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Continuity, Ideology, & Culture in Recent Studies of Greek Land Warfare

Grand Ballroom L Friday 1:30

Scholars working on Greek land warfare have been numerous and active, a creative and contentious bunch in the last decade or so. In fifteen minutes I have no hope of even mentioning all the historians who have contributed to our knowledge. I apologize in advance. And, inevitably, those I do mention may not be any happier. I really do find much of the scholarship in this field exciting and admirable, both the views developed in the nineties by scholars such as Josiah Ober and Victor Hanson, what I'll be calling the orthodox position, and the revisionists of the last decade such as Hans Van Wees and Peter Krentz. I personally know and like several of the scholars involved. Alas I can hardly just blandly agree with and praise views that often stand in direct opposition to each other; Van Wees entitled his book *Greek Warfare: Myths and Realities* and I'm not nearly post-modern enough to say I agree with and believe in both the myths and the realities. Nonetheless, I can say that these are tricky issues and that our evidence is often indecisive; many of the arguments on both sides are plausible, but I've discerned precious few knock-out punches. It is easier to be fascinated by this topic than to know who's right.

I plan first to touch on a couple of new ideas about the interaction of culture, ideology, and Greek warfare. Second I'll consider the argument that the pure hoplite formation was confined to the fifth-century. I'll reserve most of my time for recent critiques of the thesis that archaic land warfare was limited by conventions that broke down in the fifth century—a topic that involves all of my title concepts, continuity, ideology, and culture.

First, culture and ideology. One of the fascinating aspects of 1990s scholarship was the way that hoplite warfare was seen as a natural outgrowth of the egalitarian and agrarian aspects of archaic culture. While Hanson, and Ober focus on the quotidian experiences of hoplite farmers, J. E. Lendon in his engaging and creative *Soldiers and Ghosts:A history of Battle in Classical Antiquity* goes back to the role of culture in an older and higher sense. He focuses on the role that Homeric epic played in the practice and conception of Greek warfare: "The heroes of epic always sat invisible upon the shoulders of the Greeks, whispering their counsel." (37) This relationship provides the main perspective uniting Lendon's wide-ranging and insightful explorations of the competitive ethos and especially "the hoplite ideal of competition in passive bravery." (86-7).

Turning to ideology, Hans Van Wees has taken aim at the notion that military service justified political rights. The connection between service and rights was always ideological and never a simple representation of social reality. For example, the issue of who really matters in war was often a matter of controversy, liable to divergent interpretations—Aeschylus' insistence that the capture of the little island of Psyttaleia by hoplites was more important than the concurrent naval battle of Salamis provides a salient example. The import of Van Wees' argument however, is more complicated than it first appears. The statement "those who took part in war had political rights" is false. But the argument that "those who took part in war ought to have political rights" is, nevertheless, well attested: it must have been expected to have some persuasive force. The argument from military service did not always determine practice, but that is a far cry from showing that it had no influence on people's thinking and thus on politics and the course of history—as Kurt Raaflaub has shown.

Let us now turn to our second topic, a key issue in the practice of hoplite warfare. The orthodox view holds that clashes between tightly packed formations of hoplites constituted the main part of land warfare from the seventh through most of the fifth century. Only in the late fifth century did other troops—cavalry, peltasts, slingers, and archers— begin to play an important role in Greek land warfare. In contrastVan Wees argues for a long period of loose and fluid formations in which hoplites, often equipped with throwing spears, fought along side light-armed soldiers of various sorts. It was only in the fifth century that somewhat tighter formations of hoplites by themselves dominated battle. His basic arguments are two

First, he rebuts the notion that hoplites could only fight in formation because their shields protected only their left sides. This was true only while hoplites faced forward and advanced into battle—thus the comments of Thucydides about formations creeping to the right as they advanced. But when hoplites fought they turned sideways to each other with their shield side in front—as can be seen in vase paintings and figurines. Thus the shield protects both sides; this observation opens the possibility of a more open and fluid formation in the archaic period, and also a less crowded classical phalanx.

Van Wees' second main argument is that the pure hoplite formation was a fifth-century innovation. Up to 600 BC, hoplites are depicted on vases—and occasionally in poetry—as fighting in conjunction with other types of troops and often equipped with throwing spears. Despite the difficulties in interpreting vase paintings as evidence for actual military practices, I am inclined to accept Van Wees' arguments for a more open and fluid battlefield up to 600BC. His argument is more difficult to make for the sixth century: he concedes that there are far fewer picture of hoplites with throwing spears or light-armed troops interspersed with hoplites; hand-to-hand combat seems to be the

rule. This last seems to me to mark the crucial transition to hoplite warfare, which I would thus put earlier than Van Wees.

I turn now to the theory of the limited hoplite contest—and its discontents. In the 1990s an appealing grand scheme of the military history of 700-300 BC dominated scholarship. According to this model, archaic warfare, largely consisting of hoplite battles, was a rule-bound and limited way of fighting; these limiting conventions served the interest of the farmers who dominated city-states and fought as hoplites. The breakdown of this way of fighting began in the fifth century: war became more intense as limits broke down. In a series of incisive articles Peter Krentz has challenged this model—seconded now by a book-length treatment by John Dayton. Three of Krentz's objections derive from the nature of our evidence.

First the tidbits we hear about sixth-century land warfare, when hoplite battle is supposed to have been most limited, include various cases of deception, tactics, and vigorous and bloody pursuit of defeated enemies. We may, of course, be dealing with the selective reporting of the unusual, the cases where a man bites a dog and it makes the newspapers. But without detailed descriptions of archaic battles conducted according to conventions, it is hard to prove what was actually "usual"—not to mention the possibility of "rules" mainly observed in the breech.

Second, our first detailed historical accounts are of wars in which such limits are thought to have broken down: the Persian Wars and then the Peloponnesian War. In this case, orthodox scholars are in the awkward position of having to explain why our first really good evidence does not reflect previous practices, but rather a new and relatively unlimited mode of fighting. I say awkward advisedly: plausible counter-arguments can be made on behalf of the orthodox view: the Persian Wars were fought against a non-Greek enemy and thus the conventions, deriving in part from fellow-

feeling among Greek farmers, were tossed aside; the fifth century was so full of political and cultural changes and the rivalry between Sparta and Athens, both atypical states, was so intense that the manifest breakdown of many limits during the Peloponnesian War is not difficult to explain.

Krentz's third source argument is a related one: the sources that do refer explicitly to archaic conventions limiting war begin in the classical period. These may well be idealizing the past rather than accurately depicting archaic practices. For example, Demosthenes (9.48) idealizes the wars of the ancestors as lawful and open in contrast to Philip's tactics, but these wars turn out to include the Peloponnesian war, which was, in fact, anything but a limited war.

The second main avenue of revisionist attack is to consider the reasons for limits on warfare. This is a complicated matter. Josiah Ober lists no fewer than twelve limits on hoplite warfare in the archaic period. These must be considered one by one; the history of declaring war or returning the loser's dead under truce is not the same as that of pursuing a defeated enemy or killing captives. Nor are motives typically unmixed and singular. This is obviously not a subject for one part of a fifteen-minute talk, but two examples will illustrate the main lines of the revisionist argument.

First, the obligation to return the enemy dead and to erect a trophy were certainly conventions; they meant that every battle had an agreed winner and loser, that the opponents communicated with each other, and that the mutilation of the dead was taboo. But this ritual closure of a battle persisted through the classical period; thus the revisionist see continuity between archaic and classical practices rather than the breakdown of an earlier limit. That classical warfare could nevertheless be intense and bloody permits the revisionists to minimize the significance of the burial truce and trophy as a limit on warfare's destructiveness.

Second, the limitation of archaic hoplite warfare to one period of the early summer was determined by practical considerations. Farmers fought when they could afford to leave their farms. Several revisionists emphasize that there were merely concrete and practical reasons for several of Ober's limitations on warfare. The weakness in this argument hinges on the word "merely." Even functionalist or exclusively practical explanations for limits on the conduct of war say something, indeed say something important, given that the escalation of warfare is often dramatically dysfunctional for everybody involved, but occurs nevertheless.

Historians need not confine their interest to limits that arise out of niceness. Victor Hanson, for example, waxes eloquent upon "the wonderful, absurd conspiracy" that led to a limited form of war and the "agrarian utopia" that resulted: wonderful certainly sounds nice, but conspiracy is not a metaphor implying altruism. Indeed, Victor Hanson's work as a whole grows out of a keen awareness of the practical reasons for these limits, how this system of warfare suited the farmers' schedule. And central to Ober's explanation of constraints on warfare is the question *cui bono*; he, too, is plainly not expecting to find altruism.

Nevertheless, it would be foolish to eliminate all factors other than the utilitarian from an explanation of Greek warfare; war is not independent of culture. Can it have made no difference to archaic warfare that it involved armies coming from the same strata of society in different cities? That the combatants generally shared a single religion, language and culture? Numerous historical parallels—and the counter-example of the Persian Wars—suggest that such factors can and likely did make a difference.

Some revisionists emphasize one new and crucial factor to explain the intensification of warfare in the fifth century: the increase in the wealth and power of

the state in the period from 550-450. Hans Van Wees and Louis Rawlings in particular emphasize that war became intense, not because of a breakdown in limiting conventions, but because warring states were more and more capable of harnessing manpower and resources—for example, they possessed the resources necessary to conduct a protracted siege of another city; Athens seems to have been able to field vastly larger armies after the establishment of the democracy than it was in the sixth century. I find this theory an appealing one, albeit one that is not mutually exclusive with the thesis of the breakdown of limits. War could have become more intense because states had greater power, because they became more willing to use it, or both.

A basic assumption behind both sides of this argument is one made famous by Carl von Clausewitz: war tends to become more and more intense up to the limits of the combatants' power. Therefore we need to explain how it is ever limited. Another perspective is possible: in the absence of technological advances, wars, especially those fought against the same enemies, tend to be fought in the same way: before the modern age generals not only prepared to fight the previous war, they often ended up fighting it. Hence we should seek positive explanations for the changes in and intensification of warfare in the fifth century. One place to look is democratic Athens, which seems to have been outstanding in its conscious attempt to optimize its military, from the ship-building of the early fifth century, to the construction of the long walls (and the between wall) to the creation of an archer corps and state subsidies to create a strong cavalry. This is a topic covered by several of the essays in the forthcoming collection edited by David Pritchard.

In conclusion, a long-lost theory of the anthropologist Hugh Turney-High allows us to draw together two main areas of contention. Turney-High argued that primitive war ends when we find a battle line, that is a formation that men may not leave on their

own initiative. This seems, at first, an oddly concrete definition: what about ritual? what about religion? what about different motives for war? But the existence of a line in which men are required to stand, fight, and die requires a level of community power over the individual that usually comes only with a strong state. Hence the revisionist model that posits the late development of the rigid hoplite phalanx and the late development of state powers and wealth may go together. To me the question remains the sixth century, a period in which we may not have quite the evidence we need for decisive conclusions either about state powers or about the hoplite phalanx.