

# [Classical greece, war and ethics: an analysis](https://assignbuster.com/classical-greece-war-and-ethics-an-analysis/)

Fifth century Greece is often attributed with being the birthplace of modern democracy, law, and western humanities. Greek city-states developed different forms of governance with very different political structures and strengths. Greek colonization led to the spread of the Greek language and Greek culture, but it also resulted in tensions with the neighboring Persian empire, culminating in the Persian Wars.  Athens, home to Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles and many other philosophers, mathematicians, and playwrights seems a likely contender for most influential and modernly advanced polis (Greek city-state). Athens also developed a culture of science, culture, and philosophy, and became a powerful city state. However, many other city-states such as Delphi, Thebes, Athens, Corinth, Olympia and Sparta, despite warring, participated in modernly ethical wartime practices some of which are outlined in the source articles below.

In “ Remembering war in fifth-century Greece: ideologies, societies, and commemoration beyond democratic Athens”, an article submitted to “ World Archaeology Vol. 35(1): 98-111 The Social Commemoration of Warfare”: author Polly Low posits that focus of this topic prior to this paper is centered on the democratic state of Athens, due to their relatively modern governing ideology. However, there is evidence of other non-democratic, and from the lens of Athenian citizens, savage states participating in “ Athenian” commemoration of its dead. Low utilizes three archeologicalsources of evidence to demonstrate the extents to which war dead werecommemorated in the various polis(city-states) in classical Greece around 5 th century BC. All of which come from anti-Athenian city states(Megara, Tanagra, and Thespia).

Low’sfirst example is a Megarian white marble stele, 76cm in height and 53-56cm inwidth, which has inscribed a list of twenty-six names of deceased combatantslisted under their respective tribal headings. It is unknown if this stele hadany total, unifying heading as it was not preserved. The list of names iscomprised of an uneven number of names distributed among the listed tribes, along with the names of non-citizens. The inclusion of non-citizens (slaves, exiles, and/or allies) under the heading “ epoikoi” is paralleled in Atheniancommemorative displays, yet rare outside of Grecian practices. 1

Thesecond evidence is of a memorial from the Boeotian city of Tanagra. Thiscasualty list is inscribed as four columns in black stone. There is no heading, definitively, unlike the first example it has been fully preserved. The list of63 names contains no patronymics (a name derived from the name of a father orancestor). Two of the names on this list are described as Eretrieus (from thecity of Eretria) and are the only two which have any other qualifiers. Althoughit is likely that these individuals participated in battle in defense ofTanagra, it is significant to note their inclusion despite not being members ofthe polis. Despite being a common practice in Athens, the oligarchical Boeotiarecognized the importance of lives given in defense of the state, despite theirorigin. 2

Thethird, final, and most important evidence presented by Lowe is that of thestate war memorial in Thespiae which in 424BCE was still a Boeotian city-state, among the best-preserved examples from classical Greece. The importantdiscovery was a large enclosure (32m x 23m) which seems to have been in one ofthe city’s main cemetery. “ When excavated, the enclosure was found to containthe traces of a large funeral pyre, with remains of cremated bodies and ofextensive grave offerings: ceramics, glass, and terra- cottas, as well asbronze and bone objects, and traces of foodstuffs… As well as this cremation, the tomb also contained seven inhumations. The reason for this anomaly is notquite clear. The possibility that the different form of burial reflects adifference in the status of the dead cannot be ruled out, although there is nogood evidence to support this view” 3 as there was no discernabledifference in the quality of the burial, nor the quality or quantity in theofferings. It is likely that “ these inhumations took place after the cremation: these bodies might be those who died of their wounds some time after the battle…It seems improbable, at any rate, that there was any great chronological gapbetween the two kinds of burial, since the inhumations certainly precede the erectionof the stone enclosure (the head of one of the skeletons lies under the line ofthe east enclosure wall.” 4 When reconstructed it was determined thatat one point there would have been 25 stelae containing 300 names, prominentlydisplayed on the front wall of the enclosure. On the remaining stelae 102 namesare displayed, 10-12 on each. Apart from two, names are listed withoutpatronymics. Those two exceptions, Tisimeneis and Polynikos, which are listedwith pythionika and olymoionika respectively, as victors of Pythian and Olympicgames. 5

Lowes examples indicate that commemoration of the “ war-dead” was an important feature of Greek civilization even outside of the popularized Athens. “ Democratic Athenians saw in their traditions of commemorating their war-dead something intrinsically Athenian and somethingintrinsically democratic. The fact that the oligarchic Thespians were, simultaneously, engaged in objectively very similar practices, or that theAthenian monuments also commemorated non-Athenians, does not mean that thoseAthenians were deluded in their beliefs, but shows, rather, the extent to whichthe meanings of commemorative monuments of this sort are not fixed by thenature of the monuments themselves, but derive their shape from the changingcontexts in which they are found.” 6 In “ The Laws of War in AncientGreece”, published in Law and History Review, Vol. 26, No. 3, Law, War, andHistory (Fall, 2008), pp. 469-489, author Adriaan Lanni discusses the laws, mostly unspoken, governing war between the polis (city-states) in classicalGreece, and examines to what extent these laws affected the tactics and actionstaken by these city-states. Lanni breaks the question down into four constituentelements.

Firstly, how were these laws formed? Most of the laws governing interstate war stemmedfrom “ laws common to all men”, that is laws that most citizens intrinsicallyacted regarding, not being formulated or written. Often these laws resulted fromreligious thinking at the time.

Secondly, by what mechanisms were these unspoken laws enforced? Despite evidence of instances of violations being punished by other parties in multi-state agreements, or abstract punishments delivered by the gods in response to behavior that didn’t follow religious mandates, Lanni indicates that the laws were often not enforced by other states, but by the actions of the state itself in an effort to retain or improve its reputation “ Reputational damage may have been the most effective sanction against violating the laws of war. Honor and status were the currency of the Greek world…The ramifications of a damaged reputation extended beyond loss of honor: the typical Greek city-state’s security and economic success depended on its relationships with other states via treaties, alliances, and informal friendship (philia) relationships.” 7 Becauseof the influential nature of nationalism and the honor attributed to those whodistinguished themselves in battle, the influence of laws of war affected alllevels of many armies.

Thirdly–what, specifically, were these “ laws common to all men”? Lanni describes foursuch laws: Protection of Sacred Places, People, and Events — temples, sanctuaries, and other religious buildings were not to be disturbed, even inwartime.

1. Immunityfor Heralds and Ambassadors – “ International law granted immunity to heralds(professional messengers used to communicate with foreign states) and ambassadors(citizens who were appointed to represent their polis and negotiate with aforeign state). This norm enjoyed widespread acceptance by the Persians as wellas Greeks.” 8
2. Treatmentof Enemy Dead – “ Respectful treatment and return of the enemy dead was anotherwell-entrenched norm with religious origins. Stripping a dead soldier to claimhis armor was standard practice, but by the early classical period it wasconsidered contrary to international law to mutilate or harm the body in anyway. This norm sprang from religious rather than humanitarian or dignitaryconcerns: to deny burial was to interfere with the funeral rites required bythe gods.” 9
3. Treatmentof Captives – “ Because Greek religion was devoid of ethical content, religiousbeliefs and customs did not give rise to norms making war more humane… InGreece, the code of honor generally required simply “ helping one’s friendsand hurting one’s enemies;” nothing, least of all compassion and mercy inbattle, was owed to the soldiers or citizens of enemy state.” 10 It’sinteresting to note however that this thought was not
4. total in terms of its acceptance by Greek citizens, as many philosophers and playwrights challenged this norm.
5. Finally, Lanni answers the question “ Did the Laws of War Constrain Greek States?” Yes. And no. Greek city-states were only constrained by these common laws insofar asthey contributed to their reputation, or lack thereof, and to the prescriptionsof the gods. As expected, of non-binding laws, these laws were also taken intoconsideration along with the interests of the state’s welfare.

Whencomparing “ The Laws of War in Ancient Greece” and “ Remembering war infifth-century Greece: ideologies, societies, and commemoration beyonddemocratic Athens” the former takes a broad approach of looking at the wartimepractices of Greek city states, whereas the latter looks at a specific aspectof these practices, commemoration of the war-dead. Interestingly “ The Laws ofWar in Ancient Greece” makes a point attributing those acts of commemoration toreligious mandate, which “ Remembering war in fifth-century Greece: ideologies, societies, and commemoration beyond democratic Athens” does not. Both articlesdescribe the somewhat enlightened and progressive practice of honoringcasualties of war as well as dictates that constrain wartime practices. “ Rememberingwar in fifth-century Greece: ideologies, societies, and commemoration beyonddemocratic Athens” seeks to, and in my opinion, succeeds in proving that manyGreek polis, not just Athens, took part in an important element of these commonpractices. In “ The Laws of War in Ancient Greece” this is attributed likely tothe religious mandates as denying a burial would interfere with funeral rites.

Professor Polly Low author of “ Remembering war in fifth-century Greece: ideologies, societies, and commemoration beyond democratic Athens” is a professor of classical and ancient Greece at Durham University in Durham, United Kingdom. He has authored several journal articles, as wellas his own book, and edited several other books on classical Greece. He studiedat Oxford obtaining an undergraduate degree and Cambridge for his PhD. 11

ProfessorAdriaan Lanni author of “ The Laws of War in Ancient Greece” is a professor ofCriminal Law at Harvard university and in addition teacher several legalhistory courses on ancient Greek and Roman law. “ She received a B. A., summa cumlaude, in Classical Civilization from Yale University, an M. Phil. in Classicsfrom Cambridge University, where she was a Marshall Scholar, a J. D. from YaleLaw School, and a Ph. D. in History from the University of Michigan.” 12

Both authors, I think were motivated by a desire to examine to what extent historical law and humanities during wartime affects current practices of diplomacy and wartime law. With increased international tensions stemming from religious and national conflicts, modern diplomats and historians may want to look to the successes and prescription of past nations. Fifth century Greece contributed much to modern ethics, wartime law, modern democracy, and western humanities. By examining the practices of these key societies, it may be possible to make better decisions about the future of international policy.

### Bibliography

* Harvard Law School. “ Adriaan Lanni.” Harvard Law School. Accessed November 17, 2018. https://hls. harvard. edu/faculty/directory/10503/Lanni.
* Lanni, Adriaan. “ The Laws of War in Ancient Greece.” Law and History Review 26, no. 3 (2008): 469-89. http://www. jstor. org/stable/27641604.
* Low, Polly. “ Remembering War in Fifth-Century Greece: Ideologies, Societies, and Commemoration beyond Democratic Athens.” World Archaeology 35, no. 1 (2003): 98-111. http://www. jstor. org/stable/3560214.
* “ Staff.” Department of Classics and Ancient History Staff. Accessed November 17, 2018. https://www. dur. ac. uk/classics/staff/? id= 17406.