The Culture of War: an ancient Greek perspective

Introduction

The ethics of war in any place or time must depend hugely on the cultural tradition in which people of that place and time think about war. The attitudes of the Athenians of the C5 BC are of particular interest to me, not only because I know more about that period than about any time since, but also because it is possible to see, fairly clearly, a link between the cultural tradition of war and what the Athenians (and other Greeks) of the time actually did, said and thought about the wars they fought – and what *we* do, say and think

The most important influence on the culture of war in the ancient Greek world was a fictional story, the *Iliad*. That is, the poet Homer's account of part of the Trojan War. This war was believed to have been fought between a coalition of Greek cities and the city of Troy, in modern Turkey, around 1200-1100 BC, Homer sang about it circa 750 BC, and the Athenians I'm talking about lived between 500 and 400 BC. It seems that everyone living in Athens knew the work, and it was universally respected as the cornerstone of Greek history and values. It was part of the mythological framework within which almost all literature, including Athenian tragedy, was set.

It is notoriously difficult to infer from what happens in an epic poem, or from a tragedy, either the motivation of the poet or the assumptions of the different members of the audience for whom the works were intended. But here goes.

1. Courage

The overriding requirement for an *Iliad* warrior in battle was *courage*. There was the ever-present risk of dying, obviously, but no fighter could ever let that influence his behaviour. Partly this was an inculcated sense of self-respect, such as the Greek hero Odysseus's musings when he was in a tight spot in Book XI: "Damn. What am I to do now? It would be pure cowardice to run for it, frightened by the odds against me; but even more unpleasant to be trapped alone . . . But why talk to myself like this? I know cowards run from the battlefield; but the brave warrior must stand unflinching, to kill or be killed." And partly because you needed not only your own self-respect but the respect of others: the Trojan prince Hector, just before he decides to fight Achilles in single combat and inevitably be killed, speculates that, if he bottled out, he would feel "shame before the Trojan men and Trojan women in their trailing gowns".

The C5 BC Athenian man would feel the same way, albeit in a quite different military context. The soldiers of that era, rather than fighting as individuals as in the *Iliad*, generally fought as 'hoplites' (heavily armed infantry) in a 'phalanx' – a square or rectangle of soldiers packed together, charging the enemy – or resisting their charge – with all their shields forming an

impenetrable wall facing the opposition. The success of the phalanx depended on every man holding his position; if anyone started to run away, the next man would be left defenceless from one side, and the whole formation might disintegrate. A battle in that time must have a resembled a rugby scrum, a huge pushing match where eventually one side would give way and lose, not the ball, but the battle. The Athenian Socrates, usually known for going round the city annoying people by making them discuss philosophy, was renowned for his refusing to run away (at the age of 45) when the Athenians were suffering a disastrous defeat at the battle of Delium, in 424, in their long war against the other great military city, Sparta.

This attitude was required over and over again. War was endemic in C5 Greece, one statistic being that Athens was engaged in fighting in an average of 2 out of every 3 years during the century. There was no standing army, and so an ordinary citizen might be needed to fight any year until he was 60; the battles can be imagined as a scrum between middle-aged retired rugby players. So every man was in danger of dying in war at several points in his life; that is one reason why, both in the *Iliad* and in Athenian life, it was taken that the most noble thing that a man could do was to die in battle. Ideally, you would fight bravely and survive every time, but survival was a lucky extra. In the famous 'funeral speech' that the contemporary Athenian historian Thucydides puts into the mouth of the great politician and general Pericles, where he is giving the 'tribute' (as we'd say nowadays) to those men who'd died in the first year of the current war (430), he says, "To me it seems that the consummation that has overtaken these men shows us the meaning of manliness in its first revelation and in its final proof . . . They thought it more honourable to stand their ground and suffer death than to give in and to save their lives." That's what being a man was all about. A man who never fought in a war and at least risked death in battle would not be considered a real man.

2. Memorials

I've been talking about hoplites, heavily-armed infantrymen. It's worth noting that these were predominantly landowners. There were a lot of poorer, mostly landless citizens who, in Athens almost uniquely, rowed the triremes (three-banked warships, each rowed by 200 men) that fought the naval battles. But it was infantry battles that really counted in the imagination. In the wars against Persia in the first half of the C5, despite the huge importance of the naval battles of Salamis and Mycale, in 480-479, it was the less pivotal land battle of Marathon in 490 that was regarded for centuries afterwards as Athens's finest hour, their Battle of Britain moment – a battle in which the landowners of poor little Athens defeated the might of the Persian empire. The 192 men killed in the battle had their own burial mound at Marathon and – according to one plausible theory – were commemorated in the sculptures we can still see on the Parthenon temple frieze, or rather in the British Museum. These 192 were elevated to the

rank of ‘hero’, something between human and god. In much the same way, the warriors in the *Iliad* – and other great warriors of the mythical age – had hero cults still going in the C5. The funerals of contemporary Athenians were not on the same scale as the massive funeral of Patroclus in the *Iliad* (almost the whole of Book XXIII: a funeral pyre and a whole day of sporting competitions), but there was the funeral oration given each year, like that of Pericles, and the sons of fallen fathers were looked after by the state, in particular given a set of hoplite armour in a ceremony at the festival of Dionysus. (“Thank you, but what I really wanted was the latest mobile phone.”) Just as now, it was vitally important to treat the dead as heroes, to encourage future generations.

3. Leadership

What about the philosophy of leadership? In the *Iliad*, the fighters that you’ve all heard of, those that do the bulk of the fighting, are all kings: Agamemnon, Menelaus, Achilles, Ajax, Diomede, Nestor. The commanders do not sit in well-appointed mansions issuing orders by telephone to their subordinates: they actually lead. Homer even gives a rationale for their role, when the Trojans’ ally Sarpedon explains to his friend that all the honours they get in their homeland – the estates, the best food and drink, etc – oblige them to “take our places in the front ranks of the Lycians and fling ourselves into the flames of battle”. The French would say ‘noblesse oblige’.

The same convention applies in C5 Athens, too. The generals do not merely sort out strategy and tactics – of which there was very little around the pushing match that constitutes most land battles – but they lead their soldiers over the top. Many commanders died in battle. And not only among the Athenians. One of the most famous battles in history was Thermopylae in 480, where the Spartan king Leonidas and his 300 Spartans fought to the last man against the vastly superior Persian army. A later Spartan king, Agesilaus, died at the age of 84 on his way back from his latest campaign: according to Plutarch (admittedly a source almost half a millennium later), his “entire body was disfigured by wounds”. Contrast this approach with a passage from a book about the American war in Vietnam: “In Vietnam the record is absolutely clear . . . the officer corps simply did not die in sufficient numbers or in the presence of their men often enough to provide the kind of ‘martyrs’ that all primary sociological units, especially those under stress, require if cohesion is to be maintained”.

4. Democracy

Connected with the involvement of leaders in the fighting is the fact that, in Athens at least, decisions to go to war were taken not by remote rulers, but by a vote in the Athenian assembly. This was open to any Athenian citizen, that is, men who would have to fight in any war that was declared. It is unlikely that many individuals actually *spoke* in the assembly, but they could all *vote* (by a show of hands). In fact the leading politicians in Athens, those that were voted

into office each year, were called '*strategoi*', meaning 'generals', and were the very men, like Themistocles and Pericles, who would be leading the army into battle. The image we have of the First World War, caricatured in *Blackadder*, is the polar opposite: politicians in London, generals in mansions well behind the lines, ordinary men told to go over the top as cannon fodder.

5. The attitude of women

The next topic to consider is the non-combatants, especially women. It's notoriously difficult to gauge the attitude of women to war, or to anything else, since all literature we have was written by usually aristocratic men and predominantly for other men to hear (or read). But here goes. In the *Iliad* there are two categories of women, the aristocratic queens and the captive concubines – who used to be aristocratic women until the Greeks conquered their town. In Book VI there is a scene inside the Trojan palace where Hector – the top Trojan fighter, son of the king – is taking a breather, and also there are his wife Andromache, his brother Paris, and Helen of Sparta, the Greek queen Paris had eloped with, thus making her Helen of Troy and provoking the war. Hector is itching to get back to the battlefield, while his wife pleads with him to stay, since she, and their baby son who is there too, will suffer terrible things if Hector is not there to protect them. It is a touching scene, but of course Hector has to turn down her request and return to fighting: a man has to do what a man has to do. Paris, on the other hand, while not exactly a coward, much prefers hanging about with Helen and polishing his armour to doing any actual fighting. Helen, far from being grateful for his attendance, urges him to get out there and do his bit. This makes me feel that, if Hector had followed his wife's wishes and ducked out of the fighting, she would – under the surface at least – have been deeply shocked and ashamed.

There is not much written about women in accounts of C5 Athens, but one uplifting example comes from the historian Herodotus, who reports that, when the Persians were temporarily in control of Athens in 479, they suggested a deal in the Athenian assembly: one man, Lycides, spoke in favour. He was promptly stoned to death by the other Athenian men present. When the women of the city, who had all been evacuated to a nearby island, heard about this, they *en masse* "attacked Lycides's house on their own initiative, and stoned both his wife and his children to death". The odd piece of evidence we have suggests that women supported their husbands where possible – even though in Athens they had absolutely no formal power to influence decisions in the Assembly, no role in politics at all, and were seen as belonging at home while men did manly things like politics and fighting. In that funeral speech which I mentioned earlier, put into the mouth of Pericles by the historian Thucydides, there is a special passage at the end addressed to the women of Athens, whose regular function was to deal with the funerals of their relatives: "The greatest glory of a woman is to be least talked about by men, whether they are praising you or criticizing you".

Whether that is the typical view of men, let alone of women, it is clearly meant to make sense to the men expected to read Thucydides's history.

6. The fate of women

But what happened to the women if their city lost the war? Andromache knew all too well what would happen if the Greeks overran Troy; she's not making it up for rhetorical effect, as it is exactly what Hector himself predicts: "Deep in my heart I know well the day is coming when sacred Troy will be destroyed . . . what distresses me more is the thought of you, when you are dragged off in tears by some bronze-armoured Greek, your freedom gone." That is the fate that awaits women on the losing side: slavery. We've already seen examples of this at the *beginning* of the *Iliad*. The great argument between Agamemnon and Achilles concerns captive women. Agamemnon, the army leader, has had to give up the extra-special woman he was awarded when the Greeks sacked a nearby town – she turned out to be the daughter of a priest of Apollo, who has started a plague until she is returned to her father – and, out of injured pride, Agamemnon demands to take the presumably slightly less extra-special woman that Achilles was awarded at the time. Achilles is outraged, and goes on strike. The rest of the events in the *Iliad* stem from there.

That convention would be replicated several centuries later, since that is exactly what happens, or can happen, when the Athenians conquer a city. The norm, or at least one extreme of the norm, is to kill all the men and sell all the women and children into slavery. (Slavery, by the way, was a perfectly normal condition in the C5 world – nothing to do with nationality, colour, social class; if your city lost a war, you might well end up either dead or a slave. Nothing personal.) A notorious example was in 427BC, when the town of Mitylene, on the island of Lesbos, revolted from what was in effect the Athenian empire. Thucydides gives us a set-piece debate in the Athenian assembly on what to do with the citizens that have just been defeated. They had already decided to put to death the entire adult male population, and to sell all the women and children into slavery. A ship had been sent to Mitylene with orders to the Athenian army there to do just that. In fact the assembly met the next day, for the aforementioned debate, and were persuaded by a man called Diodotus (never heard of in any other connection) to relent, and they sent another ship to countermand the orders – which arrived just in time. That is an example of an extreme decision that was never enacted, but it might have been. Because . . .

In the same year, the Spartans did in fact enslave the whole female population of Plataea, and one side in the civil war in Corcyra (Corfu) sold the women who'd been on the losing side into slavery. Later, in 421, according to a brief mention by Thucydides, "The Athenians reduced Scione. They put to death the men of military age, made slaves of the women and children, and gave the land to the Plataeans to live in" – that is, the people whose city had been destroyed in

my first example. My last example is another notorious one, the island of Melos being the victim: after a long conflict, in 415 "the Melians surrendered to the Athenians, who put to death all the men of military age whom they took, and sold the women and children as slaves. Melos itself they took over for themselves, sending out later a colony of 500 men".

There are no doubt other examples, but that gives you a taste of what went on in wars fought in the C5 BC, following the example of the mythical Trojan War and the treatment of women on the losing side by the Greeks.

In fact, this custom of war did not go unquestioned, as we saw in the assembly debate about the fate of Mitylene. Euripides's play of 415, *The Trojan Women*, produced just after the fate meted out to Melos, brings the plight of captured women – especially aristocratic ones – to the attention of the Athenian audience, which probably included a large proportion of the male citizen population. We don't of course know what the audience thought about it, but we can bet that at least some of the men there were encouraged to question the convention of the day – as in most of that author's plays. We don't do that sort of thing nowadays, for the very good reason that there is no international system of slavery to make it possible. But some countries have been known to do other things, for example the invading Russian army in Berlin in 1945. [That's not just historical bias: a friend of mine is a German woman of 95 who was there at the time, and hid in an attic]. And in so many wars today there are reports of soldiers committing rape and pillage systematically, as though it is fair compensation for the inconvenience of having to fight.

Not only does the practice go back to ancient Greek times, but that very play I mentioned – *The Trojan Women* by Euripides – has been used in modern times to make a political point about current events: the 1971 film by Cacoyannis was assumed to be a blast at the American conduct of war in Vietnam, and an early modern production of the play by Professor Gilbert Murray, in 1904, was "widely interpreted as a protest against the inhuman conditions in which Boer women and children had been incarcerated by the British during the Boer War". That particular tradition of brutality was not started by the Nazis, but practised by the ancient Athenians and carried on 2,400 years later (in a less brutal form) by the British. It is still alive.

Conclusion

To sum up briefly, the cultural attitudes the Greeks may or may not have bequeathed to us are: the nobility of courage and dying in war, especially in land battles, the importance of memorials to honour the dead, the need for the leaders to take part in the front line, democratic decision-making, the acceptance by unenfranchised women of their men's fighting, and the awful fate awaiting women, and other non-combatants, on the losing side.