Health and Wellbeing in the Ancient World

Armies in ancient Greece

Professor King:
Hello. I'm Helen King. I'm Professor of Classical Studies at the Open University and today I'm talking to Owen Rees who's the author of Great Battles of the Classical Greek World and a PhD student at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Hello Owen.

Owen Rees:
Hello Helen.

Professor King:
So we've heard a lot about Roman armies so far in terms of their health. Can you start by telling us something about what armies were like in Ancient Greece?

Owen Rees:
Within the Classical Greek world Greek armies are very different to the Roman model you would have been looking at. The Greek polis, the Greek city state each would have had an army but it was not a standing army. It was what you might classify more as a militia army. So these are just everyday citizens with other jobs, other roles who would be called to arms either when the need arose or especially during the Peloponnesian War annually.

But the core of the Greek military body is the Hoplite, the citizen heavy infantrymen who would have been armoured with a spear and shield, the aspis and is the core element of the Greek army in battle. It’s the one that they talked most about.
Professor King:
So the soldiers are basically very different. Do we know if they’d have been healthy or not?

Owen Rees:
This is a brilliant question because it depends entirely on what model you choose to use when looking at Greek warfare. Take the Hoplite as a classic example. The Hoplite in Athens, which we know most about, democratic Athens, the great polis of the Classical Greek world. They had a system of conscription called the Catalogus. But to be on the lists for the Catalogus you needed to have a certain social status, a certain financial status.

So by definition someone who’s bought through as a Hoplite was himself quite a wealthy man. So from that perspective we would expect him to have enough leisure time to exercise. But on the same token he would have had enough money and enough capability to eat well.

However, we also know that the Hoplites were supplemented by volunteers who weren’t necessarily rich enough to appear on these lists. But because these people would have come from a slightly lower social strata, a lower income, we can’t assume the same level of physical athleticism through training which needs leisure time as I said. But also you can’t assume the same level of dietary capability.

Professor King:
So you’ve told us something about the Athenians for whom we have more literary evidence at least. What about the Spartan army because that always comes across in ancient sources as really the greatest of the ancient armies. Was it really so great?

Owen Rees:
Was the Spartan army really that great? Revisionists would say no, of course not. They lived as much on their reputation as they do on their capabilities in
war. From the Battle of Plataea which is sort of the last great land battle of the Persian wars in 479 BCE we don’t really see the Spartans send out a major army that we can reconstruct. Again until later, the Peloponnesian War, you’re talking some 80 odd years later if not further, what we actually see the Spartans do is they lead armies. But in actual fact whenever you quite often read or learn about Spartan victories these aren’t actually Spartan soldiers doing the fighting.

So in one respect the answer is actually, no they’re not as good as we think they are. But on the other hand what we have to accept is that the Greek sources really believed they were.

They have this agoge, this institutional training which is not just military related but it does have a lot of military elements. And this is when we see that actually the Spartans are capable of things on campaign and in battle that no other Greek army is capable of.

You’re thinking of sort of great manoeuvres and great movements and great abilities of endurance. Whereas in reality all the Spartans really mastered was a simple flanking manoeuvre which they repeat over and over again in battle. Where they extend their right wing, rotate it 90 degrees and then come in at the flank of the enemy. And this constantly wins them battles. And no other Greek army can do it.

**Professor King:**
I love it. So the Spartans are basically living on their reputation and one manoeuvre which they’re really, really good at.

Can we think a bit about those who are disabled by war so they don’t die in battle because in Greek terms dying in battle is the beautiful death, kalos Thanatos, it’s a good way to go. But if you don’t die, if you’re just left disabled and you can’t fight anymore what provision is made for those people?

**Owen Rees:**
Within Sparta admittedly from a late source, from Plutarch, but he describes that basically injury and ailment was not an excuse for a Spartan to not continue in the military. So he does give us stories of people going back when lame, you know, with lots of different injuries and ailments. So the Spartan ideal or at least the later Spartan ideal that was not an acceptable excuse. You must either be dead or serving.

But in Athens we have a slightly different image. We know that in Classical Athens there seems to have been a, to use the modern term, a welfare state as such or a pension. But we don't explicitly know that this is for the military. We are told it is for people who are made unable to fend for themselves, unable to look after themselves financially within Athens.

This then raises the question where does that leave the injured? And we do have snippets of evidence where we might be able to get to an idea. For instance, there is a famous play Philoctetes which is all about an injured veteran of war, the hero from the Trojan War, Philoctetes himself, in which he constantly laments how he has been treated because of his injury. And we ask the question, is this actually a reflection of how injured veterans are treated in Athens. Is it they're looked down on, they're ignored because they have no value, they have no worth or not.