

TWO HOPLITE RUNNERS AT SOUNION

(PLATE 94)

WHILE WALKING in southern Attica in November of 1983, I came upon the rough engraving of two hoplite figures cut in bedrock just northwest of Mont Michel, the prominent height (225 m.) overlooking the northern part of the Agrileza valley. Plate 94: a shows part of a map with the peak labeled toward the upper right. The Agrileza valley is just to the west, and Cape Sounion (not shown) is a little under four kilometers due south of Mont Michel.¹ In recent years two excavations have taken place in this area, one conducted by Konstantinos Konophagos, the other by Evangelos Kakavoyiannis.² The site of Konophagos' explorations is about half a kilometer northwest of Mont Michel, at the confluence of the Agrileza valley with the smaller Soureza valley coming in from the west. The excavation's eastern limit lies slightly up the side of the main valley. Here, just outside the excavation fence, a succession of low shelves of exposed Agrileza marble (not indicated on the map) forms a natural stairway from the bottom of the valley to the level at which the slope of Mont Michel first distinguishes itself from the valley wall. The hoplite figures are cut on the horizontal surface of one of these shelves approximately 50 meters above the valley floor. The spot is marked by a white X on the map.

The figures are mere outlines (Fig. 1; Pl. 94:b), made in the way customary for simple figured engravings. First, rows of shallow holes were cut into the rock to establish the basic shapes. Then these holes were rather coarsely joined by the scraping away of intervening rock. Weathering has played havoc here and there with the figures, erasing some lines and greatly enlarging others, but the general roughness of shape and the absence of interior detailing give the impression that they were not fashioned by a skillful hand.

The larger of the two figures stands 0.76 m. tall. He wears a Corinthian helmet with low plume and carries a nearly round shield approximately 0.30 m. in diameter. Both legs are well preserved and show the figure to be in a running pose. There is no trace of his right arm fore or aft. We are probably to understand that it is in that part of its to-and-fro movement where it is hidden by the runner's body and shield. The figure is not wearing greaves, nor is there any indication that he is carrying a weapon. He is thus an athlete running in a hoplitodromos.

The hoplite is not running alone but is pursued by a smaller competitor, who stands 0.36 m. tall and carries a shield 0.13 m. in diameter. The weathered condition of the rock leaves some uncertainty, but with the aid of water and earth I was able to establish that the smaller hoplite is similar in every way to his larger opponent. He is a running figure whose right arm is not shown. He sports a Corinthian helmet with low plume but does not wear greaves or carry a weapon.

¹ The map is a photograph of part of sheet XV of *Karten von Attika*, E. Curtius and J. Kaupert, ed., Berlin 1881–1891.

² Kakavoyiannis' excavation is on-going, and therefore no report has appeared. Konophagos excavated for three years, 1976–1978, and published a brief report in his book, *To αρχαίο Λαύριο*, Athens 1980, pp. 375–389.

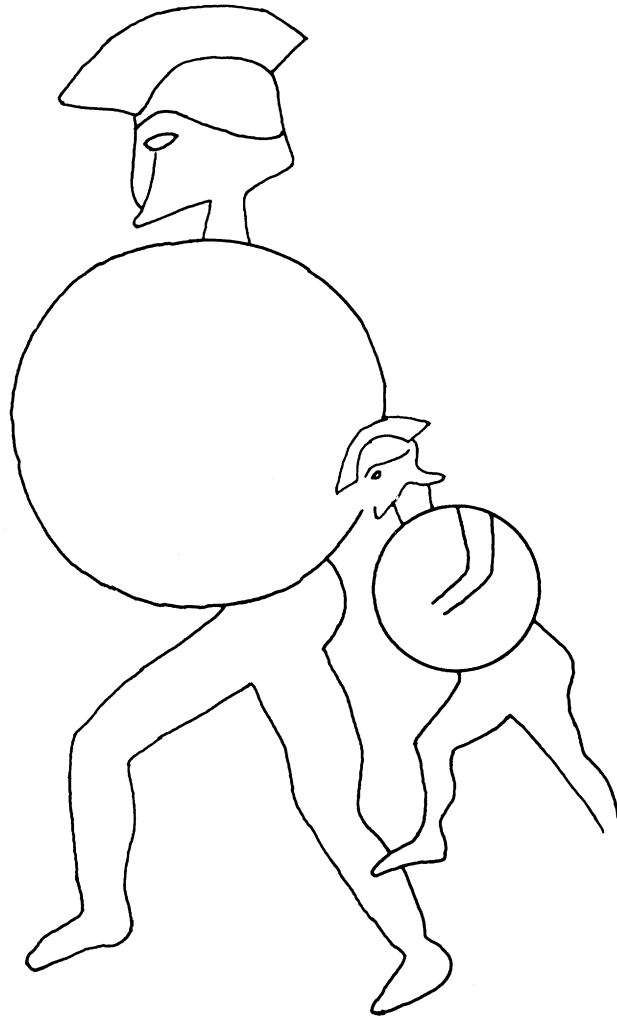


FIG. 1. Drawing of hoplite runners at Sounion. Scale 1:6

The smaller hoplite is more bent over, as if making a great effort to catch up with his fellow contestant. Although the engraver did not use a thinner line for the smaller figure, he seems to have cut him to a much smaller scale in order to suggest that he is trailing in the race. Yet at the two points of overlap, the smaller figure's head and right foot with the larger figure's shield and left calf, it is the smaller hoplite who overlaps the larger one. This is not visually consonant with the suggestion that the smaller figure is in the rear. But since we are dealing with a simple and rough engraving, we should be ready to excuse such infelicities of perspective and give credit where it is due. Thus the larger hoplite is to be understood as greatly outdistancing his opponent and winning the race.³

³ The overlapping is so carefully rendered as to indicate contemporaneity of the two figures. I rule out the possibility that the smaller hoplite was cut first and the larger one added at some later date.

An arm- or leg-shaped outline appears on the shield of the smaller hoplite. It is not possible to discern whether its lower end terminates in a hand or a foot. If the shape were meant to be his left arm as if seen through a transparent shield, arm and neck would be greatly malaligned. If it were a shield device, it would be difficult to find a parallel. In Attic vase painting, the largest body of pictorial evidence for shield devices, I know of no human arm devices, and while human legs are not uncommon on shields on vases, they do not resemble the shape of the object depicted here.⁴ The engraver was obviously not well versed in the niceties of figure engraving or vase painting. If he meant to show the hoplite's arm, he was not bothered by its unconvincing position, and if he meant a shield device, he did not feel constrained by the conventions of painterly art. Nor did he feel impelled to give the two figures equal treatment, for the larger hoplite's shield presents only an empty expanse of uncut rock.

Although the hoplite engraving is in a well-exposed location quite within the confines of the deme center of Sounion,⁵ there can be no question that we are dealing with an official honorary monument for the winner of a hoplitodromos. Honors conferred by the deme on one of its own would take the form of a stele with relief or a statue, not a coarse rupestral drawing. Nor can it easily be viewed as an unofficial commemoration by the family or a friend of an athletic victor. Since no names accompany the depictions, I am inclined to see the drawing as merely a doodle, perhaps scratched by a sports fan or someone who was dreaming about competing in a hoplitodromos.

It remains to attempt to date the engraving, an especially difficult task when, as here, it involves a crude rupestral carving. I know of no other rock-cut depiction of a hoplite runner that could be used for comparative dating purposes. There is a fully armed hoplite cut in the rock of a marble quarry near Ephesos,⁶ but it is no help in dating the figures at Sounion. Attic vase painting provides a better basis for comparison because of the popularity of hoplite runners as subjects in black and red figure from the latter 6th century to the middle of the 5th. Yet a comprehensive survey of the scenes showing hoplite runners yields mixed results with respect to the chronological development of the equipment used in the event.⁷ Greaves and Corinthian helmets are more common in black figure, while in red figure the greaves are frequently missing and the Chalcidian helmet is more common. Yet enough

⁴ With very few exceptions among the several dozen known human-leg devices, the leg depicted is the left leg. In no case does the device extend all the way to the edge of the shield as the object does here. There are two shallow, round holes above and below the object. I take them to be fortuitous pockmarks.

⁵ I use the term "confines" in no official sense. I simply mean that the rocky shelf with the engraving is located in the area of house remains and bottle-neck domestic cisterns which are identified by some, myself included, as the deme center of Sounion because of the finding of *IG II² 1180*, a deme decree of Sounion, in a modern slag heap some 300–400 meters to the north. For the findspot, see P. Wolters in A. Kordellas, «ΛΑΥΡΕΩΤΙΚΑΙ ΑΡΧΑΙΟΤΗΤΕΣ», *AM* 19, 1894 (pp. 238–247), pp. 244–246. Most recently in opposition to the Agrileza site as the deme center: H. Lauter, "Das Teichos von Sunion," *Marburger Winckelmann-Program 1988*, 1989 (pp. 11–33), pp. 26–27.

⁶ Cf. W. Alzinger, "Ritzzeichnungen in den Marmorbrüchen von Ephesos," *JÖAI* 48, 1966–1967 (pp. 61–72), pp. 66–70. The hoplite, 0.40 m. tall, is dated by Alzinger to around 470 B.C.

⁷ The fullest discussions are J. Jüthner, *Die athletischen Leibesübungen der Griechen*, II, *Einzelne Sportarten*, i, *Lauf-, Spring- und Wurfbewerbe*, *SBWien* 249, 1968, pp. 112–134 and G. Neumann, "Der Waffenlauf im antiken Griechenland," in *Der Tübinger Waffenläufer (Tübinger Studien zur Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte 4)*, U. Hausmann, ed., Tübingen 1977, pp. 31–44.

scenes show a mixing of the costume to restrain us from stating any but a general chronological rule, namely that in the course of time the greaves disappear and the preferred helmet type becomes the Chalcidian. The hoplite runners at Sounion, wearing Corinthian helmets but no greaves, cannot readily be compared with any of the painted scenes. I would not want to date them more closely than around 500 B.C., with generous latitude left on both sides of that date. The near-by settlement that served as the deme center became a mining boom town toward the end of the 6th century. It was then, or early in the 5th century, that one of the settlement's residents probably cut two hoplite runners on a patch of near-by bedrock.

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b. Rock with engraving of hoplite runners



a. Map of Agrileza Valley