Was there mental trauma in ancient warfare?

PTSD IN ANCIENT GREECE

For over fifteen years it has been an accepted historical practice to refer to episodes within ancient Greek history, and portrayals of characters in Greek drama, as exhibiting behaviours akin to modern veterans suffering with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Indeed, it is becoming more and more common that figures from ancient history are being retrospectively *diagnosed* with PTSD. Yet, to date no book length treatment exists to debate the validity of this implied universalism: that PTSD can be found and equated in history, with little regard for the social and chronological boundaries that separate the present from the past.

By Owen Rees and Jason Crowley

So what is the argument for PTSD in ancient Greece, and what, if any, are its flaws? In this article, two authors present the opposing views to the debate, as it stands, using the same quoted sources to highlight the differences in interpretation. In some respects, this situation is similar to that which bedevils the study of hoplite combat, in which two contrasting and mutually exclusive schools of thought – probably well known to readers of *Ancient Warfare* magazine! – currently co-exist.

What is PTSD?

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder is an anxiety disorder that is brought about by witnessing a terrifying or traumatic event; it can even be triggered by simply hearing of a traumatic event such as the loss of a loved one. The symptoms most commonly exhibited are flashbacks and nightmares, avoidance and emotional numbing, being 'on guard' and hyper-vigilant, depression, and substance abuse.

While the majority of people will experience post-traumatic stress symptoms under similar circumstances, two thirds of those people will see these symptoms reduce within a short period of time. For the remaining third, the continuation of these stress reactions soon becomes a problem, and this is referred to as PTSD. PTSD is a medical diagnosis that includes a wide range of causations, so it is often substituted by a more generic term such as 'combat trauma' by historians, to show that the analysis is related to only those who have been affected by war.

THE UNIVERSALIST POSITION

The case for: Owen Rees

Since the turn of the twentieth century, the western world has been made more and more aware of the damaging impact that war can have on the minds of its participants. From the harrowing poetry born from the First World War to the detailed studies of the veterans from the war in Vietnam, we have become attuned to the psychological pressures and effects that warfare has in the lives of individual servicemen and women. In the words of the war-poet Wilfred Owen: "these are men whose minds the Dead have Ravished", these are the walking wounded.

The medical term for this psychic combat trauma has changed over time: during the American Civil War it was known as 'Soldier's Heart', in the Great War it was called 'shell-shock', and during the Vietnam War it became 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder'. With new labels came new research, and more studies into the causes of this phenomenon, bringing us in the modern day a collection of information of megalithic proportions. What this research reveals is that, underpinning the vast array of causes and factors involved in an individual suffering with PTSD, there is an important biological element – but the full argument would make for very boring reading in a history magazine. The most relevant aspect is the connection between trauma and biological 'fear-processing', a process that is autonomic (i.e. uncontrolled by thought) and is present in all mammals. While there are anomalous factors to consider, we have a building block on which to explore the ancient world – if there is a biological underpinning to combat trauma, and that trauma is universal, then it should manifest itself in a similar way to how it does in the modern day.

THE RELATIVIST POSITION

The case against: Jason Crowley

As Owen has set out, the universalist position is extremely strong. The conclusion many draw from this evidence, namely that the Greeks found the experience of combat traumatic, has an intrinsic human appeal. Modern soldiers, of course, often return from operations traumatized by their experiences, and whilst modern warfare is undeniably horrific, the art of war in Antiquity seems to us even worse. Greek hoplites, for instance, did not engage their enemies at a distance like modern soldiers, instead, as Xenophon describes (*Hell.* 4.3.19), they stabbed and hacked them to death at such close range that the living would emerge from battle covered by the blood of the dead.

The clearest benefit the universalist position offers is a direct connection with Antiquity. If we accept that the Greeks experienced life and death in the same why as modern people, then ancient history ceases to be an endeavour primarily concerned with the past and one directly relevant to the present. In essence, the universalist position offers us the opportunity to learn about ourselves by learning about the Greeks, because the Greeks *were just like us*.

And that, of course, is the obvious problem with the universalist position. The Greeks were not just like us. In fact, they were very different.

The culture of combat

The Greeks, unlike most of us, lived in a world defined by war, and unsurprisingly, their culture reflected this harsh reality. While we admire men who are fashionable and entertaining, the Greeks idolized the warrior. While we learn to love our neighbour and turn the other cheek, the Greeks learned to help their friends and harm their enemies. While we value peace, the Greeks esteemed war.

A Corinthian helmet as used by Greek warriors of the Archaic and Early Classical periods. Some have pointed out how a helmet like this would have obscured the head and face and therefore make the wearer on the battlefield less human and more terrifying. Currently in the British Museum.

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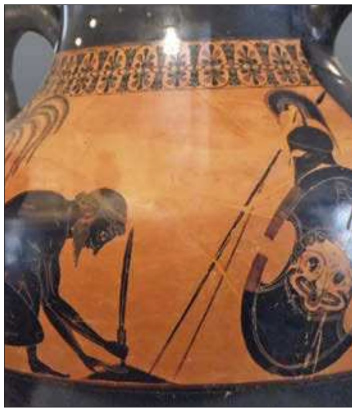

Ajax, distraught, prepares to commit suicide by literally throwing himself onto his sword, which he is currently fixing into the ground. From a black-figure amphora by Exekias dated to 530/525 BC. Currently in Château-musée de Boulogne-sur-Mer.
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In the fifth century BC, the speaker Gorgias of Leontini, Sicily, wrote a rhetorical argument defending the reputation of Helen of Troy. The piece was most likely written during the Peloponnesian War and in it he gives an insight into the effects of fear on Greek soldiers (*Encomium of Helen*, 16-17):

> *And some people before now, on seeing frightful things [in war], have also lost their presence of mind at the present moment; fear so extinguishes and expels thought. And many have fallen into groundless distress and terrible illness and incurable madness; so deeply does sight engrave on the mind images of actions that are seen.*

Written almost 2,500 years ago, Gorgias' description of fear in war still rings true today. The sight of 'frightful things', which he described earlier to include the armament of the enemy, creates a loss of rational thinking. This in turn creates terror in some people, who become unable to act, and he even describes a chronic illness and 'madness' manifesting from this experience. In one short fragment Gorgias has succinctly described a variety of stress induced effects on the soldier which corresponds with our understanding of combat trauma (Gorgias' 'madness'). Interestingly, the description of "groundless distress" implies a soldier experiencing anxieties without any causal factors; this must mean after war, because Gorgias has already described factors for the initial fearful response in his prose. Finally, Gorgias reemphasizes the link between the visual impact that caused the fear and how it "engrav[es] on the mind" these images – the experience of war has caused these effects. He has described Wilfred Owen's ravished minds.

This cultural divergence, then, creates obvious problems when we try to interpret the ancient evidence, as the case of Clearchus reveals.

As Owen explains, the universalists, seeing no real difference between modern and ancient humans, view the portrait Xenophon offers of his dead comrade as the description of a man suffering from PTSD. Admittedly, the similarity between the PTSD checklist and the character traits described by Xenophon is striking, but Clearchus' diagnosis ignores two crucial factors: the culture that produce the evidence and the context in which it is presented to the reader.

Xenophon, an admirer of the Spartan society, is describing a product of the society he admired. Clearchus, like other Spartan boys, would have been taken away from his mother at the age of seven and enrolled in the *agōgē* (for which see Xen. *Lac. Pol.* 2.1–14), a state-run system of education that was designed to produce the perfect hoplite. Even when he graduated at the age of eighteen, he would have lived in barracks. Is it any wonder, then, that after such an upbringing and a lifetime of active service, Clearchus was a hard man who found satisfaction and fulfilment in war?

Clearly, when we consider the description of Clearchus, culture is crucial, and so too is the context in which that description is offered. In Xenophon's narrative, the Ten Thousand have won the Battle of Cunaxa (Xen. *Anab*. I.8.1–29), but Cyrus, who the Greeks intended to put on the Great King's throne, is now dead, and worst still, their commanders, Clearchus included, have been seized by the enemy and will soon be dead, too (Xen. *Anab*. 2.5.25–6.1).

Xenophon's portrait of Clearchus, then, is offered when the Ten Thousand are leaderless, and tellingly, his portrait is one of three. In this sequence, Clearchus the Spartan is,

Herodotus offers one example of a soldier experiencing something similar to what Gorgias has described. At the Battle of Marathon, the Athenian hoplite Epizelus "was fighting bravely when he suddenly lost sight of both eyes, though nothing had touched him anywhere – neither sword, spear, nor missile. From that moment he continued blinded as long as he lived" (Herodotus 6.117).

Here we have a direct link between combat and a stress-induced, physiological response that for many years would have been called 'hysterical blindness' (for the full story of Epizelus, see *Ancient Warfare* Special 2011). What is interesting about Epizelus is that his combat trauma is shown to continue throughout his life, he never regained his sight, and yet he was not chastized in the same way as many traumatized veterans of modern wars. Epizelus became a popular figure in his home town and was even memorialized as part of the painted colonnade (*stoa poikile*) that sat on the north side of the agora. So in this instance we see continuity with the modern day, in the form of combat trauma, but also divergence through the social reception of the traumatized veteran.

A counterpoint to Epizelus' heroic homecoming comes in the guise of the Spartan commander Clearchus (see *Ancient Warfare* VIII.5 for his full story), whose military experience straddled thirty long years and exposed him to the full experience of Greek warfare: land battles, naval battles, siege warfare, and ambush. In Xenophon's *Anabasis* (6.1–16) the author wrote a eulogy to the general in which he described Clearchus as a man who loved war (*philopolemos*), who enjoyed danger and to as Owen demonstrates, too harsh, Proxenus the Boeotian is too soft, and Menon the Thessalian is too selfish.

And can we guess who comes next in the narrative? Well, of course, it is Xenophon himself – a leader, by implication, who is neither too harsh, too soft, nor too selfish, but instead, just the man to save his fellow Greeks from their impending doom!

The indirect approach

So, was Clearchus a man suffering from PTSD, or merely a rather typical Spartan whose character portrait served to flatter the author who wrote it? Certainly, this interpretation seems more internally consistent and culturally sensitive than that offered by the universalists, but the hypotheses it presents cannot be proven, and so it remains just another subjective and unfalsifiable reading from which no sweeping generalizations can or should be drawn.

Unless, of course, it can be reinforced. Naturally, such external reinforcement cannot come from the other pieces of direct evidence Owen has adduced since the alternative readings that can be offered merely magnify the size of the problem rather than solve it.

A two-stage indirect approach to the problem, however, is available. The first stage is to identify those factors that increase a modern soldier's susceptibility to PTSD, and then to see if those factors are present on the ancient battlefield.

Using the twentieth-century American soldier as a case study, I discovered he was vulnerable to trauma not because he was in some way psychologically weak, but because modern warfare exposed him to a wide range of factors closely correlated with PTSD. He was often tired and deprived of sleep when he went into battle, he fought socially and physically

lead the attacks, and who was an unusually harsh disciplinarian that was incapable of personal relationships. Xenophon's wider narrative also depicts Clearchus as a very paranoid man, who was prone to violent and aggressive outbursts, and became so consumed by war that he was even exiled from the *Spartan* community, implying that this behaviour went beyond the social norms of Sparta itself. In Xenophon's eulogy we see many of the markers of modern veterans, especially the impact of hyper-vigilance that has primed Clearchus' body to thrive in stressful situations to such an extent that it became an addiction (this is not an unusual physiological adaptation to prolonged stress).

While there is social variance in every epoch of history, what seems apparent in the case of ancient Greece is that the biological markers are understood well enough now to find the common link between ancient and modern combat trauma. The question is not whether PTSD (combat trauma) is apparent in the ancient Greek sources, but rather how did it manifest and how was it dealt with by the Greek societies?

isolated from his comrades, he faced threats he could not counter and when he killed his enemy, he transgressed the socio-religious norms and values he had been raised to cherish.

The twentieth-century American soldier, then, faced a perfect storm of psychological adversity. By contrast, the situation faced, for instance, by the Greek hoplite, was much more benign. He was not usually tired or deprived of sleep when he went into battle, he was socially integrated with and fought in close physical proximity to his comrades, he could counter the threats he faced, and when he killed his enemy, he validated the socio-religious norms and values he'd been raised to cherish.

The conditions required for PTSD, therefore, are present on the modern battlefield but absent on the ancient, and so, to diagnose Clearchus with PTSD is, to me, to ignore the vast social, religious, and tactical differences that separate the modern from the ancient world. The Greeks, then, were not just like us. They were not susceptible to PTSD, nor is that susceptibility universal. Instead, PTSD is a historically and culturally specific condition unknown in Antiquity.

Further research

Readers, no doubt, will take sides in this debate, but hopefully, dialogue will continue, and the debate will not end in impasse. Clearly, more research is needed, and those currently working in this field may still yet resolve the current stalemate, either by refuting one of the opposing views or by successfully synthesising the two.

Certainly, the debate is worthy of our attention – if we can resolve it, we will not only further our understanding of both ancient and modern combat, we will also enhance our ability to care for soldiers who risk everything on our behalf. AW

Dr Jason Crowley is Lecturer in Ancient History at Manchester Metropolitan University. Owen Rees is a regular contributor to* Ancient Warfare *and a PhD student at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Further reading

- J. Crowley, *The Psychology of the Athenian Hoplite: The Culture of Combat in Classical Athens* (Cambridge 2012).
- J. Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York 1994).