

Greeks at War

Images of hoplites (heavy infantrymen) were popular on ancient Greek pottery. The majority of images showed these soldiers as glorious and beautiful heroes [[The Body Beautiful 43](#)]. Their frequent appearance in Greek art highlights the high status that they held in ancient society [[Citizenship 1](#)].

Ancient Greek boys were trained from a young age to become citizen soldiers [[Education 14](#)], so that they had time to develop the skills and physical fitness they would need in warfare. Each **polis** (city-state) had its own way of training the young men, but Attic (Athenian) vases and other sources give us the most information about the Athenian system. At Athens each youth, by the age of 18, would become an **ephebe**, thus a member of the **epheboi**. Then he would take part in athletic competitions including running, **pankration** (a combination of boxing and wrestling) and other sports. Training in athletics would build up his fitness levels and prepare him for warfare [[Citizenship 1](#)]. Once training was complete, each ephebe gained the status of hoplite.

Only the rich could afford hoplite equipment—armour and weapons—because it was made out of metal, which was expensive. Thus through warfare, **aristocrats**—citizens with political power—showed off their wealth and therefore their status. Some aristocrats could also afford horses and chariots and thus serve in the cavalry. The poorest men would serve in the navy, as they could not afford equipment [[Warfare 29](#)]. Hardly any art depicts these sailors—they could hardly afford to pay for it!—yet they were an important part of the ancient Greek forces and, by the fifth century BC, they made up most of the military.

In ancient Greece there were frequent conflicts between different poleis and foreign countries. In such an unstable world hoplites would be called upon to fight in battles regardless of whether it was close to home or in a foreign land. This meant that the men could be absent from their homes for much of the year. In the absence of family, life was tough for a hoplite. The heroic representations of them on pots show these soldiers as glorious and beautiful, as they wished to be remembered.

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