

Who fought in the ancient Greek Battles of Himera? Chemical evidence provides answers

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Temple of Victory at Himera, Sicily, constructed by the defeated Carthaginians after the first Battle of Himera in 480 BCE. Credit: Katherine Reinberger

Geochemical evidence reveals that armies in the Battles of Himera were a mixture of locals and outsiders, according to a study published March

24, 2021 in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* by Katherine Reinberger of the University of Georgia, US, and colleagues. These data contradict certain claims made in historical accounts by ancient Greek writers.

In 480 BCE, the ancient Greek city of Himera successfully fought off a Carthaginian army. In 409 BCE, Carthage attacked again, and Himera fell. Historians of the time, including Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus, write that Himera stood strong in the first battle thanks to the aid of Greek allies, while it went unaided in the second battle. However, given the limited and partisan perspective of those ancient historians, these accounts are liable to be incomplete and biased.

The authors of the present study tested these historical claims against [geochemical evidence](#). They sampled strontium and oxygen isotopes from [tooth enamel](#) of 62 soldiers who fought in the battles. The soldiers' tooth chemistry varied based on their region of origin.

The researchers found that only about one-third of Himera's soldiers from the first battle were local to the area, while around three-fourths were locals in the second battle, corroborating the written claims that Himera was more aided by outsiders the first time than in the second battle. However, the evidence also shows that, contrary to written accounts, many outsiders were not Greek allies, but were instead mercenaries hired from beyond Greek territories.

This study demonstrates the power of archaeological remains to test the claims of historical texts and reveals a potential bias in ancient writings. Ancient Greek historians might have intentionally downplayed the role of foreign mercenaries in the Battles of Himera in an attempt to maintain a more Greek-centric narrative and to avoid the subject, potentially distasteful to Greek society, of hired foreign mercenaries.

The authors add: "Here we were able to use isotopes to support ancient

historians, while also challenging those sources by finding evidence of mercenaries and potentially foreign soldiers from very diverse geographic origins. This study is also important to future studies of migration in the Mediterranean by expanding the network of comparative isotopic values."

More information: Reinberger KL, Reitsema LJ, Kyle B, Vassallo S, Kamenov G, Krigbaum J (2021) Isotopic evidence for geographic heterogeneity in Ancient Greek military forces. *PLoS ONE* 16(5): e0248803. doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0248803

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