Wars that shaped the world by Thomas G. Palaima

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War and Society in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds: *Asia, the Mediterranean, Europe and Mesoamerica* (Harvard U Pr: Cambridge MA, 1999) by Kurt Raauflaub and Nathan Rosenstein

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"Many wonders there are, and nothing is more wondrous than man," intones the chorus in Sophocles's *Antigone* (441BC), as they begin their famous anthropological catalogue of the hard-won achievements of man: sea-faring, agriculture, hunting, the domestication of wild horses, mastery of the subtleties of speech and "wind-swift thought", the creation of well-ordered city-states (*poleis*), and medical triumphs over "incurable" diseases.

This is upbeat stuff, a catalogue of positive progress that more resembles the selective spin of an Al Gore campaign speech about the Clinton presidency than a realistic review of what human beings have made of themselves. The "ode to man" is set dramatically for the original Athenian audience in the aftermath of a fratricidal civil war involving the treasonous use of mercenaries from other *poleis* in an attack upon the city-state of Thebes. According to ancient biographical tradition, the Athenians liked *Antigone* so much they elected Sophocles to the board of ten *strategoi* (generals) the following year. They knew a convincing likeness of war and its effects when they saw one.

The faint sounds of buzzing in Sophocles's panegyric ointment come from two flies. The Greek word used for the "wondrous thing" called man, *deinos* , can also mean "terrible, dread"; and the final strophe makes clear that citizens of Greek *poleis* can and do act in ways that bring destruction upon themselves and their communities. But the biggest fly is sitting silently and insatiably right on stage, in plain sight of the Athenian citizens packed into the theatre of Dionysus. The Greeks called it *polemos* - war.

The Athenian audience for *Antigone* consisted mostly of *hoplite* "citizen-soldiers", military veterans who knew war first hand from a half-century of unprecedented military build-up, high-stakes land battles and wearying naval campaigns, beginning with two Persian wars (490 and 480-479) during which the sacred citadel of Athens was sacked by the Persians. Their militarism spread throughout the greater Aegean region and even, disastrously, into Egypt, as they pursued an aggressive policy of maintaining their self-asserted hegemony. In the Egyptian campaign alone (460-454), an estimated 8,000 men died, roughly 15-20 per cent of the adult male population of Athens.

The Peloponnesian war and the further loss of 28,000 Athenian soldiers still lay ten years in the future. Among its special horrors was the reintroduction of the "Homeric" mode of warfare: destroy a captured city, kill the men and sell the women and children into slavery. Thucydides recognised the Peloponnesian war for what it was, a world war. But, unlike H. G. Wells, he had enough hard wisdom to know that, the wondrous attainments of Athenian wealth, power and *paideia* notwithstanding, no war could bring an end to all war.

Thucydides and his contemporaries knew war from bitter experience. Peace to them was an illusion, war the true constant: "What most men call peace is merely an appearance; in reality all cities are by nature in a permanent state of undeclared war against all other cities" (Plato, *Laws* 626A). In writing his history of the Peloponnesian war, Thucydides begins with the *archaeologia* , his own quick survey of major events in the Greek past, a former general's no-nonsense "ode to man": from earliest times to the opening of the Peloponnesian war, the progress of man is the progress of military power and the acquisition and control of resources to maintain it. *War and Society in the Ancient and Medieval World* shows how and why Thucydides's vision prevailed throughout pre-industrial times in the Mediterranean and elsewhere. Because of the omnipresence of war or its spectre within ancient Greek - and Roman - culture, editors Kurt Raaflaub and Nathan Rosenstein recognise the real need to explore in theoretical terms how war (including military technology and organisation) affected ancient society (including economic and political systems) and vice versa.

The papers in *War and Society* , stemming from a colloquium organised by the editors in June 1996 at the Centre for Hellenic Studies in Washington DC, explore elements of the interaction between war and society in the ancient Greek and Roman world and in selected pre-industrial societies that offer cross-cultural perspectives. Four chapters take up Archaic-Classical and Hellenistic Greece, Republican Rome and the Roman Empire. Nine others treat early China, Japan to AD 1300, ancient Egypt, the Achaemenid Empire, the Byzantine period, early medieval Europe, the early Islamic world, and the ancient Maya and Aztecs. The histories of actual wars and battles - and, we should also point out, analyses of cultural ideologies as reflected in mythology, religion, literature and iconography - are subordinated to the purpose of understanding, for each cultural period, "how the military sphere was organised, to what extent it was embedded in other structures of society, and what the origins of that system were".

The chapters work well independently as serious treatments of their cultural periods, but are unified by careful attention to the underlying critical themes and concerns posed by the editors. As might be expected, approaches vary according to the kinds of data available for the different periods and the different interpretative methodologies used by individual contributors. Anthropologists write the two chapters on pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, historians the other nine-period chapters. This imbalance is righted by the synthetic chapter of anthropologist R. Brian Ferguson, "A paradigm for the study of war and society".

Ferguson interprets the other 13 contributions according to the categories of intra and inter-polity infrastructural, structural and superstructural connections between war and society, and uses his own work with warring non-state peoples for added perspective. His sections on superstructure conveniently extract what can be said about the ideological basis for supporting and pursuing war in the cultures under examination. His analysis is pertinent, because ancient Greek and Roman history encompasses cultural developments from tribal to city state to empire, from agricultural subsistence to massive agricultural surplus generated by imperialist acquisition of land and resources. Readers might well want to begin with Ferguson's contribution. Victor Davis Hanson and Barry Strauss contribute an epilogue with reflections on the modern period, many of them "quite disturbing".

Indeed, Egyptian, Byzantine and Roman justification of war through the ideology of "enemy provocation" reminds us of Orwell's "two minutes hate". The difficulties of the Japanese Taiho military with "guerrilla-style" mounted archers remind us that well-equipped, technologically advanced fighting forces are not guaranteed success. Just ask American grunts in Vietnam who "humped" 60-plus £ of modern defensive armour, high-tech fire power, water, food and personalia. One such grunt, Mitchell Sanders in Tim O'Brien's Vietnam novel *The Things They Carried* , looks at a typical enemy corpse, a Vietcong boy in shorts and sandals, carrying as standard issue a pouch of rice, a rifle and three magazines of ammunition, and sizes up the lesson this way: "You want my opinion, there's a definite moral here." The moral is universal and timeless, and makes me wonder if the ancient Maya, Aztecs, Chinese or Egyptians had a word with the same ambiguities as *deinos* .

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