have been convinced that these contingents were supplied mostly by mercenaries from either non-Greek territories or the fringes of the Greek world, there are substantial indications that at least some Athenian citizens were trained in the use of light weapons and hit-and-run tactics. Focusing on key passages from Thucydides and Xenophon, this paper aims to explore the deliberate silences and exaggerations of difference in literary descriptions of light infantry in the late fifth and early fourth centuries. In examining the ways in which ancient authors described the use and status of light-armed troops in Greek armies, it is necessary to consider the complications posed by the role of warfare as an important source of social prestige and element of civic ideology within individual Greek city-states. Only then will we be able to construct a more nuanced definition of what constituted a typically "Greek" style of war.