

# Ancient Greek hoplites

## Aims

To help students interpret paintings on pots  
To help students use evidence to find out about hoplite warfare  
To encourage students to consider a range of sources in their enquiries

## Description

- A sequence of 16 slides to explore an overall question: 'What do pots tell us about Greek hoplites?'
- Slides 1-12 invite students to explore one painting of a hoplite in detail
- Slides 13-16 ask students to compare the painting they have explored with other paintings of hoplites

## Teaching ideas

- The presentation can be used on a whiteboard with the whole class or could be followed by individual students or groups.
- Slide 11: see notes on the main picture for information about the bowl.
- Follow up slide 12 by asking the students to list all his equipment in the order that they think he would least like to lose it in battle.
- Ask what archaeologists might find in the grave of a hoplite who had been buried with all his equipment. What would survive and what would not?
- After looking at the different pictures of hoplites, explain that except for the Spartans, hoplites from the same city state did not all have the same uniform. Also hoplites had to provide their own equipment, so only richer men could be hoplites. Discuss how this is different from modern armies and what the students think of it.
- Explain that hoplites fought next to each other in a long line. Each man used his shield to cover the left side of his own body and the right side of the next man's body. Which end of the line do the students think the enemy always tried to attack? Where would they put their best hoplites?
- Explore the *War* chapter of the British Museum's Ancient Greece website: [www.ancientgreece.co.uk](http://www.ancientgreece.co.uk) which tells the stories of the hoplite battles of Thermopylae and Plataia against the Persians.

## Notes on the pictures

**Main picture:** painting from a red-figure hydria (water jar) of a hoplite warrior; made in Athens about 480BC. The warrior has the following equipment:

- he has pushed back his Corinthian style helmet; made of bronze
- body armour or cuirass; made of sheets of linen stuck together to form a stiff, tough barrier; the linen is in strips at the waist to help movement
- tunic underneath of linen or wool

- short sword in a scabbard on a strap across his chest; hangs on the left for use with the right hand
- round shield (called a 'hoplon' from which the name hoplite comes); usually a wooden base with a sheet of bronze covering it; it has a central arm strap and a hand grip at the edge; always worn on the left arm; shields usually had a design for recognition or to frighten the enemy
- spear with bronze tip; about 2 metres long; used for stabbing underarm and overarm, not usually for throwing; the foot of the spear had a heavy bronze point for balance and for killing fallen enemies
- bronze greaves to protect the lower leg
- woollen cloak and bowl: the picture actually shows a warrior about to pour an offering of wine for the gods before going to war; this is not a normal food bowl or drinking cup

**Slide 14:** made in Athens about 450-40BC. This soldier is setting out for war. He has a different style of helmet and you can see designs on his cuirass.

**Slide 15:** black-figure pot made in Athens about 540BC. He does not seem to be wearing a cuirass. You can see clearly the crest on his helmet (made of horsehair) and how he uses the spear overarm for stabbing.

**Slide 16:** black-figure pot made in Athens about 540-30BC. A Corinthian helmet with a different sort of crest covers his face. He wears a bronze 'bell' cuirass not a linen one, which must have been much heavier and more awkward.

## Background information

- Hoplites were heavily-armed Greek infantrymen; they provided their own equipment and came to the fore in the sixth century BC as the main fighting force for a Greek city state. Some historians argue that the disappearance of monarchs in the sixth century and the growth of the idea of citizenship were due to the rise in importance of the class of men who could afford to arm themselves as hoplites.
- Hoplites fought in rows across the battlefield, with the shield protecting the right side of the next man in line. They used the shields to push and the long spears to stab the enemy. This required collaboration and training; anyone leaving the line created a weakness that the enemy could exploit.
- Greek armies also contained lightly armed troops with throwing spears, slings and bows who played an important role in harassing the enemy. Only the very rich could afford horses, so there were few cavalry and they were not seen as the main force of the armies. This changed in the period of Philip II of Macedon and Alexander the Great (fourth century BC), who had access to large numbers of horsemen and used cavalry to great effect.
- For further reading, we can recommend the following:  
 Connolly, Peter, *Greece and Rome at war*, Greenhill Books, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition, 1998: beautifully illustrated and suitable for confident young readers  
 Hanson, Victor Davis, *Hoplites: the classical Greek battle experience*, Routledge, 1993: for adults