

A soldier's life

Ancient Greece was made of many individual **poleis** (city-states) that were often at war with each other, but might come together to stop foreign invaders. In such an unstable world, a soldier provided his **polis** (city-state) with the means to protect both its land and its people. Farming the fertile plains provided the state with food and wealth, so Greek citizens needed to defend their farms and families from attack. Citizen-soldiers were therefore an essential part of Greek society and many stories about them are shown in plays, poems, histories and also on painted pots [[Myth and religion 11, 14, 45](#)].



Armed warrior on an Attic black-figure oinochoe attributed to the Athena Painter, ca. 500-475 bc, in the Ure Museum [[26.12.14](#)].

Each state had its own way of developing a boy into a citizen-soldier. Ancient sources, mainly written histories and inscriptions, give us the most information on the Athenian system. At 18, after swearing an oath, each boy was called an **ephebe** and became a member of the **epheboi**. Each ephebe was trained in sports and military tactics. The epheboi took part in athletics contests, especially running [[Education 14, 25-26](#)], as well as intensive weapons practice. Intelligence and a clean appearance were qualities that Greeks admired. It was very important for soldiers to always look their best for battle [[The body beautiful 43](#)]. Each young Athenian who completed military training, became a **hoplite** (man-at-arms) [[Warfare 2-5](#)]. His duty as a free citizen was to go to war for his state whenever he was needed [[Citizenship 23-24, 26](#)].

A meeting of free Greek citizens was essentially a gathering of warriors. Most Greek states could not pay for a permanent army. This meant that citizens had to form into temporary armies when there was a threat of war, since most soldiers were farmers, who could not be away long from their land. Each soldier needed to provide his own military equipment, which was expensive because it was made of metal [[Citizenship 1](#)]. As a result only property owners could afford the equipment to be soldiers, which they showed off to prove their wealth and social status. In Athens, the wealthiest citizens—aristocrats—could also afford horses and joined the cavalry [[Citizenship 3](#)], while farmers entered the infantry as hoplites [[Warfare 2-7](#)] and the poorest of citizens entered the navy [[Warfare 29](#)].

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