

# THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

## EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

### Fact Sheet



### The Ancient Greeks Warfare

Ancient Greece was not a unified country, but a collection of city-states (*polis*). Each polis had its own method of government, but all had strict laws which denied citizenship to women, slaves, freed slaves and foreigners. It was the duty of all citizens to fight for their polis when required, which was often, for if the city-states were not united in fighting a common enemy they were usually fighting each other. A strong army was essential for maintaining the boundaries of the polis, although battles were often fought for political rather than economic gain.

#### "Illyria" style helmet

Case 4, Object I, Museum number Gr.B.6

This type of helmet was made in many parts of the Greek world. The stalks on the top of the helmet would once have held plumes.

### Armour

The amount of armour a soldier wore depended on his personal wealth. A full set of armour consisted of a helmet, corselet and greaves (leg armour). The Spartan army famously commanded the most frightening presence on the battlefield with a combination of their slow, measured advance and their long flowing hair and crimson cloaks. Armour was made of bronze (an alloy of copper and tin), wood and leather. The heated bronze was shaped either by hammering or by casting in clay moulds. Greek smiths could vary the constituent parts of the alloy to suit a particular purpose; they added, for example, extra tin when making swords to give additional hardness to the metal. Helmets, which were made in various styles, were formed from single sheets of hammered bronze. Shields were made of wood and leather with a thin shell of bronze and were often decorated with a family or city emblem. Arrowheads and spear tips were cast in clay moulds.

#### Oil Flask (Lekythos): a warrior arming

Case 4, Object I2, museum number GR.6.1917

Made in Athens 510-500 BC, attributed to the Arming painter

The warrior bends to tie one of his greaves around his left leg. He already wears his corselet and his shield is on the ground in front of him.



## Training

Training in athletics began early and was an essential part of a boy's education (see *Athletes Fact Sheet*). At around 18, boys in Athens became trainee soldiers called *ephebes*. They spent two years in military service mainly confined to barracks, at the end of which most served as *hoplites* or foot soldiers (named after their round shields called *hoplons*). As each citizen had to provide their own armour, the wealthiest served either as hoplites or joined the cavalry; the less well off took the rank of *peltasts* (lightly armed soldiers), and the poorest served as oarsmen for the navy.

## Organisation

In battle, the foot soldiers fought shoulder to shoulder several ranks deep in a formation known as a *phalanx* and this tactic dominated Greek warfare for many years. Each carried his shield in his left hand, thus protecting his own left side and the unprotected right side of the soldier immediately to his left. Having thrown their spears, the phalanx charged at the enemy hoping to break their ranks. Cavalry usually protected the flanks and rear of the phalanx. Armies generally had a small group of archers and of javelin throwers. In the later stages of the Greek civilisation, horse soldiers and light armed infantry played an increasingly important role as did siege warfare, which became more complicated with the use of battering rams, catapults and siege towers.

## Naval Warfare

Where the Spartans and Boiotians were masters of battles on land, Athens excelled in naval warfare. At its height, the Athenian fleet numbered between 200 and 400 *triremes* (war ships) each manned by some 200 men. The majority of these men were mercenaries, without whom the Athenians would never have been able to command such large fleets.