Ephebes as All-Round Warriors?

One remarkable feature of the ephebeia, a two-year long state-funded program of compulsory military service for eighteen and nineteen year old citizens of Athens, was its institutionalized system of peacetime military training, consisting of gymnastic exercises, hoplite weaponry and unit drill, and non-hoplite arms ([Arist.] *Ath.Pol.* 42.3-4). Previously the Athenians, on account of their amateur ethos, had regarded training for war as a private affair or as an unnecessary distraction from earning a living (Xen. *Mem*. 3.12.5; Plat. *Leg*. 831C-832A). This paper examines why the *demos*, despite the disdain shown by their ancestors for the lightly armed infantryman’s cowardly tactics (e.g. Eur. *Iph.Taur*. 195-203), hired specialized instructors to teach the ephebes how to fire the bow and cast the javelin.

In particular I will argue against the prevailing view that the ephebes were instructed in peltast tactics – the very antithesis of hoplite warfare (Thuc. 4.126.5-6) – so that they would be equally adept at fighting as hoplites in the phalanx and as skirmishers on the rugged Athenian borderlands or on campaign outside of Attica (e.g. Ober 1985, 90-1; Rawlings 2000, 237-41). If we consider that the effectiveness of light troops on the battlefield depended upon their individual skill with missile weapons (Xen. *Cyr*. 2.1.7), which could only be gained by constant practice from childhood (e.g. D.S. 15.85.4-5), then the ephebes’ proficiency after one year of training would have been rudimentary in comparison to the mercenary peltasts Athens routinely recruited from Thrace and the less well-developed areas of Greece during the Classical period (Best 1969). Given the lack of training, it is doubtful whether ephebes could have fought effectively as peltasts or archers against Boeotian raiders – the ephebeia’s primary military function – and other threats to the *chora* of Attica.

A more plausible explanation is that the ephebes were never intended to be skirmishers, but were taught how to use missile weapons from a fortified position: i.e. the Athens-Piraeus enceinte and the garrison fortresses. The motivation to hire *toxotai*, *akontistai*, and *katapaltaphetai* could instead be attributed to the demos’ fear of Macedonian invasion should conflict break out with Alexander the Great, a concern well founded because the Athenians had already been threatened with invasion on three separate occasions in 338/7, 336/5, and 335/4 B.C. (Aeschin. 3.131; D.S. 17.4.6-9; Arr. *Anab*. 1.10.2-6). If we accept this, the ephebes’ instruction in the javelin and the bow was one of the measures taken during the Lycurgan period to strengthen Athens’ land defenses against a possible invasion, alongside the refurbishment of the *polis*’ fortifications and the construction of an arsenal of 50,000 missiles on the Acropolis (Plut. *Mor*. 852C).

Best, J.G.P. 1969. *Thracian Peltasts and their influence on Greek Warfare*. Groningen.  
Ober, J. 1985. *Fortress Attica. Defense of the Athenian Land Frontier 404-322 B.C.*   
 Leiden.  
Rawlings L. 2000. “Alternative Agonies: Hoplite martial and combat experiences beyond the Phalanx.” In H.van Wees ed., *War and Violence in Ancient Greece*, 53-77.

London.