

## BOOK REVIEW

*Combat Trauma and the Ancient Greeks*. Edited by PETER MEINECK and DAVID KONSTAN. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Pp. xiv + 310. Hardcover, \$95.00. ISBN 978-1-137-39885-7.

War is traumatic and it always has been. Given recent conflicts and renewed interest in veterans returning home, it is natural that combat trauma in ancient warfare is receiving more attention. As the editors explain, this volume is the result of a 2011 conference on combat trauma and ancient theater connected with the NEH funded program *Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives*. The conference organizers brought together a range of specialists on Greek history, culture, and texts to address several questions: was there combat trauma in the ancient world, is it reflected in the extant literature, and can we detect responses to such trauma? Fortunately, the organizers did not limit their discussion to trauma suffered by soldiers. The result is a generally useful set of discussions that demonstrates the benefits of asking new questions of old evidence while considering various traumas resulting from conflict in ancient Greece.

In his introduction David Konstan opens by acknowledging the seminal work of Jonathan Shay on veterans' homecoming, trauma and ancient texts. If anyone can be said to have initiated recent work on the topic of the conference, it is Shay.<sup>1</sup> Konstan surveys one key problem in studying combat trauma in ancient Greece—the lack of any recognition by contemporaries that there was soldiers' trauma resulting from war. He does not dismiss evidence of trauma, but draws attention to the lack of interest ancient authors gave to it or to a connection to warfare. In introducing the topic and the evidentiary problem underlying it Konstan sets the stage for the chapters to follow. Kurt Raaflaub addresses the broad nature and experience of warfare in the ancient city, concluding that warfare brought many traumas. He makes the necessary point that warfare affected many people directly and indirectly, but conflict was sufficiently common that our

<sup>1</sup> J. Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995) and *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trails of Homecoming* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002). Both works were more about changing policies toward returning veterans than about the Homeric epics.

sources do not comment on all its impacts. He then covers some sample outcomes of war including care of the wounded and dead, treatment of prisoners and slaves, and the impact on families, and mothers in particular. While he cannot go into depth on any of these cases he demonstrates the issue's breadth and points out areas needing more work.

In the next two chapters William Race and Corinne Pache draw on homecomings in Homer's *Odyssey* for their discussions of Odysseus' return home and war's impact on women, respectively. Pache's chapter also draws directly on the experience of recent American Iraq-war veterans, in this case female veterans, to compare what Homer provides us about Penelope with a modern case-study.

The next four chapters focus on soldiers' experiences and the question of their combat trauma. The first two of these chapters, by Larry Tritle and Jason Crowley, provide opposing views on the presence of combat trauma in ancient Greece. Tritle crafts a strong argument that there is plentiful evidence of the existence of trauma among soldiers and Crowley, drawing heavily on a culturally constitutive argument, denies the presence of PTSD. While Crowley is correct that we cannot put ancient soldiers on the couch for analysis, his argument veers into polemic. The evidence, cited by both authors, seems to suggest that some soldiers (across history and cultures) have suffered from some trauma, suggesting that combat trauma is not a twentieth century phenomena. However, a key problem with any analysis of combat trauma is that while we have symptoms, we do not understand enough about the causes (neurophysiological, psychological, etc.) that might explain why some fighters experience combat trauma, regardless of what name we give it, and why others with the same set of experiences do not. If the causes of such trauma are primarily neurophysiological rather than psychological, then we will be closer to understanding why such trauma has appeared over time since the biology has not changed that much compared to culture and psychology. Retrospective diagnoses are not new to historians, nor are the debates that arise from them. These chapters show that this debate cannot be settled without more research into the causes of soldiers' combat trauma, a task beyond the scope of this volume.

Sara Monoson's account of Socrates' military activity is informative and useful. Socrates was clearly involved in combat, but Monoson effectively argues that Plato emphasizes Socrates' resilience. She then builds on her analysis of Socrates to show how Plato's appreciation of both veterans' resilience and the potential for trauma show up in the *Republic*. Juan Sebastian de Vivo tries in the next chapter to address trauma through the limitations of the Corinthian helmet

combined with a consideration of the post-battle *tropaion* as a construct necessary for imposing narrative order on the chaos of the finished battle. While his discussion of the helmet's limitations may be useful to some readers, the section on the *tropaion* is a stretch that leaves the whole chapter seeming out of place in this volume.

The ways in which theater reveals and dealt with war trauma eater is the focus of the next four chapters. These authors again remind readers soldiers were not the only potential sufferers of trauma. Nancy Rabinowitz' useful chapter on women in tragedies points out the complexities and repercussions of trauma suffered by women as war victims. Nancy Sherman provides a discussion of trust, trustworthiness and veterans drawing heavily on the tragedy *Philoctetes*. Alan Sommerstein effectively treats the avoidance of warfare's violence in Aristophanic comedy and Sharon James focuses on examples of familial trauma found in the comedy of Menander.

The last two chapters provide a provocative close to the volume. Tom Palaima effectively tackles the disconnect between politicians' words and the treatment of war by veterans. The final chapter, by Paul Woodruff, provides a moving in which a veteran draws on the tragedy *Electra* and discusses how plays provide contemporaries ancient and modern the means for dealing with the emotions brought on by the traumas of combat.

Taken as a whole, this is a valuable volume not just for those interested in the traumas of war suffered by soldiers and non-combatants, but also for readers considering the ways in which societies find coping mechanisms for dealing with traumas, societal and personal. Several chapters show what can be done with new approaches to old evidence as well as the limitations of some of our investigations. This successful volume is much more than its title initially suggests and its appeal should be as well.

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