

Homer and the Agony of Hoplite Battle

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To Larry Tritle, friend, teacher, scholar

Fiction presents an unreal world which is about the real world...
The principle of all fiction, however fanciful, is realism.
(James Redfield)¹

Abstract

At the first “Many Faces of War” conference Larry Tritle offered a thought-provoking essay, entitled “Inside the Hoplite Agony” (published in *AHB* 2009), on the real-life experience and agony of hoplite fighting, challenging many accepted views and urging us to discuss this topic not from a detached outside perspective but from that of the men and societies involved. My paper intends to show that the *Iliad* offers us many opportunities to meet Larry’s demands, although in a few cases it might force him to modify some of his views. In the first part I explain why and to what extent it is possible to find in Homer’s battle descriptions evidence of an early form of mass fighting in somewhat dense formations. The importance of this possibility is obvious: the *Iliad* contains by far the longest, most detailed, and most intense depiction of battle in all of Greek literature; if this depiction is at least in part (and in identifiable parts) realistic and historical, the gain for our understanding of the real-life experience of Greek battle is potentially enormous, even if this concerns a form of fighting that stands at the very beginning of the development of the hoplite phalanx. In the second part I will use epic evidence to support, illustrate, and in some instances challenge Tritle’s criticism of established views of hoplite fighting. In the third part I will present evidence that allows us to gain an insider perspective on the agony of those fighting in an intense infantry battle and thus to illustrate those aspects of battle that are rarely visible in other ancient sources and usually neglected in modern scholarship.

INTRODUCTION

My title is deliberately paradoxical: everyone agrees that there are no hoplites in Homer; hence there cannot be any hoplite agony in Homer either.² Moreover, the currently

¹ Redfield 1975: 59.

² This is a slightly revised version of a paper I offered at the Second “Many Faces of War” conference in Calgary in March 2012. It is in part a response to Larry Tritle’s article in the *AHB* of 2009 and intends to complement it. A slightly abbreviated German version will be published in a Festschrift for Pierre Ducrey. I thank the editors of both publications for agreeing to this double publication. I dedicate this English version to

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prevailing view holds that, if Homer's battle descriptions correspond to any historical reality, this reality represents almost an extreme opposite to hoplite fighting. For illustration, I quote the reconstruction of Hans van Wees, the most acclaimed expert on Homeric fighting today:

The heroic army is composed of many small and loosely organized bands of warriors, held together by personal ties of subordination and companionship. Battles are fought in open order; at any particular moment the majority of men remain at a distance from the enemy, while a substantial minority of individual "front-line warriors" venture closer to fight with missiles or hand-to-hand. There is much mobility back and forth as every man in the army is expected to join combat at least occasionally, and even the bravest heroes retire from battle every so often.³

In fact, van Wees finds a close analogy in tribal fighting in New Guinea.⁴

Homer's *Iliad* contains the longest, most detailed, and most intense descriptions of battle and infantry fighting that survive in all of Greek and Roman literature.⁵ If it is possible to demonstrate that some elements of this description, and what elements exactly, are likely to correspond to historical reality, our gain in understanding the real-life experience of early Greek infantry battle is potentially enormous. Our gain will be even greater if such reality relates in some ways to hoplite fighting—if, that is, my view proves acceptable that in Homer we do in fact grasp the early stages of the development that resulted about a century later in the fully developed hoplite phalanx, and that Homer's fighters might thus be called "proto-hoplites." I shall begin by summarizing and slightly elaborating upon the arguments in support of this thesis that I presented earlier.⁶ I shall then discuss some of the ideas Larry Tritle offered in a paper in which he analyzed the reality and agony of hoplite fighting, challenging some accepted views and urging us to discuss this topic not from a detached outside perspective but from that of the experiences of the men and societies involved.⁷ In my third and final part, I shall demonstrate in how many ways my identification of historical elements in Homer's narrative allows us indeed to appreciate Homer's detailed battle description as an "insider's view" of the agony of intense infantry fighting in the early stages of the development of the hoplite phalanx.

It might be useful to offer a brief summary of the basics of hoplite fighting. From the late seventh century BCE, hoplites (usually land owning citizens who could afford the equipment) were uniformly protected by bronze helmet, breastplate (cuirass), greaves, and a large and concave round shield carried by arm band and grip on the left arm; their offensive weapons

Larry Tritle, whom I greatly admire as a scholar and teacher, and even more as a person with rare human qualities; his friendship has enriched my life.

³ Van Wees 1997: 690. Illustrations: van Wees 2004: ch.11.

⁴ Van Wees 2004: 154-55.

⁵ These battle descriptions are to be found in bks. 3-7 (first day of fighting), bk. 8 (second day), bks. 11-18.242 (third day), and bks. 20-22 (fourth day) of the *Iliad*.

⁶ Raaflaub 2005, 2008, 2011.

⁷ Tritle 2009b. Some scholarship on this topic can be found in Hanson 1991b; Lloyd 1996; Krentz 2007; Wheeler 2007.

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were spear and sword. All this equipment shows up in tombs from the late eighth century and was in its combination the result of specifically Greek developments, designed for frontal fighting in a relatively tight formation called phalanx, usually hundreds of men wide and at least eight deep. Marching and sometimes running, they clashed with the opposing phalanx, stabbing with their spears and swords, using the shield as a weapon as well, pushing forward, killing and trying to avoid being killed. Those who went down were replaced by those in the next line. After sometimes extended fighting one side broke and fled. After a short pursuit, the victors erected a trophy on the battle field, plundered the dead enemies, collected their dead, and took care of the wounded. A truce allowed the losers to retrieve their dead. This “pure” hoplite battle was often complicated by the use of archers, javelin throwers, and slingers before the hoplites clashed, and of horsemen who could create confusion by attacking the flanks or rear of the phalanx—although with few exceptions organized corps of light-armed troops or cavalry are attested only much later. Moreover, since mass was of crucial importance, the uniformity of equipment probably often was more an ideal than a reality, especially in the hind ranks of the formation.⁸

“PROTO-HOPLITES” IN HOMER

The historian dealing with the kinds of issues I am tackling here has to find answers to the following questions:

First, to what extent does the society depicted in the epics (“epic or Homeric society”) reflect a real society that can be placed in time and space, rather than an amalgam of realistic and fictitious elements or even a complete fiction? This question has raised intense debate, and some scholars still support an amalgam or fiction theory. The prevailing opinion, however, nowadays seems to agree with the view proposed a long time ago by M.I. Finley and developed further by a number of scholars, including Christoph Ulf, Walter Donlan, Hans van Wees, and myself: in contrast to the foregrounded and heroically exaggerated events and actions, the social background, in which these events and actions are embedded, is sufficiently consistent to depict a society that can be located close to the poet’s (or poets’) own time and world. To be sure, this background too contains some elements of anachronism, exaggeration, and fantasy. After all, the poet claims to be describing a distant world of heroes who were much larger, stronger, and more enduring than men in his own time. But such elements, including extraordinarily large and heavy weapons or uniformly big and round numbers, can usually be recognized rather easily and lifted off without changing the picture drastically.⁹

⁸ On hoplite battle, see, e.g., Anderson 1970; Pritchett 1971-91: IV. 1-93; Mitchell 1996; Hanson 2000; van Wees 2004: ch.4; Lendon 2005: ch.1. Especially the question of the development of this phalanx and when it reached its “pure form,” if ever, is much debated; van Wees 2000; Krentz 2002 propose a very late date; contra: Raaflaub 2007: 132-36; Schwartz 2009. On the development of the equipment and external influences, see Hanson 1991; Raaflaub 2013.

⁹ Ulf 1990, 2009; Van Wees 1992; Raaflaub 1997, 1998, 2011; Donlan 1999. Doubts: e.g., Shear 2000; Cartledge 2001: 156-57; Osborne 2004. Van Wees 1992: 269-71; 1996: 3 considers the figures realistic.

Second, as far as battle descriptions in the *Iliad* are concerned, how do “heroic” and mass fighting relate to each other? Here a view long prevailed, that the only fighters who matter in epic battle are the heroic leaders and that therefore the masses of common soldiers, although present, are essentially negligible, mere “cannon fodder.” By now, this view has largely been abandoned; most scholars agree that Homer’s battle descriptions, while foregrounding the heroes’ duels, special qualities and responsibilities, and extraordinary achievements, embed the fighting of these heroes into confrontations between mass armies in which all fighters are expected to make a meaningful contribution. In emphasizing the extent of the role of the masses I am going farther than others but, I think, with good reasons.¹⁰

Third, to what extent do the forms of fighting described in the *Iliad* correspond to any historical reality, and how, if at all, are they related to forms of fighting attested in later Greek history? Much recent debate has focused on this question. Agreement that the masses play a meaningful role has not prevented the emergence of diametrically opposed views about the form of such mass fighting. Van Wees (quoted above) considers very loose, even scattered fighting the norm, condensation of formations an exception, while I take a rather opposite view. One crucial reason for such starkly diverging interpretations of the same evidence is that van Wees, like most scholars working on these issues, tries to construct one coherent and logical model that accommodates all the evidence.¹¹ By contrast, I now think that this effort might be misdirected and we should rather try to separate scenes reflecting real-life experiences from others that are mostly fantastic, designed to create special effects and entertain. The question then is whether we can find a reliable method to define and distinguish such scenes.

I suggest that this is possible if we understand and respect the epic poet’s narrative techniques and the conventions of his genre. For example, extended conversations between heroes before they fight (or avoid fighting) each other (such as, most famously, that between Diomedes and Glaucus), or lengthy battle exhortations (such as those of Agamemnon before the first battle in the *Iliad*) seem (and are) completely unrealistic in any kind of mass fighting. Yet the genre as such has close analogies in the modern song-theater called opera, where the action is frequently suspended during long arias and continues only after they have ended. This is obviously unrealistic too but such operatic set pieces are expected by the audience and contribute greatly to their enjoyment.¹² The same must be true for battle field exhortations and conversations in oral epic performances.

For our specific purposes, two other features are more pertinent. The formulaic nature of epic song, composed in performance, has long prompted the recognition of elements called “type scenes” (such as, in the context of battle, scenes of arming, exhortation, or taunts before a duel).¹³ More recently, narratologists have pointed to the poet’s technique of

¹⁰ Van Wees 1994, 1997, 2004: ch.11; Snodgrass 2006: 344-59; Raaflaub 2008; Singor 2009.

¹¹ Van Wees (as in n.10); for similar efforts, see Hellmann 2000; Franz 2002; Wenger 2008; Schwartz 2009.

¹² “Operatic set pieces”: Raaflaub 2008: 480-81; Diomedes and Glaucus: *Il.* 6.119-236 (see Donlan 1999: 267-82); Agamemnon: 4.223-421.

¹³ Type scenes: Fenik 1968; see Edwards 1987: 71-77 with further bibliog.

alternating between “panoramic and scenic perspectives,” that is, between broad overviews of the battle field (as if looking through a wide-angle lens), and close-up views zooming in on one or more duels (as if through a telephoto lens).¹⁴ This technique allows the poet to remind his audience that the foregrounded heroic duels which make up the largest part of his battle description, are not isolated events but embedded in fighting along an extended battle front.

Epic battles combine two very large type scenes; attaching one to the other in alternation, the poet “overextends” the battles and lets them last the whole day, from morning to nightfall.¹⁵ This too is unrealistic; it corresponds to the equally unrealistic, heroically exaggerated endurance of epic fighters. One of these large type scenes begins with preparations for battle, armament, exhortation, assembly of the troops and march into battle, always in tight formation of fighters who all seem to be equipped with the panoply, followed by the clash of the armies and fighting, depicted in the alternation between panoramic and scenic views, until one side breaks and turns to flight. The poet uses appropriate similes to illustrate the denseness of the formation, the visual impression it makes, the horrendous noise and dust caused by the collision of the armies, and the fierceness of the ensuing fighting. I call this phase a “normal battle” and postulate that it is essentially realistic and corresponds to the real-life experiences of poet and audiences.

This “normal battle” is fought by armies arranged in formations that are recognizably massed and dense, even if they are often looser and more flexible than the fully developed hoplite phalanx; it is therefore “proto-hoplitic.” Normally, the flight of one side should end the battle. Before the use of “combined arms” and reserves, it was virtually impossible to halt the flight and restore a formation capable of resuming the fight. Heroes, however, can achieve the impossible, and eventually a leader on the losing side, often encouraged and aided by a god, stops the flight, reassembles the troops, leads them back into battle, and another “normal battle” follows. Before this happens, however, the poet treats his audience with dramatic scenes of chaotic fighting between individuals and small groups, ranging over the entire battle field, in which usually one hero rises above all others, excels in an extended solo performance (*aristeia*), mows down crowds of opponents, and achieves most improbable feats. I call this “the flight and *aristeia* phase.” Although these scenes too contain elements of real life, overall they are fantastic, allowing the poet to display his narrative skills and treat his audience with exciting entertainment and lots of “special effects,” including reliance on unusual weapons, frequent and intense intervention of gods, and the use of chariots (elements that are almost entirely excluded from the “normal battle”).¹⁶

To the poet’s audiences it would have seemed acceptable that men in a long-gone heroic age could lift and throw boulders that not even three of their own contemporaries were able to handle, but when it came to matters and relationships of everyday life the poet had to be

¹⁴ Latacz 1977: 68-95; de Jong and Nünlist 2004.

¹⁵ For detailed discussion and examples, see Raaflaub 2008: 479-83.

¹⁶ Raaflaub 2011: 18-25 on the uses of chariots. Van Wees too recognizes that the “chariot really comes into its own during flight and pursuit, when speed is a matter of life and death” (1996: 4; see 1994: 140-41). Our views still differ considerably.

accurate; otherwise he would be booed out of the hall.¹⁷ Moreover, epic song was (and remained) attractive not only for its entertainment value but because audiences could identify with the heroes' plight and dilemmas. Identification requires familiarity; hence the social background depicted in the epics needed to be close enough to be recognizable. Transposed into the future, science fiction novels and movies rely on the same distinction. In the *Iliad*, fighting is a crucial part of this background, and the "normal battle," I suggest, offered a familiar setting with which the men in the audience could identify, while enjoying the fantastic fireworks the poet offered in the "flight and *aristeia* phases." These "normal battles" and a few other instances of mass fighting in tight formations get us as close as is possible to understanding early Greek infantry battles. Since heroes, however, are still human, their intense and sometimes traumatic battle experiences even in the "flight and *aristeia* phases" help us understand the agony of such fighting.

INSIDE THE HOPLITE AGONY

Larry Tritle has an immense advantage over most of his fellow scholars who work on ancient warfare. He has experienced battle himself; he knows the agony of death and survival and, as he puts it himself, has "some idea of what happens when opposing ranks of infantry crash into each other."¹⁸ Among his important publications on ancient warfare, I single out his studies of the impact of such agony on the soldier's psyche as we grasp it in Achilles' mutilation of Hector's body and his going berserk in the final battle in the *Iliad*, Alexander's killing of Cleitus the Black, Xenophon's portrait of the mercenary general Clearchus, and the philosopher Gorgias's comments on the trauma of war.¹⁹ I cannot but agree fully with most of the points he makes in his paper on "Inside the Hoplite Agony." This is especially true for his comments on the mechanics of hoplite battle; the emphasis he places on the horrors of hoplite battle, the terrifying cacophony of noises caused by thousands of clashing arms, screaming fighters, and men being wounded and dying, the awful smells and feels of a battle field made increasingly slippery by blood and body parts, and riddled with obstacles (broken and discarded weapons, dying men, and corpses), and the sense of panic felt by many soldiers: Aristophanes knew what he was talking about when he described the war god as "running down your legs," that is, "emptying your bowels" (*Peace* 240-41). Tritle also rightly calls us to think about practical issues such as the rescue of wounded men and how many healthy men this kept from fighting. Modern discussions far too often ignore these aspects and thus offer a sanitized and misleading picture.²⁰ In this section, I will think along and add some observations and modifications, especially where Homer offers useful information.

First, the "mechanics of hoplite battle." A long-standing theory used to explain the "shoving" (*ōthismos*) mentioned in ancient sources as the tendency, at some point during

¹⁷ Strasburger 1953.

¹⁸ Tritle 2009b: 50.

¹⁹ Tritle 1997, 2003, 2004, 2009a; see also 2000, 2010, and see n.51 below.

²⁰ See n.7 above. Sources of the classical period do offer some information, though, e.g., on the madness of battle or deterioration of the battle field, Soph. *Eurypylos* fr. 210.47-48; Xen. *Ages*. 2.14. On Aristoph. *Peace* 241, see Sommerstein 1985: 144 with discussion and parallels.

the battle, to tighten the ranks, lock the shields, and push against the opposing line until it broke, with those in the back applying additional pressure.²¹ This has been contested, and Tritle rightly argues against it: soldiers were carrying weapons to kill and protect themselves, not for shoving matches; the popular comparison with a rugby match seems misleading. You shove your opponent out of the way or to the ground (fighting forward and using the shield as a weapon) but you simply cannot be shoved in your back by the man behind you — right into the enemy's weapons. That the shield was indeed used as a weapon is suggested not least by one of the formulae that Homer uses for the clash of armies:

Now as these advancing came to one place and encountered,
they dashed their shields together and their spears, and the strength
of armoured men in bronze, and the shields massive in the middle
clashed against each other, and the sound grew huge of the fighting.²²

The weight of the equipment and its impact on the fighter's endurance is difficult to assess. Many consider the weight a serious obstacle to movement and agility; Tritle sees no such obstacle.²³ Agreed, the helmet is light; so are the greaves. The bronze cuirass is heavier (about 2.3 kilograms), and it is hot inside, and inside the helmet too. Sword and spear are heavy, the shield very heavy (about 6.75-8 kilograms; hence many throw it away during flight).²⁴ All this matters little if well-trained athletes specialized in such events run with some of this equipment in the stadium during competitions at festivals: an intense but relatively short effort.²⁵ But it does matter a lot if average citizens have to carry such weight during a long hoplite battle. Hence the shield's concave shape: the soldier can rest it on his shoulder whenever possible.²⁶ And, I suggest, the fighter will avoid as much as possible any maneuvers requiring him to carry the shield on his arm alone. Even so, after a while the best fighter will get tired and need to be replaced. The Romans eventually created a formation, based on subunits (cohorts and maniples) that allowed for the systematic replacement of tired units by fresh ones; the Greeks did not, and we know nothing about the mechanics of such exchanges.

Comparison might help, though what follows is necessarily impressionistic. In Switzerland, which maintains a militia army, athletes compete in a sport called *Waffenlauf* (an "armed race"), dressed in military uniform and boots, carrying a backpack with some equipment, and the gun, over varying distances up to the marathon format.²⁷ Some of these runners are semi-professionals, most amateurs, training for a long time before the race, like marathon runners. Their amazing feats must not be generalized: the average militia man would fall far behind. After seventeen weeks in officer's training camp, I was in top shape,

²¹ See Wheeler 2007: 209-10 with bibliog. in n.103.

²² *Il.* 4.446-49 = 8.60-63; see Tritle 2009b: 53-54.

²³ Tritle 2009b: 53-55.

²⁴ For recent detailed discussion of these issues, see Schwartz 2009: ch.2.

²⁵ On the *hoplitodromos*, see Kyle 1992: 88-89.

²⁶ Concave shape: Hanson 1991a: 67-71.

²⁷ See Wikipedia "Waffenlauf Schweiz"; apparently interest in this sport has diminished in recent years.

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able to run thirty miles fully equipped and up long hills even with heavy loads. A year later, coming out of civilian life for exercises, even with normal physical training, it was a very different story. Three weeks of racing in the Tour de France greatly transform even a professional cyclist's body.

The Romans formed their armies in the spring, trained them for several weeks and then took them to war, releasing them only in the fall, or even keeping them in service for several years. Cyrus the Younger's and Alexander's armies served for months and years, marching through half the world. Archaic Greek hoplite warfare usually was a short affair, not offering enough time to get into such superb shape. This changed from the mid-fifth century: Socrates served at Potidaea and Amphipolis, longer campaigns. Still, we need to consider other factors as well: the social background of the hoplites, and training. Many of my cousins are farmers in the Swiss mountains. They do hard physical work every day: their arms, legs, and upper bodies are strong; their endurance is amazing. The famous medieval and early modern Swiss mercenaries were the ancestors of my cousins: farmers used to hard and long physical labor.²⁸ Greek farmers too were by occupation fit for hoplite service; the phalanx initially consisted of farmers fighting on their land for their land. To compensate for the lack of such "natural training," Alcibiades and his elite cronies spent much time exercising. Socrates was a stonemason; his body must have been strong too. Strong physique and endurance acquired over a long time must have enabled soldiers to fight for longer periods than we might expect. But hoplite fighting was more than an endurance test. It also required adept handling of weapons, mobility, fast reactions, and movement in formation. I will return to the issue of training.

At Pharsalus in 48 BCE, the decisive battle in the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, the latter ordered his troops not to attack Caesar's army on the run but to stand still, meet the scattered line of the running attackers in solid formation, and let the opponents get exhausted by running twice the distance. Caesar's soldiers began to run but, thanks to their experience and training, realized what was going on, stopped in the middle, out of missile range, caught their breath, and then resumed the running attack. Their ability to adjust to changed conditions, acquired in years of previous service, is important.²⁹ So is Caesar's comment on Pompey's decision:

It appears to us that he did this without sound reason, for there is in everyone a certain eagerness of spirit and an innate keenness which is inflamed by desire for battle. Generals ought to encourage this, not repress it; nor was it for nothing that the practice began in antiquity of giving the signal on both sides and everyone's raising a war-cry; this was believed both to frighten the enemy and to stimulate one's own men (Caesar, *Civil War* 3.92.4-5).

You need to get the adrenalin rushing! True, Caesar's legionnaires were not the same as classical Greek hoplites, but some information is valid across cultures and ages.

²⁸ On a comparison between Greek and Swiss mercenaries, see Ducrey 1971.

²⁹ Caesar, *Civil War* 3.92-93.

This offers a transition to Tritle's second focus: the actual battle and issues of formation.³⁰ At Pharsalus, upon the trumpet signal, a veteran centurion fired his men up with a few words, then ran out first from the right wing, followed by his elite unit. An attack on the run thus causes a broken line from the start, and the clash between the two armies would be uneven, scattered, and break the formation up even more. Attacks on the run probably were not uncommon; the slow and steady advance into battle, with the piper giving the rhythm to maintain formation, as the Spartans practiced it and an archaic vase illustrates it, might not have been the norm. The *Iliad* twice contrasts the steady, disciplined, and silent march into battle of the Greeks, "breathing valor, stubbornly minded each in his heart to stand by the others," with the clamor and shouting of the multi-voiced Trojan attack.³¹ Tritle mentions other factors that would add up to creating a broken and chaotic battle line, with some soldiers meeting their opponents farther ahead, others farther back. Fighting thus might have happened between individuals or small groups.³²

This fits the Homeric evidence well. In epic battle, the long front is broken up into many duels between individual fighters, often involving their neighbors in the line who might be brothers or friends. Even in "normal battles," missile and hand-to-hand combat are still combined — fighters throw and thrust their spears, and vase images show them holding a longer thrusting and a shorter throwing spear.³³ This requires that, at least intermittently, the battle lines are separated by an interval large enough to throw a spear. As modern experiments show, this space need not be wide because a thrown spear has fatal impact only from a short distance. Yet this suffices to explain the "hanging back" and "storming forward" of individual fighters that is mentioned often.³⁴ And it allows for the use of the shield as a weapon that Tritle postulates.³⁵

Clearly, then, it was difficult to maintain a close-order formation. This raises several questions. The first concerns spacing. The traditional view imagines shield almost touching shield and the left half of one soldier's shield protecting the right side of his neighbor to the left. Tritle may well be right in suggesting that hoplite formations probably were more open than this. But evidence to the contrary should not be ignored. Homer's similes (for example, describing a tightly-built wall) force us to think of tight formations.³⁶ True, these might describe the march to battle rather than the battle itself but the impression is that the armies clash in these same formations. Furthermore, Homer's heroes often miss their target and hit

³⁰ For recent discussion of these issues, see Lazenby 1991; Mitchell 1996; Wheeler 2007.

³¹ Spartan advance: see Lazenby 1985; Singor 2002. The famous hoplite panel on the Chigi vase (c. 650 BCE) features a piper: Ducrey 1986: 63; van Wees 2004: fig. XVIII. Greeks vs. Trojans: *Il.* 3.1-9; 4.428-38.

³² Tritle 2009b: 56-57.

³³ Two spears: van Wees 2000: 147-48, as illustrated on the Chigi vase (n.31 above). At least in the "flight and *aristeia* phases" archers play a role. Paris and Pandaros are archers on the Trojan side, both associated with treachery and thus despised as fighters; contempt for the archer is expressed in *Il.* 11.385, 390. But the issue is more complicated: Raaflaub 2011: 17-18 with nn. 64-65 and references.

³⁴ Interval: Raaflaub 2008: 479 n.37. On experiments: *ibid.* 479; Matthew 2012 who, however, examines only the impact of spear-thrusts, typical of the classical phalanx.

³⁵ See above, at n.22.

³⁶ Tight wall simile: *Il.* 16.212-17.

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the next soldier who thus must have been standing pretty close to the target. Even if these lines are formulaic, they must be plausible to the audience.³⁷ The same is true of another formula:

Shield was pressed close against shield, each man standing shoulder to shoulder;
over their glittering helmets the horse-hair plumes touched as they nodded,
so tightly packed were the ranks (*Il.* 13.131-33 = 16.215-17).

Polybius, an experienced general, read these lines as referring to the characteristic order of the phalanx.³⁸ True, he is talking of the Macedonian phalanx with its much longer spears (*sarissa*); this phalanx was tightly closed both laterally and in depth because the soldiers carried the *sarissa* with both hands and closeness was essential to keep the wall of spears impenetrable; but this makes Polybius's perception of Homer's description all the more interesting.

Most importantly, Thucydides famously describes the shifting front line at the battle of Mantinea in 418:

It is true of all armies that, when they are moving into action, the right wing tends to get unduly extended and each side overlaps the enemy's left with its own right. This is because fear makes every man want to do his best to find protection for his unarmed side in the shield of the man next to him on the right, thinking that the more closely the shields are locked together, the safer he will be. The fault comes originally from the man on the extreme right of the front line, who is always trying to keep his own unarmed side away from the enemy, and his fear spreads to the others who follow his example (Thuc. 5.71.1; trans. Rex Warner).

Although the opposing general fears a flanking maneuver, it is not intended as such, and Thucydides clearly describes a general phenomenon, typical of all hoplite battles. His testimony thus confirms the traditional view, and nobody can justly say that Thucydides was not an experienced military man.³⁹

It is Tritle's merit to have reopened this discussion. The solution perhaps is that the *ideal* was to maintain a tight formation, as Homer says explicitly: in stark contrast to the Trojans, the Achaeans march into battle silently, "breathing valor, stubbornly minded each in his heart to stand by the others." The Spartans were especially good at this, precisely to avoid breaking their ranks. Others advanced "with great violence and fury" which, we saw, offered other benefits.⁴⁰ To hit a looser enemy line with a solid formation would seem initially to

³⁷ Grethlein 2006: 160.

³⁸ Polybius 18.29.5-6. Unfortunately, the interpretation of these lines is not entirely clear (Walbank 1967: 587-88). A similar passage in Tyrtaeus (11.21-34 West) describes the close encounter between fighters in opposite lines.

³⁹ Tritle 2009b: 65; see Hornblower 2008: 187 with bibliog.

⁴⁰ *Il.* 3.8-9; cf. 4.429-38 ("to stand by the others" suggests a compact formation: see below n.68). Thuc. 5.70: "the two armies met, the Argives and their allies advancing with great violence and fury, while the Spartans came on slowly and to the music of many flute-players in their ranks. This custom of theirs has nothing to do

have favored the Spartans, but the effects of battle would soon have broken their formation more open as well, and then it was a matter of courage, discipline, and skills, where the Spartans' long and constant training again gave them an advantage. Perhaps, as Homer suggests, a tight formation was especially useful during the advance, offering better protection against missiles, and in a defensive stance.

Still, the question remains: did hoplite fighting *require* more space? This depends on what stance the hoplite took behind his shield. As Christopher Matthews now shows, hoplites were more flexible and able to vary their formations, depending on the needs of the evolving battle. But the normal formation was compact.⁴¹ Here I find Tritle's arguments less compelling. The war dance (*pyrrhichē*) was a performance, a show; it presumably incorporated movements useful in battle but exaggerated them. The Athenian Sophanes, who constantly turned his shield and never held it quiet, must have been exceptional: no one else, I guess, would at the beginning of battle throw out a heavy iron anchor tied to his belt to hold him in position, and few could claim to have challenged and defeated an Olympic victor in single combat during a siege. Sophanes was a great fighter but a showman.⁴²

What about visibility? Tritle probably is right: limitations in vision and hearing caused by the Corinthian helmet have been exaggerated. Soldiers *did* notice what went on around them, and they will have been acutely aware of where the next buddy was whom they could call for help.⁴³ But the two viewpoints are not incompatible. Vision and hearing *were* limited. Soldiers involved in heavy fighting had little time to look beyond their immediate area, and the immense battle noise made it very difficult to hear signals or orders. The focus *was* on frontal fighting: the goal was to overwhelm the enemy in front and break the opposing line. Once a breakthrough occurred and the enemy was in flight, coordinated maneuvers (like wheeling around to attack the remaining enemy formations from the flank or rear) were easier.

But if the battle line was more open and chaotic, how could the enemy be kept from breaking through? Once an army turned it was virtually impossible to restore the battle, even if, as Tritle's examples (Marathon, Delium, Mantinea) show, flight on one wing could be offset by victory on another. Here the ability of the hind ranks was crucial to step up, replace fallen comrades, and plug any breach that might emerge. Epic battle descriptions are helpful: similes compare the ranks with waves in the surf; spears thrown too high stick in the ground behind their targets, and leaders circulating from one wing to the other find a free alley behind the front line of fighters.⁴⁴ Hence, as Tritle postulates it for other reasons, there was an interval between the ranks. An archaic vase fragment illustrates this too: to the left men fighting, to the right, after an open space, the second rank waiting, crouching, ready

with religion; it is designed to make them keep in step and move forward steadily without breaking their ranks, as large armies often do when they are just about to join battle."

⁴¹ Matthew 2012.

⁴² Sophanes: Hdt. 9.74-75. On the war dance (*pyrrhichē*), see Ceccarelli 1998.

⁴³ Visibility: see discussion by Matthew 2012: 96-101; Tritle 2009b: 52-53, 60.

⁴⁴ Surf simile: *Il.* 4.422-28.

to spring forward to replace a fallen comrade or to prevent an enemy breakthrough.⁴⁵ Other passages and similes in the *Iliad* seem to describe ranks standing closely behind each other. Formations thus must have varied: close-order and more open ranks were adopted in different situations.

Still, much depended on the ability of the front ranks to sustain the impact of the initial clash and prevent a quick breakthrough of the enemy. Armies were arranged accordingly. In Homer, the best fighters are placed in the front, the weaker ones in the middle so that they must fight even against their will. Just so, experienced veterans and officers formed the front line of the Spartan phalanx. In a critical situation Homer's soldiers trade arms so that the best fighters can use the best equipment. Nestor proposes to muster the army by *phylai* and *phratries* because these units (whatever they are) are supposed to be supportive of their men — and they permit observation of who is a coward and who is brave.⁴⁶ Mutual support is recognized as crucial, and, we note, observation is possible.

Finally, moving and fighting in a formation, even a loose one, required training. So did the handling of fairly heavy equipment during intense and long battles. The problem is that we hear about naval and cavalry training but hardly anything about hoplite training outside of Sparta.⁴⁷ Tritle postulates that there must have been a lot of it, mostly locally and in groups, perhaps in the same units in which the men were fighting. They knew that they could be called up to service on short notice; they knew, from own experience or others' reports, what hoplite fighting was like and that it was in their own interest to be prepared so as to give themselves the best chance to survive. Thucydides' comments in the Funeral Oration can easily mislead:

There is a great difference between us and our opponents, in our attitude towards military security... [and] in our educational system. The Spartans, from their earliest boyhood, are submitted to the most laborious training in courage; we pass our lives without all these restrictions, and yet are just as ready to face the same dangers as they are... There are certain advantages, I think, in our way of meeting danger *voluntarily*, with an easy mind, instead of with a laborious training, with natural rather than with state-induced courage. *We do not have to spend our time practising* to meet sufferings which are still in the future; and when they are actually upon us we show ourselves just as brave as these others who are always in strict training (2.39; my italics).

The contrast is pointed: no state-imposed strict training, no *agōgē* and militarized society. Instead: the citizen does *voluntarily* what needs to be done. Pritchett has collected the extant evidence that suffices to establish the fact that citizen trained but leaves us guessing about the details. As with so much else that concerns daily life, everybody knew about this: no need to write about it. This is not the place to discuss details but I mention one indicator: Peter Siewert explains the distribution of demes, trittyes, and phulai intriguingly by drawing in

⁴⁵ Vase image: van Wees 2004: fig. 21; Tritle 2009b: 56 fig. 2. The Chigi vase (n.31 above) gives a similar impression. Need for interval between ranks: Tritle, 54.

⁴⁶ Best fighters in front rank: *Il.* 4.300; exchange of equipment: 14.370-84. Nestor: 2.362-68. On *phylai* and *phratries*: Finkelberg 2011: 665.

⁴⁷ On hoplite training: e.g., Pritchett 1971-91: II. 208-31; van Wees 2004: ch.7; Tritle 2009b: 58-59.

the roads: when the hoplite army was called up, men would start marching from the fringes of Attica on the roads to Athens; at every junction, they would be joined by other members of their units so that the tribal regiments would be complete before even reaching the Agora in Athens.⁴⁸ We would expect a polity that structured itself according to the needs of its hoplite army to have found ways to ensure that its citizens arrived in battle in decent physical shape and with the skills needed to survive. Yet, in a pointed contrast Xenophon lets a mercenary general say: armies “made up of citizens must include some men who are already past and some who have not yet reached their prime. And there are very few people in each city who keep constantly in good physical training. But no one serves in my mercenary army unless he can stand physical hardship as well as I can myself.”⁴⁹

The Spartans may not have been professionals in the strict sense of the word, but it is easy to underestimate the power of conditioning. The strength and discipline ingrained in the Spartan “peers” (*homoioi*) through life-long training, the fear of shame instilled by their value system and communal norms, and their profound familiarity with each other through constantly living and exercising together: all this gave them an amount of both physical *and* mental preparation, cohesion, and toughness that was often decisive — not to speak of the impact, even before the battle began, of their mere reputation, even mystique. As Xenophon says of Cyrus’s army (perhaps thinking of the Spartans): an army “filled with enthusiasm, ambition, strength, courage, exhortation, self-control, obedience: this, I think, is the most formidable thing an enemy has to face.”⁵⁰

HOPLITE AGONY IN HOMER

My discussion so far has shown that the *Iliad* offers much that advances our understanding of the real-life experience of ancient infantry battle. Concerning the “agony” of battle, Homer’s *Iliad* is perhaps our best source, and we would do well to call upon its testimony more often. If not an eye witness with personal experience himself, the poet at least knew very well what he was singing about. We remember Odysseus praising the Phaeacian bard for describing events as if he had been there himself or heard from one who was.⁵¹

For the thesis that essential parts of Homer’s war and battle narratives are informed by real-life experiences Tritle’s and Jonathan Shay’s recognition of symptoms resembling PTSD in some of the heroes’ actions and reactions offers most welcome confirmation.⁵² Modern experts who study epic depictions of wounds and death come to similar conclusions. Christine Salazar points out that in many passages “there is an insistence on anatomical and medical details..., as if the poet had some interest in those subjects and wanted to communicate his knowledge to his audience.” A nineteenth-century German military

⁴⁸ Siewert 1982.

⁴⁹ Xen. *Hell.* 6.1.5.

⁵⁰ Spartan deterrence: Robinson 2011. Xen. *Cyr.* 3.3.59.

⁵¹ The bard’s knowledge: *Od.* 8.488-92.

⁵² PTSD symptoms: Shay 1994, 2000, 2002; Tritle: see above n.19.

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surgeon even recognized Homer as an ancient predecessor.⁵³ Of course, Homer was neither that nor a historian or sociologist of war, and, as Salazar suggests, his care for detail in the description of wounds and deaths suffered in battle may have had ulterior purposes, such as to enhance, through their tolerance of wounds and pain, the great characters' heroism and to facilitate the audience's identification with his narrative. "The descriptions emphasise the effectiveness of the blow and the competence of the slayer. The anatomical details help to make these facts more visible to an audience who would be able to appreciate such details... In Marg's words, the exact location and the type of wound are important 'just as a hunter, an expert — and such is the warrior and soldier — would notice and discuss these things'."⁵⁴ Moreover, some aspects of this picture are clearly excluded: for good poetic reasons, "the poet never describes protracted agony before death."⁵⁵ Only one passage suggests that wounds require continued care, and another hints at the long-term impact of wounds, when Hector urges the Trojans to keep up the pressure on the Achaeans:

Never,
not without a struggle, not at their royal ease
are they going to board those ships! No, no,
let every last man of them lick his wounds—
a memento at home—pierced by arrow or spear
as he vaults aboard his decks. (8.512-15; trans. R. Fagles)⁵⁶

As is to be expected in this kind of poetry, some of this "medical detail" is part of the poet's store of formulaic expressions and thus of the standard repertoire of epic song. While the great leaders usually do not allow themselves to show signs of discomfort, as much as they may hurt, less exalted characters groan loudly as they are hit or die. Even so, the suffering is real enough. Ajax hits Hector with a stone "in his chest next to the throat" and spins him around; as if hit by a lightning he falls in the dust.

The spear was knocked from his hand, but his shield
and helmet flew up in the air and then came down
clattering on the rest of his embellished armor.

His comrades protect Hector from furious Greek attacks, circle him with their shields, lift him up, carry him out of battle, and evacuate him with his chariot. Reaching the river, they

poured water on him. This brought him around.

⁵³ War wounds: Salazar 2000: ch.6, with further bibliog. on p.127. Surgeon: Frölich 1879: 64.

⁵⁴ Salazar 2000: 129 with ref. to Marg 1976: 10-11.

⁵⁵ Salazar 2000: 128-29, with ref. to Redfield 1975: 37 (epic distance); Griffin 1976; 1980: 48: "there are to be no mutilated and hideously suffering warriors to blur the overriding contrast between heroic life and heroic death" or, for that matter, mar the picture of beautiful heroic death. On p. 144 Salazar emphasizes again that, despite "the impression, at first sight, of great accuracy and realism" closer scrutiny reveals many omissions and — presumably deliberate — vagueness, which suggests that the medical details are not a purpose in themselves.

⁵⁶ Salazar 2000: 128-29, 145 (on *Il.* 15.390-94).

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His eyes opened, and kneeling on his knees,
he vomited up a cloud of black blood.
Then he sank back to the ground, and darkness
covered his eyes. The blow still mastered his spirit.⁵⁷

Of course, Hector will be healed miraculously by divine intervention. What matters here is simply that all of this underscores the poet's and his audiences' close familiarity with the physiological and psychological impact of heavy infantry fighting.

Such familiarity expresses itself in other ways too. Healers or doctors appear several times, attending the wounded. They are craftsmen, itinerant specialists (*dēmiourgoi*), and highly appreciated: "A healer is a man worth many men in his knowledge of cutting out arrows and putting kindly medicines on wounds."⁵⁸ Of course, they primarily take care of the great leaders. Ordinary men help their comrades as best as they can, removing the spear or arrow, protecting them with their shields, leading them to the back, and assisting them in other ways.⁵⁹

So spoke wounded Eurypylos, and the others about him
stood in their numbers and sloped their shields over his shoulders, holding
the spears away. (*Il.* 11.591-93)

A comrade applying a bandage to his friend's wound appears repeatedly in vase paintings.⁶⁰

The difficulties of evacuating a wounded warrior are similar to those incurred by Homeric fighters in rescuing the corpse of a fallen leader (here Patroclus):

They caught the body from the ground in their arms, lifting
him with a great heave, and the Trojan people behind them
shouted aloud as they saw the Achaians lifting the dead man
and made a rush against them...

But the Trojans pale for fear when the two Ajaxes, protecting the carriers, wheel around and face them. The poet compares the effort of carrying a dead comrade out of the raging battle with the strain and sweat two mules suffer when they pull a huge beam over a rough mountain path. It takes hard work by four men to rescue one body — just as Tritle postulates it in his paper.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Hector's suffering: *Il.* 14.409-39; 15.9-11; see also 11.349-60 where Hector's helmet is hit by Diomedes' spear, which knocks him out for a while.

⁵⁸ *Il.* 11.514-15 (trans. R. Lattimore). On the healers: Salazar 2000: 136-38; among the *dēmiourgoi*: *Od.* 17.383ff.

⁵⁹ Salazar 2000: 138-40. Protection with shield: also illustrated on a late-fourth-century sarcophagus with an Amazonomachy (Salazar, fig. 3). Evacuation of wounded: just below.

⁶⁰ Salazar 2000: fig. 1; Ducrey 1986: figs. 142, 143.

⁶¹ Evacuating the body of a dead fighter: *Il.* 17.715-53; Tritle 2009b: 62-63; see also Vaughn 1991.

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To return for a moment to the psychology of battle, Hans van Wees sketches the wide range of reactions visible among the fighters.⁶² On one extreme we find those who revel in the prospect, like “Odysseus the Cretan” who dislikes ordinary work and household management but loves ships “and battles and polished javelins and arrows, miserable things which others find horrifying” (*Od.* 14.222-26). The latter is the other extreme, prompting even leaders to try to avoid going to war.⁶³ Van Wees points out that the epithets used to characterize the epic battlefield (destructive, dreadful, abominable, a cause of tears, or simply bad, also bloody, wretched, baneful, cruel, harsh, piercing and “burning hot”) convey the strong impression that this is a very grim place indeed. “The narrative adds to the less than pleasant picture with regular references to pain, exhaustion, sweat, dust and noise.” This explains the epithet “ill-sounding” for war, and “the dreadful din” as a common metaphor for battle.⁶⁴ Here is one of the relevant similes, illustrating the clash of the armies (again in Fagles’ trans.):

Squadrons clashed with shattering war cries rising,
Not so loud the breakers bellowing out against the shore,
driven in from open sea by the North Wind’s brutal blast,
not so loud the roar of fire whipped to a crackling blaze
rampaging into a mountain gorge, raging up through timber,
not so loud the gale that howls in the leafy crowns of oaks
when it hits its pitch of fury tearing branches down —
nothing so loud as cries of Trojans, cries of Achaeans,
terrible war cries, armies storming against each other. (14.393-401)

Homer is a master in describing the “emotions of battle.” Fear and exhaustion appear frequently as factors that curtail the will to fight. Ares and Athena drive the two armies forward at the beginning of the first battle, and with them Terror, Fear, and Hate (or Strife),

whose wrath is relentless,
she the sister and companion of murderous Ares,
she who is only a little thing at the first, but thereafter
grows until she strides on the earth with her head striking heaven.
She then hurled down bitterness equally between both sides
as she walked through the onslaught making men’s pain heavier.⁶⁵

Hate grows more powerful as war and suffering progress. Fighters whose friends have been killed, react with pity and anger, determined to avenge the death of their buddy, especially if the killer boasts with his deed and ridicules the victim:

He spoke, and sorrow came over the Argives at this vaunting,
and beyond others he stirred the anger in wise...

⁶² Van Wees 1996: 5.

⁶³ The same “Cretan Odysseus” needs to be compelled by the people’s strong will to lead his polis’ contingent to Troy (*Od.* 14.235-39), and another leader buys off his obligation to do so (*Il.* 23.296-99).

⁶⁴ Van Wees 1996: 6

⁶⁵ *Il.* 4.440-45; see also 11.67-73 (trans. R. Lattimore).

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Aias, for the man had fallen closest to him.⁶⁶

We know Achilles' immense grief and anger about the death of Patroclus; here is the reaction of another fighter:

He spoke, and Antilochus was choked with horror.
He was speechless, astounded; his eyes
welled with tears; his voice stuck in his throat (17.694-96; trans. Lombardo).

Fear and terror are ubiquitous. Even the greatest, and all the more the masses, shudder when they realize their danger. Seeing Ajax approaching with huge strides, smiling confidently and shaking his spear, the Trojans

were taken every man in the knees with trembling and terror,
and for Hektor himself the heart beat hard in his breast (7.215-16).

[A]nd the shivers came over the limbs of all of them,
and each man looked about him for a way to escape sheer death (14.506-7).

Young Achaean warriors, facing the Trojan leaders Hector and Aeneas, are compared with a terrified cloud of starlings when they see a hawk bearing down on them: "so they went, screaming terror, all the delight of battle forgotten." Fighters get pale, sweat, and fidget, are stunned, their limbs lose strength, their teeth chatter, and "hearts collapse at their feet." "Quite a few courageous men break down and cry when the situation seems desperate; quite a few others beg for mercy, pleading with their conquerors not to kill, but capture and ransom them instead."⁶⁷

I end with a couple of passages that describe how the battlefield deteriorates during close-up fighting among massed armies. Both concern the fight over the body of a fallen hero, scenes within a "flight and *aristeia* phase" in which those nearby form a dense formation to protect and secure the body. First, Sarpedon, the leader of the Lycians, whom Patroclus has killed:

The plain of Troy thrummed with the sound
of bronze and hide stretched into shields,
and of swords and spears knifing into these.
Sarpedon's body was indistinguishable
from the blood and grime and splintered spears
that littered his body from head to foot (16.636-41, trans. Lombardo),

while fighters kept swarming over his body like flies in a sheepfold over a pail of fresh milk.

In the fight about the body of Patroclus, the poet describes an arrangement that — although circular, not linear — seems to anticipate the principles and ethics of hoplite

⁶⁶ Anger and pity: e.g., 14.458-61, 486-89; 17.346, 352.

⁶⁷ Van Wees 1996: 8, 11 with more references ("hearts collapse": Fagles). Screaming terror: 17.755-59.

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fighting — staying in close formation confronting the enemy and protecting each other — and shows an understanding of the advantages of this mode of fighting. The Achaeans had

packed behind their shields,
ringing Patroclus round on all sides, spears jutting
as Ajax ranged them all and shouted out commands:
“No one back away from the body! No heroes either,
bolting out of the Argive pack for single combat!
Cluster round Patroclus, shoulder-to-shoulder,
fight them at close range!” At the giant’s command
the earth ran red with blood, slithering dark now
and the soldiers’ corpses tumbling thick-and-fast,
Trojans and breakneck allies piled alongside Argives—
how could the Argives fight without some bloody losses?
But far fewer of them went down, remembering always
to fight in tight formation,
friend defending friend from headlong slaughter.⁶⁸

So all day long for the men of war the fighting raged,
grim and grueling, relentless, drenching labor, nonstop,
and the knees, shins and feet that upheld each fighter,
their hands, their eyes, ran with the sweat of struggle...
(17.354-65, 384-88 (trans. Fagles))

Such is the reality of early Greek infantry fighting — a reality that in many ways anticipates the experience of a hoplite battle and thus helps us understand better what was going on “inside the hoplite agony.”

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⁶⁸ Similarly Tyrtaeus urges the Spartans to fight “standing by one another” and insists that “fewer die” in this way (10.15; 11.11-12 West).

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