

Classical greece, war and ethics: an analysis



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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 archeological sources of evidence to demonstrate the extents to which war dead were commemorated in the various polis(city-states) in classical Greece around 5th century BC. All of which come from anti-Athenian city states(Megara, Tanagra, and Thespia).

Low's first example is a Megarian white marble stele, 76cm in height and 53-56cm in width, which has inscribed a list of twenty-six names of deceased combatants listed under their respective tribal headings. It is unknown if this stele had any total, unifying heading as it was not preserved. The list of names is comprised 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 Athenian commemorative displays, yet rare outside of Grecian practices.¹

The second evidence is of a memorial from the Boeotian city of Tanagra. This casualty 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 of 63 names contains no patronymics (a name derived from the name of a father or ancestor). Two of the names on this list are described as Eretrians (from the city of Eretria) and are the only two which have any other qualifiers. Although it is likely that these individuals participated in battle in defense of Tanagra, it is significant to note their inclusion despite not being members of the polis. Despite being a common practice in Athens, the oligarchical Boeotians recognized the importance of lives given in defense of the state, despite their origin.²

The third, final, and most important evidence presented by Lowe is that of the state war memorial in Thespieae which in 424 BCE was still a Boeotian city-state, among the best-preserved examples from classical Greece. The important discovery was a large enclosure (32m x 23m) which seems to have

been in one of the city's main cemetery. " When excavated, the enclosure was found to contain the traces of a large funeral pyre, with remains of cremated bodies and of extensive grave offerings: ceramics, glass, and terracottas, as well as bronze and bone objects, and traces of foodstuffs... As well as this cremation, the tomb also contained seven inhumations. The reason for this anomaly is not quite clear. The possibility that the different form of burial reflects a difference in the status of the dead cannot be ruled out, although there is no good evidence to support this view" ³ as there was no discernable difference in the quality of the burial, nor the quality or quantity in the offerings. 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 gap between the two kinds of burial, since the inhumations certainly precede the erection of the stone enclosure (the head of one of the skeletons lies under the line of the east enclosure wall." ⁴ When reconstructed it was determined that at one point there would have been 25 stelae containing 300 names, prominently displayed on the front wall of the enclosure. On the remaining stelae 102 names are displayed, 10-12 on each. Apart from two, names are listed without patronymics. Those two exceptions, Tisimeneis and Polynikos, which are listed with pythionika and olymoionika respectively, as victors of Pythian and Olympic games. 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 something intrinsically

democratic. The fact that the oligarchic Thespians were, simultaneously, engaged in objectively very similar practices, or that the Athenian monuments also commemorated non-Athenians, does not mean that those Athenians were deluded in their beliefs, but shows, rather, the extent to which the meanings of commemorative monuments of this sort are not fixed by the nature of the monuments themselves, but derive their shape from the changing contexts in which they are found.”⁶ In “The Laws of War in Ancient Greece”, published in *Law and History Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3, *Law, War, and History* (Fall, 2008), pp. 469-489, author Adriaan Lanni discusses the laws, mostly unspoken, governing war between the polis (city-states) in classical Greece, and examines to what extent these laws affected the tactics and actions taken by these city-states. Lanni breaks the question down into four constituent elements.

Firstly, how were these laws formed? Most of the laws governing interstate war stemmed from “laws common to all men”, that is laws that most citizens intrinsically acted regarding, not being formulated or written. Often these laws resulted from religious 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 <https://assignbuster.com/classical-greece-war-and-ethics-an-analysis/>

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 Because of the influential nature of nationalism and the honor attributed to those who distinguished themselves in battle, the influence of laws of war affected all levels of many armies.

Thirdly-what, specifically, were these " laws common to all men"? Lanni describes four such laws: Protection of Sacred Places, People, and Events — temples, sanctuaries, and other religious buildings were not to be disturbed, even in wartime.

1. Immunity for 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 a foreign state). This norm enjoyed widespread acceptance by the Persians as well as Greeks." ⁸
2. Treatment of Enemy Dead - " Respectful treatment and return of the enemy dead was another well-entrenched norm with religious origins. Stripping a dead soldier to claim his armor was standard practice, but by the early classical period it was considered contrary to international law to mutilate or harm the body in anyway. This norm sprang from religious rather than humanitarian or dignitary concerns: to deny burial was to interfere with the funeral rites required by the gods." ⁹
3. Treatment of Captives - " Because Greek religion was devoid of ethical content, religious beliefs and customs did not give rise to norms making

war more humane... In Greece, the code of honor generally required simply “ helping one’s friends and hurting one’s enemies;” nothing, least of all compassion and mercy in battle, was owed to the soldiers or citizens of enemy state.” ¹⁰ It’s interesting 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 as they contributed to their reputation, or lack thereof, and to the prescriptions of the gods. As expected, of non-binding laws, these laws were also taken into consideration along with the interests of the state’s welfare.

When comparing “ The Laws of War in Ancient Greece” and “ Remembering war in fifth-century Greece: ideologies, societies, and commemoration beyond democratic Athens” the former takes a broad approach of looking at the wartime practices of Greek city states, whereas the latter looks at a specific aspect of these practices, commemoration of the war-dead.

Interestingly “ The Laws of War in Ancient Greece” makes a point attributing those acts of commemoration to religious mandate, which “ Remembering war in fifth-century Greece: ideologies, societies, and commemoration beyond democratic Athens” does not. Both articles describe the somewhat enlightened and progressive practice of honoring casualties of war as well as dictates that constrain wartime practices. “ Remembering war in fifth-century Greece: ideologies, societies, and commemoration beyond democratic

Athens" seeks to, and in my opinion, succeeds in proving that many Greek polis, not just Athens, took part in an important element of these common practices. In "The Laws of War in Ancient Greece" this is attributed likely to the religious mandates as denying a burial would interfere with funeral rites.

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Professor Adriaan Lanni author of "The Laws of War in Ancient Greece" is a professor of Criminal Law at Harvard university and in addition teaches several legal history courses on ancient Greek and Roman law. "She received a B. A., summa cum laude, in Classical Civilization from Yale University, an M. Phil. in Classics from Cambridge University, where she was a Marshall Scholar, a J. D. from Yale Law 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.

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