

Treatment of Captives in Ancient Greek Warfare: A Vicious Cycle

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The Nereid Monument in the Lycean tomb, dated to between 390 and 380 BCE, depicts a besieged city in which a woman is tearing out her hair in lament of her potential fate – rape, enslavement, and possibly death. The image testifies to the cruel and inhumane treatment of captives that often characterized ancient Greek warfare, particularly with respect to siege warfare. In ancient Greece, only the taking of a city resulted in a large number of captives, both combatants and civilians. This essay argues that the treatment of captives constituted a vicious cycle in which the defenders of city would resolutely resist the siege for fear of massacre, mass rape, and enslavement; this stalwart defense, in turn, would contribute to cruel treatment of captives when and if the city fell. I organize this paper in the following way: after outlining the treatment of captives in Greek siege warfare in general, I explore the options that defenders faced and examine the motives of cruel treatment of captives in the light of having faced hardened resistance during the siege. Lastly, I examine a possible limitation to this argument posed by the distinction Greek philosophers drew between Greek and barbarian combatants, but demonstrate the argument’s continued validity despite this assertion.

The Nereid Monument in the Lycean tomb, dated to between 390 and 380 BCE, depicts a besieged city in which a woman is tearing out her hair in lament of her potential fate – rape, enslavement, and possibly death.¹ The image testifies to the cruel and inhumane treatment of captives that often characterized ancient Greek warfare, particularly with respect to siege warfare. In ancient Greece, only the taking of a city resulted in a large number of captives, both combatants and civilians.² This essay argues that the treatment of captives constituted a vicious cycle in which the defenders of city would resolutely resist the siege for fear of massacre, mass rape, and enslavement; this stalwart defense, in turn, would contribute to cruel treatment of captives when and if the city fell. I organize this paper in the following way: after outlining the treatment of captives in Greek siege warfare in general, I explore the options that defenders faced and examine the motives for the cruel treatment of captives in light of the attackers facing hardened resistance during the siege. Lastly, I examine a possible limitation

¹ Harry Sidebottom, *Ancient Warfare: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 25-8.

² Michael M. Sage, *Warfare in Ancient Greece: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2003), 115.

to this argument posed by the distinction Greek philosophers drew between Greek and barbarian combatants, but demonstrate the argument's continued validity despite this assertion.

The ancient historian Xenophon writes that "it is an eternal law the wide world over, that when a city is taken war, the citizens, their persons, and all their property fall into the hands of the conquerors."³ Indeed, once captured, combatants and civilians alike lost all legal status and became absolute possessions of their masters, their status as property reflected in the lack of a separate term in ancient Greek to distinguish human slaves from material 'booty'.⁴ From that point onward, they could be disposed of in whatever way best suited their captors. Most often, this took the form of massacre, rape, slavery, or ransom.

According to historian Yvon Garlan, captives were massacred in approximately a quarter of recorded cases, despite the moral dubiousness of killing civilians in Greek culture.⁵ One of the earliest recorded cases took place *circa* 511 BCE when Croton besieged its rival city Sybaris and, after taking it, killed all of its estimated 300,000 inhabitants.⁶ During the pillaging of a city, mass rape was customary; Greek literature in particular testifies to the horrors that women had to suffer.⁷ In Homer's *Iliad*, for example, Nestor specifically instructs the Greek forces to "let no man make haste to depart homewards until each have lain with the wife of some Trojan."⁸ Those who were not killed during or after the siege were usually enslaved, most often sold to distant places with little hope of returning home.⁹ At the same time, the option of being ransomed was reserved for a very limited segment of the population. Not only did it require funds significantly exceeding the slave-value of the person at stake, but also someone

³ Xenophon, *Cyrpaedia*, trans. L. Dindorf (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 199-200.

⁴ Yvon Garlan, *War in the Ancient World: A Social History*, trans. Janet Lloyd (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975), 71.

⁵ Garlan, 71; Sidebottom, 55.

⁶ Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, trans. V. V. Latishev (Moscow: Moscow State University, 1993), 433-435.

⁷ Paul B. Kern, *Ancient Siege Warfare* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 158-62.

⁸ Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. A. T. Murray (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1928), 77.

⁹ Angelos Chaniotis, *War in the Hellenistic World* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 113.

outside the city would have to take a private interest in saving the individual, as all of the captive's property already belonged to the captor.¹⁰

There were only two options for a besieged force – to fight resolutely or to surrender – and given the fate that captives came to expect in ancient Greece, there could be little motivation for the latter. The Melian dialogue, recorded in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, reveals that relations between parties in a conflict were based on power, not on justice. As the besieging Athenians tell the deputies of Milos, "right... is only a question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."¹¹ Consequently, surrendering only diminished the captives' bargaining power, as they would be putting themselves at the mercy of their subjugators. The risk was sometimes taken, but often did not pay off, as Thucydides' account of the massacre at Plataea during the Peloponnesian War illustrates. The Plataeans, who had fought the Spartans as Athenian allies, had surrendered before the superior forces before the town walls "under the understanding that the guilty should be punished, but no one without form of law."¹² After receiving the surrender, however, the Spartans conducted a mock trial and massacred all the male captives, selling the women into slavery.¹³

If the city was taken, its citizens sometimes decided death was preferable: according to historian Pasi Loman, on more than one occasion women killed themselves and their children in order to avoid the rape and enslavement that would follow.¹⁴ For example, in 310 BCE, Axiothea, wife of Nicocles, encouraged citizens to commit mass suicide rather than face capture by Ptolemy I; she even immolated herself to prevent the invaders from taking possession of her body.¹⁵ Therefore, men would fight

¹⁰ Chaniotis, 113.

¹¹ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crowley (London: Scottiswoode and Co., 1874), p. 397.

¹² Thucydides, 206.

¹³ Thucydides, 218.

¹⁴ Pasi Loman, "No Woman No War: Women's Participation in Ancient Greek Warfare," *Greece & Rome* 51 (2004), 10.

¹⁵ Loman, 10.

relentlessly at the thought of not only what the enemy might do to their women and children, but also of what the women might do to their children and to themselves. Polyaeus writes of Phocian women who piled up wood for a funeral pyre and climbed upon the woodpile with their children in preparation for defeat; this sight inspired the Phocian men to fight with double vigor to fend off the besieging Thessalians.¹⁶ In such a way, the defenders, given the suffering they would endure if their city fell, had every motive to fight resolutely till the last.

Facing strong resistance from those avoiding captivity at all costs, the besieging force would have even further reason to treat captives harshly. One motivation stems from the value the Greeks placed on a reputation for brutality in discouraging rebellion among their subjects. For example, Cleon's speech advocating that the Athenian soldiers kill all of the male citizens and enslave the women and children of the rebellious city of Mitylene invoked imperial justifications. According to him, Mitylene should be made an example with which to intimidate other Athenian subjects in order to keep them in line.¹⁷

Another factor encouraging inhumane treatment of captives was the high price of sieges. Such operation were incredibly expensive, especially those which met hard resistance and lasted for a long time. They required wages and food for soldiers, fodder for horses, and copious supplies and material for siege-works, all transported to the troops via long supply lines, often making heavy use of naval transport. The siege of Potidaea in 432-430 BCE alone is estimated to have absorbed two-fifths of Athenian capital reserves.¹⁸ As such, the sale of captives into slavery may have been an economic necessity to offset the costs of such operations. It also may have been necessary in the larger context of

¹⁶ Polyaeus, *Stratagems of War*, trans. R. Shepherd (London: Georg Nicol, 1793), 362.

¹⁷ Thucydides, 194-5.

¹⁸ Sidebottom, 94.

a war; Nicias, for example, having captured the Sicilian town of Hyccara, sold its inhabitants for 120 talents, funds he badly needed to maintain his army.¹⁹

Another motive for a bloody reprisal on the besieged were the hardships that long sieges inflicted upon the attackers. As historian Victor Hanson has pointed out, Greek soldiers were culturally accustomed to a single short yet decisive battle that would determine victory or defeat.²⁰ Sieges, on the other hand, could be protracted affairs, especially if the defenders were energetic and committed. Not only would the besiegers be constant in danger of counterattacks, but they would also face the possibility of disease and starvation.²¹ Therefore, attackers who had endured the fear and danger of a lengthy siege would sack a city even more brutally in revenge for these hardships.²² Thus, citizens of cities subject to long, protracted sieges were more likely to receive harsh, cruel treatment from their subjugators if the city fell.²³ This relationship illustrates the vicious cycle of in the treatment of captives, which only encouraged overall violence.

Some historians have argued that Greek standards of warfare should be understood in a more nuanced way, appreciating the differing ways in the ancient Greeks treated captives they regarded as barbarians as opposed to those whom they regarded as fellow Greeks. Garlan notes that toward the end of the classical period, massacre and mass enslavement of captives “began to be condemned as too harsh, except... in the case of barbarians.”²⁴ Indeed, in *The Republic*, Plato argues that Greeks are naturally friends, and that it is only due to the “sickness” of Greece, manifested through factionalism, that they sometimes fight each other. Consequently, he argued that Greeks should exercise restraint

¹⁹ Kern, 151.

²⁰ Victor David Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* (London: University of California Press, 2009).

²¹ Louis Rawlings, *The Ancient Greeks at War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 129, 140.

²² Sidebottom, 94.

²³ Kern, 149.

²⁴ Garlan, 72.

and cause minimal damage to their fellow kinsmen, punishing only those guilty of instigating strife.²⁵

Likewise, Aristotle's *Politics* posits that one of the aims of warfare is in enslaving those who deserved to be slaves—that is, barbarians—and not in despotism over peers.²⁶

However, the distinction between barbarians and fellow Greeks that these philosophers espoused did not always reflect a distinction in practice. If anything, that there was a normative discussion of standards of war testifies to the existence of such a problem in the first place. However, even if cultural standards began to influence the treatment of Greek captives by Greek captors, the fact remains captives had no guarantee of humane treatment, their treatment subject to the whim of their conquerors. Several cases testify to the relative ease with which pragmatism and bloodlust could overcome traditional morals in war, such as in the treatment of religious sanctuaries and priests.²⁷

The brutal treatment of captives in ancient Greece most often drove the defenders of a city to resolutely resist the siege for fear of the consequences of surrender or defeat. The attackers would then have to wage a costly, protracted and frustrating siege that would, in turn, anger the besiegers, leading them to treat their captives even more cruelly in revenge if the city fell. While Greek authors argued that Greeks should not war with their kinsmen, instead exhorting Greeks to reserve such brutality for barbarians, such writings on this subject testify more to Greek besiegers' indiscriminately harsh treatment of captives than to any recognition of this distinction in practice. Thus, more broadly, one sees a vicious cycle of violence that characterized ancient Greek siege warfare. This example of violence begetting violence remains important today as an illustration of the consequences of warfare without guarantees of fair treatment for non-combatants and prisoners of war.

²⁵ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937), 497-9.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 611.

²⁷ Chaniotis, 160-3.

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