

## Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in the Ancient Greek and Roman Soldier

Since the publication, in 1995, of Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam*, an increasingly popular view of PTSD in soldiers holds that modern day combatants experience the horrors of warfare in much the same way as did ancient Greek and Roman soldiers and that PTSD must have been just as prevalent in the classical world as it is today.

Shay takes this position both in his *Achilles in Vietnam* and in its sequel *Odysseus in America*. Lawrence Tritle, himself a Vietnam veteran, espouses the same view in *From Melos to My Lai: A Study in Violence, Culture and Social Survival*. David Grossman, in *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, pushes the argument even further by maintaining that, more than any other wartime event, it is the act of killing another human being that causes PTSD and that soldiers of *all* time periods have suffered the same emotional trauma as a result of killing enemy combatants.

At heart, the intent of this position is altruistically therapeutic; the modern soldier with PTSD should take some solace from knowing that his/her condition is not a result of personal cowardice, inadequacy, or softness, since even the toughest, most renowned soldiers of classical antiquity also had to deal with PTSD. Ultimately, however, the position may be more deleterious than helpful in that it obstructs investigation into the complex issues surrounding wars conducted by otherwise highly civilized societies, especially the issue of modern war's effect on individual soldiers.

Our study is to show that the emotional makeup of the classical soldier and the nature of the wars he fought were so different from the mindset of his modern counterpart and his/her wars that one cannot assume *prima facie* (as does the position outlined above) that modern and ancient soldiers suffer(ed) PTSD to the same degree and in the same percentages.

Virtually every contemporary study, whether scholarly or anecdotal, lists some or all of the following factors as causes of PTSD:

- continuity of combat and/or exposure to danger
- experience of extreme violence, horrendous injuries, and loss of life
- survivor guilt
- guilt over wartime activities:
  - taking human life
  - committing atrocities
  - inflicting collateral damage
- lack of unit cohesion
- lack of a buffering, decompression period for the returning soldier

An analysis of the character of Graeco-roman warfare and a reconstruction of the psychological profile of an ancient Greek or Roman soldier, based on the nature of his culture, will establish that at least some of the recognized causes of PTSD did not exist for the classical soldier and also that the other causes of PTSD are likely to have had a much less severe impact on an ancient Greek or Roman soldier because of his cultural upbringing.

The mindset that a classical soldier took into battle almost certainly steeled him, to some significant degree, against the blood, gore, death, and vulnerability he witnessed in battle. As Randall Stewart argues in “Did Ancient Greek and Roman Soldiers ‘Aim High’?: Toward a Psychological Profile Combat Soldiers, Ancient and Modern” (*The Ancient World* 42 [2011] 34-51), the classical cultures of Greece and Rome were very different from our modern Western culture—much more different than similar. Ancient Greeks and Romans lived daily with levels of violence, vulnerability, and death that most Americans would find completely unacceptable

today. Furthermore, the kind of personal liberty and well-being enjoyed by most modern Westerners was completely beyond the grasp of the average citizen in the Graeco-roman world. A soldier from such a society is not likely to experience the brutality and destruction of war in quite the same way as a modern combatant.

## References

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