

Thracian Infantry: The Essence of the Peltast and his Role in Greek Warfare

Asen Bondzhev

New Bulgarian University, Department of History, Sofia, BULGARIA

Received: 28 February 2026 ▪ Revised: 17 June 2026 ▪ Accepted: 13 July 2026

Abstract

First mentioned by Thucydides in 431 BC, peltasts were equipped with the distinctive pelte shield, which was both a symbol and a practical tool in battle. The paper presents several depictions of peltasts on red-figure pottery, explores the evolution of the peltasts in Greek warfare, focusing on their tactics and role in the defeat of Spartan hoplites under the command of Iphicrates in 390 BC. Despite the heavy emphasis on hoplite warfare in Greece, the peltasts played a crucial role in providing flexibility and maneuverability on the battlefield. The article also touches on the adoption of peltast tactics by Greek forces, demonstrating the influence of Thracian military methods on Greek infantry during the 4th century BC.

Keywords: peltasts, Thracian military, pelte shield, hoplite, Iphicrates, Greek warfare, Thracian light infantry.

1. The Thracian peltast

The first mention of peltasts is by Thucydides (2.29.5), who describes the conclusion of an alliance between Athens and the Odrysian ruler Sitalces and his obligation to assist the Athenians with an army composed of horsemen and peltasts.¹ The peltast was the main Thracian military unit. Its name derives from the light wicker shield, *pelte* – elliptical or nearly circular, cut inward on one side, forming the shape of a crescent and covered with sheep or goat skin.² Often it was decorated with artistically crafted metal plates, and pottery shows that drawings of magical significance may have been depicted to instill fear in the enemy and to ward off evil from the soldier – for example, huge eyes with a specific shape; among the Greeks, the Gorgon was most commonly depicted. It was carried in the left hand, with the inside slipping through a strap (a *porpax*, *πόρπαξ* – two X-form crossed bands in the center of the shield) to the elbow, where it grabbed another strap at the end of the shield. Since the *pelte* shield is not mentioned by Homer, it is likely that its appearance was only after the end of the Bronze Age, probably during the Early Iron Age, when protection from the new iron weapons was sought, and probably the Thracians' solution was to make a new type of shield, which they called the *pelte*.³ Over the centuries the semantics of the term peltast has changed, but always one of its main symbols remains the *pelte*

¹ For Thracian cavalry, see Bondzhev (forthcoming).

² Detschew, 1957: 362. Finds of *peltai* in Thrace are extremely rare and may be due to the perishable materials from which they were made (Stoyanov, 2015: 429).

³ Zhekov, 2021: 85.

shield. Herodotus (7.75.1) describes the peltasts from Bithynia who took part in Xerxes' army in 480 BC, so:

The Thracians served having fox-skins [*αλωπεκίς, alopekis*] upon their heads and tunics about their body, with loose mantles of various colors thrown round over them [*ζερά, zeira*]; and about their feet and lower part of the leg they wore boots of deer-skin [*ἐμβάδες, embades*]; and besides this they had javelins and round bucklers [*πέλη, pelte*] and small daggers.⁴



Figure 1. Attic red-figure drinking cup (kilyx) depicting a Thracian peltast wearing a multicolored zeira (decorated with stripes and geometric patterns), a cap with long ear and neck flaps, and boots, holding a light crescent shield (pelte) decorated with large eyes and a spear, c. 470–460 BC. Arthur M. Sackler Museum, inv. 1959.219.



Figure 2. Red-figure jug depicting a two Thracian peltasts (and a horseman) wearing a multicolored zeira (decorated with stripes and geometric patterns; under the cloak: a chiton, fastened with a belt), a cap with long ear and neck flaps, and boots, holding a light crescent shield (pelte) with visible porpax (πόρπαξ) and two javelins. Dated to c. 425 BC, found in 1965 in Apollonia (present-day Sozopol, Bulgaria). Archaeological Museum Sozopol, inv. 261. Nedev, 2019: fig. 538.

⁴ The javelin had a short range and little penetrating power (Anderson, 1991: 21). In most pottery depictions, peltasts are not shown with a sword, but in the rare exceptions, when it is present, it is not drawn; out of 130 examples only two depict swords (Lissarrague, 1990: 156, n. 26).



Figure 3. Red-figure jug depicting a two Thracian peltasts (and a horseman) wearing a multicolored *zeira* (decorated with stripes and geometric patterns), a cap with long ear and neck flaps, and boots, holding a light crescent shield (*pelte*) and two javelins. Dated to c. 425 BC, found in 1996 near present-day Karnobat (Gyaurska mogila), Bulgaria. Archaeological Museum Karnobat, inv. 447. Hermary, 2010: fig. 336.⁵

In 400 BC, Xenophon (7.4.3-4) elaborates on the clothing:

There was deep snow on the plain [southeastern Thrace, present-day Türkiye], and it was so cold that the water which they carried in for dinner and the wine in the jars would freeze, and many of the Greeks had their noses and ears frost-bitten. Then it became clear why the Thracians wear fox-skin caps on their heads and over their ears, and tunics not merely about their chests, but also round their thighs, and why, when on horseback, they wear long cloaks reaching to their feet instead of mantles.

We learn about the attitude of the Greeks towards the “barbarian” troops from a speech by Brasidas during his campaign in Illyria in 423 BC, in which he encouraged his hoplites to fight lightly armed troops on a mountain terrain:

The present enemy might terrify an inexperienced imagination; they are formidable in outward bulk, their loud yelling is unbearable, and the brandishing of their weapons in the air has a threatening appearance. But when it comes to real fighting with an opponent who stands his ground, they are not what they seemed; they have no regular order that they should be ashamed of deserting their positions when hard pressed; flight and attack are with them equally honourable, and afford no test of courage; their independent mode of fighting never leaving any one who wants to run away without a fair excuse for so doing (Thuc. 4.126.4-5).

And although this is a general statement, overall the reports of Thucydides and Xenophon give the impression that Thracian warfare relied, on the one hand, on thrust and power, and, on the other – on light manoeuvrability, which in no way represent chaos, as it might seem at first glance, but a specific way of warfare, which under given conditions has all the advantages. Otherwise Thracian mercenaries would not have been in demand assisting the Greek hoplite army.

Due to the rare use of heavily armed combat units, Thracian military tactics were distinguished by their flexibility.⁶ When the Arcadians attacked the villages in Bithynia, the Thracians defeated the heavily armed Greek hoplites in the following manner:

⁵ See also Georgieva, 2005. For a full list of suggested datings, see Ivanov, 2024: 81.

⁶ Plutarch (*Life of Aem. Paul.* 18.5) describes a heavily armed Thracian soldier during the battle of Pydna in 168 BC: “First the Thracians advanced, whose appearance, Nasica says, was most terrible, – men of lofty

The Thracians who escaped them, however, began to gather – and many had escaped, inasmuch as they were light troops as against hoplites . . . At daybreak they proceeded to form their lines all round the hill where the Greeks were encamping, their troops consisting of horsemen in large numbers and peltasts . . . And they made attacks upon the hoplites without danger to themselves, inasmuch as the Greeks had neither bowman nor javelin-thrower nor horseman; so they would come running or riding up and throw their javelins, and when the Greeks charged upon them, they would easily get away; and different parties kept attacking at different points. Hence on the one side many were being wounded, on the other side not a man (Xen. *Anab.* 6.3.4-8).

2. The peltast in Greek warfare

The Greeks associated Thracians with emblems of the barbarian other and foreign excess and thus they often depicted the peltast as the antithesis of the heroic hoplite. The hoplite phalanx, formed eight men in depth, consisted of heavily armed warriors with helmet, cuirass, greaves, large heavy shield (*aspis*), sword (*xiphos*) and heavy spear for thrusting (*dory*) – an armament of 15-20 kg. Classical Greek armies preferred to use heavy infantry, although some mountain communities always used light-armed troops for raiding. The light-armed soldier was generally despised as unorganized and ready to flee, unlike the hoplite.⁷ It was only during the Peloponnesian War when the Athenians employed some mercenary Thracian peltasts.⁸

Probably because of the proximity to the Thracians, those inhabiting the Greek settlements in the Thraceward region were among the first to recognize the effectiveness of Thracian styles of warfare and adopt Thracian tactics themselves. Athens itself was also considered a geographic neighbor to the Thracians, because of its presence in the Thracian Chersonese.⁹ For example, at the end of the 5th century BC, Xenophon demonstrated a strong grasp of the essence of the peltasts, recommending to Seuthes II that his forces march in a staggered formation overnight – the heavier troops should start the march first, followed by the light infantry peltasts, and finally the cavalry.¹⁰ This arrangement ensured that all the troops would arrive together in the morning, preventing the variations in speed from causing the forces to become separated (*Anab.* 7.3.37-39).

Originally, for the ancient authors, the peltasts were only Thracians or Hellenes inhabiting *apoikiai* in Aegean Thrace. Peltasts became a regular presence in Greek infantries from the last quarter of the 5th century BC on, but they never replaced the hoplite phalanx as the primary military arm of virtually every Greek *polis*.¹¹ Thracian-style infantry tactics were instrumental to

stature, clad in tunics which showed black beneath the white and gleaming armour of their shields and greaves, and tossing high on their right shoulders battle-axes [*ρόμψαία* = *rhomphaia*] with heavy iron heads.” For the Thracian *rhomphaia*, see Paunov, 2005.

⁷ Hanson, 1989: 13-17; 1998: 13-18. Thuc. 4.94.1

⁸ Thuc. 2.27; 4.129.2; Snodgrass, 1967: 98; Best, 1969; Anderson, 1970: 113-114; Williams, 2004.

⁹ Southern *poleis* later adopted Thracian military practices. See Best, 1969: 12-13; Isaac, 1986: 85-86, 103-4.

¹⁰ Thracian peltasts favored night attacks (Pritchett 1974: 170-171; Hdt. 6.45.1; Xen. *Anab.* 7.2.22; Polyaeus 2.2.6, 8, 10).

¹¹ Sears 2013 287. In the first half of the 4th century BC, many ancient orators equated peltasts with mercenaries (Best, 1969: 126-133), and the massive use of mercenaries was seen as one of the main factors in the intensification of internal struggles in the *poleis* and their economic exhaustion due to the need to pay them wages (Thuc. 7.27: “the pay of each man was a drachma a day”). At the same time, according to the orators, mercenaries were the cause of the decline of the *polis* troops, composed of hoplite citizens, which for them were the foundation of the *polis* as a state-political system (Zhekov, 2023: 83).

Greek military developments in the 4th century BC,¹² when the hoplite came more and more to be supplemented by the light-armed peltasts, which were effective against heavy infantry unsupported by other arms but were vulnerable against a variegated force. Greeks themselves were often prized as mercenaries in the 4th century BC precisely because they were heavy infantrymen – a type of soldier underrepresented in the armies of the Persians and other non-Greek powers.¹³

The peltasts achieved their most famous military feat under the command of Iphicrates, who succeeded marshaling peltasts so skillfully that they became accustomed to fighting in formation when the situation demanded it. This was no small feat for troops accustomed to fighting loosely as individuals.¹⁴ Thus in 390 BC, after several years of campaigning, Iphicrates and his peltasts defeated an entire *mora* of Spartan hoplites – about 600 of Greece's most formidable heavy infantry – near the port of Lechaion at Corinth (Xen. *Hell.* 4.5).¹⁵ The hoplites looked down on the light-armed mercenaries, boldly passing by the peltasts' position with their right sides unshielded. Without cavalry or hoplite support, the peltasts attacked in small groups, throwing javelins before retreating effortlessly. Despite suffering losses and injuries, the Spartans tried to respond by sending their youngest hoplites after them. However, the peltasts led the young Spartans far from the protection of the phalanx, then turned and cut down the isolated hoplites.¹⁶ Although the Spartans had cavalry, the horsemen chose not to pursue the peltasts, instead staying with the phalanx to maintain a solid front and negate the advantage of their fast horses (4.5.16). The Spartans eventually withdrew in disgrace, having lost around 250 of their 600 hoplites. This victory brought Iphicrates widespread fame, as it shattered the myth of Spartan invincibility. It was considered unthinkable that skilled hoplites, especially the elite Spartan warriors, could be defeated by light-armed troops, particularly ignoble Thracian mercenaries.¹⁷ After this point, within a decade, almost all warring Hellenic *poleis* formed contingents of peltasts; so did even the Spartans, who were the biggest proponents of traditional tactics using only a hoplite phalanx.¹⁸ This conservatism of theirs is echoed by Xenophon (*Hell.* 4.4.17): before the second battle of Lechaion, mentioned above, the Spartans mocked the Arcadian hoplites, who they said feared the peltasts of Iphicrates “just as children fear hobgoblins”. Xenophon explicitly stresses that up to this point the Lacedaemonians despised the peltasts, but despised their allies even more because they feared the peltasts.

Iphicrates' experience with Thracian peltasts helped him to develop in 374/373 BC a versatile infantry soldier – a cross between a Greek hoplite and Thracian peltast.¹⁹ The goal of Iphicrate's military reforms were to make the infantryman more maneuverable and agile.²⁰ Both Diodorus (15.44) and Nepos (*Iph.* 1) agree that the large and unwieldy hoplite shield, the *aspis*, was replaced by the smaller Thracian-style *pelte*. The size of the spear was increased: Diodorus says by half, but according to Nepos, the length was doubled. The sword was lengthened to up to

¹² Anderson, 1970; Griffith, 1981. Sears, 2013: 234-289. See also Webber, 2011.

¹³ Best, 1969: 110-119.

¹⁴ Anderson, 1970: 121. Sears (2013: 121) suggests that most mercenary peltasts were Thracians.

¹⁵ Konecny (2001) estimates the size of Iphicrates' peltast force at around 1500.

¹⁶ Iphicrates appears to have learned from his previous experience with this Spartan tactic, turning it to his advantage (Sears, 2013: 285).

¹⁷ Sears, 2013: 276-277; 2015: 314. See also Parke, 1933: 52-55; Best, 1969: 87-88; Sealey, 1976: 395; Hamilton, 1979: 261-270; Hanson, 1998: 95; Konecny, 2001: 79-127; Roisman & Yardley, 2011: 434-435; Konijnendijk, 2014; 2018: 101. For a comprehensive historiographical overview of the battle, see Konijnendijk, 2014. For a tactical visualisation of the battle, see Webber, 2022: 3-4.

¹⁸ Zhekov, 2021: 89.

¹⁹ 374 BC is proposed by Best (1969: 102), 373 BC by Everson (2004: 172).

²⁰ Best, 1969: 87-110; Lazenby & Whitehead, 1996; Zhekov, 2013; 2021.

twice. The soldiers wore light and easy to untie boots, and the standard chain-mail or brass armor was replaced by a lighter linen cuirass.²¹

3. Conclusion

The peltasts, recognized for their agility and lighter armament, provided a significant counterbalance to the heavy hoplite forces. It is highly likely that the term peltast is of Hellenic origin rather than Thracian, as the Thracians likely did not feel the need to specifically define their own type of troops. While in the 4th century BC the term gradually became synonymous with mercenary, during the Hellenistic era it became an integral part of the armies of the Hellenistic states. The term lost any ethnic or other semantic associations with mercenaries or foreigners, and became a designation for a specific type of infantry equipped with distinctive weaponry and performing specialized tactical tasks.

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The author declares no competing interests.

References

- Anderson, J. (1970). *Military Theory and Practice in the Age of Xenophon*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Anderson, J. (1991). Hoplite Weapons and Offensive Arms. In V. Hanson (ed.), *Hoplites. The Classical Greek Battle Experience*. London and New York, 15–37.
- Best, J. (1969). *Thracian Peltasts and Their Influence on Greek Warfare*. Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff.
- Bondzhev, A. (forthcoming). Emergence and Early Stage of Development of the Thracian Cavalry.
- Bozhkova, A. (2017). *Ancient Ceramics Between Haemus, Rhodope and Euxine Pontus (VII–I c. BC). Characteristics, Distribution and Use*. [Антична керамика между Хемус, Родопи и Евксинския Понт (VII–I в. пр.Хр.). Характеристика, разпространение и употреба]. Veliko Tarnovo: Faber.
- Detschew, D. (1957). *Die Thrakischen Sprachreste*. Wien: Rudolf Rohrer (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse, Schriften der Balkankommission, Linguistische Abteilung 14).
- Everson, T. (2004). *Warfare in Ancient Greece. Arms and Armour from the Heroes of Homer to Alexander the Great*. Sparkford: The History Press.
- Georgieva, R. (2005). Jug From Karnobat with Images of Thracian Warriors [Каничка от Карнобат с изображения на тракийски войн]. *Arheologiya*, 1-4, 32–40.

²¹ Sears, 2013: 282–283. Everson (2004: 173) assumes that Iphicrates got acquainted with the usage of linen cuirasses during his campaign in Egypt. Although Xenophon is the main source on the military and political career of Iphicrates, he does not report his reform with the peltasts, which is attested only in the 1st century BC by Diodorus and Nepos. One of the reasons might be his personal dislike of Iphicrates. For all other reasons, see Zhekov, 2021: 90–91.

- Griffith, G. (1981). Peltasts, and the Origin of the Macedonian Phalanx. In H. Dell (ed.), *Ancient Macedonian Studies in Honor of Charles F. Edson*. Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 161–167.
- Hamilton, C. (1979). *Sparta's Bitter Victories: Politics and Diplomacy in the Corinthian War*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Hanson, V. (1989). *The Western Way of War. Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*. New York: Alfred Knopf.
- Hanson, V. (1998). *Warfare and Agriculture in Classical Greece. Revised Edition*. University of California Press.
- Hermay, A. (2010). Les vases et leur décor à l'époque classique: transfert de formes et d'images entre grecs et Thraces (Ve s. av. J.-C.). H. Treziny (ed.), *In Grecs et indigènes de la Catalogne à la Mer Noire*. Paris: Errance, 481–486.
- Isaac, B. (1986). *The Greek Settlements in Thrace Until the Macedonian Conquest*. Leiden: Brill.
- Ivanov, Y. (2024). Jugs with Thracian Hunter-Warriors from Burials in Sozopol and near Karnobat – Parallel Systems with a Narrative of Πέλτη Type Shields [Кани с тракийски ловци воини от погребения в Созопол и край Карнобат – успоредни системи с разказ за щитовете тип πέλτη]. In R. Hristova (ed.), *History and Culture of Karnobat Region*, vol. 5. Burgas, 76–99.
- Konecny, A. (2001). Κατέκοψεν τὴν μύραν Ἰφικράτης. Das Gefecht bei Lechaion im Frühsommer 390 v. Chr. *Chiron*, 31: 79–127. = Konecny, A. (2014), Κατέκοψεν τὴν μύραν Ἰφικράτης. The Battle of Lechaion, Early Summer, 390 BC. In N. Sekunda & B. Burliga (eds.), *Iphicrates, Peltasts and Lechaion*. Gdansk, 7–48.
- Konijnendijk, R. (2014). Iphikrates the Innovator and the Historiography of Lechaion. In N. Sekunda & B. Burliga (eds.), *Iphicrates, Peltasts and Lechaion*. Gdansk, 7–48.
- Konijnendijk, R. (2018). *Classical Greek Tactics. A Cultural History*. Leiden: Brill.
- Lazarov, M. (2003). *Ancient Greek Painted Ceramics from Bulgaria* [Древногръцката рисувана керамика от България]. Varna: Slavena.
- Lazenby, J., & Whitehead, D. (1996). The Myth of the Hoplite's Hoplon. *The Classical Quarterly*, 46(1), 27–33.
- Lezzi-Hafter, A. (1997). Offerings Made to Measure. Two Special Commissions by the Eretria Painter for Apollonia Pontica. In: J. Oakly, W. Coulson & O. Palagia (eds.), *Athenian Potters and Painters. The Conference Proceedings*. Oxford: Oxford Book, 353–369 (Oxbow Monograph 67).
- Lissarrague, F. (1990). *L'autre guerrier. Archers, peltasts, cavaliers dans l'imagerie attique*. Paris–Rome (Images à l'appui 3. Collection publiée par le Centre de recherches comparées sur les sociétés anciennes et l'École française de Rome).
- Nedev, D. (2019). Red-figure Jug [Червенофигурна кана]. In A. Baralis, K. Panayotova & D. Nedev (eds.), *Apolonia Pontiyska. Po stapkite na arheolozite. Kolekcii na Luvar i balgarski muzei*. Sofia: Faber, 450–451.
- Parke, H. (1933). *Greek Mercenary Soldiers: From the Earliest Times to the Battle of Ipsus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Paunov, E. (2005). Rhomphaea: A New Thracian Sword from the Western Rhodopes (Southwest Bulgaria) [Ромфея: новооткрит тракийски меч от Западните Родопи]. In T. Stoyanov, M. Tonkova, H. Preshlenov & H. Popov (eds.), *Heros Hephaistos. Studia in Honorem Liubae Ognenova-Marinova*. Veliko Tarnovo: Faber, 374–380.
- Pritchett, W. (1974). *The Greek State at War. Part II*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Roisman, J. & Yardley, J. (2011). *Ancient Greece from Homer to Alexander: The Evidence*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Sealey, R. (1976). *A History of the Greek City States 700–338 B.C.* Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sears, M. (2013). *Athens, Thrace, and the Shaping of Athenian Leadership*. Cambridge University Press.
- Snodgrass, A. (1967). *Arms and Armour of the Greeks*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

- Stoyanov, T. (2015). Warfare. In J. Valeva, E. Nankov & D. Graninger (eds.), *A Companion to Ancient Thrace*. Wiley-Blackwell, 426–442.
- Webber, C. (2011). *The Gods of Battle: The Thracians at War, 1500 BC–AD 150*. Barnsley.
- Webber, C. (2022). The Effect of Peltasts on Greek Warfare. *ThracianTV* [YouTube channel] – youtu.be/TKOnHMfh1ZM?t=192.
- Williams, M. (2004). Philopoemen's Special Forces: Peltasts and a New Kind of Greek Light-Armed Warfare (Livy 35.27). *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte*, 53(3), 257–277.
- Zhekov, Z. (2013). Iphicrates – the Reformer-strategist [Ификрат – стратегът реформатор]. In *Bulgaria, bulgarite i Evropa. Tom 6*. Veliko Tarnovo, 43–52.
- Zhekov, Z. (2021). The Peltasts in the Ancient Narrative Tradition [Пелтастите в античната наративна традиция]. In P. Delev, D. Boteva-Boyanova & L. Grozdanova (eds.), *Jubilaus VIII: Zavrashane kam izvorite. Chast 1. Istoriya i epigrafika*. Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo “Sv. Kliment Ohridski”, 83–96.

