

[BMCR 2016.12.09](#) on the BMCR blog

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2016.12.09

Victor Caston, Silke-Maria Weineck (ed.), *Our Ancient Wars: Rethinking War through the Classics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016. Pp. vi, 289. ISBN 9780472052981. \$45.00 (pb).

Reviewed by **Giorgia Proietti, University of Trento (giorgia.proietti@unitn.it)**

[Publisher's Preview](#)

[Authors and titles are listed at the end of the review.]

Comparative studies based on different epochs and places in the ancient world are becoming more frequent in historical research. While politics (most of all the concept of democracy, on the one hand, and interstate power relationships, on the other) dominated comparative studies in the past, in recent years the experience of war and its aftermath, including individual and collective emotions, psychological reactions, and forms of commemoration, has come to the forefront as a main topic of comparative research.¹ The present volume represents this latter trend well.

The book stems from a conference held at the University of Michigan in 2012 that was organized by Victor Caston and Silke-Maria Weineck, who are also the editors of the book as well as the authors of its introduction and epilogue, respectively. The central theme of the conference and the *fil rouge* of the present volume is how Western thinking about war and war-related phenomena in the 20th and 21st centuries turns to ancient Greek reflection on the subject.

As Victor Caston explains in his detailed introduction, the book is structured in three parts: the first is about 'Rethinking the Ancient, in View of the Modern'; the second exploits the comparative approach the other way round, that is 'Rethinking the Modern, in View of the Ancient'; the third one, named 'Other Moderns, Other Ancients', deals with classical reception studies. The contributors are interdisciplinary, including classicists and historians, philosophers, literary scholars, and political theorists.

The first three essays in the first section are of extreme interest regarding the possibility of applying modern categories, such as 'genocide', 'home front', and 'unnecessary war', to ancient phenomena. Hans van Wees argues, in light of several examples known from ancient sources, that Greek warfare demonstrated the practice of annihilation of an entire community (*anastasis*), but that for the most part it aimed at a symbolic expression of overwhelming power, rather than at physically destroying a human group for religious or ethnic reasons, as we can unfortunately witness happening throughout the world today. He argues, moreover, that there was no standard pattern for Greek genocide, but that it comprised a wide range of actions, among which massacre of adult men and enslavement of women and children were the most common. Kurt Raaflaub, who is not new to reflections on innovative aspects of ancient warfare,² investigates how in Classical Athens war affected the civilian population, both in the pre-war period, and during and after the conflict. After

reviewing the social, political and economical implications (from military training to the care of the wounded and maimed, from the commemoration of war dead to the public support of war orphans), he offers an insightful view of the impact of war on the mindset and imagery of the ordinary people, specifically women (partly through the lens of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, put on stage in 411 BC, during the Peloponnesian War). Raaflaub's contribution goes much further than illuminating the concept of 'home front' in antiquity and presents a comprehensive treatment of the social and human costs of war in Classical Athens. David Potter's essay on the problematic historiography of 'unnecessary wars' compares the narratives of the Peloponnesian War, the First Punic War and the First World War, which exhibit striking features in common (or 'narrative patterns', as Potter defines them) all aimed at dissimulating the actual reasons and responsibilities behind the conflict. The essay thus provides a significant contribution to our understanding of the mechanisms that shape historical (or, more generally, public) discourse concerning events whose brutality was far worse than expected. The article closing the first section of the book, by Sara Monoson, though not explicitly exploiting the comparative perspective, provides an original picture of the figure of Socrates, known by his contemporaries not only as a philosopher but also for his endurance (*karteria*), both physical and psychological, in battle. She suggests that Socrates' endurance can hopefully resonate with contemporary concerns about the psychological effects of combat experience.

The second section of essays, which looks at the modern through the lens of the ancient, opens with Nancy Sherman's piece on the theme of the psychological trauma suffered by veterans who served in Iraq. Recognizing the failure to live up to an ideal as the main feature of their 'moral injury', she proposes Aristotle's notion of self-empathy and self-love (*Eth. Nicom.* 9.8) as a possible key towards healing, alongside stage psychoanalysis (on which cfr. Peter Meineck in this volume, *infra*). Paul Woodruff's article also looks at ancient literature (Athenian tragedies and Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*) in order to understand how war, today as much as then, affects and changes people's moral character, and arouses a variety of behaviours and responses. The following article, by Arlene Saxonhouse, brings back the discussion to a more general and theoretical level, concerning ethics and politics, and the intertwining between the two. She addresses the problem of political responsibility and justice concerning the initiation of war (a theme that Potter's essay has already treated, although in a different light). By taking the Mytilenian debate (Thuc. 3.36-49) as a case study for reflection on the subject, she calls into question leader-focused theories which hold only public figures directly responsible for collective decisions in democratic regimes, and argues instead in favour of an active role of the populace as well: now as then, "To separate ourselves from our leaders in order to escape responsibility as a community is to turn democracy into an empty ideal" (p. 181). The following contribution by Peter Meineck, founder and artistic director of the Aquila Theatre, and of the *Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives* project, deals with combat trauma suffered by ancient and modern veterans, and the cultural therapy offered by the performance of Athenian plays both in 5th century Athens and on modern stages. It is debated whether ancient soldiers can be retrospectively diagnosed with combat trauma (the modern, clinical Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD).³ Although Meineck believes, following Jonathan Shay's and Lawrence Tritle's seminal works on the subject,⁴ that ancient and modern veterans effectively share common psychological reactions to war, it is significant that his main reflection moves from the modern to the ancient, and not the other way round. While it cannot be taken for granted that in antiquity there were social and anthropological frameworks from which post-war trauma equivalent to modern PTSD could originate, no one can doubt that veterans today (just as war veterans of 5th century Athens) can therapeutically recognize themselves in tragic characters such as Ajax or Philoctetes, as Meineck's Aquila Theatre (or analogues such as Doerries' Theater of War Project) clearly demonstrate.

The three essays included in the last section of the book exhibit a different kind of approach to the subject. Rather than comparing ancient and modern phenomena concerning war, they deal instead with the different receptions of significant figures from Classical warfare such as Achilles (in Seth L. Schein's and Susanne Göttsche's contributions) and Spartacus (in Page duBois's). In different ways they shed significant light on the cultural reception of ancient characters, themes, and phenomena (and, indirectly, of comparative research in general). Emphases on relevant aspects of antiquity change radically according to the historical context, its collective values, and semantic needs.

Silke-Maria Weineck's short, though strong, epilogue, entitled 'Distances', is striking in providing additional meaning(s) to the previous articles in this volume. She not only evokes the atmosphere surrounding the original delivery of these collected papers, where veterans, or people related to veterans in various ways, were present both among the audience and the speakers themselves, but more importantly, she renders the concrete, even problematic, relationship between American student veterans of war and academics who have never served in the military, and, more generally, between people who fight in war(s) and people who have never fought in war. An unavoidable distance divides these constituencies: a distance, however, that can be, if not bridged, at least challenged, or mediated, by rethinking war through the Classics.

The book as a whole is an excellent volume, well balanced in terms of both structure and thematic coherence, and also consistent in the methodological framework underlying the individual essays, which do not mechanically apply a comparative approach but consider every single case study in relationship with its distinctive historical context. An updated bibliography ends each essay, and a final index, comprising both ancient sources and relevant words, is provided at the end of the volume. In sum, the book makes an outstanding contribution to the understanding of different aspects of war and post-war, and the human communities involved, both ancient and modern.

Table of Contents

Introduction, Victor Caston

Part I: Rethinking the Ancient, in View of the Modern

Genocide in Archaic and Classical Greece, Hans van Wees

Lysistrata and War's Impact on the Home Front, Kurt A. Raaflaub

"War Guilt", "National Character", "Inevitable Forces", and the Problematic

Historiography of "Unnecessary Wars", David Potter

Socrates' Military Service, S. Sara Monoson

Part II: Rethinking the Modern, in View of the Ancient

Moral Injury, Damage, and Repair, Nancy Sherman

War as Education, Paul Woodruff

Deciding to Go to War: Who is Responsible? Arlene W. Saxenhouse

Combat Trauma and the Tragic Stage: Ancient Culture and Modern Catharsis? Peter Meineck

Part III: Other Moderns, Other Ancients

"War, What Is It Good For?" in Homer's *Iliad* and Four Receptions, Seth S. Schein

Modern Achilles: The Beauty of War and the Battle of the Sexes, Susanne Göttsche

"I Am Spartacus": Ancient War and Slavery in the Movies, Page duBois

Epilogue: Distances, Silke-Maria Weineck

Contributors

Index

Notes:

1. Most recently for instance: *Cultures of Commemoration. War Memorials, Ancient and Modern*, ed. by P. Low, G. Oliver, P.J. Rhodes, Oxford 2012; *War as Spectacle. Ancient and Modern Perspectives on the Display of Armed Conflict*, ed. by A. Bakogianni, V.M. Hope, London 2015; *Commemorating War and War Dead. Ancient and Modern*, ed. by M. Giangiulio, E. Franchi, G. Proietti, Stuttgart, forthcoming.

2. Focused studies on themes such as the recovery of the corpses or the treatment of the wounded exist (and are listed in Raaflaub's bibliography). Nonetheless, broad as well as far-reaching analysis of the dramatic aspects of war in antiquity are recent: see also K. Raaflaub, "Father of All - Destroyer of All: War in Late Fifth-century Athenian Discourse and Ideology", in D.R. McCann - B.S. Strauss (eds.), *War and Democracy: A Comparative Studies of the Korean War and the Peloponnesian War*, Armonk, NY, London 2001, 307-56; K. Raaflaub, "War and the City: The Brutality of War and Its Impact on the Community", in *Combat Trauma and the Ancient Greeks*, ed. by P. Meineck, D. Konstan, New York 2014, 15-46; G. Proietti, "Fare i conti con la guerra. Forme del discorso civico ad Atene nel V secolo", in *Conflict in Communities. Memories of the Past and Expectations for the Future in Archaic and Classical Greece*, ed. by E. Franchi, G. Proietti, Trento, forthcoming.

3. See for instance the variety of positions and approaches in *Experiencing War. Trauma and Society from Ancient Greece to the Iraq War*, ed. by M. Cosmopoulos, Chicago, 2007; *Combat Trauma and the Ancient Greeks*, ed. by P. Meineck, D. Konstan, New York 2014. For a refusal of the universality of combat trauma see in particular J. Crawley, "Beyond the Universal Soldier: Combat Trauma in Classical Antiquity", in *Combat Trauma and the Ancient Greeks*, (cited above), 105-130, and, concerning the Roman world, A. Melchior, "Caesar in Vietnam: Did Roman Soldiers Suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?", in *G&R* 58.2, 2011, 209-23.

4. J. Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, New York 1994; J. Shay, *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*, New York 2002; L. Tritle, *From Melos to Mylai. War and Survival*, London 2000; L. Tritle, "Gorgias, the Economium of Helen, and the Trauma of War", *Clio's Psyche* 16.2, 2009, 195-99.

[Read comments on this review or add a comment on the BMCR blog](#)

| | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Home | Read Latest | Archives | BMCR Blog | About BMCR | Review for BMCR | Commentaries | Support BMCR |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|

BMCR, Bryn Mawr College, 101 N. Merion Ave., Bryn Mawr, PA 19010