

## The Ancient Greeks at War

**Review Number:**

669

**Publish date:**

Saturday, 31 May, 2008

**Author:**

Louis Rawlings

**ISBN:**

9780719056574

**Date of Publication:**

2007

**Price:**

£50.00

**Pages:**

257pp.

**Publisher:**

Manchester University Press

**Place of Publication:**

Manchester

**Reviewer:**

Paul Hunt

*The Ancient Greeks at War* by Louis Rawlings is a wide-ranging and varied survey: it presents a clear and well-informed overview of key issues in the study of Greek warfare and of the modern controversies about them - though without extensive footnotes. Given the time period surveyed (1600 BC to 323 BC), the variety of ways of fighting and of thinking about war, and the difficulties of the evidence and the vast bibliography on the subject, this is an ambitious project. Rawlings wisely does not try to subordinate this sprawling topic to a single argument or theme; his overarching conclusion is merely that 'organized violence between Greek communities manifested itself in a variety of ways' (pp. 1, 224). Nevertheless, his treatment is lively and engaging throughout. Most impressive is the range of the topics he covers, from 'survivor's syndrome' to militarism, and from Ares to the cost of a trireme. Except for a smattering of small objections, I had only two serious reservations: in one important case Rawlings does not present contrary scholarly arguments accurately; some chapters suffered from chronological imprecision. Before turning to these issues, let me summarise the book's ten chapters and conclusion.

A brief opening chapter, 'War and peace in ancient Greece', treats general attitudes towards war and peace. Rawlings makes cogent arguments against the view that the default relation between Greek cities was a state of war and that treaties only provided temporary halts in this natural enmity (pp. 8-10). He harps, however, on Thucydides's argument that the period of the Peace of Nicias was not really a time of peace. This is misleading. Thucydides's claim is specific to one period and not a generalisation: indeed, Thucydides presupposes that periods of true peace do exist - or else how could the war have really started in 431? Rawlings rightly emphasises debate and controversy about war (p. 11). Although the horrors of war were well-known (pp. 6-8), a competitive sense of personal and communal honour was a central factor encouraging the recourse to war (p. 14).

In 'Early Greek warfare' Rawlings turns to the conduct of war, the topic of the rest of the book. He discusses the scanty evidence for the nature of Bronze-Age warfare and highlights the symbolic functions of chariots, walls, and even swords (pp. 21-3). He then turns to Homer's depiction of war, which, following Hans van Wees, he takes to be largely contemporary and coherent, rather than an amalgam of practices from different time periods (pp. 36-7). (1) He also endorses van Wees's position that the fighting in Homer was 'a more fluid and realistic affair than many commentators have realized' (p. 37).

The 'Makers of war' focuses on the land warfare of the archaic period. Rawlings accepts the controversial assumption of E. Jarva that the proportion of different items of equipment found as religious dedications reflects the proportion in use (p. 46). (2) This assumption leads him to minimise the importance and prevalence of expensive bronze armour, especially the cuirass. Accordingly he is sceptical of the argument that warfare, and thus the state, was dominated by those able to afford metal armour (pp. 49-50). In opposition to traditional scholarship, he also argues that hoplites could fight effectively as individuals and not only when in tight formations on clear and level terrain. (p. 57-8).

Chapter four, 'The patterns of war', is primarily devoted to criticising the position that 'the farmers of the phalanx ensured that ideological constraints were placed on hoplite warfare' - what I shall be calling the theory of the 'hoplite contest' (p. 63). He argues that battles fought on agreed terms were rare (pp. 64-6); that hoplite battles were only one aspect of war (pp. 67-8); that fighting took place in passes and in rough terrain rather than only in level planes (pp. 71-2); and that other types of soldiers played a large role (pp. 66-7). Rawling argues that limits on the intensity of war were mainly economic and logistical: states could not afford long campaigns and this led to 'a desire to bring the enemy to battle as quickly as possible' (p. 73).

To some extent the next chapter, 'Battlefield engagements in the age of the hoplite', continues this line of reasoning. Rawlings argues that the relative simplicity of most Greek battles was due to 'the practicalities of organizing and motivating large groups of men to realize their capacity for destruction', rather than to any commitment to fair fights (p. 101; see also pp. 82, 90). He also covers topics such as the role of peltasts (javelin throwers) and cavalry in battle, co-ordination between units from different cities, the pursuit of defeated enemies - which was quite limited - and the aftermath of battle.

Rawlings begins his sixth chapter, 'Naval warfare', by considering the evidence of Homer, who depicts individuals organising raids using ships for transport, but does not report actual fighting at sea (pp. 105-6). By the time of the Persian Wars, the state controlled the construction and maintenance of warships, which fought each other at sea (pp. 106-7). Rawlings rightly stresses the mobility of navies compared to land armies (pp. 111, 118-19) but also notes their high cost, both to construct - which also required a variety of hard-to-obtain raw materials - and to man (pp. 112-14). He also treats with sympathy the argument that naval power contributed to democracy, but notes how inconspicuous naval crews are in our surviving evidence - except as the 'naval mob' held in contempt by elitist intellectuals like Plato (pp. 109-11).

'Siege warfare' begins with a discussion of Mycenaean fortifications and, as might be expected, Rawlings finds no evidence in Homer of any recollection of Bronze-Age siege-craft (Homer knows only 'direct and rudimentary' attacks on cities) (p. 129). Rawlings even considers the theory that the Trojan Horse was a battering ram before dismissing it (p. 130). He explains the relative lack of evidence for circuit walls in the

archaic period by arguing that the degree of social organisation of that age was insufficient for their construction (p. 132). Offensive operations against cities also required the resources of a state and thus became more and more common in the 5th century (p. 137). He also makes the perceptive point that the ability to conduct sieges often depended on sea-borne supplies and thus naval power (p. 136). Unfortunately, his treatment does not distinguish consistently between starving a city into submission and storming it; consequently, Philip and Alexander receive scant notice (p. 140). But the Macedonians' ability to take walled cities by storm revolutionised warfare and was crucial to their establishing domination over Greece. For example, Philip's quick capture of Potidaea is often contrasted with the Athenian siege during the Peloponnesian War which took over two years at the height of Athenian power.

A long chapter on 'War and the economy' covers four main topics. First, Rawlings considers the extent of agricultural damage an invading army could inflict. His reasonable position is that earlier claims of long-term damage are probably exaggerated - as argued by Hanson (3) - but that even the threat of 'short-term famine' could explain why cities often decided to fight to defend their farms (p. 148). He next shows the importance, both material and psychological, of acquisition in war - mainly plunder of various forms including slaves. Again the exertion of state control limited but did not eliminate the ability of soldiers and generals to profit individually from war. A short section considers the economic role of arms production including shipbuilding; given scholarly neglect of this subject even this brief foray is praiseworthy. His final section focuses on the way that wars were financed. He argues for the 'monetarisation of war' in the classical period (p. 160); the market in mercenaries is but the most obvious sign of this.

It is laudable that Rawlings devotes an entire chapter to the intersections of Greek religion and warfare, for these were complex and important. Although Ares, the god of war, was a minor god in terms of cult (p. 178), other, more important Olympians as well as several lesser deities were regarded as playing a crucial role in war: Zeus and Athena in particular were associated with victory (p. 178) and the actual participation of gods and heroes in battle was sometimes reported (pp. 179-80). Greeks consulted the gods, especially the oracle at Delphi, about recourse to war. There were also rituals to assure divine goodwill at the start of campaigns, just before battle, and after it (pp. 187-95). Some of these rituals aimed simply at winning: Xenophon represents Spartan religious scrupulousness as 'a key element in their success' (p. 188). In a number of cases, however, the intervention of the divine tended to mitigate or limit the conduct of war: war stopped during truces for Pan-Hellenic festivals such as the Olympics (p. 189); the Greeks did not mutilate the corpses of defeated enemies but gave them back under truce for burial (p. 193); and 'the generous treatment of the defeated was viewed as pious, the mistreatment of the defeated could be viewed as contrary to divine law' (p. 195). All these restrictions seem *prima facie* at odds with Rawlings's earlier view that there were only practical limits on the intensity with which the Greeks fought. (4)

The final chapter treats 'War, the individual and the community'. Rawlings begins by considering individual reactions of rage or despair to the experience of combat and the plausibility of the modern parallels cited by Jonathan Shay and Lawrence Tritle (pp. 203-4). (5) These individual experiences took place in a social context as is implied by the frequent reference to shame or its avoidance (pp. 205-6). In general shame, or praise, was a motivating force for soldiers. Sparta, in particular, was 'a place where the values, ethos and even social structure of the state and its citizens appeared to be geared to celebrating, glorifying and perpetuating the warrior ...' (p. 208). Athenian soldiers lacked the bonding inculcated by the Spartans' constant military training and communal messes; the Athenian phalanx gained its cohesion from the peacetime bonds of the friends, relatives, and neighbours who fought in units together (p. 212) - as Victor Hanson has shown. (6) Athenian society and culture was not devoid of militarism: the honorific public ceremonies at the coming-of-age of young men who had lost their fathers in war is a conspicuous example (pp. 215-16). The last part of the chapter surveys the roles and experiences of women in warfare; in particular, when a city was captured, enslavement and sexual subjection to the conquerors was a likely and much-feared outcome (pp. 218--20).

The conclusion picks out a few of the most important themes that run through 'the complexity and diversity of Greek experiences of war' (p. 224). Although hoplites were 'the most ideologically important infantry from the seventh to fourth centuries' (p. 224), they were regularly supplemented by other forces, socially

mixed, and were themselves 'military all-rounders' rather than limited to close formation fighting on open plains.

Even more important, it is in the conclusion that Rawlings most explicitly situates his overall approach within the two different grand schemes of the development of Greek warfare that have dominated scholarship of the last few decades. Rather than accepting the view, popular since the late 1980s, that posits a breakdown of the 'hoplite contest' in the 5th century, Rawlings is sceptical that there every were anything but practical limits on the intensity of Greek warfare: '[The Greeks] were limited only by their capacity to organize themselves ... From Agamemnon to Alexander, the evidence suggests that at no time were the Greeks ever constrained by a sense of agonism to conduct their wars in a fair and sportsmanlike fashion' (p. 226). To explain the increased intensity of warfare in the classical period, Rawlings follows the work of Hans van Wees and emphasises the crucial role of social organisation, in particular the growth of the state (pp. 224-5).

Rawlings's position is certainly up-to-date; it is mainly within the last decade that criticisms of the 'hoplite contest' model by scholars such as van Wees and Peter Krentz have gained acceptance. (6) But, although Rawlings is vehement in his assertions - for example, when he says that 'such modern views simply do not hold water' (p. 64) - I had serious reservations about the fairness of his presentation of the position he is attacking. (8) First of all, scholars such as Victor Hanson and Josiah Ober do not argue that limits on warfare were entirely ideological. They argue that ideology played a role, but also admit practical limits. For example, Hanson argues that major battles were limited to one time of year because they had to take place in late spring during a break in an otherwise busy schedule of agricultural tasks. It is fair enough for Rawlings to argue that practical considerations ought to be accorded more weight in shaping the nature of Greek warfare than ideological considerations, but he sometimes ignores the nuance and complexity of the views he is criticising. Second, the views of Hanson and Ober are not as naively positive as is implied by Rawlings when he repeatedly describes their position as making Greek warfare 'fair and sportsmanlike': their position is that it was largely the class interests of relatively affluent, often slave-owning farmers that was served by limitations on warfare according to the theory of the 'hoplite contest'. Third, Rawlings devotes several pages to showing that formally arranged battles or duals were rare occurrences (pp. 64-7). This is true, but obvious; such cases do not play a major role in most versions of the 'hoplite contest' model as Rawlings repeated implies they do. Finally, Rawlings correctly points out that the Greeks 'attempted to gain every advantage that they could from terrain' in the Persian Wars (p. 64). He does not mention the cogent argument that this seeming contrast between the conduct of wars among Greeks and against non-Greeks implies that the limits on warfare among Greeks were not simply practical matters of military advantage.

A second source of worries about the book is its treatment of chronology within its topical framework. The topical arrangement of the chapters is a logical and almost inevitable choice - for example, one would not want the treatment of naval warfare to be delivered in dollops according to century. In some places, however, more precision would have made matters clearer. First, after an introduction claiming a span of well over a millennium, the first chapter 'War and peace in ancient Greece' focuses only on evidence from the late classical period without mentioning that early Archaic attitudes may have been very different - not to mention Bronze-Age views, about which we know almost nothing. Second, the claim that the book runs to 323 and thus covers the armies of Philip and Alexander is simply false advertising; they receive only a few scattered sentences - 'sarissa' is not even in the index - in no way commensurate with the importance of Macedonian military innovations and success. A final chronological issue relates to Rawlings's criticism of the theory of the 'hoplite contest'; pertinent early evidence of blocking passes rather than fighting an open battle is interspersed with examples from later periods, when even the most adamant modern proponent of limits on hoplite warfare believes that these have broken down (p. 71-2). Rawlings argues for significant continuity in the conduct of Greek warfare (p. 40), but more frequent chronological distinctions would have been useful within his topical framework.

Two recent works provide substantial overviews of Greek warfare through the classical period on approximately the same scale and at the same level as Rawlings's book (readers may consult Hans van Wees, *Greek Warfare: Myths and Realities*

or the relevant sections of the first volume of *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare*. [\(9\)](#) *The Cambridge History* has the advantage of incorporating diverse scholarly perspectives, but it is predictably expensive. Hans van Wees's own book is obviously the best place to look for his seminal theories about the fluidity of the archaic phalanx and his emphasis on the pivotal role of state control and organisation in the intensification of Greek warfare. As we have seen, Rawlings summarises and endorses many of van Wees's ideas. Perhaps the greatest strength of his book is the extremely wide range of topics considered, their vivid and concrete treatment with the copious quotation of primary sources in translation and, finally, its generally high level of scholarship - my sundry criticisms notwithstanding.

## Notes

1. The most recent versions of these arguments are found in H. van Wees, *Greek Warfare: Myths and Realities* (London, 2004), p. 153-65, 249-52. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. E. Jarva, *Archaiologia on Archaic Greek Body Armour* (Rovaniemi, 1995). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. V. Hanson, *Warfare and Agriculture in Classical Greece*, Revised Edition (Berkeley, 1998). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Rawlings tries to counter this by insisting that practice was unaffected by these values (p. 200), but he states earlier that '[t]he cessation of violence on fixed "holy" days and festivals and the observance of such, even when tactically detrimental, provide evidence that religious scruples could be influential' (p. 189). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. V. Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* (New York, 1989) pp. 117-25. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. J. Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York, 1994); L. Tritle, *From Melos to My Lai: War and Survival* (London, 2000). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. But note A. J. Holladay, 'Hoplites and heresies', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 102 (1982), 94-103. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. For an entree to both sides of the controversy see J. Ober, 'Classical Greek times', in *The Laws of War: Constraints on Warfare in the Western World*, ed. M. Howard, G. J. Andreopoulos and M. R. Shulman, (New Haven, 1994) pp. 12-26 and P. Krentz, 'Fighting by the rules: the invention of the hoplite agon', *Hesperia*, 71 (2002), 23-39. Fuller treatments pro and con can be found in V. Hanson, *The Other Greeks: The Family Farm and the Agrarian Roots of Western Civilization* (Berkeley, 1999) pp. 219-350 and J. Dayton, *The Athletes of War: An Evaluation of the Agonistic Elements in Greek Warfare* (Toronto, 2006) - which seems to have come out too late for Rawlings to take into account. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. H. van Wees, *Greek Warfare: Myths and Realities* (London, 2004); *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare. Volume I: Greece, the Hellenistic World and the Rise of Rome*, ed. P. Sabin, H. van Wees, and M. Whitby (Cambridge, 2007). In the name of full disclosure, I should say that I contributed a chapter to *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare*. [Back to \(9\)](#)

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/669>

## Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3643>