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# **Xiphos**

The **xiphos** (Ancient Greek: ξίφος [ksíphos]; plural **xiphe**, Ancient Greek: ξίφη [ksíphe:])<sup>[1]</sup> is a double-edged, one-handed Iron Age straight shortsword used by the ancient Greeks. It was a secondary battlefield weapon for the Greek armies after the dory or javelin. The classic blade was generally about 45–60 cm (18–24 in) long, although the Spartans supposedly preferred to use blades as short as 30 cm (12 in) around the era of the Greco-Persian Wars.

### **Etymology**



Iron xiphos, Thessaloniki museum

Stone's Glossary has xiphos being a name used by Homer for a sword. The entry in the book says that the sword had a double-edged blade widest at about two-thirds of its length from the point, and ending in a very long point. [2]

The word is attested in Mycenaean Greek Linear B

form as  $\exists h \in A$ , qi-si-pe-e. $\frac{[n \ 1]}{A}$  A relation to Arabic  $\underline{saifun}$  ('a sword') and Egyptian  $s\bar{e}fet$  has been suggested, although this does not explain the presence of a  $\underline{labiovelar}$  in Mycenaean. $\underline{[10]}$  One suggestion connects Ossetic  $\ddot{a}xsirf$  "sickle", $\underline{[11]}$  which would point to a virtual Indo-European  $*k^wsibhro$ -.



Modern reconstruction of a Greek xiphos and scabbard.



Actaeon holding a xiphos. Painted vase from Metaponto, c. 390–380 BC

#### Construction

Most *xiphe* handles followed a two-piece construction (similar to a knife) using either native woods or for more exotic imports like ebony and animal bone. The two slabs were attached to the tang of the sword, secured via two or three pins and then made smooth via filing giving the characteristic oval shape of a *xiphos* grip. Hand guards usually followed a "bridge" shape and were either also of organic material or iron or a combination of both, also secured via pins on each point. Some swords found in Italy or Macedonia tended to have an iron extension/reinforcement running along the handle (see picture of modern reconstruction of a *xiphos* made by Manning Imperial above).

There have been finds of *xiphe* with hilts decorated with gold foil. These swords were most likely ceremonial since they are always found in burial sites.

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Surviving *xiphe* are relatively rare, but appear alongside iron weapons in burial sites, indicating both a household status and continued use into the Iron Age. [12]

### **History**

The period between the Classical and Iron Ages is often referred to as a "dark age", but it featured important developments and innovations in metal casting, alloy construction, and procurement as widespread use of metallurgy slowly spread out of Iberia. [13]

The xiphos sometimes has a midrib, and is diamond or lenticular in cross-section. It was a rather light weapon, with a weight around 450–900 g (0.99–1.98 lb). It was generally hung from a baldric under the left arm. [14] The *xiphos* was generally used only when the spear was broken, taken by the enemy, or discarded for close combat. Very few *xiphe* are known to have survived.



Iron *xiphos*, *khopis* and iron spear heads, Thessaloniki Museum

The *xiphos*'s leaf-shaped design lent itself to both cutting and thrusting. The origin of the design goes back to the Bronze Age; the blade of the *xiphos* looks almost identical to the blade of the Mycenaean Naue II sword, which itself transitioned from having a blade of bronze into a blade of iron during the Archaic period. It is likely that the *xiphos* is the natural evolution of the iron version of the Naue II but with a more sophisticated handle design.

The leaf-shaped short swords were not limited to Greece, as mentioned, but can be found throughout Europe in the late Bronze Age under various names. [15]

The early Celtic La Tène short sword, contemporary with the *xiphos*, had a virtually identical blade design as the xiphos. [16]

## **Bronze sword myth**

Contrary to popular belief, no example of a *xiphos* made from <u>bronze</u> has ever been found. The several whole or partial *xiphe* blades found in places such as Olympia, Macedonia and Southern Italy were all made exclusively from iron. Furthermore *Xiphos* swords only began to appear centuries after typical Bronze Age weapons - such as the Naue II - had transitioned from bronze to iron. In reality the <u>Bronze Age sword</u> during the <u>Bronze Age</u> was a completely different weapon, and Xiphe were not developed until after the end of the Bronze Age circa 1200 BCE. Researchers think the misidentification of Bronze Age ornaments has created the modern-day myth that the *xiphe* were ever cast in bronze.

#### See also

- Gladius
- Khanda
- Iron Age sword
- Kopis

Makhaira

#### Notes and references

#### **Notes**

1. Qi-si-pe-e is thought to be the <u>dual number nominative case</u> form of \*qi-si-po; that is, its meaning is "two swords". It is found on the <u>PY</u> Ta 716 tablet. [3][4][5][6] Mycenaean ‡⊕ ₹, pa-ka-na, could be an attested form of φάσγανον, phasganon, the famous <u>Homeric</u> word for sword. [7][8][9] A sword is usually represented iconographically in Linear B by the ideogram ♣.

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#### **External links**

Casting (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R62TPFzBQ40)

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