

Θέσθαι τὰ ὄπλα

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This expression is not infrequent in the historians, but its exact sense is hard to grasp. According to the *Lexicon of Liddell-Scott-Jones (LSJ)* the phrase τίθεσθαι τὰ ὄπλα has four senses, but this section is so badly arranged that it is very hard to follow. The senses are there distinguished as: ‘**a** *rest arms*, i.e. halt with arms in an easy position but ready for action ... **b** *bear arms, fight* ... **c** *lay down arms, surrender* ...’ (with two examples which do not involve surrender!) ‘**d** τὰ ὄπλα εὖ τίθεσθαι, *keep your arms in good order*.’ It is obvious that **d** does not belong with this idiom, since it is a part of the large class of examples where the verb is qualified by εὖ or καλῶς, e.g.

εὖ μὲν τις δόρυ θηξάσθω, εὖ δ’ ἀσπίδα θέσθω. II. 2. 382.

Where it is used with ὄπλα in Xenophon it is in fact in the present.

τὰ ὄπλα εὖ τίθεσθε. Xen. Cyr. 4. 5. 3.

This implies that the arms are to be kept all the time in good condition. But the other three senses are normally used in the aorist, and it is likely that the phrase reproduces an order used in military drill. But it is not altogether clear what action a hoplite would take on receiving the order θέσθε τὰ ὄπλα.

There is a well-attested sense of τίθημι *place on the ground, put down* something being carried. A very clear example comes from an inscription at Epidaurus:

ἐκελίσατο θέμεν τὰν κλίναν, ἐφ’ ἅς τὰν Σωστῶ[ράταν ἔφε]ρον. Schwyzer *DGE* 109. 31.

In the middle:

τοὺς μεθ’ αὐτοῦ θέσθαι κελύσας τὰς ἀσπίδας καὶ αὐτὸς θέμενος, τὰ δ’ ἄλλα ὄπλα ἔχων. Xen. *HG* 2. 4. 12.

Here they laid aside their shields, but kept hold of their other weapons. But in a few passages of later Greek laying down one’s arms is mentioned as a sign of surrender:

εἰς πεντακοσίους δὲ θεμένους τὰ ὄπλα παραδοῦναι σφᾶς αὐτούς. Diod. Sic. 20. 31. 5; 20. 45. 7.

It is important to note that θέσθαι τὰ ὄπλα here has its literal meaning and does not, *pace* LSJ, mean surrender.

ὁ ... στρατιώτης τὰ ὄπλα θεῖς πέπανται τῆς πολεμικῆς μανίας. Plu. 2. 759a.

The use of the active does not seem to be significant here, the middle being more frequent as the arms involved are one's own. The sense is presumably 'on laying aside his weapons'. It has nothing to do with surrendering.

We can therefore concentrate on the two principal uses of this phrase. It is obvious that when marching the hoplite carries his spear on his shoulder, and when halted allows the butt to rest on the ground. This is parallel to the modern rifle drill, where when marching the weapon is carried on the shoulder at the slope, and when halted may be lowered so that the butt rests upon the ground. This action is described in English by the command 'Order arms!'. But it appears that the Greek phrase means something more than merely resting the spear while halted. In some cases the word ἀντία is added, which must imply that the spear is held out facing forwards.

ἀπικνέονται ἐπὶ Παλληνίδος Ἀθηναίης ἰζὸν καὶ ἀντία ἔθεντο τὰ ὄπλα. Hdt. 1. 62. 3; 5. 74. 2.

It is clear that it does not mean 'halted there', but 'grounded their spears facing forwards', the normal meaning of ἀντίος. This would be achieved by placing the butt on the ground a short distance behind the feet and holding the spear at an angle pointing forwards, so that it could easily be lowered to meet an attacker.

In other cases θέσθαι τὰ ὄπλα alone seems to have the same meaning.

ἀπικόμενοι δὲ ἔθεντο πρὸ τοῦ ἰσοῦ τὰ ὄπλα. Hdt. 9. 52.

ὑπεχώρησαν πρὸς τὸν λόφον καὶ ἔθεντο τὰ ὄπλα καὶ οὐκέτι κατέβαινον, ἀλλ' ἠσύχαζον. 'They retreated to the ridge and took up a defensive posture, and stopped coming down, but remained still.' Th. 4. 44. 1.

It is not always possible to be sure if this meaning is intended, but I know of no example where this is not a possible meaning. For instance

θέμενοι δὲ ἐς τὴν ἀγορὰν τὰ ὄπλα. Th. 2. 2. 4.

This describes the Theban force which had been secretly admitted to Plataea; they entered the city unobserved, so they would not simply have halted in the market-place, but would have prepared for an attack by the citizens.

ὁ δὲ θέμενος τὰ ὄπλα ἐγγὺς κήρυκα προοπέμπει. Th. 7. 3. 1.

The Athenians were thrown into confusion, but formed a line of battle to confront the Syracusans. Gylippus brought his troops close and halted them in a defensive posture while he sent a herald forward to parley.

There are a number of examples in Xenophon's *Anabasis*. For instance, two groups of Greek troops started attacking each other. An officer named Proxenus then came up with his detachment.

εὐθύς οὖν εἰς τὸ μέσον ἀμφοτέρων ἄγων ἔθετο τὰ ὄπλα καὶ ἔδειτο τοῦ Κλεάρχου μὴ ποιεῖν ταῦτα. Xen. An. 1. 5. 14.

He led his men between the opposing parties and put them on the defensive while he appealed to one of the officers to stop what he was doing. He eventually calmed them down.

καὶ παυσάμενοι ἀμφοτέροι κατὰ χώραν ἔθεντο τὰ ὄπλα. An. 1. 5. 17.

Both parties rested their arms on the spot they occupied; they had not yet abandoned any intention of fighting.

A little later Cyrus arrested Orantas and ordered the Greek officers to bring their hoplites,

θέσθαι τὰ ὄπλα περὶ τὴν αὐτοῦ σκηνήν. An. 1. 6. 4.

They were to make a ring round his tent to prevent any interference with the proceedings inside.

In some cases we find added the words ἐν τάξει. This can only mean that they took up a defensive posture while formed in line of battle.

καὶ ἐν τάξει θέμενοι τὰ ὄπλα συνήλθον οἱ στρατηγοὶ ... παρ' Ἀρτιάδων. An. 2. 2. 8.

ἅμα δὲ ὄρθρω παρήγγειλεν ὁ Κλέαρχος εἰς τάξιν τὰ ὄπλα τίθεσθαι τοὺς Ἑλλήνας ἥπερ εἶχον ὅτε ἦν ἡ μάχη. An. 2. 2. 21.

The use of the present is remarkable; it must mean that he ordered the Greeks to take up and hold a defensive posture on the spot they occupied at the time of the battle. Similarly when a force of three hundred canoes arrived, each holding three men, two of them disembarked and

εἰς τάξιν ἔθεντο τὰ ὄπλα. An. 5. 4. 11.

This was certainly an unfriendly act. I would therefore suggest that in this sense the phrase is best rendered as *stand on guard*.

The perfect passive of τίθημι is normally supplied by another verb, κείμαι. So we find an example of this phrase with κείμαι substituted. Xerxes' spy sent to observe the preparations to defend Thermopylae was unable to see the men behind the wall; but he was able to observe those in front of it.

ὁ δὲ τοὺς ἔξω ἐμάνθανε, τοῖσι πρὸ τοῦ τείχεος τὰ ὄπλα ἐκείτο. Hdt. 7. 208. 2.

He was astonished to see that those who had been ordered to stand on guard outside the wall were exercising and combing their hair.

Once this sense is established it is then possible to see how the phrase developed an extended meaning. Those who have experienced military service in wartime will know that actual combat occupies only a very small fraction of their time, but preparing and standing by for it, often in uncomfortable and dangerous positions, is the common lot of the soldier. It is quite possible for troops to serve throughout a campaign without ever being in action, but their mere presence may have had an important bearing on the result. Thus it is not surprising that a phrase which originally meant *to stand on guard* was extended to cover being on active service.

Examples where it means simply *to serve as a soldier, be under arms* only appear from the fourth century BC.

οὐτ' ἐν Πειραιεῖ οὐτ' ἐν ἄστει ἔθετο τὰ ὄπλα. Lys. 31. 14.

It is obvious that this is not a statement of where he did not halt, but indicates that in neither place did he serve as a soldier in its defence. In the present:

ὁπόσοι περ ἂν ὄπλα ἱππικὰ ἢ πεζικὰ τιθῶνται καὶ πολέμου κεκοινωνήσωσιν. Pl. Lg. 753b.

Here the original sense is clearly being lost: 'all who serve as soldiers on horse or on foot.'

χειροτονούντων δὲ στρατηγούς μὲν καὶ ἱπάρχους πάντες, ταξιάρχους δὲ οἱ τὴν ἄσπίδα τιθέμενοι. Pl. Lg. 756a.

The infantry commanders are to be chosen by all who serve in the ranks; the substitution of ἄσπίδα for ὄπλα no doubt emphasises that the cavalry did not take part.

θέμενος τὰ ὄπλα δις μὲν ἐν Σάμῳ, τρίτον δ' ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ πόλει, τῷ σώματι τὴν εὐνοίαν ... ἐνεδείξατο. Dem. 21. 145.

οἶδε πάτρας ἔνεκα σφετέρας εἰς δῆρον ἔθεντο
ὄπλα καὶ ἀντιπάλων ὕβριν ἀπεσκέδασαν. Inscr. ap. Dem. 18. 289.

ἔθετο τὰ ὄπλα μετὰ τῆς πόλεως. IG 2². 666. 12.

ὄς ἂν στασιαζούσης τῆς πόλεως μὴ θῆται τὰ ὄπλα μηδὲ μεθ' ἐτέρων. Arist. Ath. 8. 5.

πρὸ τῆς Σαλαμίνοσ ἐν ταῖς ναῦσι τὰ ὄπλα θέσθαι καὶ διαγωνίσασθαι κατὰ θάλατταν. Plu. Cim. 5. 2.

The phrase can even be used figuratively:

ἐν τῇ τῆς ψυχῆς στάσει τίθεσθαι τὰ ὄπλα πρὸς τὸ λογιστικόν. Pl. R. 440e.

It would appear therefore that the sense given by LSJ as **a** needs to be redefined as *to stand on guard*, and senses **c** and **d** should be assigned to other sections of the article.