

Peculiarities and Utilitarianism in the Fighting Tendencies of the Assyrian Infantry During the 9th Century BC in an Eastern Mediterranean Context

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Abstract. *In my paper, I analyze the fighting styles, tendencies and military tactics of both the infantries of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the Greek world as its counterpart during the 9th century BC. The structure, which this overview follows by commenting and constructing a commentary contains an introduction, during which the methods of the research are going to be conducted, including the main source of information and how the structure of the paper is going to be laid out. After that, a brief mention of the historical importance will take place. Through the form of a brief expose, I will go over why is this period and its military peculiarities seem deserving of attention. Then for the main body of the paper are the following points of interest.*

- 1) the infantry armaments, through which both armies equipped themselves and operated;
- 2) the methodological parallels between the utilitarian behavior of both military viewpoints at the time and what comes as different between them;
- 3) the defensive equipment and its hierarchical meaning during the period;
- 4) the infantry subdivisions and their utility for both representatives of the military comparison followed closely by the conclusion of this comparison.

Rezumat. *În lucrare se analizează stilurile de luptă, tendințele și tacticile militare atât ale infanteriștilor Imperiului Neo-Asirian, cât și ale lumii grecești în secolul al IX-lea î.Hr. În introducere se vor expune metodele de cercetare, inclusiv sursa principală de informații și modul în care va fi structurat articolul. Se vor descrie motivele pentru care această perioadă și particularitățile sale militare par să merite atenție. Pentru restul lucrării se vor discuta următoarele puncte de interes :*

- 1) armamentul de infanterie;
- 2) paralelele metodologice între comportamentul utilitarist și diferențele;
- 3) echipamentele defensive și semnificația lor în perioada respectivă;
- 4) subdiviziunile infanteriei și utilitatea lor.

Keywords: Assyria, Ancient Greece, warfare, tactics, weaponry, military equipment, strategy, infantry.

Introduction

This paper deals with the infantry military equipment and its functionality during the reign of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC), with particular emphasis on the peculiarities

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distinguishing his army from the Greek formations in the context of how they were equipped to act and react during combat. The research method provides a comparative analysis and commentary on the attested features in the armament of the infantry units mentioned and how it was most likely used in the context of warfare during the 9th century BC. The sources regarding the military equipment of the given period find place at Tamás Dezső's catalog² of the Assyrian weaponry, in this case – in one of his many volumes. Each specific case will be analyzed contextually in terms of its purpose and use by also pointing out the features that make it distinguished from its Greek infantry counterpart. There will also be attention paid to existing Assyrian trends that do not correspond to a universal time and place of infantry structure progression.

Historical Importance

To begin with, it is necessary to give outline briefly the historical narrative reflected in the sources in order to understand why this study aims to examine this period in its context of the war. On the side of the early Neo-Assyrian Empire is the expansionist policy (sometimes referred to as “the imperial mission”) of Ashurnasirpal II and its distinctively well-attested details in Mesopotamian history. Moreover, the entire historiographic activity carried out in the specific period and place speak of an extremely active correlation between domestic and foreign politics. The drive, which is creatively reflected by the given rule, affects sources of all kinds (from royal inscriptions to royal hymns and other genres), which speaks of an extremely successfully implemented propaganda on behalf of the Assyrian ruler³.

On the other side of the comparison is the pre-polis (and later – the polis) world of the Greeks, in which, unlike the eponymous rule of the Assyrians, the various groups of Greek origin⁴ did not have a universal single-headed authority to direct and restrain their expansion. The attested actions of their activity, however, are reduced to quite a few and relatively independent (authority wise) authors, following in one way or another (be it from the Homeric epics, the “professional” historiography of Herodotus or the military travelogue of Xenophon) the general narrative of development, which is particularly well reflected in the context of the Greek warfare.

These two sides/styles of military historiography are of importance not only because they differ in design, but because they actively try to depict the importance of military actions without suffering from their reason behind existence (emperor's orders and cultural genesis).

² DEZSŐ 2012.

³ See TAPXAH 2022, 83.

⁴ See BRYCE, BIRKETT-REES 2016, 199.

Infantry Armaments

Let us begin with an exposition of what exactly characterized an infantry unit in the Assyrian army: As Dezső points out⁵, the most important items of equipment for a common infantryman included a pointed bronze helmet, bow, quiver, spear, and a shield. Leaving aside (for now) the lack of any other mention in regards to protective (body) armor, apart from the helmet, it seems that the offensive equipment assigned to the individual infantry unit was selected as utilitarian as possible. More precisely: the presence of both ranged and close combat weaponry in the possession of a single soldier indicates, that there was some diversion in the types of commands that individual infantry formations could carry out. In this line of thought, a parallel between the current period of warfare and later ones, especially in the context of other places and their trends, seems as a difficult one to say the least. The factor that contributes to the complexity in such a comparison is that of the specialization of individual military units that accumulates over time. The example that can (and should) be given as the most adequate in terms of the problem is based on the Greek fighting structures during the Archaic period (9–8th century BC). Greek warfare at this time avoided the admixture of mixed (qualification wise) abilities in its common infantryman. The reason for this is as much in the positive as in the negative – mastery over a certain type of weaponry should always be preferable in a single branch of its variability rather than broad and common use of plenty weapon types. In other words, the best soldier is one who fulfills his intended function or strictly profiled occupation (horseman, infantryman, archer, etc.). The lack of subdivision in the weapon systems of the Assyrian infantryman, or more precisely – providing him with every possible form of weaponry, demonstrates and reinforces what Sargon of Akkad (ca. 2334–2279 BC) gave as a feature during his reign compared to practices of the former (city-state) system. Namely – a paid professional army, which dominates over the militia (composed of civilians) as it is specifically designated for its employment. This professional occupation, however, stands out with a comprehensively expressed (in terms of weaponry) ability for waging war in each infantryman, in contrast to the infantry formations in ancient Greece, which were strictly differentiated in their function.

Comparative Analysis

In this context, the trends relative to the Archaic period, between Eastern and Greek ranks are defined as follows: While Greek warfare required a military unit selected for each distinct role, dividing even the infantry into two as heavy and light with divisions such as main and auxiliary, the Eastern model emphasized total military literacy to its own infantrymen. This situation expresses itself in the ability of each professional soldier to be able to handle, if not all, then the majority of weapons known up to that time (swords, axes, spears, bows, etc.). A

⁵ DEZSŐ 2012, 53.

very particular parallel would unite the Greek with the Eastern comprehensive military literacy, and it would express itself in the specifics of the Spartan military technique. *Agogi*⁶ is the tradition during which the young children of Sparta were progressively trained to handle any weapon on the premise that in battle the status (durability) of armaments is variable rather than permanent. This means that their ever so popular dominant fighting technique, namely the phalanx, is not a permanent/absolute constant, as well as the fact that they were well aware of how their weapons could be damaged. Hence the need for every single soldier to be able to handle any type of weapon well, even in an emergency situation (damage control/strategy adaptation after armaments loss).

On the other hand, what appears as a pretext for the ability to handle different types of equipment, it could not be considered as imitative to the absolute utilitarianism, which is typical of the Assyrian infantry. Moreover, it was a common practice that Spartan soldiers did not use ranged weapons other than javelins (throwing spears) and, in very rare cases, slings. These ranged/projectile weapons can rather be characterized in the short- and medium-range category. In Sparta, the passive self-regulation against the bow and arrow was so prevalent, that it was dogmatically seen as a disgrace and dishonor for a soldier to be its user⁷, and this is precisely NOT the case in the Assyrian infantry. The ability of the common soldier to be able to cover more roles and commands affects maneuverability in combat, which is ultimately a well-expressed form of adaptability during wartime. It was this kind of attitude towards individual cases against what was decreed by Lycurgus that led ancient Sparta to the gradual decline⁸ of its military apogee towards the middle of the classical period (5–4 centuries BC).

One might be left with the impression that in the Assyrian infantry any unit could be a substitute for another missing one in the whole variation of combat units, which are in operation. This could not be fully assumed in its entirety. Separate divisions, such as archers and charioteers, are attested in the sources, but this does not directly mean that the common infantryman can, in the absence of the specific units, become their direct substitute. Rather, we might think of it in the context of experience and expertise in a certain profile: A common archer would perform much better at following his position-specific commands, which usually come as following few variations of static long-range formations. The narrative that would make more sense for an infantryman wielding a bow is a momentary ranged strike at the enemy

⁶ See ESPOSITO 2020, 18.

⁷ The Spartan emphasis on close-quarters combat and their reluctance to adopt certain long-range weapons, such as bows and arrows, due to their cultural values and military philosophy are depicted multiple times in history; One (of many) such mention is within the Histories of Herodotus, when the Spartans arrogantly answer that “they will fight in the shade” when they are shot at by the barbarians
See HERODOTUS 2013 [Book 7. Section 226], 513–514.

⁸ For more information in regards to the problems of Sparta’s political structure and how it affects its people, creating the tensions, which sunders it to its core, see П’БЦЕИ 2017, 152.

and engaging in a direct confrontation afterwards. This could serve as an example of a military value derived from shock combat, in which the Assyrian infantry could gain an instant advantage as a direct consequence of its preset interchangeability in terms of armaments. The very specificity of the fighting style (the variety of commands and formations that can be executed) is such for the Assyrian infantryman, that his maneuverability and adaptability on the battlefield emerge as more important to his role. This is what differs to the situations of individual other units such as archers and battle chariots, whose function is reduced to the utilization of their strictly distributed combat profile.

Defensive Equipment and its Hierarchy

Returning to the subject of armor, something special is noticeable regarding its distribution throughout the Assyrian infantry troops of the period: Lamellar armor, composed of small initially bronze and then iron plates, was assigned not only to the front line of the army⁹. It is the opposite; its prevalence covers even the long-range units (slingers and archers). However, the moment when such protective clothing is inherent rather to the elite platoons of the Assyrian army is different. This suggests that militia (civilian) troops relied on whatever they could earn/pay for/afford as defensive (and offensive) gear. Such a distribution of equipment raises the question of hierarchization through clothing. From the preserved information we know that the protective clothing of the Assyrian infantrymen at the time of Ashurnasirpal II and later (until 745 BC), in contrast of their Greek counterparts, relied on their pointed helmets, shields, broad bronze belts and (if the soldier's position permits it) lamellar cuirasses.

Raising the topic of hierarchization through clothing, it is clear that unlike the Greek emphasis on the helmet (usually expressed by a colored crest running the length or width of the helmet) and later the ribbon/flag of the spear (βάβδον¹⁰), the Assyrian infantry general, the one around the period 9–8th century BC, differs not through his helmet, but through the presence of mail vest. However, there is also the following special detail: Under their (if available to the soldier) breastplates, the infantrymen are dressed in tunics, which have some differing geometric motifs painted on them. These insignia/markings do not indicate rank in the army so much, rather they attest to the ethnicity and place of origin of the infantryman in question¹¹. De facto, it turns out that the multi-ethnic configuration of warriors can freely reflect their origins without affecting their battle cohesion and cultural perception as a whole in a given army. The commanders in the Assyrian infantry can also be recognized by the specifics of their weapons. Their identification includes carrying maces or staffs. If their equipment does not differ in function, as in the previous example, then their weapons in use

⁹ DEZSÓ2012, 53.

¹⁰ See КОЛИАС 2012, 239.

¹¹ DEZSÓ 2012, 54.

come as distinctively decorated. Their representations in the sources also contribute to something else – their place on the battlefield itself. Usually their depictions are included not only in the battle itself (as a personal guard and escort of the royal carriage) but also after it, an example of this would be depictions involving the leading of prisoners of war¹².

Infantry Subdivisions and Utility

With regard to the previously mentioned problem of divisions in the Assyrian infantry structure, the following distinctions can be made: It is composed of archers, spearmen, and footmen, whose equipment (of the latter), as previously mentioned, is mixed¹³. An interesting detail that can be gleaned from sculptures of Ashurnasirpal II is how, in a battle scene of a siege, figures recognized as ordinary infantrymen are depicted in the context of labor troops¹⁴. This type of reflected activity testifies to a utilitarianism in the Assyrian regular infantry that goes beyond the work, which relates solely to direct (face-to-face) combat. The work that they do, expressed in this case as digging trenches and servicing war machines, is similar to the auxiliary workers of the Greek world at that time. Usually during a campaign or colonization in the Greek world, it was not excluded to hire people as support staff¹⁵. Sometimes even slaves could perform this function¹⁶. In this regard, the professional Assyrian infantry minimizes individual support units and emphasizes total adaptability on the part of its regular infantry. It could also be argued that their all-encompassing applicability on the battlefield could have served well against the king's financial commitment to them. In other words, to avoid waste in hiring separate groups of people, which could be interpreted as more resources aimed at the infantry. The other thing that can be speculated on in the field of Assyrian infantry applicability is their tactical correspondence without the direct and constant intervention of their commander-in-chief. More precisely: if, in a field situation, individual infantry units were subordinate to few of their immediate commanders and lost (contact with) one, they could regroup and adjust their tactics on the move according to the enemy position without wasting time in inactivity. This line of thought affirms the infantry structures of the East as more self-contained and largely functionally autarkic units, unlike the Greek ones, which relied on skilled and distributed function throughout their ranks. This can be supported by the information we have about how Ashurnasirpal II, in pursuit of his enemies, inspected the terrain on which the next battle would take place¹⁷. In these calculations of his, every possible situation is foreseen,

¹² DEZSÓ 2012, 55.

¹³ DEZSÓ 2012, 54.

¹⁴ DEZSÓ 2012, 54.

¹⁵ See ТУКИДИД 1979, Chapters 24-28.

¹⁶ See CONNOLLY 1981, 44.

¹⁷ See ТАРХАН 2022, 84.

where stocking the soldiers with all possible equipment and their ability to react against every single geographical variable is key in achieving maximum efficiency and effect during a given military campaign. It is in this preparedness that the Assyrian infantry excels over the Greek tradition of assessing and predicting potential variables.

Regarding the heavy and light form of the common infantryman in the Assyrian army during the 9th century BC, the following can be said: At the Balawat gates, divisions can be distinguished in the images according to the "weight" of the individual infantry unit. It is about utilizing the mobility of the military elements, something that the Greek world already introduced in its military work during its conquests in the Mediterranean (15–13 centuries BC¹⁸). The maneuverability of the individual infantryman in the ancient world was always calculated at the expense of his protection. So the Greek hoplites (heavy infantry) and gymnasts (light infantry, but sometimes synonymous with auxiliaries) appear as the two complementary sides of the field equation, which implies the ability of an infantry army both to attack and retreat quickly, as well as being able to hold its positions for a long time¹⁹. In this context, their clothing differs radically in regards to the materials of its creation. The Greek hoplite is clad in bronze (later iron) while the gymnast retains his mobility thanks to his light leather gear. This element is another that differentiates trends in the Eastern and Greek infantry traditions. The Assyrian army during this period continued to use its lamellar armor with the difference that the "heavy" equivalent of an infantryman wore a long one²⁰. The bronze plates cover not only his torso, but also his limbs (usually up to the knees and elbows).

However, a problem remains. It is the weight of the weapon carried by the infantry: In the sources for the Assyrian infantry of this period, there was no problem of replacing a light with a heavy shield, even by the archers²¹. First it must be clarified what is the difference between the two. A heavy shield has a bronze (later iron) coating, which is usually carried either on its own with some kind of handle attached on the inside (also of metal), or the metal surface is clad around a wooden scaffold that serves as a link between the handle and the clamped metal exterior of the shield. A light shield, on the other hand, is not so much about how big it is, but how much it lightens the weight of the infantryman's overall gear. It is made of wood and in some cases has leather linings on its exterior, although this is more typical of the traditional shields of the Near East and Greek islands at the time²².

¹⁸ For more information in regards to the period, see ПОПОВ 2022, 7.

¹⁹ See ANDERSON 1970, 94.

²⁰ DEZSÓ 2012, 55.

²¹ IBID., 56.

²² Pelte – A leather shield used by Thracians and Greeks as a must in the ranks of peltasts (auxiliary infantry responsible for long-range combat using spears and slings) and gymnasts (main/auxiliary infantry relying on maneuverability in close combat).; For more about the shield and its importance in the Greek ancient (and medieval) world see КОЛИАС 2012, 99.

In addition to the crafting material, depictions of archers carrying both types of shield also exist. One very small detail, however, leaves room for conclusions about the infantry's ability to execute commands. In some places, the shields of the Assyrian ranged units (in this context - archers) are depicted with an umbo, on which a spike is mounted²³. This means that while they could maneuver between separate static formations in which some of the archers stood as a wall in front of their “brothers in arms”, this wall could not be made of multiple stacked lines of soldiers one behind the other. This difference in the “wall of shields” paradigm contrasts sharply with the multi-layered Greek phalanx, in which the minimum is about three rows of warriors behind each other. The blade mounted in the center of the umbo (the center of the shield, usually behind and on which the hilt is mounted and around which the rest of the peripheral part of the shield is balanced) interferes with shield formations that require more than one row to be effective. In this context, we are sure that an infantry wall of the archers' shields could not be used at all against stopping cavalry or war chariots. Most likely, these shields served one-off repellences of solitary enemy warriors, who attacked head on against a regrouping or resupplying infantry squad. The spiked umbo is very scarce in the Greek world, precisely because of its peculiarity that the structured wall of shields is impossible to be reinforced by additional lines of infantry if each rear row is in a condition to injure its allies, located right in front of them.

Conclusion

As a conclusion to the comparison of the two trends in the period of 9–8 centuries BC, namely - those in the Mesopotamia and in the Greek world, the following description could be given. The Assyrian infantry utilized its common soldiers to the maximum in their capacity as a unit, which is capable of following multiple formations, who explores and traverses heterogeneous terrain, and adapts during combat thanks to its material readiness. In the Greek world, the trend can be likened to high-profile military formations countering the enemy's imitative one in measured but predictable offensives. They may even be said to lack material adaptability in the combat itself, compared to the Assyrian infantry tradition, making each single conflict during a campaign the same in its course of action. Pre-calculations presuppose a specific (calculated in detail) use and distribution of troop units, whereas the Assyrian model of infantry activity is prepared for every single spontaneous variable during war. One can, albeit ironically, compare the two trends through the rules of the game of chess. The Greek model relies on the precision and function of each individual piece as best utilized in its capacity as such through selected patents and algorithms of action. While in the East, the main emphasis of the regular infantry is its function as pawns, waiting to become the necessary piece

²³ DEZSÓ 2012, 56.

according to the development and current situation of each individual positioning on the battlefield.

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