

CLASSICAL WISDOM LITTERAE

◆ A LETTER FOR THE CLASSICALLY-MINDED ◆



When I first started to plan this month's newsletter, I had thought vaguely about 'war'. Military history has always been fascinating to me and is, undoubtedly, important and instrumental to study in order to understand a large part of the ancient world.

Buuuutt... Perhaps 'war' was a little *too* broad. I had to narrow it down! But how? Should it be just Roman? Greek? Assyrian? Each division was still way too immense.

Fortunately for all, I was saved by Mary Naples. She sent me an excellent article on the Amazons (page II) and a new theme immediately presented itself, that of the 'warrior'.

With this concept now before me, my mind began to whirl. What makes a soldier or a general a warrior? Is it a specialized form of combat? Or unique warfare skills? Is it a label reserved to honor those who just *war* better than others?

While maybe the modern connotations are such, in the ancient world a warrior was a much more specific thing.

First, it is a person who belongs to a warrior class... something we don't have 'technically' have these days.

But secondly, and perhaps the most importantly, is that a true warrior partakes in a very high code of conduct. These ethical and honor codes have a purpose, to stave off corruption as well as ensure the safety of the citizenry from their own warrior class. But more than anything, it elevates them. It is what makes a soldier, hoplite or officer something more courageous, something more valiant: it makes them a warrior.

Read on to learn about *Kleos* (page VI), a driving force for the ancient warriors, as well as the Spartan training methods (page XIII). We also look into a few examples of the greatest warriors, both fictional and nonfictional (page IX and XII). And most certainly, don't forget Mary's article on the famous female warriors, the Amazons....

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[Classical Wisdom](#)

IN THIS ISSUE:

II. *The Return of the Amazons:* Mary Naples

V. *The Face of the Amazon*

VI. *Kleos: Death and Glory:* Van Bryan

IX. *Ajax: Clean your Soul:* Ben Potter

XII. *Top 10 Real Life Warriors from the Ancient World*

XIII. *Spartan Training, Crafting Warriors of Legend:*
Van Bryan

THE RETURN OF THE AMAZONS

BY MARY NAPLES



On the vast steppes of Eurasia, in an area the Greeks referred to as Scythia, lay the remains of a young woman approximately twenty to thirty years of age, dating back to the fourth century BCE. Although the common feminine accoutrements, such as mirrors and jewelry, were buried alongside her, there were some unpredictable items around her as well. Two iron lances mark the entrance to her burial mound, along with an enormous armed leather belt, bronze-tipped arrows and various other instruments of war.

Moreover, her deathblow came in the form of a battle-ax smashed through her skull demonstrating without a doubt that this woman was a warrior.

But as brave and daring as this young woman may have been, she was not an outlier. Thousands of burial mounds such as this one can be found from Bulgaria to Mongolia. Before the onset of DNA testing, these grave sites were believed to be those of male warriors. But we now know that in some areas fully thirty-seven percent of all the burial mounds excavated are those of female warriors, complete with battle scars and surrounded by their tools of combat.

In a time when women were seldom seen and almost never heard, could these plucky Scythian women be the famed Amazons for which Greek writers of antiquity were so fond of reporting?

Steeped in Greek culture, the Amazons were a notorious force to be reckoned with for heroes and gods alike. From Homer and Herodotus to Strabo and Plutarch, their stories were part and parcel of the Greek tradition. So interweaved in Greek mythology that Amazons were a popular theme in Greek art, with their images and statuary adorning public, private and sacred spaces. In vase art the Amazons were second only in popularity to Heracles himself, meanwhile artifacts show that dolls with the Amazon's distinctive headgear have been found

in the graves of young girls in Greece and the surrounding area.

But the question that has long vexed scholars throughout the ages is were they real or imagined?

Although writers of antiquity wrote about the Amazons as historical fact, most latter-day historians believed that Amazons were the stuff of legends. Yet today it is no coincidence that the area pinpointed by Ancient Greek writers as home to the Amazons is also a region rife with the remains of warrior women. More and more scholars are revising their assessments about the authenticity of the Amazons as DNA testing is proving that the antiquarians may have been right all along.

But who were the Amazons? And how did they live?

Eurasian women, in an area known as Scythia to the Ancient Greeks, highly resemble the caricature we have of the Amazons. Indeed, the ancients were well aware that the women to whom they referred to as Amazons were actually Scythians, a nomadic people who



lived in a myriad of small tribes within the vast territory of Eurasia. Once Scythians began breeding horses they flourished becoming famous for their mounted warfare.

When the Greeks started establishing colonies along the Aegean coast of Anatolia from 1000-700 BCE, Scythians and Greeks began having skirmishes. Not coincidentally this was around the time that the Amazons began to capture the Greek imagination. In the eighth century BCE, Homer was the first to consider them in *The Iliad*, which is set in the Bronze Age (2800 BCE- 1050 BCE) several hundreds of years before Homer composed the epic.

But the Amazons were not a Greek invention as some scholars have insisted over the years. In addition to Greek mythology, non-Greek narratives from such ancient cultures as Persia, Egypt, India and China include stories about nomadic warrior women as well.

Unfortunately, the Scythians themselves were pre-literate so we have to rely heavily on Ancient Greek and non-Greek sources to fill in the blanks for us about their lives. Notwithstanding archeological and linguistic artifacts, how else can we learn about the warrior women?

The truth is, though the Scythian nomadic culture was without writing, it was not without stories.

These stories, called the *Nart* sagas, were an ancient oral tradition of the Caucasus reckoned to be as old, if not older, than Homer's famous epics. The sagas depict a race of warrior horsewomen who strongly resemble our notion of the Amazons. Largely independent from the yoke of marriage, these women were courageous and forthright; characteristics the Greeks attributed exclusively to the male gender.

Furthermore, the sagas suggest a possible etymological link to the word Amazon itself, as one of their vignettes portrays a

famous queen called Amezon. Alas, life for a warrior woman was often dismal, poor Queen Amezon discovered that the warrior she killed in battle was none other than her beloved.

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The name “amezon” is an example of the word in its native origin, but the Greeks had their linguistic equivalent of “amazon” as well. One persistent myth that has dogged the Amazons has an etymological link to their name. Most archaeologists now agree that Amazons did not cut off their right breasts, or any breasts for that matter. Yet the myth of their only having one breast has endured throughout the ages.

Why the tale? Perhaps the reason lies in the word “Amazon”. Broken down etymologically in Greek, “a” meant without and “mazos” means breast. Were the ancient Greeks trying to make the Scythian women look even more exotic than they were, putting a further distance between them and their secluded Greek counterparts?

To be sure, the chasm between Greek women and their nomadic sisters was wide enough already without the single-breasted fable as the two cultures were poles apart in their treatment of the fairer sex.

In the Amazon's resource scarce nomadic society, everyone was expected to pitch in to do his or her part. Indeed, scarcity became a great liberator as girls trained right alongside boys in hunting and warfare. After all, females were just as effective at riding horseback, thrusting spears and slinging arrows as their male counterparts.

(It should be noted that although warrior women likely fought together as a group, as yet there is no evidence to support that the Amazons existed as a society unto themselves without males, as the Greeks attested. In fact, burial grounds from the region demonstrate that warriors, both men and women, lived together as a populace.)



*Amazon Preparing for Battle
or Armed Venus*

Because there was no set age for marriage, nomadic

women and men were free to commingle with each other before marriage and even to take on other lovers after marriage. Due to the seasonal patterns that are typical in nomadic life, they migrated from pastures in the summer to campsites in the wintertime. Each spring brought bands of tribes together as a means of forging alliances, thus inter-tribal unions were accepted and even commonplace.

Many experts assert that in most tribes women were warriors until they had children, at which point they stayed with their kin; that is unless a mother chose to fight. It is believed that a woman had some agency in how she wanted to live, though primarily young or childless women were the warriors.

It must have been astonishing for Greeks to discover the freedom afforded to unattached nomadic women. After all, Greek girls, no more than fourteen or fifteen years of age, were more often than not kidnapped by their suitors and then confined in marriage to a life of servitude and domesticity. In direct contrast, amongst the nomadic tribes, competition between males and females was



A helmeted Amazon with her sword and a shield bearing the Gorgon head image, Tondo of an Attic red-figure kylix, 510–500 BC

frequently encouraged. As marriage was not rigged in favor of the male from the onset, there was some parity between the lovers, something utterly foreign to the Greek way of thinking.

Make no mistake, despite the tall tales of man-haters on the one hand or promiscuous vixens on the other, Greeks admired, even idolized, the warrior women and have the stories to prove it.

Three of Greek's leading heroes had life-changing encounters with the race of warrior women. In the ninth of his twelve labors, Heracles was forced to strip the magical girdle off of their warrior queen, Hippolyte, one of the tribe's fiercest fighters. Unsurprisingly, it did not go well for the Amazon queen. Not one to realize his own strength, Heracles, in an attempt to strip Hippolyte of her belt, ended up killing her.

The second hero was Achilles, who fell head over heels in love with another of their queens, Penthesilea. But tragically he discovered his attraction to her while they were engaging in hand-to-hand combat on the battlefield. Indeed, it was only after Achilles killed Penthesilea that he realized, alas too late, that he had fallen madly in love with her.

And finally, Theseus, the mythological first king of Athens, kidnapped then married Antiope, yet another Amazon queen and daughter of Ares, god of war. This



The Amazon Queen Penthesilea



Jupiter and Antiope, Antoine Watteau. 1714 - 1719.

made her queen of Athens and sparked a war between the Amazons and the Athenians.

In each of these vignettes, the Amazon either dies nobly at the hands of a Greek hero or in the case of Antiope is treated no worse than a Greek woman.

Amazingly, for all their misogyny, no other “race” of people is handled as justly in Greek mythology as the Amazons. After all, Amazons were portrayed as being brave and daring, adventurous and enterprising, independent and forceful; qualities the Greeks had sorely discouraged amongst their women, much to their disadvantage.

Although the myths are considered in the realm of fiction, the substance behind them is real; their content is palpable. Experts now maintain that it was not uncommon for women and men to engage in hand-to-hand combat. And conversely, in an example of art imitating life, it may not have been uncommon for Greeks and Amazons to fall in love. In fact, it should come as no surprise that the

Greeks were

enamored of the warrior women, as DNA testing has now shown that the Amazons were tall, athletic and fair skinned, just like those in the Greek pantheon.

Through the primordial haze of antiquity, we can start to make out the form and texture of the warrior women and the lives they led. We begin to see a shadow, a shrouded image, which was hidden in obscurity for eons, but is now coming into clearer focus.

But alas, examining a pre-literate culture dating back over three thousand years has its distinct disadvantages. Although much has been discovered about their lives, much, much more still remains to be learned... 🐼

Is this the face of an ancient Amazon female warrior?

This replica shows visage of a 16 year old fighter buried with her weapons and horses. Her remains - unearthed in the Altai Mountains - suggest likenesses to the fabled all-female Amazon warriors as known to the Greeks. Entombed next to a much older man, she lay beside shields, battle axes, bows and arrowheads, along with nine horses. The renowned Siberian archaeologist, Dr Natalya Polosmak, who located her remains in 1990, speculated the teenage warrior who died around 2,500 years ago could have belonged to an elite all-female corps of warriors within the Pazyryk culture in the mountainous region of southern Siberia.





KLEOS: DEATH AND GLORY

BY VAN BRYAN



Today we are traveling thousands of years into the past, to a time when the lives of gods and men became hopelessly intertwined, when ten-year wars were waged for honor, and when the heroes of the age fought tooth and nail to achieve their *kleos aphthiton* (eternal glory).

That's right, we are talking about heroes. More specifically, we are talking about Greek heroes or tragic heroes; some of you may already know that those two things are one in the same.

To understand the Greek hero and, more importantly, *kleos*, we must first understand the Greek song culture and the role that lyrical poetry, specifically Homeric poetry, played in the lives of classical men and women.

Hero worship in ancient Greece was a cultural staple, and lyrical poetry was the medium through which stories of heroic myths were passed down through generations.

The ancient Greeks would have understood the tales of Achilles, hero of *The Iliad*, or Odysseus, the namesake of *The Odyssey*, in the same way that the stories of Jesus Christ are known by much of Western civilization.

N.B. I'm not comparing Achilles and Odysseus to J.C. I'm merely stating that the overarching mythos of the Homeric characters would have been familiar to anybody from that age and culture in a way that the story of Jesus Christ is familiar to Western civilization and beyond.

Moving on...

So epic poetry was told, retold, and passed through the generations in the days of ancient Greece. It became something of a common thread within the ancient Hellenic society. For while

Greece shared a common land mass, language, and religion, it was not one country.

The tradition of reciting the Homeric epics and retelling the tales of Achilles, Agamemnon and Odysseus would have been a shared cultural tradition through all of Greece—from Athens to Sparta, Crete to Corinth.

What Is Kleos?

Okay, okay. That sounds all well and good. The poor ancients didn't have television or Xbox so they passed their time reciting Homeric verse. There are certainly worse ways spend an evening.

But let's get to the question at hand. Remember, we were talking about the tragic hero and his, or her, pursuit of kleos. So, first things first. What is kleos?

The first thing we should recognize is that there is not an exact translation for kleos. It most closely translates to "glory" or, more specifically, "what people say about you".

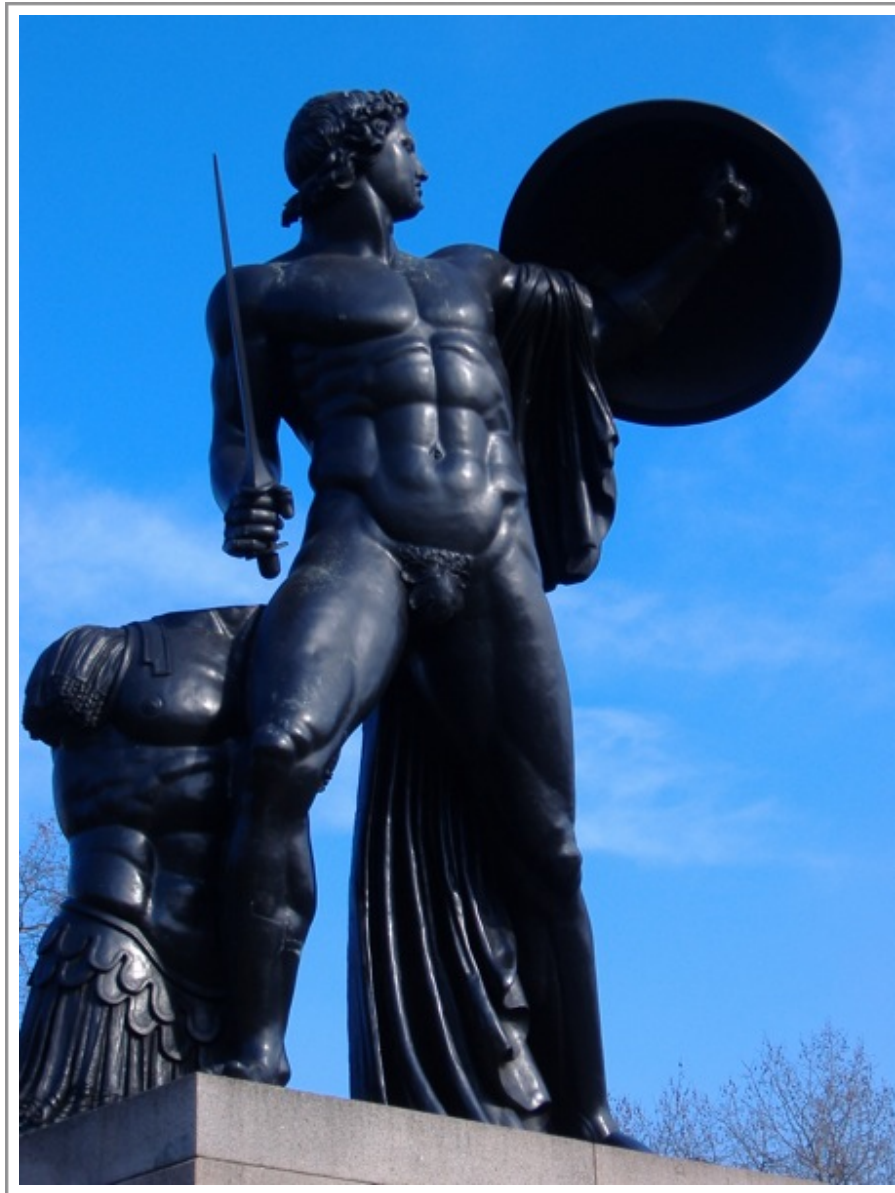
When it comes to heroic glory, kleos is actually the medium AND the message. Kleos was the glory that was achieved by Homeric heroes who died violent, dramatic deaths on the field of battle. However, kleos also referred to the poem or song that conveys this heroic glory.

The Iliad, therefore, is a type of kleos. It is the song of Achilles, the main hero of the epic who achieved eternal glory on the battlefields of Troy. Another name for the city of Troy was Ilium. This is where we get the name "Iliad".

However, kleos is not just something that is handed to you. You have to pursue it, often at great personal sacrifice. Achilles is quoted as saying...

"My mother Thetis tells me that there are two ways in which I may meet my end. If I stay here and fight, I will not return alive but my name will live for ever (kleos): whereas if I go home my name will die, but it will be long ere death shall take me." –Achilles (*The Iliad*)

Here we get to a major crux of the Homeric epic. It is that all-important question for classical heroes. Do they die young and gloriously, and have their names live on forever? Or do they live long, humble lives, but die as anonymous old men?



Statue of Achilles in Hyde Park, London

To answer this question, let's take a look at another Homeric hero, one that I'm certain you have never heard of.

In book XI, Homer takes something of a detour to tell us about the little known hero, Iphidamas. Here is a man who is an ally to King Priam and the Trojans; he was one of the first warriors to take up arms against the Achaeans (the Greeks) when they set sail for Troy. He is also the first warrior to face King Agamemnon in battle.

"Tell me now ye Muses that dwell in the mansions of Olympus, who, whether of the Trojans or of their allies, was first to face Agamemnon? It was Iphidamas son of Antenor..." – Homer (*The Iliad*,

Book XI)

Iphidamas' part within *The Iliad* is short-lived. Agamemnon kills him and strips his armor from his body.

"...he (Agamemnon) then drew his sword, and killed Iphidamas by striking him on the neck. So there the poor fellow lay and slept the sleep of bronze, killed in the defence of his fellow-citizens, far from his wedded wife." –Homer (*The Iliad*, Book XI)

So, what's the big deal? Iphidamas is just one more dead soldier in a great war? Why do I bother to bring him up?

The part you don't know is that Iphidamas had been wed to a beautiful woman around the same time that the Achaeans set sail for Troy. Given the choice to stay and live

in newlywed bliss or go and fight the Greeks, Iphidamas does not hesitate to abandon his newlywed wife to fight and die in battle.

Why does he do it? You guessed it, for kleos.

Achilles makes a similar choice.

Prompted by the death of his comrade, and lover, Patroclus, Achilles sets off in a fit of rage to slay Patroclus' killer, prince Hector of Troy.

He does this knowing full well that with the death of Hector will signal the coming of his own untimely demise. He presses on nonetheless. Achilles will not be denied his glory.

Why Do Heroes Need *Kleos*?

Some of you might be wondering what exactly is wrong with these ancient warriors. Achilles storms off towards his certain death when he could just as easily live a long life back home. Iphidamas leaves his loving wife, opting instead to die on the battlefield.

They did it for kleos, for glory. But why? Why was glory so important that these men would forfeit their lives to achieve it?

Now that really is the question.

The answer has to do with the immortalizing power of kleos. Achilles chooses his eternal glory, which would live through the centuries in Homeric verse, over his natural life, which is destined to end in death.



Wrath of Achilles, Michel-Martin Drolling, 1810

From the perspective of our modern culture, we might assume that stories of heroism are not as “real” as our own lives. The idea that we might live on forever in the hearts and minds of our countrymen does not have as much credence today as it did in the Homeric world.

After all, it was the great

philosopher, Woody Allen, who said...

“I don’t want to achieve immortality through my work; I want to achieve immortality through not dying. I don’t want to live on in the hearts of my countrymen; I want to live on in my apartment.”

However, we must remember that ancient Greece was a song culture. The Homeric epics were not merely fiction. They were considered to be real. More importantly, they were thought to convey the ultimate truth-values of the ancient Greek culture.

To a Homeric hero, a glorious death was more important than a long life. Achilles would have viewed his kleos, his eternal place in history, as being just as “real”, perhaps more so, than his actual life.

Also, the ancient heroes, more than anything else, strived to be god-like. The defining trait of gods is their immortality. Achilles, although he was born to immortal Thetis, a water nymph, is a mortal.

By achieving kleos, the hero, in a sense, achieves immortality. He is godlike, eternally glorious. His name will forever be remembered and recorded in the catalogues of human history. So now we come to understand the paradoxical idea that, in order to live forever, a hero must first die gloriously. 🐦



AJAX: CLEAN OUT YOUR SOUL

BY BEN POTTER



Aias to the Greeks, Ajax to the Romans, now known to us as the anglicized Ajax, he was 'the best of all men that ever came to Troy, save only Achilles'.

However, Ajax's status as number two in the Greek pecking order wasn't always fully appreciated. After Achilles perished when the arrow fired by the Trojan prince Paris pierced his Achilles' heel (oh the irony!) and Ajax gallantly carried his fallen comrade from the battlefield, it was assumed that the coveted armor worn by the slain hero would pass on to the number two warrior, Ajax.

However, the Greek commander Agamemnon and his brother, husband of the wanton Helen, Menelaus had other ideas. Persuaded by his eloquence, they decided to give the armor to Odysseus.

So what's the big deal? Ajax is a wealthy prince and a mighty warrior, surely he doesn't need Achilles' armor, right?

Wrong.

The armor is not merely precious, useful and a wonderful souvenir which could rival a piece of the true cross, but it is hugely symbolic. It is so saturated in symbolic honor that to be denied it, Ajax has been forced to suffer a *de facto* demotion.

This snub is enough to tip a character, who is often portrayed as tactless, boorish and arrogant, totally over the edge.

He resolved to steal out into the night and enter the beach encampments of his fellow Greek commanders whereupon he would kill whomever he could and bring the rest back to his own tent for torture.

This, Ajax achieved... or at least thought he had achieved. Instead the goddess Athena, looking to protect her favorite, Odysseus, sent Ajax mad so that instead of mutilating Agamemnon, Menelaus, et al, he butchered a flock of sheep.

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An Old Myth with a Twist

It is at this point, with sanity suddenly returning to him, that Sophocles' *Ajax* begins.

However, an Athenian audience wouldn't have been

waiting with bated breath to see what was in store for the man whose stock has dropped from the heights of second greatest of all the Greeks to being a traitor and maniacal livestock botherer. They already knew his fate; he was to commit suicide.

Whilst myths are able to evolve and Athenian

tragedians do often significantly change major details of stories, this one was perhaps a step too far even for the innovative Sophocles to tinker with.

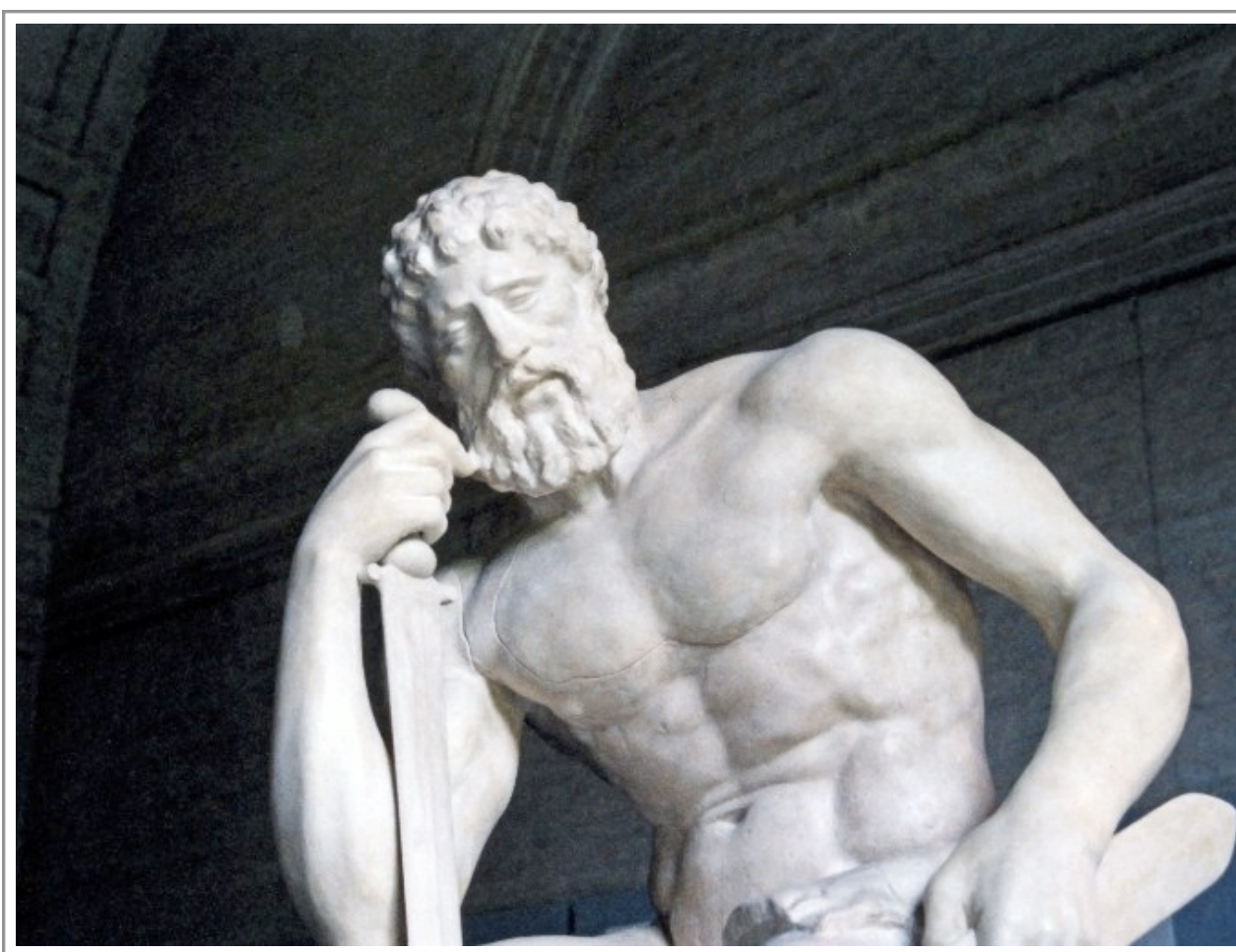
Instead what he does is develop Ajax's tragic flaw. Quite obviously pride would be the one to play up, but Sophocles mixes it with a shot of blasphemy to make a cocktail of hubris.

There is some minor evidence for such impiety in *The Iliad*. In book XI, Ajax won't listen to the gods when they instruct the Greeks to retreat from the battlefield, but continues fighting nobly and bravely when the other heroes are making their tactical withdrawal.

Also, most Greek heroes are honored by a patron deity who watches over them. Odysseus and Diomedes have Athena, Achilles has Thetis; even the Trojans Paris and Hector have Aphrodite and Apollo respectively. However, Ajax is alone.

It is this theme that Sophocles nurtures as we learn that Athena did not merely send Ajax wild to save her dear Odysseus, but to punish the doomed man himself. The Messenger (a stock character in ancient tragedy) highlights just why this is:

"The gods have dreadful penalties in store for worthless and redundant creatures, mortals who break the bounds of mortal modesty. And Ajax showed he had no self-control the day he left his home. 'Son,' said his father –



Reflecting Ajax, Munich

and very properly – 'Go out to win, but with God beside you.' 'Oh,' said Ajax with vain bravado, 'any fool can win with God beside him; I intend to win glory and honor on my own account.'"

Thus Ajax is seen not only as a character with a deeply flawed personality, but one

who is on the end of Divine retribution.

So the question that crops up isn't so much 'did he deserve his fate' as 'can we feel any sympathy for him at all'?

Tragic Hero or Not?

Well... Ajax was honor-bound to come to Troy by the oath sworn during his courtship of Helen. In Sophocles, Ajax is less concerned with rescuing the stolen princess than with trying to please or even emulate his father Telamon, who himself sacked Troy in the previous generation along with Heracles – a feat, of course, which Ajax has been unable to better.

Telamon, “the man who never smiles”, is the only man who Ajax seems afraid of and indeed he comments timorously: “How will he welcome me, when I come home empty-handed?”

It feels like Ajax been pushed all his life to try and accumulate

kleos (reputation) and succeed at every turn simply in order to be able to step out of his



father's shadow. The failure to gain Achilles' armor would have been seen as unacceptable in Ajax's own eyes and presumably also in those of Telamon.

Can we find sympathy for a man whose every waking thought is centered round yearning for his father's approval? Is this something which reinforces Ajax's pathetic vanity? And in turn does it cause us to pity rather than despise him?

Sophocles includes a "family scene" which contrasts starkly to its inspiration in book VI of *The Iliad*. It involved Hector, his wife, Andromache and their son, Astyanax. Hector, knowing he was going into mortal combat from which he may not return, is depicted as a loving husband and gentle father.

The parody in Ajax shows the 'hero', not going nobly into battle, but about to selfishly and capriciously commit suicide. In these final moments they can share together he is very curt and snaps at his wife, Tecmessa. He hopes that his son, Eurysaces, will be as good a man as he is, only more lucky. Hector, on the other hand, desired that Astyanax would emulate him, going on to bigger and better things. This makes it seem like Ajax can't bear to be outshone by anyone, not even his own flesh and blood!

Both men also worry about their wives being sold into slavery should they die. However, by committing suicide and Tecmessa being a foreigner, Ajax has all but guaranteed this fate for her.

The dramatic irony of this scene causes us to feel great pity for poor Tecmessa, an innocent victim of a self-destructive and proud fool who, instead of being the linchpin of victory in the Trojan War heaps woe upon woe, tarnishes his reputation, enslaves his loved-ones, bereaves his loyal and loving half-brother and leaves his father without an heir.

The Grave Issue of Burial

However, this is not the only way in which Sophocles creates suspense, pity and fear. Ajax falls on his sword just over half way through the story, the rest of the play is a struggle between Ajax's half-brother, Teucer and the opposing, gloating siblings, the sons of Atreus, Agamemnon and Menelaus.



Death of Ajax - Henri Auguste Calixte Cesar Serrur

The tension comes about because Teucer is being denied by the Atreidai (the sons of Atreus) the right to bury Ajax.

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Prohibition of burial rites might seem like more of an insult than a real tragedy to us, but it was of vital importance to the Greeks. It was not a matter of life and death, it was much more important than that!

Indeed, the importance of burial rites ties in with the fact that Sophocles has been, very wrongly, accused of making a hash out of Ajax due to the fact that the main character dies, and therefore the climax is reached, so early in the performance.

What these critics don't understand is that the death is a foregone conclusion, common knowledge to all, but the burial of Ajax is far from guaranteed. Consequently, this sacred rite, the blasphemous denial of which would leave no Athenian theatre-goer sitting comfortably, creates tension and drama of the very highest order. Especially as all the men at the crux of the debate are edgy, angry and highly dangerous.

Indeed some interpret the play as reflecting the mental pressure on men in the appalling conditions of siege-warfare, far away from their homes and loved-ones and with the constant threat of slavery or annihilation hanging over their heads.

An Enemy in Life, but a Friend in Death

However, the play ends on a hopeful note thanks to a most unlikely source.

Odysseus, acting like a *deus ex machina*, manages to convince Agamemnon that Ajax, despite his faults, deserves a burial. Although Agamemnon doesn't really concur and is amazed that Odysseus, mortal enemy of Ajax, wants to help Teucer, he allows him to do as he pleases.



And these are the words with which Odysseus guides the heart-broken Teucer through his darkest hour:

"I have this to say to you: I am your friend henceforth, as truly I was your enemy; and I am ready to help you bury your dead and share in every office that we mortals owe to the noblest of our kind.;"

And thus Odysseus shows us that even in death, even through enmity, even when blood has been shed, bile been spat, even when hate and hostility trickle from the lips more readily than any words of friendship or conciliation.... even then there is still room for someone to step in and make things right, to honor the gods through a kind act and to lighten, even slightly, the weight upon a bereaved and dejected soul. 🙏

Top 10 IRL Warriors from the Ancient World

1. Alexander the Great (356 BC - 323 BC) spent most of his ruling years on an unprecedented military campaign through Asia and north-east Africa. He created one of the largest empires of the ancient world by the age of thirty, stretching from Greece to northwestern India. He was undefeated in battle and is widely considered one of history's most successful military commanders.

2. Hannibal (247 - 181 BC) was a Carthaginian general, considered one of the greatest military commanders in history. One of his most famous achievements was at the outbreak of the Second Punic War, when he marched an army which included war elephants from Iberia over the Pyrenees and the Alps into Italy.

3. Scipio Africanus (236 BC - 183 BC) was a Roman general and later consul who is often regarded as one of the greatest generals and military strategists of all time. His main achievements were during the Second Punic War where he is best known for defeating Hannibal at the final battle at Zama, one of the feats that earned him the agnomen Africanus.

4. Leonidas (540 - 480 BC) was a warrior king of the Greek city-state of Sparta, famous for his stand in the battle of Thermopylae.

5. Caesar (100 - 44 BC) played a critical role in the events that led to the demise of the Roman Republic and the rise of the Roman Empire.

6. Alcibiades (450 - 404 BC) played a major role in the second half of the Peloponnesian War as a strategic advisor, military commander, and politician. Basically, whichever side he was on, was winning.

7. Antony (83 - 30 BC) played a critical role in the transformation of the Roman Republic from an oligarchy into the autocratic Roman Empire.

8. Brasidas (d. 422 BCE) was an enterprising and successful Spartan general during the early years of the second Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. His successes against the Athenians tilted the balance of the war back towards the Spartans after their disaster at Pylos.

9. Flamininus (229 BC - 174 BC) was a Roman politician and general instrumental in the Roman conquest of Greece. He chased Philip V of Macedon out of most of Greece, except for a few fortresses, defeating him at the Battle of the Aous.

10. Philip II (382-336 BC) was the king of the Ancient Greek kingdom of Macedon. He was responsible for the rise of Macedon, establishing the foundations for the empire that his son, Alexander the Great, would create.





SPARTAN TRAINING: CRAFTING WARRIORS OF LEGEND

BY VAN BRYAN



While the Spartans may not have been running laps around the Flatiron building with a kettlebell slung over their shoulder, they certainly did undergo some of the most intensive and brutal training of any civilization in ancient history.

The Spartans, for whatever reason, wrote next to nothing of their culture, or if they did, it has been lost. Almost all of what we know of the Spartan society comes from outside observers. And while many ancient authors make mention of the militaristic Lacedaemonians, it is Xenophon, a pupil of the philosopher Socrates, who associated most with the Spartans and, as a consequence, wrote extensively of the Spartan culture in his essay *“The Polity of the Lacedaemonians”*.

“The Polity of the Lacedaemonians”, sometimes referred to as *“The Constitution of Sparta”*, is most certainly an examination of Spartan culture at the height of supremacy. However, one might also mistake it as being a slight against other hellenic city states, including his own home-town, Athens.

He never comes right and shakes your shoulders, screaming “this is how it ought to be done!”.

However, his admiration for Spartan society is so pronounced that one might find it difficult to keep in mind that Xenophon’s own birthplace, Athens, was undoubtedly Sparta’s bitterest rival.

Then again, it is possible that Xenophon’s bias might come from the fact that the Spartans took him in and granted him land after he had been exiled from Athens for associating with the Persian Empire and his support of the recently executed Socrates.

Whatever the reason for Xenophon’s admiration, there is no denying that *“The Polity of the Lacedaemonians”* is one of the most detailed descriptions of Spartan life. It lists the treatment of citizens, the education of children, and the duties of a warrior. And, at least according to Xenophon, the results seem to speak for themselves.

“I recall the astonishment with which I first noted the unique position[2] of Sparta amongst the states of Hellas, the relatively sparse population,[3] and at the same time the extraordinary power and prestige of the

“XENOPHON BEGINS HIS EXAMINATION WITH THE TOPIC OF CHILD BEARING IN THE SPARTAN SOCIETY. IT WAS THE AIM OF SPARTA THAT ALL CHILDREN BE BORN HEALTHY, STRONG, AND GROW UP TO BE WARRIORS.”

community. I was puzzled to account for the fact. It was only when I came to consider the peculiar institutions of the Spartans that my wonderment ceased.”-Xenophon (Polity of The Lacedaemonians)

Xenophon begins his examination with the topic of child bearing in the Spartan society. It was the aim of Sparta that all children be born healthy, strong, and grow up to be warriors.

With this in mind, the Spartan women were treated with a level of equality that was unheard of in the days of ancient Greece. Rather than being confined to the household, Spartan women regularly competed in athletic competitions and trained, just as the men would, in a gymnasium. The idea behind such treatment is that in order to produce the best children, both the father and the mother must be healthy, fit, and strong.

When it came to the training of the children, Xenophon makes a point to mention that within most Greek city states it is common for individual children to be educated by a tutor, normally a slave owned by the father. For the Lacedaemonians, such a practice would be unthinkable.

Instead, the Spartan boys are taken *en masse* and assigned to a group of guardians and mentors known as Paidonomos, or “pastors”. The Paidonomos were selected from the most revered of the magistracies and were assigned by the Legislature of the city. They were given complete authority over the children of Sparta, often punishing them with lashings.

While we might frown on such a practice, the result, in the words of Xenophon, was that...

“...in Sparta modesty and obedience ever go hand in hand, nor is there lack of either.” -Xenophon (Polity of The Lacedaemonians)

The actual training of the Spartan youth was brutal, focusing on cultivating skills such as fighting, stealth, pain tolerance, as well as dancing, singing, and developing loyalty to the Spartan state. With the exception of the first born sons of the ruling houses, the young boys of Sparta entered into this training curriculum, known as *Agoge*, starting at the age of seven.

They would train in the art of fighting for decades, eventually becoming reserve infantry at the age of eighteen, regular foot soldiers at the age of twenty, and eventually full Spartan citizens, with the rights to vote and hold office, at the age of thirty.

The specifics of the *Agoge* training are not clear. Xenophon does describe in some detail that young boys were not only allowed to fight, but were regularly encouraged to challenge each other to regular bouts.

“Necessity, moreover, is laid upon them to study a good habit of the body, coming as they do to blows with their fists for very strife’s sake whenever they meet.”- Xenophon (Polity of The Lacedaemonians)

To develop a tolerance for pain, the Spartan youth were deprived of certain luxuries. For instance, during the *Agoge*, Spartan boys were never given shoes. In time, their feet would grow hardy and strong. It is reported by Xenophon that a barefooted Spartan soldier could outrun and out climb any other Greek citizen clad with shoes.

Additionally, the boys were given only one garment of



Spartan Hoplite

clothing. They were regularly subjected to extreme cold, all while only wearing a single cloak. In this way the young soldiers would gain a tolerance to the elements.

They were given minimal food, not so little that they would ever suffer from the sharp pangs of hunger, but never enough that their body would be completely satisfied. This was, again, a way to condition the boys for the pains of hunger and allow them to fight all the more ferociously on an empty stomach.

“AND SO THE YOUNG SPARTANS WERE CRAFTED AND HONED INTO SOME OF THE GREATEST WARRIORS OF THE ANCIENT WORLD. THEY KNEW NO OTHER LIFE THAN THAT OF PROTECTING THE SPARTAN HOMELAND AND THEY SOUGHT NO HIGHER GOAL THAN AN HONORABLE DEATH IN SERVICE OF SPARTA.”

If the boys wished to find meals outside of their mess halls, it was encouraged that they should steal food. This might seem strange. While the boys were encouraged to steal, they were also severely beaten if they were ever caught in the act. Xenophon rationalizes such a practice by saying that in this way those who lack proper stealth will be punished and learn to acquire their quarry more effectively.

“So they, the Lacedaemonians, visit penalties on the boy who is detected thieving as being but a sorry bungler in the art. So to steal as many cheeses as possible [off the shrine of Orthia[17]] was a feat to be encouraged; but, at the same moment, others were enjoined to scourge the thief, which would point a moral not obscurely, that by pain endured for a brief season a man may earn the joyous reward of lasting glory.” -Xenophon (Polity of The Lacedaemonians)



Marble statue of a helmed hoplite (5th century BC), Archaeological Museum of Sparta, Greece

And so the young Spartans were crafted and honed into some of the greatest warriors of the ancient world. They knew no other life than that of protecting the Spartan homeland and they sought no higher goal than an honorable death in service of Sparta.

It would have been unthinkable for a Spartan warrior to retreat while on the battlefield. As regular infantry, the soldiers would rather die in battle rather than face the shame of retreat in Sparta.

This tradition of bravery and ferocity in battle has recently been dramatized in popular media and has captured the imagination of modern society.

For whatever reason, the ancient Spartans remain a topic of intense fascination. They lived according to a code of war. And whenever they entered battle, they knew that they would either return home carrying their shields, or else carried upon it. 🏹

Spartan Code of Honor:

The Spartan hoplite followed a strict laconic code of honor. No soldier was considered superior to another. Suicidal recklessness, berserkery, and rage were prohibited in a Spartan army, as these behaviors endangered the phalanx. Spartans regarded those who fight, while still wishing to live, as more valorous than those who don't care if they die. They believed that a warrior must not fight with raging anger, but with calmed determination. Spartans must walk without any noise, and speak only with few words. Spartans are dishonored if they drop the shield (rhipsaspia), fail to complete the training, or desert in battle. Dishonored Spartans were labeled outcasts, and were forced to wear different clothing for public humiliation.